

Unlocking Landscapes Network: History, Culture and Sensory Diversity in Landscape Use and Decision Making

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Background

Funded by the AHRC, the ‘Unlocking Landscapes Network: History, Culture and Sensory Diversity in Landscape Use and Decision Making’ aims to explore opportunities to complement UK landscape management and decision-making approaches that foreground *biodiversity* with a focus on *human* diversity.

Through the network, we are organising a range of activities to encourage critical and cross-disciplinary discussion around the complex ways in which landscapes become meaningful to individuals and groups through their senses, personal memories and collective histories.

In particular, by turning attention to the historical and cultural factors that underpin how people enact and understand their sensory encounters with landscape, we will draw on a rich arts and humanities-led evidence base to inform more inclusive decision-making.

With a particular focus on decisions pertaining to health and wellbeing, we adopt a broad interpretation of landscape here, recognising that moments of health and wellbeing can unfold through the smallest scales of landscape encounter (for example, within city allotment plots, urban public parks and hospital gardens) to more expansive encounters with country parks, national parks, heritage coastlines and historic estates.

Supported by a series of networking activities, we aim to reflect on the role of arts and humanities research, in particular, in responding to four guiding questions:

1. How is landscape sensed and made sense of by different individuals and groups?
2. What are the cultural historical underpinnings of landscape experience?
3. What are the tensions between personal and collective landscape meanings?
4. How can we learn from human diversity to facilitate genuine landscape inclusion that moves beyond basic access provision?

Main network activities to-date

In addition to three online meetings with our Network Steering Group (April 2020, Oct 2020, March 2021), we have organised the following outward-facing activities to date:

What is landscape to you?

When lockdown began in March 2020 and we came to realise the full implications of the pandemic's progression for the original plan of network activities, we started to think about how we could take the core aims of the network forward. As Zoom and Teams quickly became new daily landscapes for many of us, often in a somewhat relentless way, we were keen to use the Network to encourage people to step out and reflect on the landscapes in the immediate vicinity of home where possible.

So we initially released a call for contributions online for people to reflect on **'what does landscape mean to you?'** We invited this in formats of people's choosing, be it short stories, poems, sketches, photos, videos or soundscapes, or other creative approaches, and circulated the call through the network Steering Group, partners, collaborators and social media etc.

We suggested a series of questions to help elicit responses relevant to the network aims:

- What is landscape to you?
- How do landscapes hold you? How do they speak to you
- What stories do your landscapes tell?
- What are your hopes for future landscapes? What do these futures mean for human and biodiversity?

We have shared seven of these fantastic contributions online: <https://sensing-nature.com/unlocking-landscapes> (complemented by a compiled list of other valuable collections around landscape experience e.g. the fantastic Willowherb Review, Places of Poetry, Common Ground, Land Lines, Nature Diaries).

We discussed these contributions at the online AHRC-funded 'Lifecourse, Narrative and Landscape' Symposium in December 2020, and will be drawing on these contributions further in our future in-person workshops to prompt discussion around the core network questions.

Whose landscape? Human diversity and historic landscape decision-making

In April 2021, we hosted our first online event, 'Whose landscape? Human diversity and historic landscape decision-making'. In total, 34 participants joined the event, including academics from across the arts, humanities and social sciences and representatives from Natural England, Historic England, Forestry England, Natural Resources Wales, National Trust, English Heritage, Sensory Trust, Willowherb Review, HEAL Rewilding, Sense, and disability arts.

Designed to promote interactive discussion and reflection (guided by a series of brief provocations written by workshop participants and supported by an [online padlet](#)), the workshop provided a valuable opportunity to share priorities, challenges and/or opportunities for embedding sensory, social and cultural inclusion into historic landscape decision-making.

In a brief summary piece about the event (available [online](#)), we identified five broad discussion themes around: landscape use and tensions, language and meaning, role of culture and cultural histories, working collaboratively and challenging power structures, and re-evaluating success. We also discussed a range of practical 'good practice' examples that we will share and build on through the development of a dedicated network website and future workshops.

Since the event, we have started a [mailing list](#) for the network that people can sign up to if interested in hearing about and/or being involved in future activities.

Marginal/marginalized? Rethinking marginality and landscape

We are in the process of organising our next [online workshop](#), which will take place on 15th July 2021, with the aim of rethinking marginality in relation to landscape, human and more than human interactions.

Organised in conjunction with network member, Professor Karen Jones and her Wellcome Trust funded project - 'The Lungs of the City', the event seeks to share knowledge and experience in relation to people and landscape beyond the well-known urban park and garden, exploring questions such as:

- Is the use of the term marginal or marginalised a useful term? Who defines who falls into these groups – in terms of people, places and other non-human animals?
- How can we better contextualise conflicts and contested use and experiences of such spaces?
- What issues accompany changes in the character of previously marginal spaces, for example as part of gentrification or rewilding? Who becomes (re)marginalised in the process?
- How can we think more about people being 'out of place in place' and the subtlety of segregation in British landscapes?
- How can questions of space and contest learn from/integrate with approaches in intersectionality or decolonising the narrative?
- What are the tensions between ideals of beauty and the reality of use and experience? Both in the past in terms of political judgements about 'beauty' and current use of social media such as Instagram?

Complementary network activities

We have secured additional funding for activities that will complement and directly inform future Unlocking Landscapes Network activities.

Re-Storying Landscape for Social Inclusion

Co-I, Dr Sarah Bell, successfully applied for funding through the ESRC Impact Acceleration Account for a two-year project called 'Re-Storying Landscape for Social Inclusion', which aims to inform interpretation, access and management decisions that respect the diverse ways in which landscapes are sensed, valued and experienced by individuals and groups over time.

While there are four distinct project strands, one strand – called 'Sensing History' – is particularly relevant to the remit of the Unlocking Landscapes Network. Working closely with Westonbirt Arboretum, Forestry England and Unlocking Landscapes Network Steering Group member, Andy Shipley, this strand seeks to develop new ways of conveying the diverse sensory experiences and histories of Westonbirt Arboretum, including finding new ways of expressing and relating to the widely celebrated 'picturesque' histories and qualities of the site.

Through the project, we have recruited (and are currently training) four volunteers with sight impairment to join Westonbirt's volunteer guide team and participate in the co-design and delivery of site interpretation, inspiring visitors' imagination about the senses and sensory history of the Arboretum. A key aspiration for this work is to demonstrate the value of moving away from framing disability as an 'access need', and recognising it instead as a potential opportunity for creativity and shared learning.

Through working with Westonbirt Arboretum to nurture a more diverse volunteer base, we aim to:

- Better harness the valuable knowledges that people from all walks of life can contribute to landscape management, interpretation and visitor experience;
- Explore ways to make the unseen or rarely felt qualities of landscape encounter more compelling across varied backgrounds, histories and life circumstances.

More information about this work is available [online](#).

In All Our Footsteps

PI, Dr Clare Hickman, has been awarded £1m funding by the AHRC for a research project called, 'In All Our Footsteps: Tracking, Mapping and Experiencing Rights of Way in Post-War Britain'. This project, led by Professor Glen O'Hara of Oxford Brookes University in collaboration with Dr Hickman, will demonstrate the importance of examining the mapping, development, use and experience of twentieth and twenty-first century rights of way.

Dr Hickman will be leading a research strand on 'pathways for meaning, health and wellbeing', with a particular focus on social inclusion and human diversity. Project outcomes will include better links between academics, practitioners, path users and policymakers, further support for deepening these connections further, a series of policy documents and a digital resources hub, all supported by an Open Access edited book.

More information about this work is available [online](#).

Future network activities

We had originally planned to organise four *in situ*, emplaced, interactive multisensory workshops and, while we have had to re-work network plans in response to Covid-19, we are still hoping to run these workshops in person, Covid-permitting, in 2021-2022.

The original plans for these workshops were as follows:

Workshop 1. Exploring the contribution of research within the arts and humanities

A hands-on workshop with collaborative activities to promote critical discussion about: what genuine inclusivity means in the context of landscape access, management and representation; and how the arts and humanities could be drawn upon to raise more widespread awareness of – and challenge – socially and culturally entrenched ‘scripts’ about what natural and cultural heritage landscapes are, how they ‘should’ be experienced and promoted, and who they are ‘for’. Depending on Covid-19 restrictions, we hope to organise this in Autumn 2021.

Workshop 2. Learning from research and engagement approaches within and beyond the arts and humanities

An opportunity to share different methodological skillsets and explore opportunities for integrated approaches with the ability to map diverse landscape sensibilities, stories and values across place and time. Depending on Covid-19 restrictions, we hope to organise this in early Spring 2022.

Workshop 3. De-coding and translating arts and humanities research

A widespread challenge in encouraging the uptake of research evidence within policy and practice lies in translating the specialist knowledge and language developed by academics into resources that are both usable and useful to decision-makers. This workshop will discuss the types of evidence needed to foster more inclusive approaches to landscape decision-making (and in what media/formats). Depending on Covid-19 restrictions, we hope to organise this in late Spring 2022.

Workshop 4. Sharing insights and extending the network

A final writing-based workshop to develop policy guidance from the discussions from earlier workshops that will be shared via the project website that is currently under development. Depending on Covid-19 restrictions, we hope to organise this in Autumn 2022.

The specific activities planned for each workshop will be informed directly by the online activities we have conducted to-date, as well as the changing policy context that is informing landscape decision-making in the UK at present (from the Covid-19 pandemic to the Black Lives Matter movement, Brexit, and the growing momentum behind green and blue social prescribing, for example).