Visual Matrix Summaries

What is a visual matrix? A visual matrix (VM) is an innovative combination of both arts- and hermeneutics-based methods. The visual matrix comprises between 6 and 30 participants who bring their associations as a group to image-based material. A frame for the matrix is created by images related to a particular research question or theme, and then participants are asked to associate from the images elicited in them rather than discussing or analysing the images, as might happen in a focus group. Then a facilitated process is set in motion whereby further images, thoughts and feelings are produced and exchanged, with the patterned responses audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis.

Our virtual approach: Before the visual matrices took place, people were invited to participate by first taking two to three photos, or other creative expressions, of our themes: the first on Landscape and Water and the second on Landscape and Time. The resulting participant images, paintings, film, poetry and sound pieces were then uploaded on a shared drive for people participating in the visual matrix could access. The visual matrix took place on Zoom and before it began, all the images, poetry, film, and sound pieces were shown as a PowerPoint presentation via Zoom. These expressions were the stimulus to start the visual matrix.

VM 1: Landscape and Water

Five main themes were interpreted from the visual matrix, which were:

1) the holding of water: rock and water;
2) human perception and trying to understand the element of water;
3) boundaries, liminal spaces and experiences;
4) being out and in control
5) water, landscape, past and present.
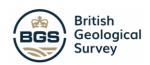
Holding of water: rock and water

The matrix began with an exploration of images about how a rock art sculpture holds water. This allowed a questioning about how water is held in the landscape even though there seems to be a boundary of the rock/land; water can still fill the rock and overflow. This brings in the idea that water is a "shape-shifter". This depicts the flowing and inherently uncontrollable nature of 'shapeless' water, where despite all efforts of the many human-made structures in the landscape, water continues to defy human control.

Human perception and trying to understand the element of water

Through various threads and interconnections in the first half of the matrix, human perception of water is examined. It begins by questioning how we perceive visually the colour of water, where dark murky water is

considered to not be clean or pure. However, it is discovered that the visual can be in error, without other sensory information, like smell, which can tell us that water is dirty, even when water looks clear. This continues on to various images and associations about the collective shared images i.e., the participant photographs that were shared in the PowerPoint, as a stimulus to begin the visual matrix, where these images provided an element of frustration, because they limit the complexity of the active and living dimensions of water, creating a falsely objectified view that limits the understanding of water and its many complex personalities and relationships. This is followed with the realisation of the limitation about how we communicate and distil the complexity of something like water into words and conversation when the visual image is also limited.

Other points relating to our human perception of water are:

- The development of concepts for things that are hidden from human perception, i.e. like not being able to see in the dark or see water molecules, but *conceptually* we know that water continues to flow in darkness and water is made up of molecules. The concept and the experience seem to perform a kind of knowing within our human condition.
- The sense of individual physical human encounter with water, i.e. holding breath and opening eyes underwater, we are mainly water and therefore have a special affinity with water, we also have a shared commonality of our relationship with water, because we are all human beings, after all, and we have a sense of place where we encounter similar experiences.
- Our feelings evoke a sense of knowing, when although we might be seeing or hearing that water is very calming, we have an extra "other sense" that knows that water has another "other" to it, such as the rapids that can destroy and the water fountain that might not be so calming.
- The unintentional and intentional framing of images/paintings and poetry of the creator who has an intention to portray water in certain ways to the perceiver through the image and perhaps understanding the intention of an image. Others, on the other hand, might perceive it differently.
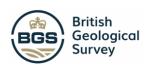
Boundaries, liminal spaces and experiences

There were several threads running through the matrix that discuss boundaries, places/ideas of seepage, or liminal spaces between water and surrounding landscape. These spaces were explored through images where rivers meet the sea (estuaries), salty and fresh water and deltas, showing that although we can make a clear difference between river and sea, it is impossible to delineate, the boundary where they meet, but yet we persist in trying to make a boundary and call water a 'trickster', because it also has no boundary including its form, as it can change from solid to liquid and seep into the landscape and even as human beings we merge with water, as most of our bodies are made of water.

There is a recognition of a boundary between the visual image and the complex experiences of water, such as the crashing of waves and smell of sulphur, where the lifelessness of the images creates a barrier to the real full experiential embodied experience of water, which ultimately creates a conversation that lacks the full substance of water's agency within landscape. This boundary seems to disappear later in the matrix where it seeks alternative modes of expression through the narratives of people's experiences of landscape and water,

eventually narrative turns away from the human experience and suggests that it is the reservoir that experiences, "as body of water as a stage for a symphony of sounds".

Other boundaries are suggested as the positioning of the farmer whose way of living with the land is a unique boundary, where the farmer's existence relies on understanding the connection of landscape and water, and 'edgelands' (the area between the country and city), where points of official and unofficial seats beside river are symbols of the individual human being and society as a whole forming an imprint on the landscape that transcends at points to the river.

Being out and in control

There are also images relating to being in and out of control. The desire of human beings to be in control of water is also associated to the intangible feelings and memories that are connected to the attachment to landscape, which can't be encapsulated into policy. This same being in control of landscape and water (based on the fantasy of modernism) also drives humanity and everything to a precipice and perhaps if we took on the role of the farmer and began working with nature, we might avoid the precipice.
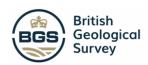
Water, landscapes, past and present

Over half-way through the matrix there is a subtle shift in the images and associations, which express the relationship of water connected to historical human actions, experiences and the present consequences of change today. These images and associations have several realisations:

- Water has the potential of disappearing and as shown in the past communities can disappear as well and this is associated to the present where the pandemic is killing the human race, further suggesting that water could disappear in the present and kill us also. Connected to this is the suggestion that water has a story from the distant past to the present shifting of coastlines, also infers that the disappearance and appearance of water is global, and we are affected globally.
- Another thread of images is related to the "ability of water to shock". These images and narratives connect the violent force of water at a global, local and even the possibility of such erosive events happening in our own backyard. All these narrative images exemplify the very volatile, unpredictable and destructive force of water today, where we are all living in a time of frequent flood events, where we are forced to accept climate change, because the water "shocks" us in its violence and destruction, because we are not living in harmony with the landscape.
- There is the suggestion that water and landscape are in cahoots, where materials from the landscape allow water to transport it elsewhere, even if it causes death to rivers. This enables a reflection on the constructed subterranean landscape as being exposed by new flooding events "sort of spewing up all this stuff into the, onto the land". This set of images and associations suggests that the "complicit" nature of flood water and the materials of the landscape brings the Earth to the surface of the landscape to lay bare the past work of humans who mined the hidden geology. What is brought to the surface however has an identity, and it can be detrimental to human beings, suggesting perhaps that it should remain hidden in the ground where it originates it.

- There is a series of images of seating next to the river, such as a sofa (an image form the collective shared images), which seems to be a reflection of the human as an imprint on the landscape, where seats can somehow be a reflection of their owners like the sofa or society relating to the official or unofficial seats distributed along the banks of rivers, where they may end up in the flood deposits forming an imprint of human society's identity where the secrets of the past are revealed.
- There is also a final reflection from and images of the collective shared images, which suggests there is an attraction of water that gathers people/community around it, even during the lockdown during the pandemic, when society couldn't move, a conglomerate of boats formed on a canal.
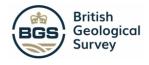
VM 2: Landscape and Time

Seven main themes were interpreted from the visual matrix, which were:

1) the struggle of humans to make sense of time;
2) which time/whose time?
3) juxtaposition of experienced time, lack of time, serenity in nature which are all in tension;
4) experience and engagement of being in landscape, transformation and reverence;
5) questioning danger, social constructs and societal differences;
6) language of nature, landscapes and time: boundaries and no boundaries;
7) imagining futures.

- The beginning of the VM was mainly about perceptions of time that were contained within the different creative contributions of images, poetry and film. The main focus was on a geological time, and it was recognised that this view is very particular to the Landscape Network and there was an awareness that most people do not view time in this way, because human time is short lived and that human presence is transient, but at the same time human presence in landscape is clearly present, whether it's in the past, or the present.
- In the early images of the matrix, there was a sense of jarring, as not all is what it seems, as humans have imposed themselves on the landscape, and even our sense of time was imposed, and we have an impression that time is "running out". And held a kind of tension in the matrix where images and associations were, in constant juxtaposition, where there was a collective unpicking of the complexity of time, landscape and nature. Nature was never really defined in the VM, but it was in constant relationship with landscape.
- The main difficulty was trying to place us ourselves as being human within landscape and nature. And this relationship was collectively perceived to be a separation between human and landscape, even though we know that we're also part of nature. This aspect became important in the VM as halfway through the VM, the images and associations were focused on the separation of human from nature. There were several interesting experiences and descriptions about real life human transformation, where people (of various ages) who had no connection with landscape could be transformed and

become more confident, self-aware and understanding of themselves and nature by being immersed and engaged in nature. And there's even an example a young man who was brought up in London, becoming a park warden through connecting with nature. And so, it was considered that this human/landscape separation could be transformed by experiencing and engaging with landscape/nature.

- This separation was further explored through descriptions of indigenous people who were considered as being one with nature. And this brought into account a state of reverence for nature, which was considered to be lacking in our western world view, but reverence could be cultivated through an immersive experience of landscape.

- The experience of being immersed in landscape having a transformative effect towards bringing human and nature together seemed to be a shared experience by everyone in the VM, because there was never an opposing image to this state.

- There were images and associations of danger while being in in in landscape, which seemed to relate to an awareness that a lot of people are afraid of nature, even though within the VM people did not feel this. It was more about people outside of the network who have a sense of danger or there is a perceived idea of good and bad bits of landscape, which make people fear landscapes creating increased the human/nature separation.

- Language was also an important thread in the VM, where it was realised that language creates layered meaning and understanding of complexity, but language also has limitations and does not necessarily carry the exact "truth" of things, such as processes and dynamics in landscapes. Language can even be a hindrance to how we think, but there was a suggestion that these dilemmas of language could be solved by travelling and experiencing landscape and cultures also.

- Definitions of landscape also came to the surface and it was suggested that it was not so much the definition of landscape that what was important, but more a collective understanding of appreciation of what landscape actually means.

- The visual matrix ended about questioning future imaginings of landscapes. And this brought an idea of a possible intention, which could bring people closer to landscape by thinking about how people would want to live/experience and appreciate their landscape in the future.

Prepared by:

Dr Nicole Manley (British Geological Survey & Queen Margaret University): Visual matrix facilitator, author of the visual matrix interpretations and summaries

Dr Anna Hicks (British Geological Survey): Landscapes of the Mind Project Leader

Dr Carol Cotterill (Colombia University): Landscapes of the Mind Co-Investigator