

Perception of the Latvian Landscape during Social and Economic Transformations

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Introduction

The landscape of rural Latvia is currently undergoing immense change because of many factors. The main ones are the return of land to owners after the fall of the Soviet Union, the abandonment of surplus land, the migration of young people to the cities, an ageing population, the collapse of rural infrastructure and the decay of old houses and rural buildings. However, no proper attempt has so far been made to assess how the population of Latvia values older, traditional cultural landscapes and the degree of importance of these to the national culture or as part of the sense of national identity. The research project described in this paper collected data from a sample of rural and urban dwellers throughout Latvia, from both Latvian and non-Latvian ethnic groups. The project aims were to explore the value and importance of different landscape elements and types to the population of Latvia, both rural and urban dwellers, and to relate this social information to perceptions of land use change and historical beliefs about the landscape, especially the pre-Soviet, first Latvian republic images of the countryside.

Latvia has a population of 2.3 million people, of whom 67.9 per cent are urban and 32.1 per cent are rural dwellers (Ministry of Agriculture 2002). This is a high rural proportion by western European standards and the country remains very rural, with some 40 per cent of the land being forest, a proportion that is increasing as a result of land abandonment. Fifty-eight per cent of the population are ethnic Latvians. The majority of the non-Latvians are Russian, Belorussian and Ukrainian, and live in towns and cities. There has been a net population decrease and also a drift, especially of younger people, to the cities, resulting in an ageing and decreasing rural population.

Farmland in many regions is either surplus to requirements or has been abandoned; in either case cultivation has ceased, allowing tree seeds to germinate and colonise these areas (depending on the productivity, terrain and climate). During Soviet times all land was nationalised and farms were managed as collectives (*kolkhoz*), with large-scale mono-cultural production (Melluma 1994). After the restoration of independence, the land was handed back to the previous owners or their descendants, many of whom lived away from the land or were not interested in farming it, leading to abandonment. People also became free to leave the collective farms, so that the population and economic structure of the countryside changed. In agriculturally more marginal areas, such as the Vidzeme or Latgale uplands, where soils are less fertile, the rate of abandonment and forest colonisation has been greatest, while the fertile flat plains of Zemgale in the south continue to be used for arable farming.

The research question was a general one to start with: 'What are the perceptions and values of the Latvian people towards the countryside?' As the approach adopted can be described as 'user-led', there was no need to elaborate the question any further, as part of the methodological approach involves the people (the research subjects) helping to frame the issues and questions for detailed investigation (see below).

Methodology

The overall methodology was rooted very firmly in approaches developed from George Kelly's personal construct theory (Kelly 1955) and David Canter's Theory of Place (Canter 1977). According to this theory, perceptions and values of landscape are considered to be constructed differently in a very personal way, depending on the interaction of three main factors: the physical world, the activities undertaken and the individual's perceptions. People's transactional relationship with place means that whether or not a person values the landscape around them will depend on how it affects the way they live and their needs and desires in daily life.

When exploring the contribution of the local landscape to people's lives, it is necessary to consider all three elements and the interaction between them. To do this, a research theory (or meta-theory) called 'Facet Theory' was adopted (Shye *et al.* 1994; Borg, Shye 1995). The main advantage of using the Facet approach in relation to this is that it facilitates the explicit structuring of the central issues in

the research and their relationships to one another. While this is often considered to be inherent in scientific investigation, it is easy to miss key issues and their inter-relationship unless they are explicitly expressed.

The research had no detailed, specific questions, but was user-led in that the issues of importance for people were uncovered during focus group discussions and then incorporated into the questionnaire. The focus groups, six in all from both rural and urban areas, were recorded and analysed by looking for the common and significant issues raised in each in response to the prompting questions asked by researchers. The questionnaire was structured according to Facet theory, the questions (or statements) being framed as constructs relating to the physical environment, activities and perceptions, using a structure known as the 'mapping sentence'. Respondents to the questionnaire were asked to agree or disagree with a number of statements along a 7-point scale. The questionnaire data from 450 respondents collected in six rural municipalities representative of different regions of Latvia and three urban areas were analysed using factor analysis and a range of SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) statistical tools. The analysis focused on differences in perceptions and values held by different segments of the population, such as Latvians and non-Latvians, men and women, different age groups, people with different levels of education and rural versus urban dwellers. The differences between the six rural areas were also compared.

At the same time land use change in each of the six rural areas used for the questionnaire and one of those used for the focus groups was examined by comparing maps from the early 20th century/1930s with modern maps, using GIS. Aspects of land use change such as proportions of forest and numbers of rural farmsteads were compared.

Results

In the focus groups the importance of traditional or typical Latvian countryside landscapes became apparent. In a typical inventory of the Latvian landscape, interviewees in all groups consistently mentioned hay cocks, storks, detached farmsteads, thatched buildings, country bathhouses, old oak trees, avenues or rows of oak and lime trees, lakes, cultivated fields, country estates without hedges or fences (unlike those in other parts of Europe), winding highways, hillocks and flower gardens (see Fig. 1). Many interviewees also mentioned manor houses surrounded by old parks, with ponds and nearby villages. The idea of the Lat-

vian landscape is also linked with the places where their predecessors lived, with childhood reminiscences and with feelings of home and patriotism.



Figure 1] A landscape in rural Latvia with most of the features considered to be archetypal.

In comparing the landscapes of the First Independent Republic with those of the Soviet period and the restored Independent Republic, the evaluation, with a few exceptions, was negative. Most people considered that the landscape had changed for the worse, although some of them held opposing views. The people were rather pessimistic about the future and worried that younger people were moving away. Many people wanted to live in the countryside, but only if their work was in a nearby town.

As part of the survey, interviewees were asked to provide up to ten words that came to mind when they thought of the Latvian countryside. This revealed a very strong dichotomy in the perceptions (see Tables 1 and 2). On the one hand, there were very positive views of the countryside in general, and those of the townspeople (which included a non-Latvian proportion) showed a marked nostalgia for an idyllic landscape, while on the other hand there was an association, most strongly presented in Table 2, of negative social and economic aspects, such as unemployment, poverty, hard work and alcoholism. This pattern, where the physical environment is attractive but where the economic and social environments present significant problems to people living there, is quite typical.

N - frequency of mentioning			
Question 1: 'Please suggest up to 10 words that come to mind when you think of the Latvian countryside'			
Country people	N	Townspeople	N
Most frequently associated		Most frequently associated	
diverse/beautiful nature/landscape	77	diverse/beautiful nature/landscape	26
clean/fresh air	54	forests	24
forests	36	country houses/detached farmsteads	19
intact/unpolluted/clean environment/nature	30	fresh/clean air	19
stillness	28	vast cultivated fields	17
birthplace/homeland	24	rest	15
hard farm work	19	childhood reminiscences	14
overgrown/unused agricultural lands/ fields/grassland	19	meadows	13
quietness	17	stillness	13
lakes	16	intact nature	12
cultivated fields	14	hard farm work	11
childhood reminiscences	14	lakes	10
warbling of birds	12	quietness	8
meadows	12	bad roads	8
country houses for townspeople	12	unemployment	7
poverty/needly people	11	bad/hard life	7
unemployment	11	overgrown/unused agricultural lands/ fields/grasslands	7
dwelling place/home	10	haystacks	6
bad roads	9	poverty/needly people	6
tidy environment	9	farms	5
	434		247

Table 1] Words associated with the Latvian countryside.

It can be seen from Table 1 that, for both rural and urban dwellers, it is the elements of the physical landscape that are most frequently mentioned as words that come to mind when thinking of the Latvian countryside. The image presented is of course a personal construct but is possibly even more a social construct related to images that are associated with a sense of national identity. The visual beauty of nature is complemented by other sensory features such as the sound of birds or sense of stillness and quietness. The urban dwellers also mentioned childhood reminiscences quite frequently, indicating that their associations with the coun-

tryside and their feelings towards it could have a strong nostalgic element. In this list the negative words come low on the list. The pattern here is that it is the urban dwellers who mention the negative social and economic aspects the most, both in terms of the numbers of words and their relative position in the list. This may reflect the fact that urban incomes are relatively higher, especially in Riga, and the types of work are less strenuous.

N - frequency of mentioning			
Question 2: 'Can you list the features that you would consider to be typical of the Latvian countryside?'			
Country people	N	Townpeople	N
Most frequently associated		Most frequently associated	
uncultivated/overgrown agricultural lands/territories/meadows/fields	69	uncultivated/overgrown agricultural lands/territories/meadows/fields	26
diverse/beautiful nature	39	beautiful nature/scenic landscape	17
felled forests	21	clean/untouched nature	10
bad/neglected roads	20	contrasts between tidy and untidy areas	10
contrasts between tidy and untidy areas	20	poverty/needy people	7
unemployment	18	felled forests	7
poverty/needy people	18	forests	5
drunkards/alcoholism	17	depression	4
forests	15	dilapidated/deserted farmsteads	4
untouched/pure environment/nature	15	unemployment	4
fresh/clean air	14	lack of finance	4
depression	13	rivers	4
dilapidated/deserted farmsteads	12	meadows	4
cultivated agricultural territories/meadows/fields/beautiful fields	12	vast territories of agricultural lands	4
desolation	10	dilapidated/deserted buildings of agricultural/collective farms	4
lakes	9	fresh/clean air	3
many places are being tidied up	8	thinly populated	3
dilapidated/deserted buildings of collective farms	8	storks	3
thinly populated/few inhabitants	7	drunkards/alcoholism	3
flow of youth from the country to town	7	small farms	3
		small herds of cattle	3
	352		132

Table 2] Features associated with the typical Latvian countryside.

The results of the second question presented in Table 2 are different from those in Table 1. This is because the question shifts in focus from images of an archetypal Latvian countryside to a typical one. What is typical becomes more of a personal construct for each interviewee and less of a social/national construct and is probably connected with the location where the interviews took place (in the case of the survey of rural inhabitants) and locations known to the urban respondents. Once people are thinking primarily of the landscape that they know and live in, it is the social and economic aspects that rise in importance, since the physical landscape tends to form the background against which daily activities of work and living take place. Thus the words describing social and economic aspects increase in number and frequency and have overtaken many of the words associated with the physical environment. Many of the words also relate to aspects of landscape change which have occurred since the regaining of Latvian independence: abandoned fields, felled forests, and dilapidated farm buildings, including remains of abandoned and defunct collective farms.

While there is no opportunity in this paper to explore the results of the survey in any detail, there are some questions the analysis of which helps to reinforce the findings described above.

The first of these questions (which, according to the methodology described earlier is presented as a statement with which respondents are free to agree or disagree to different degrees) is ‘The countryside is connected with a sense of being Latvian’.

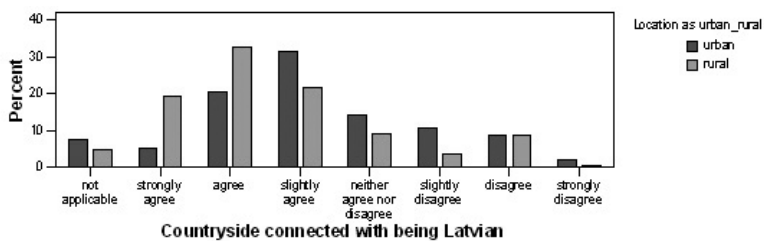


Figure 2] Responses to the statement ‘The countryside is connected with a sense of being Latvian’.

The results, here split between rural and urban inhabitants (Fig. 2), show a fairly strong agreement with this statement, reinforcing the views expressed by focus group members and the words selected by people. There is greater agreement among rural inhabitants than urban ones, the group that also contains most of the non-Latvian ethnic component of the sample and those who have no

particular connection with the countryside, for example not having lived there in childhood or having relatives who live there.

The second question is ‘The countryside landscape before the Second World War was more Latvian than it is now’.

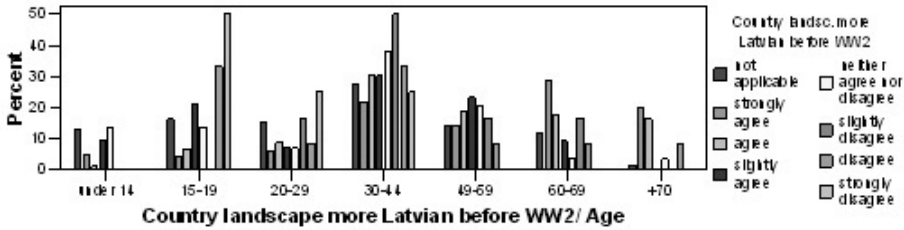


Figure 3] Responses to the statement ‘The countryside before the Second World War was more Latvian than it is now’.

The results, split roughly between major age groups (Fig. 3), show that older people who can remember the time before the Soviet takeover tend to think of the landscape as more Latvian in the 1930s, during the first period of independence, but this is much less true for the younger age groups. This shows that the younger generation, who only know the post-Soviet landscape, consider it to be Latvian. As generations change and memories fade, such shifts in perception are to be expected.

The third question is ‘Overgrowth of agricultural lands with bushes diminishes the beauty of the landscape’.

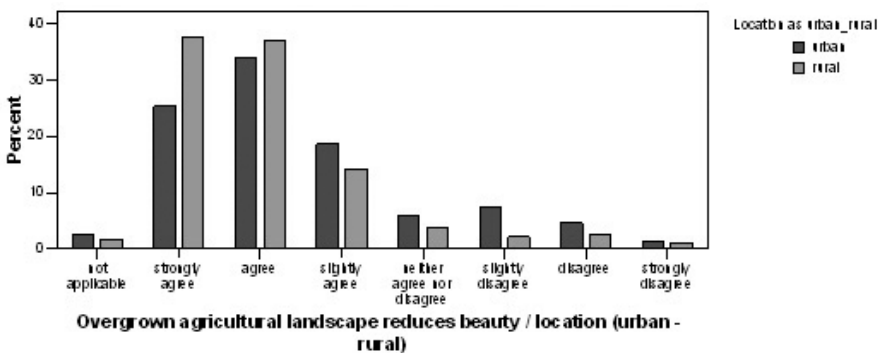


Figure 4] Responses to the statement ‘Overgrowth of agricultural lands with bushes diminishes the beauty of the landscape’.

The results, split between rural and urban dwellers (Fig. 4), show a clear agreement by both groups, though marginally more so for rural inhabitants. While the data do not allow for differences in the reasons for the bushes diminishing the beauty of the landscape, focus group members noted that the appearance signified abandonment, lack of care and lack of management. This is borne out by the results of the final question to be included here.

The final question is about management: 'Landowners should tidy up the countryside'.

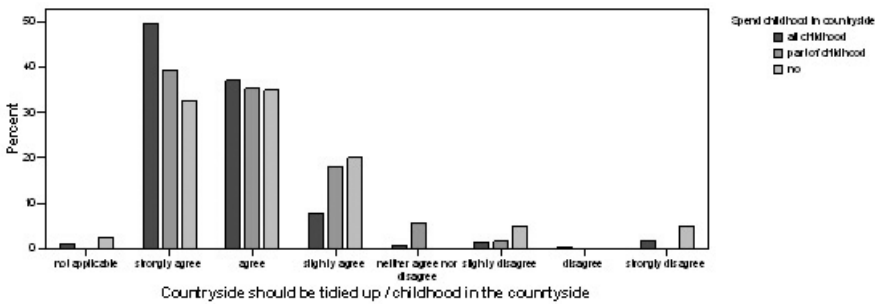
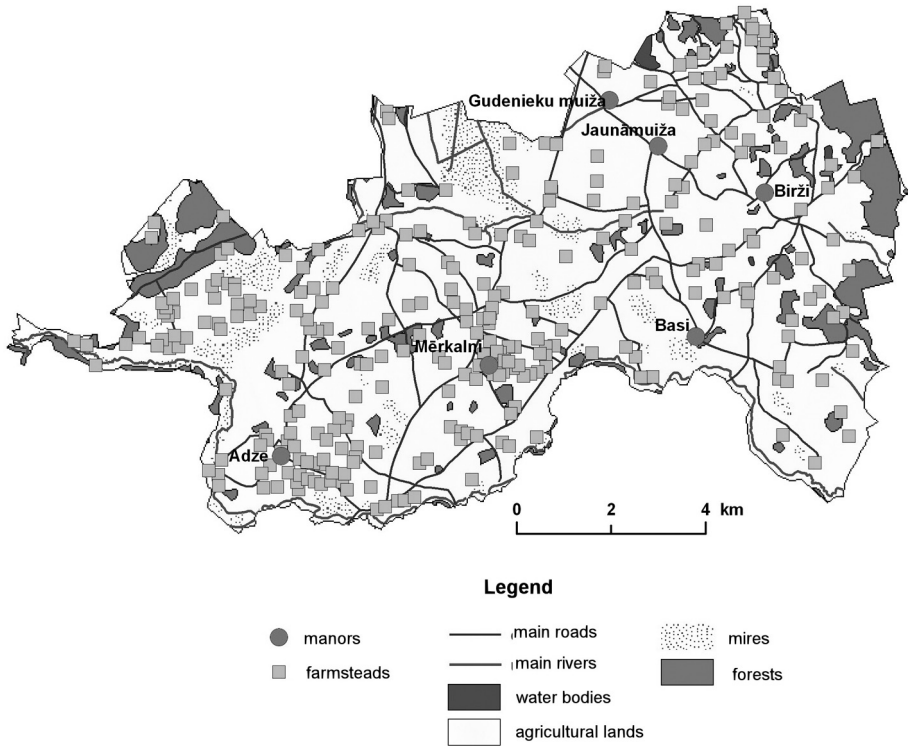


Figure 5] Responses to the statement 'Landowners should tidy up the countryside'.

The results, divided between those who spent all their childhood in the countryside, some of their childhood or none, show a generally very strong level of agreement with the statement, reflecting the perception that the countryside should be looked after.

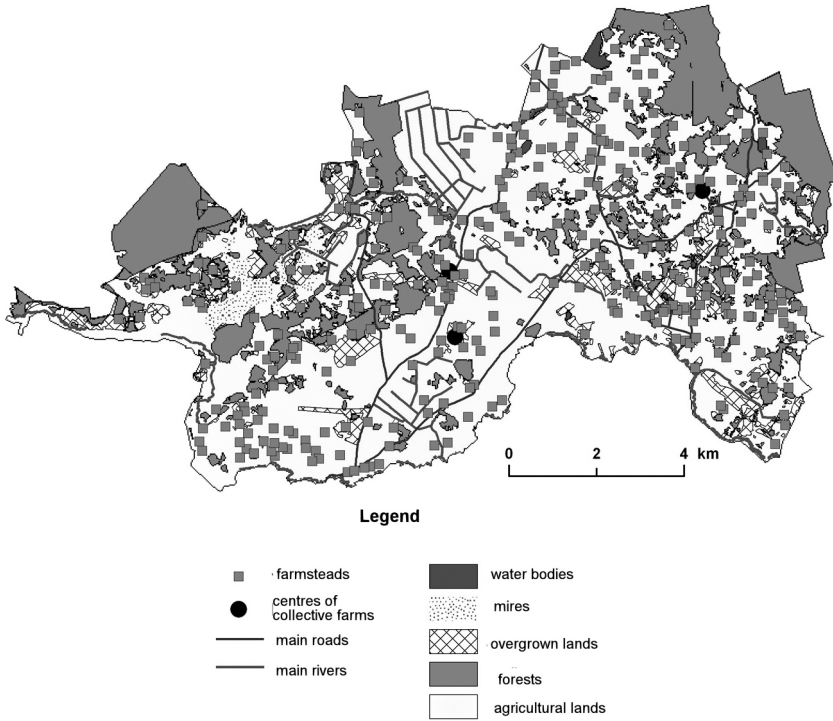
Landscape change

In this paper one geographical area will be examined in terms of the changes to the landscape structure that have taken place over the period from the beginning of the 20th century, during the first period of Latvian independence, up to the present. This area is the pagasts, or rural municipality (also sometimes referred to as 'parish'), of Gudenieku, where one of the focus groups took place. The three maps (Figs. 6–8) show the landscape changes mainly as an increase in forest and a reduction in settlement.



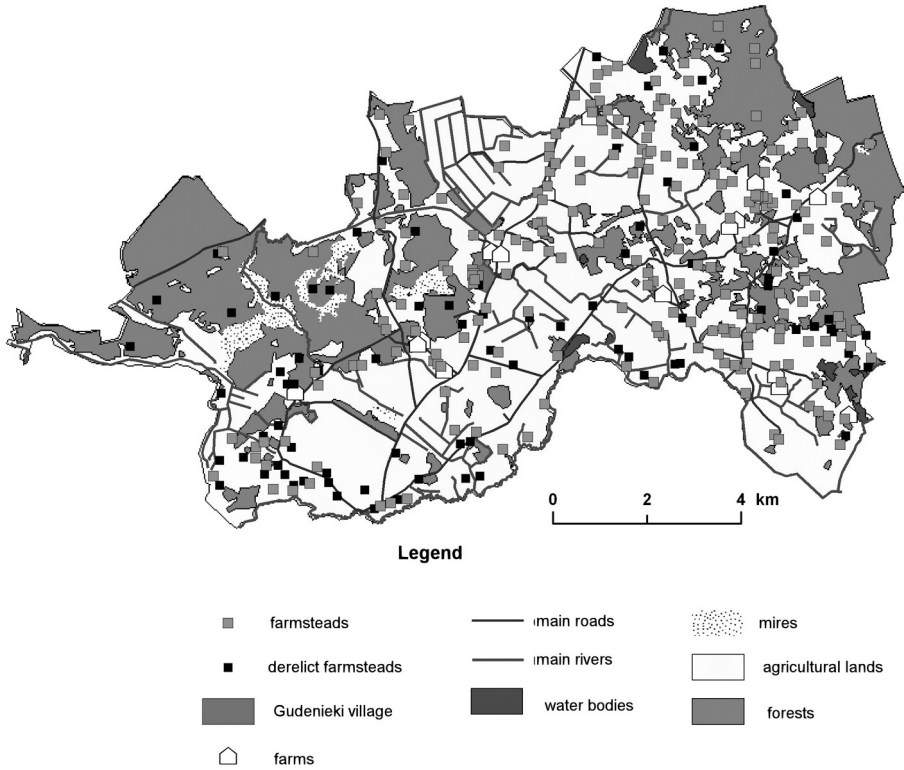
Gudenieki parish at the beginning of the 20th century

Figure 6] Gudenieku pagasts at the beginning of the 20th century, when there was only a small proportion of forest and many rural farmsteads well distributed across the landscape. There were also some wetlands.



Gudenieki parish in the middle of the 20th century

Figure 7] Gudenieku pagasts in the late 1940s, at the time of collectivisation and after the land reforms of the first Latvian independence period. The amount of forest has expanded and the pattern of rural houses has changed.



Gudenieki parish at the beginning of the 90ties

Figure 8] Gudenieku pagasts at the beginning of the 1990s, just at the time that the collective farms ceased to exist and before land restitution. The forest area has continued to expand and there are significant numbers of derelict farmsteads.

The available data covers the period 1900 to 1990 but not the subsequent years up to the present. What the maps show is that there has been an expansion of forest area from a very small percentage in around 1900 to almost 30% in 1990. It is known from visits to the area and discussions with staff at the pagasts administration that there is land abandonment and areas have continued to become reforested since 1990. The result is that, where the landscape was primarily open with extensive views across the slightly undulating landscape, many parts of the pagasts are now much more enclosed and the sense of scale and distance is no longer as strong.

The landscape is much emptier now, as the number of people living in the countryside has declined. The pattern of rural housing, which changed in the 1920s and 1930s as a result of land reform following the break up of the estates, came to be characterised by an increase in derelict houses throughout the Soviet period. This was a time when people were moved into blocks of flats constructed in the village centres by the Soviet regime under the 'Resolution of 1961' (Lūse, Jakobson 1990; Grave, Lūse 1990). Many of these houses are now complete ruins. The picture fails to convey, however, the problem of the condition of the remaining houses, which, while habitable, are often in poor repair: the roofs are in need of replacement and the infrastructure, such as electrical wiring or plumbing and drainage are in bad condition. Many of the houses are quite old – up to 200 years – and, being of log and timber construction, need regular maintenance and repair. They were built in a traditional style, using traditional methods and often reflect the regional character. Newer houses are less likely to follow these styles and traditions, contributing to the loss of the traditional rural landscape.

In another study in Latvia (Nikodemus *et al.* 2005), people in the Vidzeme upland region, which is hillier and more forested, expressed preferences for living in traditional houses reasonably close to the rural centre, and did not like the flats. They recognised the problem of the loss of many of the more historical houses, especially those in remoter places, where the home values were lower and where people did not want to live. The same study found that many of the older, poorer people were living in these remoter houses in deteriorating conditions.

The loss of houses is also symptomatic of losses of other landscape features which go with them – ponds, orchards, bath houses, gardens and barns – all of which contribute to the fabric of the countryside and which were all associated with the archetypal landscape described in the focus groups.

Discussion

The results of each strand of the research show that the Latvian countryside is perceived as an important aspect of Latvia and a contributor to a sense of identity for the Latvian population, both rural and urban. There is clearly an image of the countryside landscape which contains a particular series of elements in a coherent way, such as the farmstead, pond, orchard, row of trees, stork's nest and so on. Since the population of Latvia includes a significant proportion of ethnic non-Latvians, it might be assumed that these people do not subscribe to the image of the countryside or value it in the same way as the Latvian ethnic group does, and this is borne out by the questionnaire data to some degree, though not as clearly in the analysis of the words used to describe the countryside. It is more evident in the question about the countryside being connected with a sense of being Latvian.

The focus of many of the words selected to describe the features typical of the Latvian countryside was on the economic and social aspects of life, as much as on the physical landscape. Other research looking at these same kinds of issues has found this type of response: what is of concern to most people are the factors that affect how they live their lives; they are only concerned with the physical environment insofar as it influences this (Ward Thompson, Myers 2003; Oliveira, Dneboská 2004; Alumäe *et al.* 2003). People also bring previous experiences, expectations and their personal objectives in a place to any evaluation they make of it (Scott, Canter 1997) and therefore background helps shape perceptions.

A further layer contributing to the symbolism of the Latvian landscape is to be found in some of the recollections of those who were deported to Siberia by the Soviets in 1949 under 'Operation Priboi ("Surf")' ('Операция Прибой') (Strods 1998). Many survivors record that it was the memory of the Latvian landscape that kept them going and for which they yearned while away. Holding onto traditions is also reported to have been a means for the Latvian and other Baltic inmates of the Gulag or Latvian deportees to Siberia to keep their sense of identity, to offer mutual support and to help them survive (Applebaum 2003: 349; Nollendorfs 2002: 107).

What is known about the importance of some of these landscape elements mentioned by respondents as being symbolic of the Latvian landscape and how far back in time can the symbolism be traced?

One of the elements frequently mentioned in the focus groups and mentioned three times in the word lists is the presence of the stork as part of the archetypal

landscape. The Latvian poet Imants Ziedonis, in his essay *The Borders of Borderless Winds*, in discussing the identity of Latvian national culture, has this to say:

Contrary to common misconceptions, the more idiosyncratic values of a culture are not always found in its most archaic features. One sign of Latvian idiosyncrasy is the white stork. People respect this bird, they offer help in its search for suitable nesting places, and the possibility that someone might hunt or kill a stork is inconceivable. One cannot imagine the Latvian landscape without stork nests in trees, on top of posts, water towers and even the chimneys of abandoned houses. The fact that this bird chooses to live in Latvia (with the greatest density of stork nests in Europe) can only be explained by the biological and scenic variety of the Latvian landscape and by the healthy state of its ecology. At a time when the environment of European countries becomes ever more homogeneous and barren this wise bird has found in Latvia the most advantageous conditions for its well being. It does not mean, however, that the white stork has been a permanent fixture of Latvian landscape. Among Latvian folksongs, noted bearers of an almost encyclopedic record of our people's life ways, there are few where the name of the stork is mentioned alongside that of other birds. This means that the density of stork nests, as a sign of Latvian identity, is a phenomenon of recent history. (Ziedonis *s.a.*)

The stork is a well known sight in the Latvian landscape and it can be seen walking over the fields in summer looking for food, of which one item is the frog (Hancock *et al.* 1992: 97–102). Frogs breed plentifully in the ponds found near farmsteads and in the natural wet areas and the abandoned drains from the Soviet-era field melioration programme. Thus the stork as a symbol relies on the presence of other landscape symbols for its food, so it can be considered an indicator of a traditional cultural landscape in ways other than its own presence.

The landscape of Latvia is not only the presence of the key elements but is also associated with the appearance and sense of good management. Overgrown fields signify abandonment and lack of care and the strong degree of agreement that landowners should tidy up reflects the issues raised in focus groups about the dereliction and abandoned machinery and so on found in the countryside. Older people in the focus groups recalled the sense of pride of the farmers in keeping their land tidy, weeds trimmed, ditches cleaned out and so on. The collective farms were also well managed, and the untidiness and dereliction, as well as abandonment, have taken place since the regaining of independence.

The question of time for features to be considered valuable has exercised a number of researchers. Helen Alumäe, Anu Printsman and Hannes Palang

considered the case in Estonia, which underwent a series of political and economic changes similar to those in Latvia. They found that Soviet era remains were not old enough to be considered valuable (Alumäe *et al.* 2003). Although not considered in the research under discussion, this is possibly also the case in Latvia, although the distaste for Soviet landscapes reported in the Estonian study does not seem to be echoed quite as much in the case of Latvia.

The study of land use change reveals that the landscape has never stopped changing and that it has undergone significant change over the course of the last century. What is not revealed by the maps is when these major changes occurred, since the data is from available maps that were not compiled at the time of the major changes being initiated. In fact, it is possible to associate each phase of landscape change with one of the major political upheavals of the 20th century, when social and economic uncertainties also occurred. The first of these took place after the First World War, when Latvia became independent for the first time. This was accompanied by social and economic changes as the manorial estates were nationalised and land reform took place. There was a programme of afforestation following the beginnings of natural regeneration, which happened due to land being abandoned to some extent in the war years and the short civil war that followed. The next phase of change occurred after the Second World War, with the deportation of farmers to Siberia and the creation of collective farms. Land not needed for large-scale mechanised processes was abandoned and turned into forest. Finally, the restoration of Latvian Independence and the land restitution programme have perhaps had the most significant impact and the land use change process is continuing.

Thus, it is possible to see that social and economic transformations accompany land use changes, which are reflected in people's perceptions of the country landscape. Instead of the landscape providing a constant backdrop for social and economic change, it is also changing, giving rural inhabitants little to hold on to as they are forced to adjust to evolving circumstances. It may be that the accession to the European Union and access to agro-environment programmes will help to stabilise the situation and at least offer some potential for undertaking landscape management.

Conclusions

This research project has found that there are certain key elements that compose the traditional Latvian landscape and help to form an archetype that contributes to the Latvian sense of identity. It was also found that recent changes to the landscape, especially as a result of land abandonment, are perceived in a negative light. The rural landscape is an important contributor to the Latvian sense of identity and policy makers need to pay more attention to the protection, management and restoration of archetypal landscapes and landscape elements, many of which are at risk of disappearing.

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