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Is ecological quality similar to landscape quality?

By Pierre Donadieu

In other words, is the diversification of ecological environments accompanying a better appreciation of the aesthetics of landscapes? Nothing is less certain!

This is what explains the Swiss anthropologists Valérie Miéville-Ott and Yvan Droz in the last issue of *Economie rurale*¹. The Swiss Confederation has since 1997 adopted a deliberate landscape policy (La Conception du Paysage Suisse). It "associates landscape and biodiversity issues" (p. 53) and induces a legislative protection which confounds the aesthetic classification and the eco-biological values of natural milieu. In wetlands, for example, the only indicators of landscape quality are indicators of biodiversity. They do not take into account the different possible perceptions on these environments.

The government posits that by preserving the environmental quality of a territory, its landscape quality is de facto preserved. However, what is true in a naturalistic and objective approach is not in a culturalist approach. An ecologically rich landscape, write the anthropologists, is not necessarily a beautiful landscape; on the contrary a landscape with low biodiversity is not necessarily ugly.

But since 1996, the Swiss Constitution gives farmers the opportunity to provide landscaping services paid by local authorities, particularly on surfaces qualified as environmental compensation. Given the naturalistic assumptions of the law, only the eco-biological characteristics of rural areas are protected or restored. In parallel to this, the Government gives also direct payments to halt the decline of farms and preserve "open" Swiss landscapes.

The European research² in the last decade, in France, Italy and Switzerland in particular, has shown that it was not realistic to identify characteristics of good and beautiful landscape for all. It also outlined that tensions and conflicts between actors in landscapes production constitute the social place for a redefinition of the collective rules (standards), in a necessarily political frame (the stakes) and ideological (the aesthetic and ethical values).

Where there is landscape discord, a landscape consensus can be built, only if the values, shared or not, (memory, biodiversity, beauty, leisure, market, etc.) are expressed in a democratic public debate.

However, limitations exist in this participatory approach. In a negotiation, representatives of groups involved may harden their positions to lock, and experts involved can also not be as independent of public authorities or private lobbies as it seems.

Yet the use of the concept of landscape in the redefinition of the possible visions of the future of a territory is a very valuable tool. When properly used by landscape professionals such as landscapers, for example in plans and landscape charters, this concept can raise awareness among residents and elected on the multiple values at stake. It also can help to organize them among the new and old social groups and associations, and to inform policy makers upon arbitrary standards that may emerge in the legal system.

The ecological quality is one aspect of the landscape quality. This should not be concealed when, in France, modalities on how to implement the recent legislation called Grenelle are debated.

¹ V. Miéville-Ott et Y. Droz, « Évolution de la représentation paysagère en Suisse à partir du programme Paysage et habitats de l'arc alpin ». *Économie rurale* n° 315, Janvier-février 2010 pp. 46-57.

² M. Berlan-Darqué, Y. Luginbühl, D. Terrasson (édit.). *Paysages : de la connaissance à l'action*, Versailles, Quae, 2007.