

**17 MAI 2010*****What indicators of landscape quality?****By Pierre Donadieu*

The European Landscape Convention signed in Florence in 2000 defines the landscape policy as "an expression by the competent public authorities of general principles, strategies and guidelines that permit the taking of specific measures aimed at the protection, management and planning of landscapes" (art.1.b) This public policy requires the definition of landscape quality objectives. They are defined as: "for a specific landscape, the formulation by the competent public authorities of the aspirations of the public with regard to the landscape features of their surroundings". (art. 1.c)

The Convention does not say how each country that has ratified the Convention, will assess the implementation of the text; if and how it will verify that the landscape quality objectives have been defined and achieved or not. The implementation of the text and the evaluation of the policy remain the domain of each nation.

In each country, a way to evaluate the success (or failure) of a landscape qualification policy would be to define indicators of landscape quality. To clarify the concept of indicator, it is necessary to distinguish first, in an area of evaluation (a commune for example) *the generic quality of a landscape*. This can be evaluated by using *objective and measurable indicators of environmental quality*. For example, the distribution of land use patterns, the nitrate content of water or heavy metals in the soil, the plant or animal species diversity, the landscape fragmentation, their diversity, etc.. The material quality is then expressed in respect of standards related to health, human, animal and vegetal safety. But this quantitative indicator is not enough. No more than the number of decibels to define the quality of a sound environment, or the amount of carbohydrates, lipids and proteins for food.

Therefore it is necessary to subsequently define the *specific quality of a landscape*. It is comparable to an opinion on wine or meal, or the character of a sound environment. Unquantifiable, the judgment of taste is subjective. However, it can be regarded as a social and cultural construction which today is spreading over through design and marketing. The functional properties of goods are indeed abandoned in favor of cultural, symbolic, playful or hedonistic motivations, created by elites¹. Landscape as a distinctive character of a given territory, is often considered a "market product", especially in the tourism economy.

Just as the perfumers who recourse to "nose", wine lovers to wine experts, gourmets to food critics, the political leaders in charge of landscape qualifications call for landscape professionals, especially landscape experts. The competence assigned to them by a society is to recognize sensitive characteristics distinguishing a landscape from another, or structuring its future development. This induces the ability to describe and give them values in a given historical and cultural context. It is, for example, what do experts of landscape World Heritage in UNESCO. Indicators of landscape quality then correspond to predetermined criteria (uniqueness, authenticity, diversity, etc.).

However, as far as the "the people aspirations" are concerned, the generic and specific indicators of landscape quality, produced by experts, may be questioned by the stakeholders and users of these landscapes. Other values than only trade are indeed associable to a landscape or a place: not only beauty, but also leisure, eco-biological wealth, memory, natural and cultural heritage, jobs or local identities and social otherness. This makes varied the expected skills of experts and the results of their expertise.

¹ Olivier Assouly (édit.), *Goûts à vendre, essais sur la captation esthétique*, Paris, Institut français de la mode, 2007.

It is difficult to define indicators of landscape quality. Existing solutions are unsatisfactory. We indeed run two risks: first to reduce the judgment to the respect of quantitative standards (the landscape as environment providing health, safety and comfort); then to stick to elitists visions distant of the "people aspirations" (the landscape as site of exception, as national or global heritage).

The landscape quality objectives to be achieved should involve both sides of quality: the objective and the subjective. On the one hand by using quantified indicators (eg. environmental and economical), one the other hand with societal indicators for assessing the evolution of life environment as local common goods. These indicators still have to be defined.
