



Landscape - Is there a common understanding of the Common?

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Landscape is an important sectoral issue in its own right. The RMA specifically identifies landscape in s6(b). Here, “*outstanding natural landscapes*” are the matter of national importance. This tripartite dilutes the great import of “*landscape*” in the every-moment, every-day and ever-transforming stage-set for the theater of life³. Landscape is both the public realm and borrowed private realm of an integrated common.

Environment becomes landscape when seen, perceived and interpreted. Landscape is the intersection of nature and culture. This represents two human identity products of one origin, relentlessly chasing each other, dominating one another at times or sometimes in balance.

The rapid emerging and uncertain condition where life on earth is seemingly currently positioned is considered an unacceptable imposition. This sensitive condition is overtly sensed and experienced as landscape. Landscape as a construct needs to regain priority as a central topic in the management of areas and resources. The primacy of the RMA s5 promise demands clear responses and guidance to the variations that collective social, economic and environmental processes and actions have on landscape. Recognition of a multidisciplinary knowledge approach is therefore necessary. It is in this context that landscape becomes the integrating common foundation. To achieve this, it is important to investigate the meaning and definition of landscape.

The New Zealand Institute of Landscape Architects (NZILA) define landscape as:

“Landscape is the cumulative expression of natural and cultural features, patterns and processes in a geographical area, including human perceptions and associations.”
(NZILA - Best Practice Note 10.1)

However, I prefer the European Landscape Convention (ELC) definition of landscape as a starting point:

“Landscape – an area perceived by people whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors.” (Council of Europe, European Landscape Convention, Article 1,2000)

³ Tripartite of “*outstanding natural landscapes*” is considered by the writer as an incomplete and restraining perception of landscape and as a result leads to misinterpretation of what ‘*landscape*’ is and/or comprises. The writer considers that the focus on “*outstanding natural landscapes*” is woefully insufficient to do justice to the enormous importance of landscape as an everyday, ordinary and continuous experience. This presence of landscape as “the stage-set for the theater of life” is too overwhelmingly fundamental to be managed within the confines and the cursory and limiting construct that s 6(b) produces.

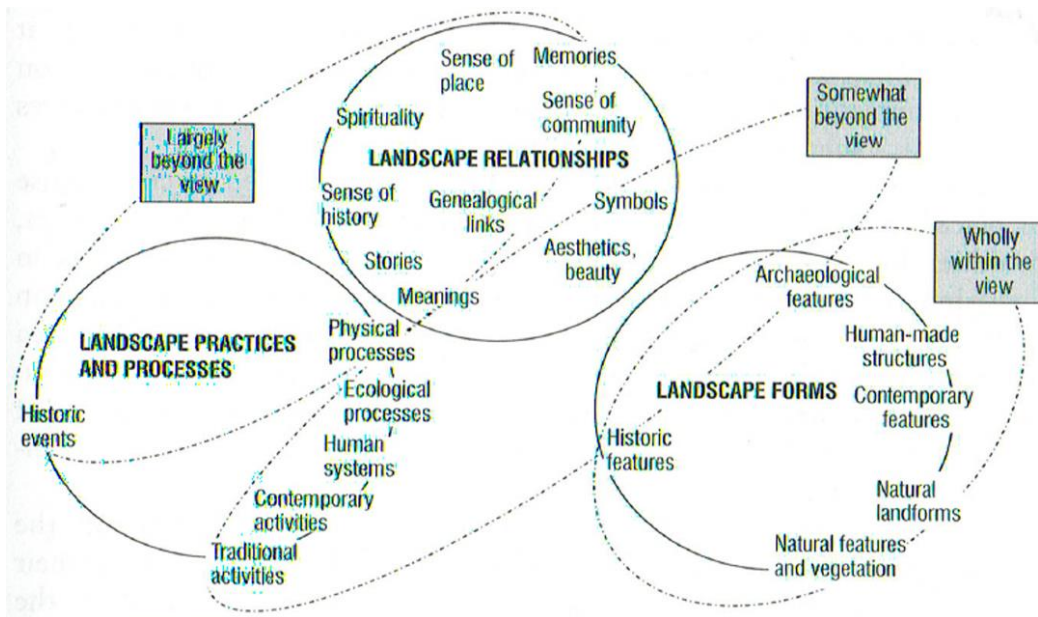
Irrespective, these careful wording(s) embrace a number of important concepts:

1. A landscape is a relatively bounded area, and that geographic recognition depends on human perception which often is spontaneous and intuitive in its identification (within a coherent area of land). Landscape therefore includes the subjective and perceptive dimension, which is the contemplation of an area (aesthetic view) and the objective and (spatial/geographical dimension).⁴
2. Landscape is the product of a relationship between a person ('the observer') and the object ("the observed"). The dominant agency is vision – "that seen" but other senses also come into play. Equally important is "perception" which passes through a lens of experiences and relationships. A multiple vision emerges - that "seen" (visible) and that "perceived" (understood) interpreted through plural meanings.
3. A fundamental factor of landscape is its "distinctive character" which has resulted from a complex pattern of actions and interactions manifest in both historical legacy (heritage) contemporary dynamics (land-use and management) and economic and social/community dynamics (associative). This introduces landscape as a constantly re-worked palimpsest, a historical phenomenon, as well as a reflection of evolution.
4. It implies that distinctive places are frequently an outcome of either a fortuitous combination of natural and human factors and/or the reverse, an accumulation of an unfortunate series of natural (catastrophic) and human (deleterious interventions) events and/or a combination of both.
5. Interaction also takes seeing and perceiving beyond an immediate process to one of ongoing reciprocal action and influence. This also provides connotations of connection and relationship/interrelationships (associative factors) inherent in a deep re-elaboration and transformation of place (spatial factors) over time (temporal factors).

Most importantly, there is human agency involved in the perception of landscape and the definition acknowledges that landscape is the result of the interaction of natural and cultural factors. What is emphasized is the presence of humans both as an active component of continuous and transformative interactions with nature, and as the synthesizer of definition.

This complexity and interactive dynamic is best illustrated in the following diagram:

⁴ Landscapes are considered to be boundless, and are more often than not seen and perceived as both static and dynamic geographic (objective) and contemplative (aesthetic) entities. Landscapes can be considered as hierarchical entities. Boundaries are either referenced and/or imposed for 'management purposes' e.g. RMA "*outstanding natural landscapes*". It is important to recognise that landscape is a 'whole' – i.e. that seen - and are not the '*features*' within any particular landscape; reference s6(b) "*outstanding natural features*"



(Source: After Countryside Agency 2006, Stephenson 2007 and Selman 2008)

Landscape Assessment (LA) therefore needs to recognise these complexities and interactions. Current LA practice recognises that landscape factors include three broad categories:

1. Biophysical (Abiotic and biotic/bio-physical including formative factors)
2. Perceptual (Experiential, sensory and aesthetic factors)
3. Associative (Cultural, heritage - including time-depth 'stories' and economic and social influences)

In applying a full appreciation of landscape dynamics it is also important to reflect on the fact that LA is but one part of the landscape planning, design and management process. This reality is often neglected in the focus on a limited and restrained application of LA [partial s6(a)/NZCPS 201) Policy 13 and s6(b)/NZCPS 2010 Policy 15 and s7(c)], particularly at a Regional and District policy formulation stage. The directive legislative constraints seemingly deny a full constitutive landscape policy input across all geographic areas, land-use typologies and sectoral domains. In this sense landscape currently under-performs in the policy context. Critical landscape management policies are limited and perceived as been necessary and only applied to the 'prettiest' or outstanding areas. Amenity landscape identification is also a selective policy process. The wider common remains as an overlooked construct and place.

The corrective process, the recovery, regeneration and creation of landscape as place, is applied through the resource consent application and implementation process, and often in the absence of formal regulation. Here, landscape as landscape architecture, planning and design performs as a different and inclusive process in the construction and management of specific interventions, whether as new developments and/or the management of existing areas and features.



The constitutive and corrective processes are an important distinction in the consideration of landscape in the RMA context.

Can we change the policy context of landscape?⁵ The emerging urgency of creating resilient and adaptive landscape beyond that of a selective protective safety culture to one replaced by an emergency culture is yet to be imagined. Certainly, historic and evolving economic, social and political inscriptions on the landscape are no longer considered to be side effects of human interventions. They are a direct expression of nature and culture acting interdependently. The plea for a closer and more intensive inspection of the relevance of landscape and its constituent parts is to be taken seriously, not just as an assessment framework, but as the fundamental basis of an applied planning and design process.

The realisation of a common understanding of the Common is critical to this important landscape endeavor.

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⁵ **General Note:** *Landscape Assessment* is represented throughout this paper as the assessment of landscape as a resource (Biophysical, Perceptual, Associative). Without confusing matters, paradoxically, *Visual Assessment (VA)* is considered to be a closely allied and integrated process with LA. However, VA specifically assesses views and amenity effects. LVIA's are normally processed as one entity, with separate and distinctive methodologies applied to each.