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Principles for the Safeguarding of historical Landscape

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**Principles for the Safeguarding of Historical Landscapes Part II: Theme II:
Agenda I. by Professor Brian Hackett, England.**

The basic matter of principle which faces anyone who has to make proposals for safeguarding an historical landscape is that landscape is alive and constantly changing as it matures, regenerates and matures again. Apart from the difficulty of safeguarding something which is always changing, compared with preserving a static building, the question always arises whether landscape is a proper subject for preservation.

There is a difference between natural landscapes which are not subject to the interference of man and those landscapes which are largely the result of a design made by man or of an activity of man. With the former, it is usually a change of climate which brings about a change to the landscape, and climatic changes take place slowly over a long period of time. Thus, there seems little argument when considering the policy for safeguarding natural landscapes — they should be disturbed as little as possible. The dilemma, however, with landscapes of the latter kind is that man's activities change very rapidly, sometimes every few years, and perpetuating this kind of landscape means maintaining what will probably be an out-dated use of the landscape. A right policy, I suggest, is that the historical rarity of the landscape is one matter to take into account, while beauty is another matter. If, for example, there is little possibility that a new design for the landscape will produce something more beautiful, why change what is already so delightful? But coming up against the hard facts of life, the financial resources and the pressure of other land uses will, often regrettably, have to be taken into account.

There are two kinds of natural landscape that require different safeguarding principles. Mountain areas with little or no vegetation can withstand human impact without much damage, and in any case, the number of visitors is restricted by the difficulty of the terrain and the climate; preservation is likely to mean minor work in a few places where wear and tear might take place. On the other hand, natural forests or natural wetlands can only accept a limited access by man without their ecological characteristics being changed; preservation will mean accepting the principle of limited access, and that restricted to defined routes. A problem with safeguarding natural landscapes is the difficulty of controlling interference from some external source, like pollution from an industry in the locality.

The degree of access is, of course, the first principle to decide upon. In Britain, the National Trust's policy is that preservation or protection must have priority over access by the public. And when their properties comprise agricultural and forest land and nature reserves, access must be restricted even though they have a duty to preserve landscape and

buildings "for the nation's use and enjoyment".

There is also the matter of preserving the peace and quietness of the landscape as well as preserving its appearance; in addition to the control of transistors, limiting access is also likely to produce quieter conditions. The location of car parks so that they are remote from especially beautiful or interesting places is a device which will limit access, as also limiting the size of car parks. The idea of limiting the hours and days of opening to the public is a device frequently adopted.

The best known formal gardens, particularly those in France, were designed for use by large numbers of people, and the paths and hedges served to control the crowds where they could do no damage. But those in Britain were smaller and sometimes the paths were grass walks. Thus, there is something of a problem with large crowds. It should also be noted that an army of gardeners was available when these gardens were laid out.

With some of the examples of safeguarding historical landscapes, it has been possible to retain the expertise of the former owner or his family, and of the gardeners previously employed, in devising plans for maintaining the character of the landscape. This has proved to be a good principle to adopt for the sake of continuity. At the beginning of this paper, I referred to the basic decision as to the principle to be adopted towards safeguarding. One could aim towards historical precision, as at Williamsburg in the U.S.A., or one could modify the planting to make use of different species or varieties of improved hardiness. Perhaps a useful principle to adopt is to be historically correct with the smaller plants in the flower beds, but to relate the tree and shrub species to those more commonly used today on the grounds that trees and shrubs are not inspected at such close quarters as flower beds. An exception to this principle is the individual specimen tree which may even be connected with some historical incident. In such cases, the likely results of tree surgery would be considered before a decision was made to cut down the tree.

A similar policy is often the right one for woodlands and groups of trees. When these are small in size and part of small scale landscape, selective and individual treatment is necessary — one tree being felled here, while another tree there would be given more room by pruning. But large woodlands out in open country can accept a management policy of clear felling in blocks, provided this is carried out in accordance with a landscape plan. An advantage of this latter policy is that it can produce an income which can be used for the sensitive areas of preservation.

An example of the historical precision problem occurs when a woodland was managed under the coppicing technique which produces numerous thin and straight stems from one

root system. This kind of timber was used for making chairs, bows and arrows, but is little used today. Nevertheless, to retain its particular character, regular felling of the thin stems must take place every few years. The coppiced woodland is also a much favoured habitat of wildlife.

Other decisions which have to be made with respect to woodlands include natural regeneration as against replacement planting, and selective felling to let in more light and thus develop a richer ground flora. When a woodland has become derelict and the safeguarding work will have to include some clearance of undergrowth, this has given the opportunity in Britain to use volunteer groups of young people as the work is easily achieved under direction.

The idea of continuity which is associated with woodland management raises a matter of principle about the date in history to which the safeguarding exercise should seek to revert. There is, of course, the argument hinted at previously that landscape is always changing as the conditions change. It is extremely difficult to dogmatise on the date in history that should be the objective. In England, many of our formal gardens were destroyed in the 18th century and replaced with landscapes of the English School — do we now revert to the original formal landscape if extensive restoration work is needed? The example of Williamsburg in the U.S.A. was a straightforward decision because the landscape immediately prior to restoration was of no particular interest.

In resolving this kind of dilemma, one should have regard to the rarity of landscapes of a particular period. It is of considerable historical interest to retain a few examples of each period and this could be the deciding factor when faced with a landscape in poor condition which retains elements both of its formal state and of the informal landscape which might have been introduced in a few places.

The advisor to the National Trust has suggested the following principles for restoring avenue planting which is in a state of old age. If the avenue is very wide and not very long and forms the visual frame to a building, the policy should be to replace the trees here and there because the foliage will be more visually significant than the trunks of the trees. If the avenue is very narrow, then reasonable lengths could be clear felled and replanted on each side. And, if the avenue is long and the width brings the trunks of the trees into prominence, another complete avenue should be planted elsewhere to take its place. There is, of course, the possibility that planting could take place outside and parallel with the trees, but this would eventually lead to a temporary situation of a much wider avenue.

In the open landscape, modern farming and forestry techniques produce rapid and often violent changes to the landscape, and it is difficult to object to them because of the economic and labour problems of maintaining the old farming practices, whilst in Britain the safeguarding problem with forestry is that the current situation demands coniferous instead of the traditional deciduous trees. Those who have the opportunity to give landscape advice are able to make proposals which go some way towards maintaining the framework of the historical landscape. But it is only in special places that historical correctness can be secured. In Britain, some parts of the ancient Royal Forests are kept more or less in their medieval state by the Forestry Commission, and the heather covered uplands still keep the sheep grazing land use, though for how long in view of synthetic materials is a question. These ancient sheep grazing lands are, however, also under threat from the invasion of commercial forestry.

There is an interesting example in the Shenandoah National Park in the U.S.A. where the pastoral landscape of the 18th and 19th century has been restored after it became overgrown with the regeneration of the natural forest when farmers moved westwards to the profitable lands of the Mid West. The early grazing practices have been reintroduced in order to keep this restored area in its historical state.

The example in the Shenandoah National Park raises the question whether one should allow an area to return to its original natural state or to some subsequent historical period. Thus, those people who may say that working in an organisation which safeguards the historical landscape do not have the challenge of creative work have overlooked the philosophical and moral challenge of deciding what is the true historical landscape.