PROTECTION OF RURAL CULTURAL LANDSCAPES:
A CHALLENGE TO SUSTAINABLE LANDSCAPE DEVELOPMENT

Walter Zsilnicsar, Graz

Introduction

Geographers share their interest in human culture and its visible expression in the various faces of cultural landscapes with historians, sociologists, political scientists, anthropologists and many other. There was always a great emphasis on the protection of human cultures, especially rare ones with long traditions and facing the danger to disappear in the future, yet it was more or less the built environment – historical monuments, settlements and buildings – which attracted our attention. The preservation of historical city-centres, towns and villages became the concern of engaged and active citizens, many of them having their mental roots in the green movement of the late sixties, of politicians and journalists with a similar background.

Protection zones for historic centers or architectonically valuable settlements were being established, supervising commissions had been installed to control interferences into the existing building structure and outside the closed settlements old and traditional farm houses no longer were left to decay, were demolished or „modernized” by their proprietors but, increasingly, changed their owners and became permanent or second homes of city-dwellers. This phenomenon, however, must not only be interpreted as a consequence of growing responsibility for the past and for the cultural heritage among the common population, but it is also the result of romanticism, especially with in urban society, and the longing for traditional values, stability, safety, orderliness, and ease. We can study the negative consequences of this mentality in our cultural landscape: questionable imitations of rural architecture, transference of rural house types into regions where they never existed before (e.g. spreading of the Salzburg-Tyrolean house type all over Austria), the „embellishment” of single family homes with symbols of traditional rural architecture and culture. All these processes have been fairly well documented in scientific literature, so there is no need to enter in to a deeper general discussion on this topic.

On the other hand, relatively little has been said so far about the problem of how to protect the traditional image of our agricultural landscapes. A lot of questions arise in this respect, and we must confess that not every single one can be answered properly or leads to a variety of possible solutions. It is not the goal of this paper to find an appropriate way how to protect our cultural landscapes but once more to draw an attention to this still unsolved problem.
Natural vs Cultural Landscapes

The relationship between man and environment has always been a focal theme for geographers. Nature unaffected and undisturbed by human impact and interference was the great counterpart of man. At the beginning of our social and cultural evolution, human being was an equal part of his natural environment. Because of limited tools, possibilities, requirements and technical skills he largely depended on the nature. Only when he began to create his own environment by shaping natural landscapes and transforming them through his skills and design to meet increasing needs and desires for a new type of transformed landscape, a cultural landscape came into being.

This man-made environment reflected to a human set of ideas, customary believes, practices and social bindings as they arose and developed in particular places or regions, constituting a distinct complex of ethnic, religious or social traditions. Thus, an intimate connection between place and culture can be postulated.

Each culture is in its sense unique and can be attributed, to some extent, to the characteristics of the place or region in which it originated. Cultural landscapes have been significantly transformed through human activity in the course of history.

It is quite obvious, therefore, that landscapes, be they semi-natural or cultural ones, are subject to continuous change. The qualitative (time-related) aspect of landscape transformation may range from very slow (thousands of years) to very quick processes (a few seconds in case of catastrophes). These processes originate and alter existing landscape structures, artifacts, values and institutions and become subject to geographic investigation. Artifacts are material objects produced and used in order to satisfy human demands. They, therefore, constitute a substantial part of our cultural landscapes.

The development of cultural landscapes is largely determinated by the physico-geographical preconditions (relief, climate, soil, vegetation, hydrologic conditions etc.) and by the character, intensity, velocity and duration of human impact onto this natural environment. Man’s relationship to his natural environment has been a recurring topic of geographic research. Up to the end of the sixties, the study of cultural landscapes centered mainly around questions as which were the visible consequences of man’s activities in space, and by analysing and quantifying them to detect and describe various types of cultural landscapes such as industrial, mining, touristic, urban and agricultural ones or differentiating them even more accurately into heavy industrial, wine growing, alpine pasture, fruit growing or horticultural landscapes and so on. A new and world wide concern about ecological imbalance and environmental degradation caused human geographers not only to concentrate on man’s technological capacity to change the face of the Earth and to discuss the social, economic or political consequences of this process but also to reflect the role of the physical environment in emerging cultural landscapes and regional diversity. Special emphasis now got an investigation of the manifold and different interrelations between man and his environmental constraints.

Human actions and attitudes were no longer dominated by mere economic goals but increasingly focused on their socio-political and environmental consequences. Conferences, symposia, discussions on this topic have been organized on the local, regional, national and international levels; declarations, programs, political manifestos
have been published but most of them did not go far beyond mere lip–services, if we only think of the results of the last world climatic conferences.

No doubt, there is an increasing concern about the status not only of our immediate environment but also of the deteriorating global situation; but still, whenever there are decisions demanded between landscape protection or preservation and economic development, job-creation, installation of new traffic facilities, energy supply or construction of new dwellings and the like, economic goals and demands usually are given priority to environmental targets. We need only observe the discussion on the economic constraints and environmental risks of atomic power plants in both the East and the West.

Being aware of this, we are calming our conscience by the protection of a few wild areas as „national parks” and of some traditional cultural landscapes as „nature parks” or „protected landscapes”, but these have also been adversely affected by the pressure of tourism.

There may yet be another reason to save a few of such areas more or less untouched and undisturbed by economic exploitation because natural or wild areas least affected by human impact represent an ecosystem where the functioning of different components may be observed and studied properly to serve as a basis for the comparison between landscapes which have been severely modified by economic activities with those natural landscapes least impacted. Thus, the level of degradation can be fathomed and it can be determined what should be done for the restoration of the landscape-ecological balance.

The growing concern of geographers with the preservation of cultural landscapes may also result from a reorientation of regional investigations focusing mainly upon locational analyses and spatial organisation models spearheaded by quantitative techniques and the over-dominance of cultural/human and economic geography to questions referring to man’s relationship to his earthly environment. This makes it necessary to view cultural landscapes from both a human and a physical geographical aspect.

**Cultural Landscape and Society**

If the natural environment influenced the development of different structures of society, the existence and quality of cultural landscapes rest on the responses of these social structures to the environment.

Environmental disruption and degradation, ecological imbalance and all kinds of human impact on nature household can be approached and solved only after considering the value – judgements which are determined by the attitudes of the entire society towards the improvement not only in our social and cultural but also and predominantly in our natural environment. The interest and desire of the society in maintaining and improving the quality, of our living space depends largely on the emotional interest of every single inhabitant. Yet single individual normally is too weak to initiate foundational changes in man’s attitude towards his environment. This role can be better played by persons in leading political, social, cultural or sometimes economic positions, by political parties, organisations, lobbying groups and with
increasing importance and influence, by educational institutions and the media. The latter are trend-leaders in creating a new consciousness and responsibility towards our (natural) environment and cultural heritage.

When talking about cultural heritage in this context, hardly anybody thinks about the preservation and protection of historically grown patterns of traditional agricultural or industrial landscapes.

It does not surprise very much, therefore, that already in 1983 S.KUX (1984, p 99 ff) complained during a seminar for environmental commissioners of the province of Styria/Austria about the weak environmental consciousness among the public and its political representatives. Much, quite obviously, has changed since then in our country, mainly due to the fact that „green” politics became increasingly important and generated a growing number of voters which could not be neglected any longer by the established political parties. „Green” voters account for 6-8% of all voters on the national level in Austria, with local elections they may gain much greater importance. Therefore, concern about the environment can be found in every political party program nowadays – since paper is patient. The political willingness to execute the verbal confessions to the necessity of the protection of the natural and cultural environment, however, lags far behind.

This is manifested not only by the still insufficient position of environmental legislation where offences against the law are being prosecuted only insufficiently, if ever, and penalties commonly are too low having the status of a simple cavalier’s offence. In case of conflicts between economy and ecology the former usually gets the better of.

The limited effectiveness of environmental policy which is closely related to the idea of landscape protection can be seen from the role it plays in political reality. There exists no separate ministry of the environment in Austria. Environmental protection was either being co-executed by the Austrian federal ministry of health or, today, by the federal ministry of families and youth. As a consequence the amount of public expenditures for measures in the broad field of environmental protection is much too low. This is not only true for the national but also for the provincial budgets.

In the Austrian province of Styria, the agenda of environmental and landscape protection are looked after by the provincial minister (Landesrat) of agriculture. In the communes we find the strange situation – quite frequently that one and the same person of the commune administrative board is responsible for both economic development and ecological control. The pressure to create new jobs, to provide and improve the infrastructure for communal expansion, and growing demand for new building space usually gets the better of in a decision-finding process evaluating economic interests and the needs for landscape protection. We are still far from translating our emotional willingness to improve the state of the environment into practice. Landscape protection measures go hand in hand with those of environmental care and require long-term investment of time, money and resources. All this may eclipse the speed of the realization of landscape improvement programs, jeopardize the interest of the public and taboo the implementation of such programs.

Downs (1972) characterized changing public interest in conserving and shaping the environment according to a sequence of stages which he called the „Issue Attention
Protection of cultural landscapes

Cycle”. The first or „pre–problem” stage is characterized by lacking public awareness towards environmental problems except for a few experts and interest groups. In the second stage of alarmed discovery and euphoric enthusiasm the issue of environmental problems catches the attention of the public which becomes so alarmed that it strives for the solution of the problems without caring for the costs of investment. The third stage is marked by the realization of the monetary problems. The public becomes aware of the investment cost and the fact that mere technological measures may not always be the best solution to environmental problems. Stage four reveals a gradual decline in public interest towards environmental and landscape protection programs due to the (high) costs of financing them and the difficulties of their implementation. The last or „post–problem” stage markes a declining public interest in the issues of environmental concerns and re–orientation to managing the „problems of every-day-life” (securing existing and creating new jobs, social security, stabilization of income and cost of living, etc.). We should note, however, that the interaction between cultural landscape as man direct and primary environment and society depends on the political, economic and social systems within which environmental and ecological problems arise.

Cultural Landscapes and Legal Constraints

In Austria, therefore, the deficient means of asserting the idea of cultural–landscape or environemental protection results among other factors predominantly from an unsatisfactory legal situation. Legislative and executive agenda are not only split up between the federal government and the government of the nine provinces but, moreover, also within the single governments themselves. Thus on the federal level environmental and landscape protection are being looked after by various governmental and non-governmental institutions such as: the federal ministries of families and the environment, ministries of agriculture, economics, transportation, health and consumers protection, chambers of commerce and labour, national branches of the World Wildlife Fund, Greenpeace, the Austrian Alpine Club and many more.

Nature and landscape protection are being executed by provincial law. Since federal law ranks higher than provincial law, conflicts between environmental protection and other claims to the use of space (construction of federal road and train network, energy supply, mining, land-use for purposes of the national defense policy, etc.) must be expected. Normally, the goal of preserving cultural landscapes, following a mere aesthetic or emotional attitude, is not sufficient for its realization. It needs strong allies to support this idea and lobbyism with leading persons and decision-makers in the powerful construction or transportation economies, with energy suppliers, mining firms like the influential gravel barons, with managers of big and expanding industries and, of course, with politicans, local, regional and national ones is indispensable.

To be aware of and deal with these influences which directly or indirectly interfere with the shaping of landscapes is not generally accepted in geographical research since they largely withdraw from a quantifiable, statistical verification. Anyway, that’s how things run.

Geographers and other space related scientists spend much time and effort describing, analysing, measuring and interpreting various land uses, interdependencies
between rural house-types and ethnic influences, climate, building materials, economic needs and interests, social and property structures, between field patterns and relief, kind of agricultural activity or livestock-farming, smallholding, tenant farming or great landed property and the unique character of different landscapes. This listing could easily be continued further, does it render the whole truth, yet?

If one has not actively experienced the process of making decisions concerning the environment among public or private institutions and dit not study the motives and emotional, educational, societal, sexual, generational or mental backgrounds of the acting persons and groupings involved, he will never be able to really understand how landscapes are actually structured, accompanying processes steered and who the actors behind these processes are.

Even ideologically based decisions concerning landscape restructuration and development as they seemed to dominate the socialist government system of the former Communist Block which officially put great emphasis on the social importance of solving environmental and ecological problems were finally made by leading heads, politicians, functionaries and ideologists who disclosed the dialectic interaction between society and nature, preached societies control over the rapacious exploitation of the natural environment and demanded ecological balance as well as an undivided access to natural resources for every single member of the socialist society. However, as we all know by now, ideology and every day reality are two pairs of shoes.

**Cultural Landscapes and Planning Strategies**

Cultural landscape is primarily one designed by man. The impacts onto landscape can vary considerably as is very well known. Among the various factors influencing the transformation process like time, place, physio-geographical foundations, culture, economy, society, etc. the role of legal constraints shall be well to the fore in this paper.

In Austria, there is no explicit law adjusted to the protection of cultural landscapes and, moreover, as mentioned above, environmental legislation like regional planning is mainly in the competence of the provincial governments. This complicates and delays regulations and measures which might have severe effects on the image of landscapes as can be proved by many examples. To issue a law or a simple decree concerning for instance an installation of a national park, a nature park or a landscape protection area very often is a process lasting years and even decades. This is especially true, if complicated and costly negotiations with different land owners have to be carried on, if either local, regional or national political situation according to the respective distribution of mandates of the governing political parties hampers the finding of consensual decisions. Additional complications may occur, if national interests are violated which can be the case with regard to traffic planning (motorways, railroads, airports, etc.), energy supply (powerplants, storage dams, high-voltage conduction-lines), mining activities or water management.

Legal instruments of planning law touch different administrational levels. This renders their nationwide application more difficult. Even within a single province substantial differences of their application–practice may occur. Additional problems
can result from the differentiation of areas of priority and areas of reservation in respect to landscape protection.

Whereas priority areas exclude explicitly uses or functions other than those defined for the relevant territory and must comply with the general planning-goals areas of reservation have to be evaluated as to competitive uses therein giving those activities priority which harmonize best with the preservation of landscapes of great cultural value. Special emphasis should be on ecologic stability, mainly in areas of intensive agricultural utilization where high grade of mechanization and automatization results from socio-economic pressures, namely on smallholders.

This is perhaps the biggest challenge in the campaign to hand over the cultural heritage of our man-made environment to our posterity. Much too long the farm population of Western market-oriented countries was seen as a mere economic factor with gradually shrinking nationwide importance. The majority of the population neither did care very much about the fate of the whole sector nor of the single farmer. Only recently the exploding expenditures for the agrarian sector on the national and EU levels where they account for more than 50 % of the whole EU budget together with a series of scandals have alerted the population.

Cultural Landscapes and the Situation of the Farms

The globalisation of agribusiness provided for a rich and extending supply with agrarian consumer goods not only from the region but from all over the world throughout the year at reasonable if not falling prices. For the small Austrian private family-farmer the liberalisation of the agro-market inside the European Union was destructive. Between 1981 and 1991 the number of full-time farms decreased from 115,806 (1981) to 83,358 (1991), that of part-time farmers, increased slightly from 182,160 (1981) to 185,648 (1991).

Increasing sensitiveness to the difficulties of Alpine farmers in their conflict with European and even American industrial farming can be observed with the Austrian population and government. An important role here must be attributed to reports of the media concerning genetic manipulation, the use of hormones in cattle-breeding, increasing supply with industrial food and penetration of chemicals into food production. Especially the pressure, if not to say compulsion on governments, consumers and small producers or shop-keepers by big firms of the international agribusiness, has raised concern not only with people sympathizing with the green-movement.

Long enough sufficient supply with agrarian products at very reasonable prices could cover public care for the troubles of the individual agrarian sector. But now, facing tremendous losses of agrarian population and culture throughout the country, being confronted with the abandonment of farms, extending fallows and reforestation of farm-land, with the disappearance of alpine pastures, old orchards composed of traditional fruit trees being replaced by monotonous plantations, hedges and alleys accompanying or enclosing fields, meadows or roads, public awareness for our endangered cultural landscapes is spreading out.
Leap-frogging of single family dwellings on the outskirts of towns and villages, interference into the traditional rural appearance of settlements through a non-rural type of construction, hardly adapted to the existing structures, an evident loss of scale and taste within large groups of the population, the fact that many old villages have preserved their former rural appearance only since they lost their socio-economic background, thus in a sense having been transformed to Potemkin-villages, all these processes have accelerated the destruction of cultural landscapes. A loss of characteristic landscapes means very often less ecologic stability.

Membership in the European Union gave efforts a new chance to overcome this defective development. EU decree Nr. 2078/92 initiated the program to promote an extensive agriculture complying with the environment and protecting the natural conditions of our living space (Programm zur Förderung einer umwelt-gerechten, extensiven und den natürlichen Lebensraum schützenden Landwirtschaft ÖPUL). This program subsidized Austrian agricultural enterprises directly with a total of appr. 8 billion ATS annually. In 1997, some 29 billion ATS of public means from the EU, the Austrian federal government and the provincial governments were spent all together to support Austrian agriculture. In addition to this agriculture has been granted a considerable amount of indirect subsidies (via tax reductions, social security benefits, etc.). However, apart from the ÖPUL program no substantial effects as to landscape protection can be expected.

As has been mentioned before, large-scale subdivisions of agricultural land instead of a small-scale field pattern was one reaction to the socio-economic changes in the 20th century (deagrarisation process, dramatic losses of agrarian labour-force, heavy mechanization, increase in productivity to meet operational losses from declining producer prices for agricultural products on the national and world markets, etc.) The use of agricultural land was not adopted to natural or environmental conditions but to the requirements of the machinery. As a result „cleared“ landscapes and poor animal and plant diversity have increasingly replaced what ... once was an integrant part of Austria’s cultural heritage: its variety of cultural landscapes. Thus, paradoxically agriculture once responsible for diversity and sustainability, and landscape protector today turns out its severest threatening.

Which strategies could be used to cope with this unsatisfactory development? Regional and local planning have either failed or only led to marginal or partial success in Austria. The main reasons for this failure were the much too late translation of planning laws and regulations into practice, the bestowal of the local mayor with the primary controlling competence in cases of the execution of local areal planning, the still observable priority of economic goals over ecological ones, ineffective environmental laws and fines which is also true with offenses against planning and building regulations predominantly in rural communes, and many more.

The responsibility for this defective development can be found as well in the present administrative structure and constitutional position which concentrates too much power in the hands of the communes and their mayors (Gemeindeautonomie, autonomous status of the communes) as in the splitting up of regional and environmental planning competences and not to forget still unsatisfactory position of landscape
and environmental protection in the heads of great parts of the population. The potential of „green“ votes amounts to about 7% to 8% on the national level, but it may reach higher percentages on a local level or in case of special votings.

Information and education seem to be the key words in the necessary campaign against ignorance and indifference as to cultural landscape conservation. The role which geography should play in this context must be extended to and intensified at all levels of the educational system, starting as early as in the kindergarten. Only if a general awareness and care of the state of the environment can be raised, far beyond environmental pressure groups or activists and environmental scientists, there will be a better chance to reach the brains and the hearts of those whose decisions and activities contribute to a large part of environment shaping.

Austrian functionaires of the chambers of agriculture have finally understood that farmers will have to reshape their traditional image, if they want to give their survival in the future a better chance. Yet, until now there seems only one program to get broader acceptance among the farmers themselves and among the public: the farmer as a landscape-gardener. And farmers again are these mostly criticized again.

An independent Alpine farmer, who for centuries was used to support his family with his own production including all the risks which might occur suddenly, found himself confronted with completely new situation: that of no longer earning his living mainly from his activities as a free agricultural entrepreneur but largely depending on an income from a private service for the public or being an ordinary labourer in other words. This is not just a question of redistributing income or changing jobs it is a matter of self-confidence, self-respect, self-consciousness, one of the long historic tradition of a the whole class of our society. So such changes induce long-lasting and far-reaching processes. Moreover, final evaluation of such an image shaping process depends also largely on size, economic structure, social structure, site, and farms situation. The image of the „free“ Alpine farmer in Austria is quite different from that of the pre-Alpine lowland farmer; the former generally being much deeper rooted to his profession and tradition inspite of harsher living conditions than the latter being closer to the market and benefitting from much easier working or infrastructural conditions.

It is quite clear that the socio-political frame conditions based mainly on economic parameters is reflecting only one side of the social role of agriculture. Monetary subsidies from the EU or the state, agricultural development programmes (EU Agenda, 2000) certainly have an impact the structure of cultural landscapes, however, not always in a sense which guarantees the sustainable development of a diverse and ecologically balanced landscape.

It is an open secret that agricultural policy in Brussels despite Austrian commissioner in a leading position is dominated by the national policies of the large member states (France, Italy, Germany, Spain) with a completely different agro-structure form that of a small Alpine country like Austria. Generally speaking, it is a conflict between large-scale farms and small-holdings, between agro-business and individual family farms, between mass and diversified production, and in some sense between economy and ecology. Of course one must be aware of the simplifying effects of such drastic comparisons, the reality being much more complicated. However, if science does want
the results of its research to be understood and accepted by the public and even more important by its political representatives, it is necessary to give up scientific arrogance, self-sufficiency and ignorance of every-day-life problems. This implies the readiness to use not only a plain, sometimes metaphorical language but also simple knowledge of demoscopy and communication techniques.

Coming back to the problem of the preservation of cultural landscapes, this means that it is not enough to make and present case or pilote studies on the subject unless they take consideration legal basis, opinion and desires of landowners and residential population, attitudes of local and regional decision-makers, possible influence of local power-groups, burger’s initiatives, protectors of the environment and not to forget the media. Among those groups, whose influence in shaping cultural landscapes apart from the local farm population must not be neglected, we should mention hunters, fishermen, tourist-managers and entrepreneurs, local and regional planners, especially those responsible for road construction.

We must not forget to point to one very serious problem in this context, that of land prices. The further existence of a traditionally differentiated cultural landscape will not only depend on the quality of models and projects of landscape protection but also on the (personal) interests, financial power and considerations of present and future land-owners, on their capacity of prevailing their interests against the various pressures on their land, and furthermore on the legal, financial and real political feasibility of landscape protection projects.

What are the perspectives of the average Austrian individual farmer in the face of reduced income, lac of investment capital, increasing difficulties to find marriage partners or successors willing to care for the continuation of farming despite an image of the whole class which does not favour a prosperous future? In many cases the only perspective seems to be resignation, leading finally to the sale of the whole property or its single parts. Considering the enormous differences of value of farm-land and of construction-land, the latter exceeding the prices for farm-land frequently by ten and more times, depending on the situation of the sites of course, the future use of abandoned farm-land can be easily foreseen.

**Conclusion**

Coming to a resumé of the previous very general thoughts concerning the future of agricultural landscapes in Austria, the chance for preservation and sustainable development of our traditional and familiar rural environment do not seem very prospective.

The continuing deagrarisation and urbanisation processes, worsening market position and income situation of the Austrian farm population together with its steady social degradation as can be seen from the many farmers turning their back upon their profession, as well as a legal basis which in many cases is not covering needs and sorrows of the individual small-holders may offer only few chances for the long-term preservation of traditional cultural landscapes. Some of them could be the following:

- An extension of landscape conservation measures from nature parks to all rural areas with an intact agricultural economy.
- New efforts to strengthen the economic basis of agricultural enterprises as one
presupposition for their mid-term survival at least.

• Strong efforts to raise the image of agricultural professions among the population which must go hand in hand with its economic valorization.

• Laws and regulations favouring the landscape scenery of rural areas and controlling more strictly unplanned urbanization.

• Giving our farmers a new and positive image and perspective as landscape protectors with an adequate income gained from these activities (which, of course, is a long-lasting and difficult societal and psychological process).

• Repel as far as possible the negative influences of the (inter)national agrobusiness on the shaping of cultural landscapes.

• And, if all the measures mentioned above do not lead to the desired effect „cultural-landscape-parks or museums” similar to the various „skansens” in Europe could be the solution. Could they??

References


