

LANDSCAPE PREFERENCES OF THE LAKESIDE VILLAGES' RESIDENTS: EXAMPLE OF THE WEST POLESIE

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Abstract. The paper presents the results of partially categorized interviews conducted among the inhabitants of the nine lakeside villages located in the Łęczyńsko-Włodawskie lakeland. The aim of the study was to show how the inhabitants of rural areas featuring high natural values perceive the environment of their own village and what are their landscape preferences. The article presents the landscape elements which, according to the respondents, are the most and the least attractive in terms of aesthetics values as well as are considered to be characteristic or distinctive for a given village. Besides, a set of characteristics features and factors determining the landscape values of the analysed areas were presented. The results showed that the inhabitants attach little importance to the aesthetics values of their dwelling-place. It was also shown that lakes are considered, by the majority of the respondents, as landscape elements of the minor significance. The most important feature deciding on the villages aesthetic qualities occurred to be the law and order referring to the spatial, technical and visual aspects of buildings and sites resulted from the fact that an owner is taking care of a given place. Recently renovated or new sites and objects obtained the highest rate.

Key words: rural landscape, landscape perception, lakeside villages, Łęczyńsko-Włodawskie lakeland

INTRODUCTION

Landscape perception is a subjective issue, which strongly differs among the individual tastes as well as depends on the social groups being examined. Many studies showed differences in landscape assessment between inhabitants of villages and cities [Van den Berg and Koole 2006], residents and tourists [Van Den Berg *et al.* 1998, Scott 2002], farmers and non-farmers [Swanwick 2009, Sowińska-Świerkosz and Chmielewski 2014]. Therefore, it is difficult to define the landscape types and elements which are preferred by the general public. It seems, however, that it is possible to identify specific sites, as well as the

landscape types and landscape features, preferred by the majority of the residents representing a given local community. Such knowledge could be very useful in spatial planning, especially in the development of public rural spaces. As *inter alia* emphasized Bryan *et al.* [2010] and Sowińska-Świerkosz and Chmielewski [2016] contemporary approach to landscape policy should integrate expert evaluations and public preferences. Not only increase trust in agency decision-making but also allows researchers and planners access to community expertise and knowledge which in turn will help them produce better plans and designs [Tress and Tress 2003].

So far conducted studies on rural areas perception by its inhabitants showed two contradictory trends. On the one hand, residents stated that they more prefer natural landscapes than landscapes that have been shaped to a large degree by human actions [Kaplan and Kaplan 1989, Ryan 2002]. On the other, their attach low value to the wild, unmanaged landscapes [Howley 2011, Sowińska-Świerkosz and Chmielewski 2014]. Many studies [Howley 2011, Arriaza *et al.* 2004] also indicate the special role of water as a highly preferred element of the landscape. This relation seems particularly important in the case of Polesia region which is characterized by the presence of hydrogenic landscapes being the basis for the development of tourist function.

While analysing landscape preferences it is important to take into account, in addition to the landscape type, the criteria and features used by the inhabitants in the evaluation of environmental values. This topic is less frequently mentioned in the scientific literature and mainly refers to the group of farmers who have a mostly functional perspective and low rated the 'non-profitable' landscapes [Swanwick 2009, Sowińska-Świerkosz and Chmielewski 2014]. For all the people, however, key is the ability to understand the landscape [Kaplan *et al.* 1998], as well as the familiarity of the landscape and their experiences of similar environment [Gerson *et al.* 1977].

The aim of this paper is to determine how the inhabitants of the Polesie region perceive the landscape and what role, according to them, serves water reservoirs located in each analysed villages in the shaping of their values. The result would also indicate elements perceived as of the highest aesthetic values, being characteristic and distinguishing a given village. Finally, conducted analysis would allow to indicate criteria and features that, in the eyes of the locals, decide on the landscape quality.

METHODS

The analysis were based on the semi-structured interviews conducted with local community members, including important representatives of those communities such as the mayor or a shop-assistant. Interviews were conducted in

direct contact at home or in public spaces. Interviews were based on the five, open questions concerning: (1) the most and the least attractive, (2) the characterise, and (3) the distinctive places and landscape elements in a given village; as well as (4) the most attractive viewpoints and (5) the features and factors that determine the aesthetic value of a particular place. The open form of an interview allowed to clarify and refine the inhabitants responses during the interview and, if needed, allowed to deeper analyse a particular issues during the elaboration of results.

Table 1. Selected demographic characteristic of the respondents

Socio economic variables	Classes
Sex	males – 49%; females – 51%
Age	under 18 years – 11% 19–35 years – 32% 36–65 years – 34% 66 years and over – 23%
Educational status	primary education – 57% secondary education – 37% tertiary education – 6%

In the years 2014–2015 interviews were conducted with 35 people living in nine villages: Draty, Głębokie, Grabniak, Kaniwola, Kochanowskie, Krzywe, Rozkopaczew, Grabów and Wytyczno. The characteristics of the respondents are presented in Table 1. All the villages are located in the Łęczyńsko-Włodawskie Lake District (Central and Eastern Poland), which is almost entirely protected as the UNESCO Biosphere Reserve West Polesie. All of analysed communities are located in the immediate vicinity of the lakes and most of them are important tourist centres.

RESULTS

The first part of the interview aimed to identify **the most aesthetically attractive** places in the respondents place of residence. A little over half of people (51%) indicated a lake. Some of these respondents, however, did not mentioned a lake in the first place, or pointed the element(s) of its development rather than a lake itself. For example, a resident of Kochanowskie village said that ‘the most attractive will be this beach which is being built’ or a resident of Grabniak village stated that ‘it is difficult to say what is the most beautiful in the village, people are saying that this is this lake’. Therefore, the detailed analysis of the respondents answers showed that among those 51% of the respondents, only 35% consider a lake as a place of high landscapes values, while the other 16%

only know that a lake is highly valued by others but they are not deeply convinced about it. Very few respondents (8%) indicated as attractive other than a lake locations featuring high degree of naturalness, such as meadows and forests. Other places indicated by the respondents as possessing high aesthetics values were new or renovated cultural objects such as playground, rope park, multi-family block, school, church or manor house. Such objects were mentioned, almost always very decisively and as the first answer, by 43% of the interviewees. On the contrary, respondents often hesitated when mentioning landscape elements existed in a given village for a long time or those which have not been recently renewed. Persons who indicated such elements (23% of interviewees) usually placed them in the second position or questioned their real attractiveness ('It could be a mansion'; 'I do not know, maybe a chapel'; 'The area near the chapel, although probably not.'). It is also worth emphasizing that 15% of the inhabitants did not indicate a place distinguishing their village in terms of landscape values.

In the next part of the interview, respondents were asked to indicate places with **the most interesting view**, both in the village and in its immediate vicinity. Also in this case, mostly mentioned was a lake (46% of respondents) but also other natural sites such as meadows or peatlands located in the Polesie National Park (26%). It seems, however, that only a few inhabitants consciously pointed out locations with an attractive viewpoints, others only indicated nice or popular places in a village neighbourhood. Interestingly, some respondents mentioned places in which they have never been, but they have heard that they are attractive (e.g. an observation tower in the National Park or a resort that is said to be 'pretty'). The concept of a view, however, was strongly associated with the open and natural areas. Only one person pointed out a place with a view on the Orthodox Church located in the built-up area.

Referring to the **disharmonious places**, the vast majority of the inhabitants did not indicate such areas (75%). Almost all others mentioned abandoned, neglected and unused sites and buildings. These were both public utilities (a fire-station, a disco), private buildings (houses, farm buildings) as well as overgrown fields and meadows. The latter was particularly pointed out by farmers. One of the interviewees, as the least aesthetic element in the village, mentioned the lake, arguing that this element is neglected and of low accessibility. None of the interviewees pointed out places which low aesthetic qualities result from the disharmonious architectural style, form, scale, colour, material or accumulation of advertising billboard.

The majority of the respondents (54%) did not also indicate **elements or places decided on the aesthetic values** of a village. The rest of the respondents mentioned very diverse features and factors, such as care and order (22%), greenery (9%), water (9%), nice people (3%) and access to services (3%). Such differentiation in responses indicates not only the way of perceiving aesthetic qualities, but also the understanding of the notion of aesthetics. Among the in-

terlocutors were people claiming that the beauty of a place does not depend on the wealth of the owner but on his care of the place. Most people, however, claimed that the aesthetics values resulted from the high financial contribution on a given place maintenance.

The last question referring to the **landscape features and elements being characteristic or distinguishing a given village from the surrounding**. Interestingly, as far as the lake is concerned, even fewer people than in the case of aesthetic qualities considered this element as od being characteristic (31%) and distinctive (26%). As the most important objects, being the symbol of a village, were mentioned objects such as school, fire-house, shop, bar, church, and clinic (62%). With regards to the distinctive features and elements, respondents pointed out very diverse objects such as: church, Ortodox Church, school, cottages, hen houses, compact building, sidewalk, or road. It seems that, compared to questions on aesthetic values, the respondents were more informed and convinced, as their responses were interesting and relevant. Indication of distinctive and distinguishing features revealed to be more easy task than the definition of subjective, and in many cases unspecified, aesthetic sensations.

CONCLUSIONS

The interviews show that the majority of the residents do not reflect on the aesthetic qualities of their place of residence. They are unable to identify the most attractive and the least attractive places in terms of landscape, avoiding responses or sharing the opinions of others. It is more easier to them to define places and objects characteristics for their village and distinguishing it from the surrounding areas.

A lake was indicated by a large proportion of the respondents as an attractive place, which is consistent with the results of other studies highlighting the high evaluation of the hydrogenic landscapes [Arriaza *et al.* 2004, Howley 2011]. Surprisingly, however, is the fact the a large part of inhabitants did not mentioned a lake as an aesthetically attractive place, or a characteristic or distinguishing feature of a given village. Although in all analysed areas a lake is located in the immediate vicinity of a village, which is the unique situation in this part of Poland. Perhaps this is due to the habit – for the inhabitants the presence of a lake is obvious and they do not consider this element as an important component of landscape, on the contrary to the people arriving from other regions. There may be also due to the fact that most of the lakes is intensively used by tourists. As a result, the villagers do not have so-called ‘landscape comfort’, which is influenced by the sense of identity of the place, the feeling of the surroundings as their own, safe space [Madurowicz 2006]. It can be proved by the opinion of one of the inhabitants of the Grabniak village (located near a lake

which is frequently visited by the tourists), who said that he more prefer peaceful place among meadows and shrubs far from the noise and dust (noise from the beach and dust from the road) than the lake.

It seems that, according to the inhabitants, the feature that determines the most attractive landscape is the law and order referring to the spatial, technical and visual aspects of buildings and sites resulted from the fact that an owner is taking care of a given place. In such condition, the style, form, scale and colour of buildings and the presence of green and water is of minor significance. The highest rated were 'tidy places' – highly preferable were newly created or recently renovated ones. This applies both to the buildings and their surroundings as well as to the roads, sidewalks, beaches, lakes and agricultural lands. The lowest rated were neglected, destroyed and abandoned sites, including overgrown lakes or fallow lands. This finding is consistent with other studies analysing the landscape preferences of farmers [Scott 2002, Howley 2011, Sowińska-Świerkosz and Chmielewski 2014]. Their results indicated that the wild and neglected landscapes are not preferred by the villagers. It must be emphasized, however, that most of the inhabitants did not indicate any disharmonious places in their village and could not determine the places or features of the landscape with the lowest aesthetic values. It proving that the aesthetic issues are treated by them in a marginal way.

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PREFERENCJE KRAJOBRAZOWE MIESZKAŃCÓW WSI NADJEZIORNÝCH: PRZYKŁAD POLESIA ZACHODNIEGO

Streszczenie. Artykuł prezentuje wyniki wywiadów częściowo skategoryzowanych, przeprowadzonych wśród mieszkańców dziewięciu nadjeziornych wsi Pojezierza Łęczyńsko-Włodawskiego. Celem analiz było ukazanie, w jaki sposób mieszkańcy terenów wiejskich o wysokich walorach naturalnych postrzegają krajobraz własnej miejscowości i jakie są ich preferencje krajobrazowe. W artykule przedstawiono elementy krajobrazu, które zdaniem respondentów są najbardziej i najmniej atrakcyjne pod względem estetycznym i widokowym, najbardziej charakterystyczne oraz wyróżniające ich wieś. Zaprezentowano również zestaw cech i czynników decydujących o walorach krajobrazowych danego miejsca. Wyniki ukazują, że mieszkańcy przywiązują niewielkie znaczenie do estetyki swojej miejscowości. Wykazano również, że jeziora nie stanowią elementu zdecydowanie docenianego przez większość mieszkańców. Najważniejszą cechą miejsc decydującą o ich walorach estetycznych jest natomiast porządek i wyraźna dbałość gospodarza o miejsce. Najwyżej oceniane były miejsca lub obiekty nowe lub niedawno odnowione.

Słowa kluczowe: krajobraz wiejski, percepcja krajobrazu, przestrzenie nadjeziorne, Pojezierze Łęczyńsko-Włodawskie