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Part I

Introduction

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1 The place of the countryside

Is there indeed anything which Science or Mechanism may create to compensate an Englishman for the loss of the Countryside?

Patrick Abercrombie (1926) The preservation of rural England.
The Town Planning Review Vol X11, No. 1, p. 7

The countryside and Shakespeare are the two great things. We should no more tear bits from the countryside than tear bits out of the first folio.

Andrew Motion interview: ‘We’re in the last-chance saloon’ (*Big Issue*, interview with Adam Forrest, 20 August 2013, <http://www.bigissue.com/features/interviews/2880/andrew-motion-interview-we-re-last-chance-saloon>)

The countryside provides a multiplicity of resources: its productive capacity, its landscapes and its wildlife. Few would doubt that the countryside plays a central role in many people’s lives, although we may well disagree as to why it seems important or indeed quite what it means. This book is about the physical resources and environmental quality of rural areas. However, it is also about the way in which those qualities are determined, who benefits from them, how they are able to do so, and who misses out.

The dictionary tells us that countryside is a ‘side’ or a part of the country: ‘a tract of country having a kind of natural unity’ (*Oxford English Dictionary*). However, in practice the idea of the ‘countryside’ is socially constructed. While its definition may indicate assemblages of various plants and animals and topographical features, our appreciation of it embodies particular combinations of these attributes together with its personal, cultural and historical associations. To most of us, the term countryside conjures up ideas of various patterns of agriculture and types of landscape. It also implies something beyond these physical attributes, the human society that lives within it and perhaps is dependent on it, that has moulded the natural resources of an area, its history and its culture. We all have a subjective view of what this entails, perhaps drawing on idealised notions of a rural society or of our heritage. Others may see it in terms of the economic activity located there or in its views or its biodiversity. No single view is correct.

There are several words in this context that would cause us similar problems, such as ‘country’ (Williams, 1973), ‘nature’ (Macnaghten and Urry, 1998), ‘landscape’ (Cosgrove, 1985), ‘rural’ (Hoggart, 1990), or ‘ecosystem’ (Pickett and Cadenasso, 2002). The understandings of these words differ between people and alter through time. Suffice it to say for our purposes, we can never fully know what these terms mean to others

TOTAL ECONOMIC VALUE					
USE VALUES			NON-USE VALUES		
DIRECT USE VALUES		ECOSYSTEM SERVICES	OPTION VALUES	EXISTENCE VALUES	BEQUEST VALUES
Marketed products	Unpriced benefits	Indirect benefits	Potential benefits	Vicarious benefits	Future benefits to others
<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ crops■ meat■ timber■ renewable energy■ space for development	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ recreation■ amenity■ landscape■ heritage	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ flood control■ carbon storage■ water catchment■ waste assimilation■ nitrogen cycling■ biodiversity	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ future heritage values■ potential gene pool■ recreational options	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ knowledge of existence without direct use	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ benefits passed on to future generations

Figure 1.1 Total Economic Value.

and cannot define them in purely physical terms. Nevertheless, our general focus will be clear.

1.1 The values of the countryside

The countryside has value in many ways. One way of looking at this is to consider what is sometimes considered as the ‘Total Economic Value’ (Pearce, 1993), represented in Figure 1.1.

The most obvious value is in terms of the goods and services that are produced using the resources of the countryside: the space, soils, rainfall, sunlight, water, and so on. The commodities produced – the crops, timber or renewable energy – can be sold in markets for a financial return. However, clearly there are many other values that cannot be marketed; the countryside is worth far more than the monetary value of the products it generates. It also provides space and attractive environments for recreation and refreshment. The landscape can be a source of inspiration and activity in the open countryside can stimulate better health (Barton *et al.*, 2009). We might conceive of at least some of these benefits in monetary terms; we often do pay an entry fee to visit a park or a forest. However, we would have more difficulty in placing a value on the Lake District as an inspiration for Wordsworth’s poetry.

The ‘ecosystem services’, such as water catchment, flood control, pollination, areas for fish spawning, waste assimilation or carbon storage, have obvious value, although they are rarely reflected in any market transactions. More recent categorisations, illustrated by the UK National Ecosystem Assessment (UKNEA, 2011), include all of the use values, including marketed products and unpriced benefits within the general category of ecosystem services, defined as provisioning or cultural services. We discuss the ecosystem services approach more generally in Chapter 3. Attempts have been made,

some would say foolishly, to place a monetary value on the Earth's ecosystem as a whole (Costanza *et al.*, 1997) and the resulting number is extremely large, although this may be seen as having little meaning to the extent that human society could simply not exist without these services. However, more meaningful information may be gained from assessments of particular ecosystem services and their specific values (Bateman *et al.*, 2011). An attempt to examine the impact of amenity on property prices, for instance, demonstrated that proximity to areas such as designated conservation areas, woodland, the coast, green space and domestic gardens has a significant impact on house prices. Overall, moving from the bottom 1% of postcodes in terms of environmental services to the highest 1% in England added about £105,000 to a house price (Gibbons *et al.*, 2014). A detailed and comprehensive assessment of ecosystem services has been undertaken in the UK in the National Ecosystem Assessment (UKNEA, 2011).

The countryside also offers other types of value not associated with current uses. Many will simply value the knowledge that the countryside exists, representing an existence value; they are prepared to contribute to causes that seek to protect the countryside from threat even though they never expect to use that particular part of it directly. Similarly, many are prepared to pay to ensure that the countryside is available to future generations for their appreciation; that it has a bequest value. Finally, it may have an option value; people are willing to pay now in order to maintain the option of experiencing its values in the future. An irreversible loss of aspects of the countryside which may be unique or for which there are no close substitutes may lead to more severe losses in the future. Of course, this is something that we can never know with any certainty. However, people may be prepared to forego income now in order to ensure that such options can be available in the future.

However, this approach to value will be seen by many as being too instrumental, suggesting that we only value the countryside for what we get out of it. Others will argue that the countryside has certain intrinsic values, independent of its values to humans. Bunce (1994, p. 34) comments that the countryside is 'a complex of myth and reality, encompassing at one end of the spectrum profound philosophical questions about modern civilisation and at the other, simple escapism.' It is, then, perhaps not possible to separate the myth from reality. We will not explore such complexities and motivations here. Suffice it to say that the countryside has values of a variety of forms associated with its various characteristics and may be judged from a variety of perspectives. What is of consequence to our discussion is that these values are widely seen to be of particular importance and that they range far beyond what we can see represented in monetary terms in markets.

1.2 The countryside in national life

Britain is one of the most urbanised countries and yet, or perhaps because of this, the countryside retains a special place in national life. The land is clearly important to those engaged in agricultural production, but this represents a rather small proportion of the total population. While relatively few of us live outside of urban areas, we regularly

visit the countryside. Natural England, the government agency providing advice and administering policies for the natural environment in England, regularly conducts surveys of visits to the natural environment and has estimated that there were 1.41 billion visits to the countryside in England between March 2011 and February 2012 from a population of 42.1 million.¹ The great majority of these visits, 82%, were to go walking and 70% of these was with a dog. The visits are mostly very local to where people live: 36% were within 1 mile and 81% within 5 miles.

Access to the countryside often has a particular psychological and symbolic significance. The open air and pleasant landscapes are seen as providing not just space for physical enjoyment but also improving health and providing spiritual revitalisation. This is commonly argued as being something that should be freely available to all as a right, and not restricted to a minority of privileged landowners. So access to the countryside may take on a social meaning, a way of challenging a social structure that permits a small minority to have ownership of a large proportion of the land.

Many people say that they would like to live in the countryside. A survey of British social attitudes (Stratford and Christie, 2000) found that while over one in three of those living in a big city had a yearning for the country life, among those who already lived there, fewer than 5% felt the same about moving to a big city. But wherever we live, there seems to be an apparent unanimity of attitudes towards the countryside. In the same survey, three-quarters of both urban and rural residents agreed that ‘the countryside should be protected from development, even if it sometimes leads to fewer jobs’ and fewer than a third wanted farmers to prioritise food production over ‘looking after the countryside’, although it is notable that newcomers to the countryside were particularly protective of it.

The appreciation of certain sorts of landscapes is often seen as peculiarly English. Lowenthal and Prince (1965), some time ago now, set out to describe landscape tastes as reflected in literature, speeches, at public hearings and in newspapers. Their comments still resonate today. They did not claim that these views necessarily reflected the views of the majority of the population, although they had no reason to doubt it. However, they argued that ‘no landscape is intimately more man-made than the English countryside’ (pp. 186–187) and that such tastes have been influential in moulding it into its present form. The countryside that is appreciated is ‘tamed and inhabited, warm, comfortable, humanized’. The idealised landscape is pastoral, a calm and peaceful deer park, with slow-moving streams and wide expanses of meadowland studded with fine trees. The landscape should be ordered and neat; grassland offers an open area easy to walk in and look at. Trees are neatly grouped. The scene should include free-ranging domestic animals, or when arable, hedgerows and small fields. More recent survey evidence suggests a continuing attachment to these sorts of traditional landscape values (Park and Selman, 2011). As we will see in later chapters, landowners have in the past set out deliberately to create scenes resembling idealisations such as portrayed by artists rather than allow ‘real nature’ to dominate.

¹ See: <http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/ourwork/research/mene.aspx#results> (accessed 21 August 2014).



Figure 1.2 Britain’s best view 1: Salisbury Cathedral.
Reprinted from *Country Life* with permission from TimeInc.

Even though the landscape should be in use, there is little concern that contemporary economic pressures should determine what that use should be. In England, for the majority of the population, the distance that we have from any direct contact with the economic use of the land arose at an early stage in our history as the country became urbanised and industrialised. Relatively few of us now have family who are directly connected with the management and use of the land. Considerable importance is given to the protection of the past and its associations; this is part of the more widespread concern for ‘heritage’. Lowenthal and Prince (1965) comment that ‘English resistance to change, English reluctance to disturb relict landscape or townscape, stems from a positive aversion to the contemporary’ (p. 207).

The sort of countryside that is most favoured may be illustrated by a *Country Life* poll in 2002 that asked readers to nominate their choices for ‘Britain’s best view’. Entries submitted were then assessed by a panel of ‘eminent judges’ to select the winners.² The view selected was a photograph of cattle grazing in pasture in front of Salisbury Cathedral and is shown in Figure 1.2. Other winning images were of Buttermere in the Lake District and Chesil Bank in Dorset.

² news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/2151009.stm.



Figure 1.3 Salisbury Cathedral from the Bishop's Ground by John Constable.
© Victoria and Albert Museum, London, reprinted with permission.

Clearly, there will be great disagreement about what might have been included and, of course, the readers of *Country Life* are hardly a random sample of the population, but it is notable that the views selected concentrate on essentially rural scenes. They suggest that landscape preferences have not changed significantly since Lowenthal and Prince wrote their review (Shoard, 2002). More recently Simon Jenkins (2013) has published a book of his ‘100 best views’; again, they are predominantly rural images but reflecting clearly the impact of human activities.

We may also note that the view of Salisbury Cathedral chosen in the *Country Life* poll bears a remarkable similarity to one of Constable’s landscapes of Salisbury Cathedral from the Bishop’s Ground, painted in 1823, reproduced in Figure 1.3. There is, then, a circularity where landscapes become more highly valued because of their association with famous artists and we then look for those qualities in the real world. The other selected views did not include man-made constructions, but they were all fundamentally influenced by human settlement and use, particularly in the grazed hills and uplands that characterise so many of our most highly prized landscapes.³ So, the ‘natural’ environment creates the context, but human influence is also fundamental to its character.

³ Agreement is not universal. George Monbiot (2013) argues that the uplands have been ‘sheepwrecked’: ‘Sheep farming in this country is a slow-burning ecological disaster, which has done more damage to the living systems of this country than either climate change or industrial pollution’ (p. 158).

Realistically, little if anything in the British countryside should be regarded as ‘natural’ at all. Ecologists refer to areas of less intensively managed land as ‘semi-natural’.

These characteristics would contrast with a similar exercise in North America or Australasia. Compare what is valued in the British countryside with the grandeur of the natural environment in the American National Parks. The British countryside is an ‘old world’ cultural landscape, represented more generally by other countries in Europe or by Japan, where land has been managed under farming systems with relatively constant technology over periods of hundreds or even thousands of years.⁴ This is not to say that land in other parts of the world has not been in continuous use. Rather, the point is that in the ‘old world’, the land has been used in a similar way, relatively intensively and more or less continuously in close association with particular human communities. This contrasts with the ‘resettled world’, typified by the USA or Australasia, where European resettlement has introduced a modern agricultural technology and systems that have made a significant break in the continuity of land use.

Green (2002, pp. 183–184) comments:

It is the gradual development of farming over millennia that has permitted the largely spontaneous colonisation of cultural landscapes by indigenous species recruited from naturally open habitats such as dunes, cliffs, wetlands and woodland glades grazed by wild animals. . . . The familiarity to the European of cultural landscapes composed of aggregations of these semi-natural managed eco-systems should not obscure the fact that such landscapes are virtually absent from those parts of the world where Western human intervention is more recent. Even in seemingly comparable and superficially similar parts of eastern North America, forest clearance and farming have resulted not in species-rich semi-natural ecosystems of native species but in species poor examples of meadow and pasture dominated by common European grasses and herbs. . . . None of these [new world] countries has anything comparable to our [European] semi-natural heaths and downs.

Over long periods of continuous use, patterns of habitats and ecosystems have co-evolved with human activities. Wildlife species colonise particular niche habitats that are associated with specific human activities. For instance, the pattern of grazing intensity and the annual cycle in the management of upland pastures over long periods of time have created selective pressures favouring certain associations of wild plant and animal species. Over time, these have developed into characteristic habitats and landscapes. Wetland farming systems with managed water levels and drainage ditches offer a variety of habitats dependent on the continuity and intensity of the agricultural management. Migratory birds visiting the area in winter rely on the opportunity to feed in wet pastures. The wet ditches are suited to a variety of insect and plant species not found elsewhere in the local environment. Even in more intensively cultivated lowland areas, there are associations amongst arable weeds, other plants and wildlife species, such as small mammals. Traditional buildings can also be part of the human/wildlife interaction. For

⁴ Excavations at Heathrow Airport, west of London, found evidence of continuous agricultural use over thousands of years. Farming began during the Neolithic period (4000–2400 BC) when forests were gradually cleared and crops were planted and gathered communally. Pollen found from hedges used as field boundaries showed that people were creating fields with boundaries from around 2000 BC, during the early Bronze Age. http://www.innovations-report.com/html/reports/earth_sciences/report-20033.html (accessed 21 August 2014).

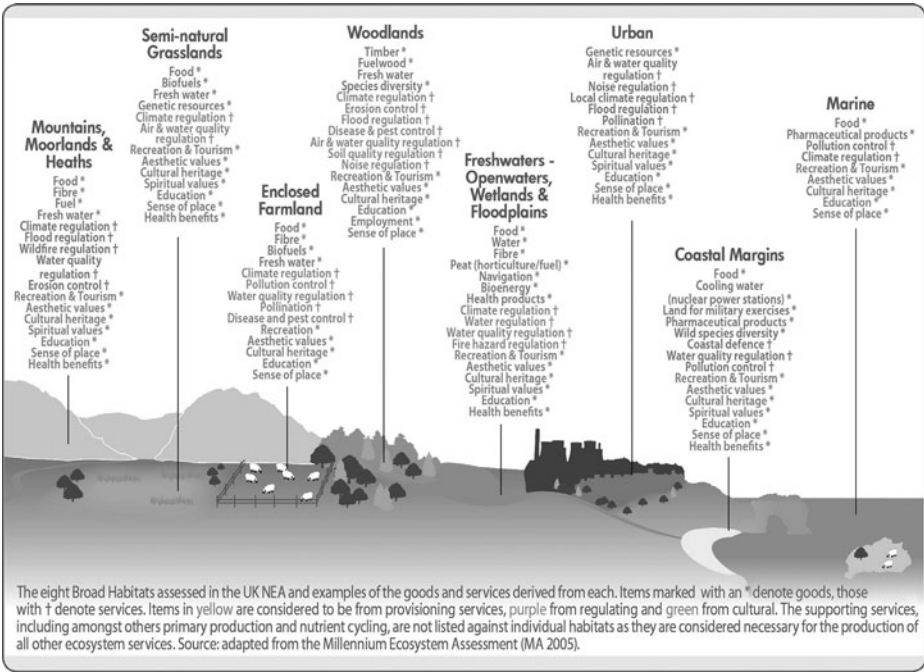


Figure 1.4 Ecosystem services provided by different broad habitat types in the countryside.
Source: UK National Ecosystem Assessment (2011) The UK National Ecosystem Assessment: Technical Report. UNEP-WCMC, Cambridge.

instance, owls nesting or bats roosting in traditionally constructed buildings can be integrated into the local ecosystem, without any alternative niches remaining in the ‘natural’ environment. The interactions and interdependencies between species within these systems are complex, sometimes with links at the microbial level, and often not fully understood.

These selective pressures work out differently at the local level depending on both natural and human influences to generate different types of landscape and habitat. The different bundles of ecosystem services provided by different broad habitat types in the countryside are illustrated in Figure 1.4, taken from the National Ecosystem Assessment (UKNEA, 2011).

Individuals commonly identify the countryside amongst the key attributes of Britishness. When asked what Britain means in 1999, Shirley Williams, a Liberal Democrat peer and former cabinet minister said:⁵ ‘Britishness is the countryside, individual liberty, unbroken tradition and no revolutions.’ Lowenthal (1991, p. 213) comments that ‘Nowhere else [other than England] does the very term [landscape] suggest not simply scenery and *genres de vie*, but quintessential national virtues.’ That the countryside remains an important element of British culture is reflected in its portrayal in the 2012

⁵ Reported in the *Guardian*, Wednesday 20 January 1999.