

HERITAGE LANDSCAPE GUIDES: A VEHICLE FOR NATURAL AND CULTURAL HERITAGE CONSERVATION AND PLANNING

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ABSTRACT

A Heritage Landscape Guide tells the story of what humans and nature have done with the land. Parts of this story can be found in books and documents, or in the memories of people. Parts of it can be seen in historical maps and photographs. Much of the story can be read on the land itself. The story is evident in the character of old buildings and other structures, in field patterns and the layout of the roads. It is also apparent in the shape and size of woods and natural areas, as well as in climate, soils and waters. Heritage Landscape Guides are intended to: help people understand how the land has evolved and what changes seem to be underway today and why; attempt to address the needs that citizens, professionals, and specialists of different kinds have for ways of integrating information about the environmental, social, economic changes that are going on around them; be a useful tool for education in schools, in training professionals and in interpreting protected areas and surrounding regions to concerned citizens; provide information that can be used for making decisions related to conservation and sustainable planning and land-use; and, help build a shared view of the heritage of a place.

INTRODUCTION

In evaluating the current state of landscape and community planning, one overarching theme that emerges is the difficulty that scholars, professionals, and decision-makers have in responding to the magnitude and pace of change confronting society. Changes of all kinds are proceeding very rapidly in Ontario just as they are in other parts of Canada and the world. These changes are sometimes so rapid and complex that while people may be aware of and concerned about them, they do not always understand or know how to deal with them. Different agencies and organizations discuss them using varied terminologies and conceptual structures, so that they are difficult to think about in an interrelated fashion. The changes are often labelled as economic, social, environmental, or institutional and are not linked to one another in terms of their interactive effects on people and communities. They are also often seen as the domain and responsibility of particular disciplines and fields of study and certain sectors, agencies or organizations.

Not much thought is given to how information from the various disciplines and organizations will be put together, not only in the minds of citizens, but also by professionals or specialists of one kind or another. Society is seen as functioning largely in terms of messages from specialists and not in terms of citizens who are receptive to and capable of bringing together and using information of many kinds in the context of civil society. In these circumstances the situation can be seen not as one in which we do not have enough information; rather it is one in which we are awash in diverse information that we do not know how to organize and deal with efficiently, effectively, and equitably.

HERITAGE LANDSCAPE GUIDES – A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In this context changes can be related to one another through certain general or integrative ideas or concepts. One such concept is 'landscape', a term that is widely understood by professionals such as architects, engineers, geographers, historians and planners, as well as by citizens, to refer to the scenic, natural, cultural, socio-economic, and historic features and values that describe and typify a place and distinguish it from others. The historic or heritage dimensions of the term are especially important because they tie the current landscape and people to what has gone before. From a heritage perspective landscape can link natural and cultural changes with those of the past and provide a set of values and meanings within which ongoing changes can be understood and evaluated.

The value of the idea of landscape has been demonstrated in other countries such as the United Kingdom and the United States through, for example, the work of the Countryside Agency and the programs of the U.S. National Park Service on both natural and cultural heritage landscapes (see for example Birnbaum and Peters, 1996; McClelland, 1995; Parker and King, 1995; Countryside Agency, 2000). Identifying and understanding such landscapes and the economic, social, natural, and other changes that have gone into their creation over the years, strengthens sense of place and community and provides a framework to deal with change. Scholars and professionals have most often taken the view that heritage landscapes are of two broad types: cultural or natural. While being very aware of this division, we also are aware that local people might not necessarily think in these terms. In our work we are adopting a landscape approach that sees both cultural and natural heritage as interrelated, especially in the context of settled environments where, from the local point of view, they are generally not conceived of as distinct from each other.

The concept of landscape therefore has considerable applicability and utility in urbanized and highly settled areas such as Ontario. However, in spite of efforts by numerous people over the years, the idea of landscape as an organizing framework for understanding, planning, evaluating, and responding to change has not been widely accepted in Ontario, nor indeed in Canada generally (Pollock-Ellwand and Nelson, 2000; Pollock-Ellwand, 1997).

CONTEXT

One exception is the Niagara Escarpment, which has been the focus of one of the most vigorous landscape planning programs in Canada since the late 1960s, through the work of the Niagara Escarpment Commission and related organizations such as the Ontario Heritage Foundation (OHF) and the Coalition on the Niagara Escarpment (CONE). Having said this, the general sense of the Escarpment

is as an outstanding geologic and scenic feature, with bedrock, cliffs, waterfalls, and other features that distinguish it as a landform in central and southern Ontario. A wider perception of the Escarpment as a bioregion or a broad cultural landscape with many distinctive natural and cultural features has not yet emerged among scholars and professionals.

In this context, the Heritage Resources Centre has recently been doing work at an international scale on the idea of Ontario's Niagara Escarpment as part of a very extensive landscape complex called the Great Arc (Nelson *et al.*, 2000). This emerges near Rochester, New York, and sweeps through southern Ontario, Manitoulin Island, Michigan, and Wisconsin into Illinois. This extensive landscape image has great potential value in that it could serve to integrate thinking about land-use change and its socio-economic and environmental effects throughout much of the Great Lakes basin. We have made contact with and secured positive response to further work on the Great Arc from concerned persons in New York and Wisconsin.

One focus of our work is on the identification and description of local landscapes in localities such as Grimsby, Dundas, Owen Sound, and Creemore that are parts of larger landscape images of the Niagara Escarpment or the Great Arc. These larger images generally reflect the view of professional planners as well as people who live outside the Escarpment area and tend to value it for recreational, tourism, and conservation purposes. Local landscape images can be discovered through close consultation with local people and can reflect their understandings and values about natural and cultural heritage and the socio-economic or working landscape in which they live. Understanding these local landscape images and their similarities to and divergences from one another – as well as the more general and essentially professional image of the Escarpment as a whole – may help all concerned to work together more efficiently, effectively, and equitably (Greider and Garkovich, 1994; Hillier, 1997; 1999).

APPROACH

The specific means or vehicle that we wish to produce to help people understand landscapes along the Escarpment is the local Landscape Guide. These Guides are basically succinct descriptions of the landscapes around localities which people can identify and relate to as a framework for judging the effects of change. The intent is to document local people's expressions of significant heritage in terms of their own standards or criteria, whatever they may be. A number of these Guides have been prepared or are in preparation including the Grand River Watershed (Nelson *et al.*, 2003a), Ridgetown-Rondeau (Nelson *et al.*, 2003b), Old Town Toronto (Nelson *et al.*, 2001) and the Upper St. Lawrence (in press).

Our methodology is based on the principles of collaborative, participatory, and interactive planning that sees shared learning among all participants as a capacity-building and enriching process (Friedmann, 1987; Healey, 1997; Innes, 1998; Nelson, 1991). The methods we are using include initial analysis of written materials on the heritage of the Niagara Escarpment and towns or municipalities along it, with special emphasis on the localities selected for this study. Once a background understanding of each of the study localities has been completed, contact is made with a small number of individuals in each locality who are known for their understanding of local heritage, activities and planning issues. These individuals are looked to as luminaries, or knowledgeable persons, with

whom we hope to refine study details in locally appropriate ways. Other techniques for recording local perspectives on valued places include interviews, workshops or focus groups, and open-ended questionnaires.

To ensure their usefulness and quality, *Heritage Landscape Guides* are prepared according to the following principles: giving a strong sense of the natural and cultural history of a place; integrating geology, biology, archaeology, history, geography, economics and other specialties to create a comprehensive understanding of a place; highlighting defining characteristics or sense of a place; involving local people, as well as other knowledgeable persons, in developing a sense of place; emphasizing maps, photographs and other illustrations to bring the place alive; learning and enjoying a place through experience; improving the Guide as new information comes available and opportunity arises; and, providing references and other information so the interested user can follow-up on the Guide.

ANTICIPATED BENEFITS

Landscape Guides are seen as a vehicle for synthesizing and building better understanding of local heritage and planning challenges. They can ultimately result in the development of a network of people within and among localities who can communicate and build upon the landscape idea as a way of understanding and dealing with their heritage and with the planning challenges that they are facing. We hope that the Landscape Guides and associated products would be found to be of general value to others who might wish to prepare their own Guides. In this respect we intend to prepare a manual for the preparation of Landscape Guides based on the work and experiences put forward in this proposal to facilitate the general application of the procedure elsewhere.

POSTSCRIPT

In reflecting on Algonquin as what most people would consider the premier provincial park in Ontario, we were struck by the fact that this park and its thousands of visitors each year do not have the benefit of a *Heritage Landscape Guide*. A Guide for Algonquin would not only tell of the rich natural and cultural history of this park, but in the process also tell much of the history of Ontario's provincial parks. In this and other ways, the Guide would enrich the experience of the visitor as well as inform and attract those yet to come to and enjoy Algonquin.

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