

The “Outstanding Research”-project: an overview of past, present and potential research of Flemish heritage.

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Introduction

Being a research institute of the Flemish government, the VIOE (Vlaams Instituut voor het Onroerend Erfgoed; Flemish Heritage Institute) focuses on research concerning Flemish ‘immovable’ heritage¹. In 2007, the “Outstanding Research”-project was initiated, aiming to draw an overview of past, present and potential research of Flemish ‘immovable’ heritage and the different researchers and research communities involved. The project will cover three parts: landscape, archaeology and architectural heritage.

In Dutch the project is called the “onderzoeksbilans” which literally means “balance of research” -referring to making up the balance. Recent studies and projects are inventoried and analyzed. Goal of this analysis is to look for hiatus and overlap in research in Flanders and to find chances for collaboration. The chosen English title “outstanding research”-project refers both to the outstanding research that has been done, as to the research which stands out to be done.

The results of the project will form the basis for drawing up the research agenda of the institute for the next years. As being a research institute of the government, VIOE has three main objectives: research of Flemish heritage, communication and presentation of heritage (research) and policy support where the “outstanding research”-project can be situated.

For the ‘landscape’ part of the project, the point of departure is the definition of landscape in the ‘European Landscape Convention’. This implies that we approach landscape research in a holistic way. Nevertheless we do stay in keeping with the broad heritage approach of the Flemish policy concerning landscape. This means that not only historical aspects are taken into account but also other heritage values of landscape like ecology, aesthetics, scientific and socio-cultural aspects.

¹ In Flanders’ policy the heritage field is divided between the so called ‘movable’ (both tangible and intangible) and ‘immovable’ heritage. The last one contains archeology, landscape and architectural heritage and falls under the policy domain of Town and Country Planning, Housing Policy and Immovable Heritage, while the first belongs to the policy domain of ‘Culture’.

The unravelling of the research field landscape:

One of the main objectives of the project concerning landscape research, was to get an overview of this complex research field. As noted in theme C of this conference, landscape research at PECRSL is not only an issue for the historic geographer, but more and more other researchers join this subject. Now also landscape architects, biologists, sociologist, policy makers, etc. are part of the PECRSL-group and they all give a different perspective on landscape research.

Our starting point for unravelling the landscape research field was a somewhat random list of research domains and disciplines. Our purpose was to get a complete overview of research fields concerning landscape research. Together with our steering committee we tried to structure and complete the departure material had. The first big step consisted of making a division between integrating research fields (like historical geography or landscape ecology) and basic/pure sciences (like history or biology). The last ones contribute to landscape research, but they don't research the landscape themselves. For the integrating research domains the landscape itself is the primary research subject. We tried to discover which basic sciences contributed to which integrating research field by drawing lines between them. This action appeared to be unsuccessful because it resulted in a chaotic jumble of lines, as is shown in Figure 1.

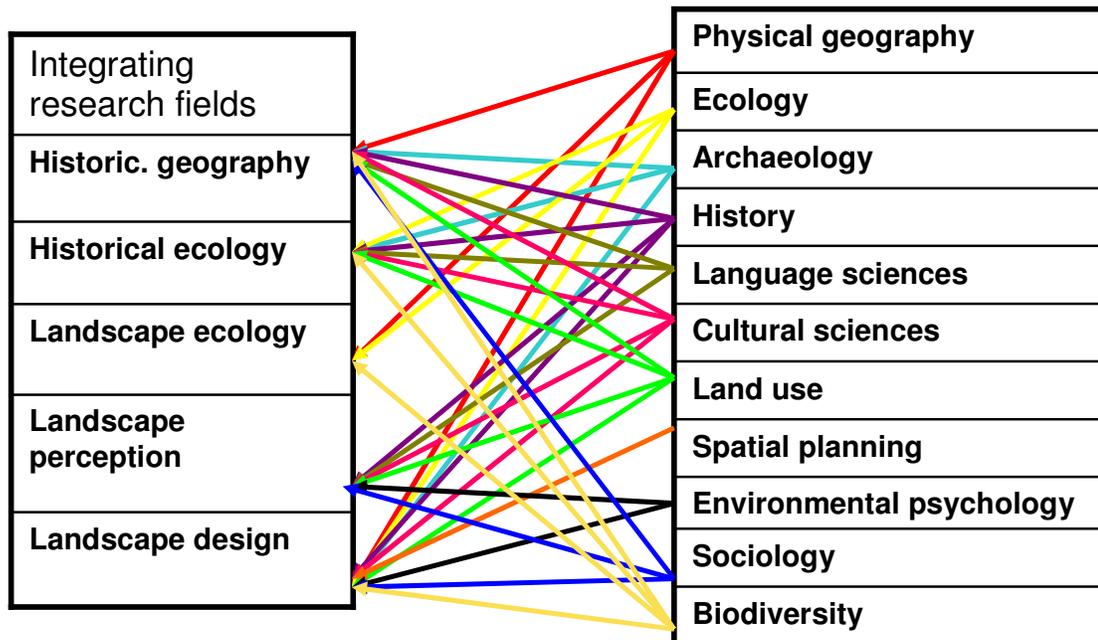


Figure 1: First attempt of structuring the different research domains contributing to landscape research. The arrows show the contribution of the basic/pure sciences grouped on the right, to the integrating research fields grouped on the left

The next step was to form groups with the different basic sciences. Three themes were distinguished: abiotic sciences (geology, geomorphology, hydrology, etc.), biotic sciences (biology, vegetation science, etc.) and social sciences (history, archaeology, cultural sciences, language sciences, etc.). These sciences all contribute to the integrating research fields which are: historical geography, historical ecology, landscape ecology, landscape perception, landscape management and landscape design. We completed this scheme by adding a part concerning research of landscape policy. Policy is influenced by the integrating research field and sciences, but on the other hand also has an influence on them. Landscape science is the field that comprises all, which is represented by the underlying surface. This is not only an integrating field, but is transdisciplinary, also considering non-scientific aspects of landscape. The final structure is shown in Figure 2.

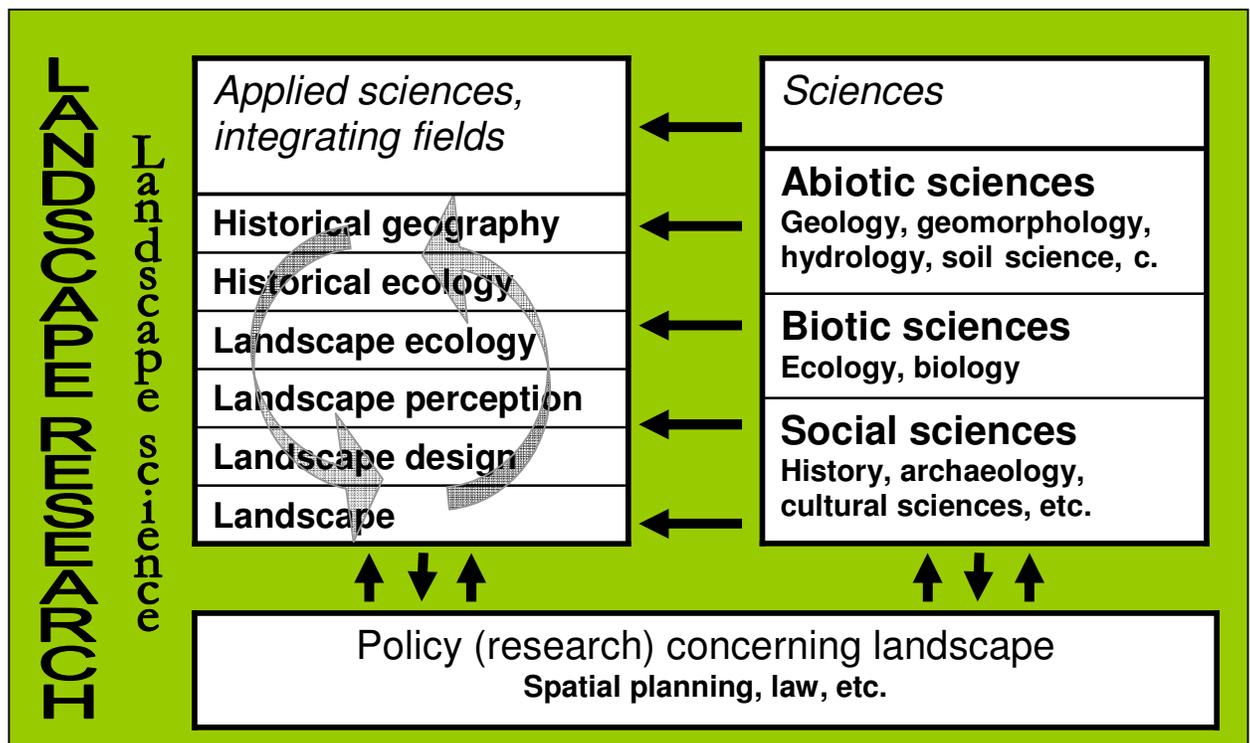


Figure 2: Overview of the research domains and disciplines contributing to landscape research, as considered in the outstanding research project. More explanation is given in the text above

Implementation

The previous exercise helped to form a structure of chapters, since every research domain forms one chapter of the document. We could not make this project without the expertise of people working in landscape research. Not only researchers themselves, but also people working in landscape management.

In search of experts, we started to make an inventory of people who are involved in landscape research and management. We ended up with a group of 40 experts who agreed to work with us, resulting into working groups with approximately five experts for each chapter. These groups were brought together in working sessions where we start to generate the information we need for each chapter.

In the first meeting of the working groups, the foundations of the chapter were formed. With the help of the experts the content of the chapter were run through to find the answer to diverse questions. The report of the meeting forms the basis for the first texts. The texts are partly written by the experts and partly by VIOE.

Content of chapter

To get unity in the document as a whole, every chapter is build up the same way. In general there are two sections. The first gives a broad introduction to the research field, preferably written by experts. For the example of historical ecology first a definition was composed, based on existing definitions and own experience. This definition applies to our own project, and is useful for the situation in Flanders. Another important part is the evolution of the research approach, compared with international impulses and evolutions in Flanders. For the case of historical ecology, the research (approach) of Oliver Rackam, George Peterken and Frans Vera (amongst others) was discussed and compared with important projects in Flanders, like the research of the “forests of Flanders” by Guido Tack, Paul Van den Brecht and Martin Hermy.

The second section of the chapter contains the overview of the research at this moment in Flanders, written by the coordinators themselves. The input of experts is also essential to make this part as complete and correct as possible. A list of research projects gives an objective view of the research from 2000 onwards. With the result of this state of the art of the research in Flanders, the hiatus in research can be looked for. In a later step, this can form the basis for the research agenda of the VIOE. In the second section there is also a part handling the current collaborations and the chances of cooperation. The sources and methods for this particular research domain are treated. A list of concerned research groups and institutions is added. The chapter concludes with a bibliography with the main general literature concerning this research domain.