

27 THE VALUE OF LATVIAN RURAL LANDSCAPE

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INTRODUCTION

The Latvian countryside and rural landscape have been undergoing immense change following the fall of the Soviet Union. At present are still underway because of many factors. The main ones are the return of land to previous owners after the fall of the Soviet Union, abandonment of surplus land, migration of young people to the cities, an ageing population, the collapse of rural infrastructure and the decay of old houses and rural buildings.

Latvia has a population of 2.3 million people, of whom 67.8 per cent are urban and 32.2 per cent are rural dwellers (Statistical Bureau of Latvia, 2004). This is a high rural proportion, by western European standards, and the country remains very rural, with some 40 per cent of the land being taken up by forest, a proportion that is increasing as a result of land abandonment. 58 per cent of the population are ethnic Latvians, the majority of non-Latvians being Russian, Byelorussian and Ukrainian, and living in the towns and cities. There is a net population decrease and also a drift, especially of younger people, to the cities, resulting in an ageing and decreasing rural population.

Farmland in many regions is either surplus to requirements, or has been abandoned; in either case cultivation has ceased and tree seeds were allowed to germinate and colonise these areas (depending on the productivity, terrain and climate). During Soviet times all the land was nationalised and farms were managed as collectives (*kolkhoz*), with large-scale mono-cultural production (Melluma, 1994). After regaining independence, the land was handed back to the previous owners or their descendants, many of whom live away from the land or were not interested in farming it, leading to its abandonment. People also became free to leave the collective farms so that the population and economic structure of the countryside changed. In agriculturally more marginal areas, such as the Vidzeme or Latgale uplands, where soils are less fertile, the rate of abandonment and forest colonisation has been greatest, while the fertile flat plains of Zemgale in the south remain under arable farming. It is generally acknowledged that

every change of political system brings about changes in people's attitude towards the environment, which finally leads to changes in the rural landscape (Melluma, 1994).

Global experience shows that landscape can be evaluated both as a physically geographical natural/cultural complex (or a space and environment shaped by nature and humans) and as a landscape in the direct sense of the word (the sensorially experienced environment), and even as an economic resource. Landscapes can be characterized according to their aesthetic value, ecological and economic value, or cultural historical value. The aesthetic value is to some extent a rather subjective criterion, which depends on a person's background, education and other factors determining perception, although many studies have shown that there are frequently similar preferences, especially for natural and spectacular scenic landscapes (Bell, 1999). Ecological value encompasses certain scientific aspects, such as biological and geographical diversity. Economic value, in its turn, is connected with the possibilities of using the landscape for the enhancement of the welfare of an individual or the society. Culturally historical value can be associated with a landscape that represents a certain epoch or historic event or the overall accumulation of many events, in the sense of an evolved assemblage of the remains of many epochs (Nikodemus *et al.*, 1996).

The research question was a general one to start with: "What are the perceptions and values of the Latvian people towards the countryside?" As the approach adopted can be described as "user-led" there was no need to elaborate the question any further, as part of the methodological approach involves the people (the research subjects) helping to frame the issues and questions for detailed investigation.

METHODOLOGY

The research was undertaken using approaches developed from personal construct theory (Kelly, 1955) and Canter's Theory of Place (Canter, 1977). In this approach the perceptions and values of landscape are understood to be constructed differently in a very personal way depending on the interaction of three main factors: the physical world, the activities being undertaken as part of our lifestyles and the perceptions we have of both of these. A transactional approach recognises that we value the landscape around us depending on how it affects the way we live, for example providing work or inhibiting social interactions.

When exploring the contribution of the local landscape to people's lives it is necessary to consider all three elements and the interaction between them. To do this a research theory (or meta-theory) called "Facet Theory" was adopted (Shye *et al.*, 1994; Borg & Shye, 1995). The main advantage of using the Facet approach in relation to this is that it facilitates the explicit structuring of the central issues in the research and their relationships to one another. While this is often considered to be inherent in scientific investigation, it is easy to miss key issues and their inter-relationships unless they are explicitly expressed.



Figure 1: Locations of focus groups and questionnaire survey.

The research had no detailed, specific questions, but was user-led, in that the issues of importance for people were uncovered during focus group discussions and then incorporated into the questionnaire. The focus groups, six in all from both rural and urban areas, were recorded and analysed by looking for the common and significant issues raised in each in response to the prompting questions asked by researchers. The questionnaire was structured according to Facet theory, the questions (or statements) being framed as constructs relating to the physical environment, activities and perceptions using a structure known as the “mapping sentence”. Respondents to the questionnaire were asked to agree or disagree with a number of statements along a 7-point scale (a Guttman scale). The questionnaire data, of 432 respondents collected in six rural municipalities, representative of different regions of Latvia and three urban areas (Fig. 1), were analysed using factor analysis and a range of SPSS statistical tools. The analysis focussed on differences in perceptions and values held by different segments of the population, such as Latvians and non-Latvians, men and women, different age groups, people with different levels of education, and rural *versus* urban dwellers. The differences between the six rural areas were also compared.

At the same time dynamics of the landscape structure as well as land use change in each of the six rural areas used for the questionnaire and one of those used for the focus groups was examined. In the study topographic maps dating from 1926 to 1930 (showing the situation from 1906 to 1927) and aerial photos of the 1990s were used. For the area where a focus group was held topographic maps of 1960 as well as the land use plan of 1990 were also examined, giving a more detailed perspective of the changes that had taken place. The comparison of 1926/30 and late 1990s could not be carried out in more detail owing to lack of information (data availability in Latvia is rather patchy). Spatial processing of the data and analysis of changes in land use was carried out using the GIS software Arc View.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Latvian countryside and rural landscape

The results of the focus group discussions showed that the respondents perceive the notion of “countryside” as a bipartite whole and as an opposite concept to the urban environment. On the one hand, it is shaped by the social environment, characterized by their own family and personal background and experience, and also by the socioeconomic processes taking place in the countryside today, and the human interrelations there. On the other hand, it is a natural environment with its typical visual aesthetic character that people also enjoy.

The positive emotions associated with the rural environment are, in many people’s opinion, related to the open human relationships, in contrast to the alienation of the urban environment; to family history, as well as to relatively unpolluted nature, peace and quiet, diverse landscape.

Low income, poor material conditions, unemployment, alcoholism, poor public transport services, inadequate communication, deforestation (or logging of forests), overgrown fields and abandoned collective farm buildings are the most often mentioned negative aspects which, according to the respondents, characterize the Latvian countryside today. Besides this, in the minds of older respondents, the current social environment contrasts with their view of the past – the period before the Second World War or during Soviet times. Possibly, this opinion is enhanced by their nostalgic memories of bygone times, when “the grass was greener and sky was bluer”. In younger respondents, their lack of experience lets them perceive the social environment only from the present day perspective.

Focus group discussions also showed that the respondents have a complex view of the countryside landscape. In their opinion, it encompasses both nature- and human-created elements. Besides, the latter have been formed over several generations and in different social systems. As the result of the discussions, two different types of landscape emerged in the mind of respondents. One of them is connected with the traditional or archetypal country landscape, the other with the one that characterizes contemporary Latvia.

In the focus groups the importance of the traditional or typical Latvian countryside landscape became apparent. As a typical inventory of this, interviewees in all groups consistently mentioned hay cocks, storks, detached farmsteads, thatched buildings, country bathhouses, old oak trees, avenues or rows of oak and lime trees, lakes, cultivated fields, country estates without hedges or fences (contrary to those in other parts of Europe), winding highways, hillocks and flower gardens. Many interviewees also mentioned manor houses surrounded by old parks with ponds and nearby villages.

In fact, all these elements mentioned by the interviewees are a harmonious part of the countryside, present without creating unpleasant feelings or associations. Unfortunately, the traditional country landscape, in the minds of the interviewees, contrasts with the Latvian landscape we see today. It was noted with dislike that next to the traditional

landscape elements we can observe ruins of individual farms or buildings of the *kolkhoz* period; fields overgrown with bushes and felled forests. Negative attitudes were also expressed towards new elements of construction, e.g., private houses, the design of which does not harmonize with their surroundings.

The fact that, when discussing the countryside, in the thoughts of respondents a serious role is allotted to the traditional landscape, shows that the people now, having experienced the changes accompanying the transfer from one kind of economic relations to another, are longing for a harmonious and orderly living environment.

Social, economic and ecological values of Latvian countryside and rural landscape

The statistical processing of the data of the questionnaire survey made it possible to single out a number of clusters. These represent the combined opinion of the interviewees about the social, economic and ecological values of the countryside and rural landscape, as well as of the processes deteriorating the landscape.

As there is no opportunity in this paper to explore the results of the questionnaire survey in detail, the analysis of some key questions which helps to reinforce the findings described above will form the focus of the remainder of the discussion.

One of these questions aimed at ascertaining interviewees' attitude towards countryside, in terms of social values is "I would like to live in the countryside if I could find a job there". The question, according to the methodology described earlier, is presented as a statement with which respondents are free to agree or disagree to different degrees.

The analysis of the data showed that, if in the future there might be job opportunities in the countryside, country life would be preferred by most rural respondents. The opposite view was mainly expressed by city dwellers (Fig. 2a). It means that at present city dwellers consider the rural environment as a less socially valuable place to live than country dwellers do. One of the factors that accounts for this result is the fact that work in the countryside provides a lower level of income than work in the city. Thus, in 2003, the gross income per month of people working in agriculture and hunting constituted only 62.4 % of the average gross income per capita per month in the country as a whole, *i.e.*, 120 lats (approximately 170€). That is also why the percentage of elderly employees in these spheres is increasing. In 2003, 53.4% of those working in agriculture were aged 45-74 (compared with an average of 37.4 % of the age group in the whole country) (Statistical Bureau of Latvia, 2004).

The positive view of the rural respondents is, however, influenced by such factors as a strong connection to a particular place. This connection is created both by family ties in the countryside (extended families living within one area or village) and ancestral roots, and by childhood memories. Childhood is the most important period in a person's life, when his/her attitude towards surroundings is being formed. The majority of people who had spent their whole childhood in the countryside was found among rural respondents. In the urban group there were more respondents who had only partly spent

their childhood in the countryside or not at all. Deeper analysis of the data showed that while an improvement of roads and the quality of infrastructure would lead to an increase in the social quality of countryside environment, urban inhabitants would choose to live in the countryside, but would continue to work in the city. This opinion was observed also among those discussion participants who were students. An implication is that in a zone around cities such as Riga, the capital, a prosperous commuter belt could develop in future as is found in many western European countries, beyond which a more marginalised rural area would remain.

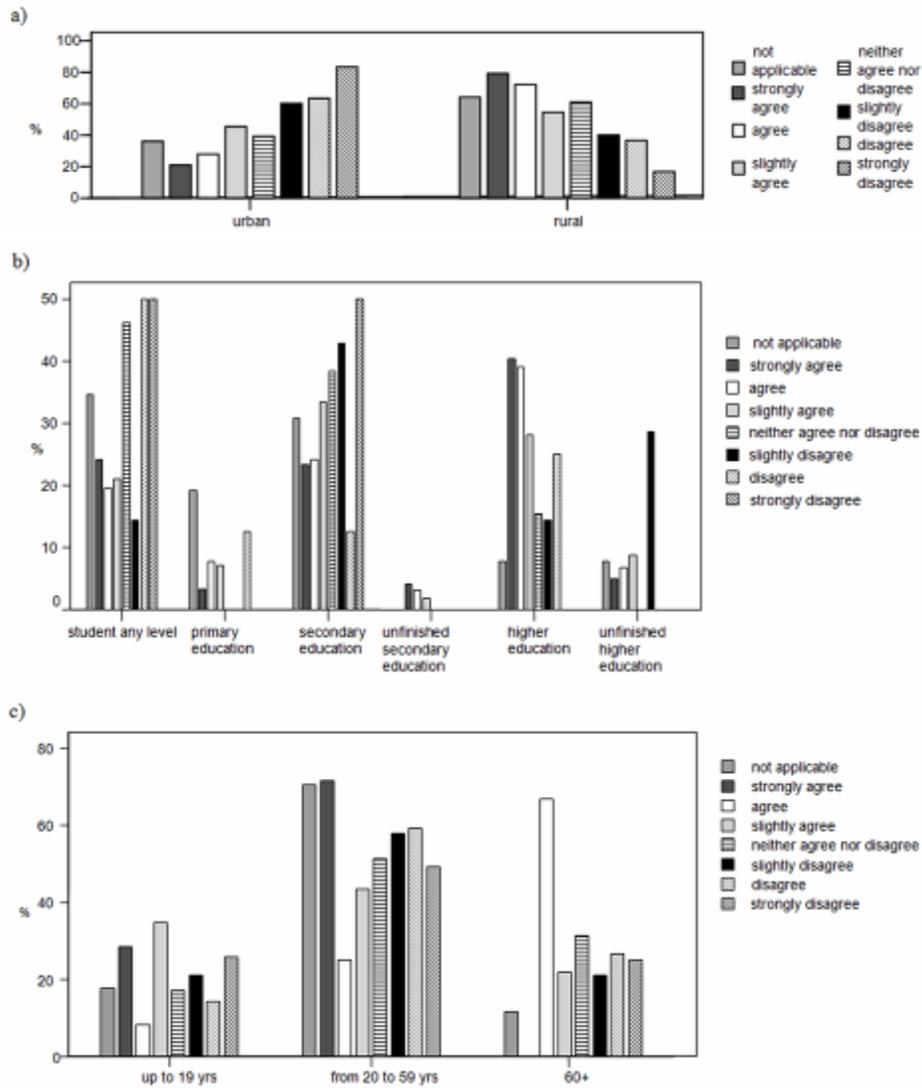


Figure 2: Responses to the statements: a) “I would like to live in the countryside if I could find a job there”. Histogram shows the distribution of each separate response (not applicable, strongly agree, etc.) among urban and

rural respondents; b) “The quality of the landscape is important for the development of tourism in the future”. Histogram shows the distribution of each response among respondents with different level of education; c) “There is too much forest in Latvia’s landscape”. Histogram shows the distribution of each response among different age groups.

The value of country environment is determined not only by social conditions, but also by the diversity and quality of nature. The quality of the countryside landscape can actually be one of the prerequisites of socioeconomic development. The possibilities of attracting financial resources to an area depend in part on its quality (Oja & Prede, 2004). Visually attractive landscapes can also improve the economic value of the rural environment. Landscape as an economic resource can substantially influence the development of tourism in a particular area. It can, in turn, solve some if not all of the employment problems of local inhabitants.

According to the data of the Latvian Country Tourism Association, the importance of countryside tourism in Latvia increases year by year. In 2004, compared with 2003, the number of countryside accommodation places such as guest houses or cottages for rent had grown by 6%, and the number of tourists staying there had grown by 31 %. Of these, 59% were local tourists, but 41% were foreign visitors. In 2004, 872 people were employed in managing these countryside accommodation types (Latvian Country Tourism Association, 2005).

The opinion of the respondents about the value of countryside landscape as an economic resource is shown by their response to the statement “The quality of the landscape is important for the development of tourism in the future”.

Analysis of the data showed a difference of opinions between respondents of different levels of education. It is people with higher education who attach most economic importance to the landscape (Fig. 2b), while respondents with secondary education tend to have the opposite view.

This result can be explained by the wider knowledge and greater experience of these better educated people. It means that they have a more diverse view of the development possibilities for the region and possibly the skills needed to turn this potential into a reality. If these educated people have a better command of languages such as English or German, needed to manage tourism from international sources, then they are more likely to see the potential for their own benefit. We can expect a greater commitment of these people in the rehabilitation and protection of the environment and landscape.

The economic value of the countryside environment can be created not only by an attractive landscape, but also by exploration of the forest as one of its main components. The forest, in turn, also contributes to the ecological value of the landscape. Today, woodlands occupy 2923188 ha (45%) of the territory of Latvia. In the future, an increase of forest cover is predicted. According to data from the Ministry of Agriculture of Latvia, 200000 ha of arable land is likely to become afforested (Latvian Environmental Agency, 2004) as the result of a drop in agricultural production and of

the land becoming surplus. Much surplus land is already turning to forest by natural colonisation.

It is common knowledge that the expansion of woodland influences its biological diversity, thus influencing the ecological value of the landscape. The responses to the statement “There is too much forest in Latvia’s landscape” differ between age groups. The result shows (Fig. 2c) that the elderly respondents from the age group over 60 years consider that there is too much forest in Latvia’s landscape.

Among respondents aged 20-59 one can observe a tendency to disagree with this view. In the youngest group, the opinions differ. Elderly people associate the forest landscape mostly with its aesthetic value and the idea of the Latvian landscape of the 1920s, when it was much less wooded in all areas, as demonstrated by the analysis of land use change. They look at the landscape with nostalgia, contrasting their youthful memories with the reality of today. The respondents aged 20-59, however, apprehend both the ecological and economic value of forest landscape while being able to see the expansion of the forest for themselves and not really remembering anything pre-Soviet. The younger people only know the currently more-heavily forested landscape.

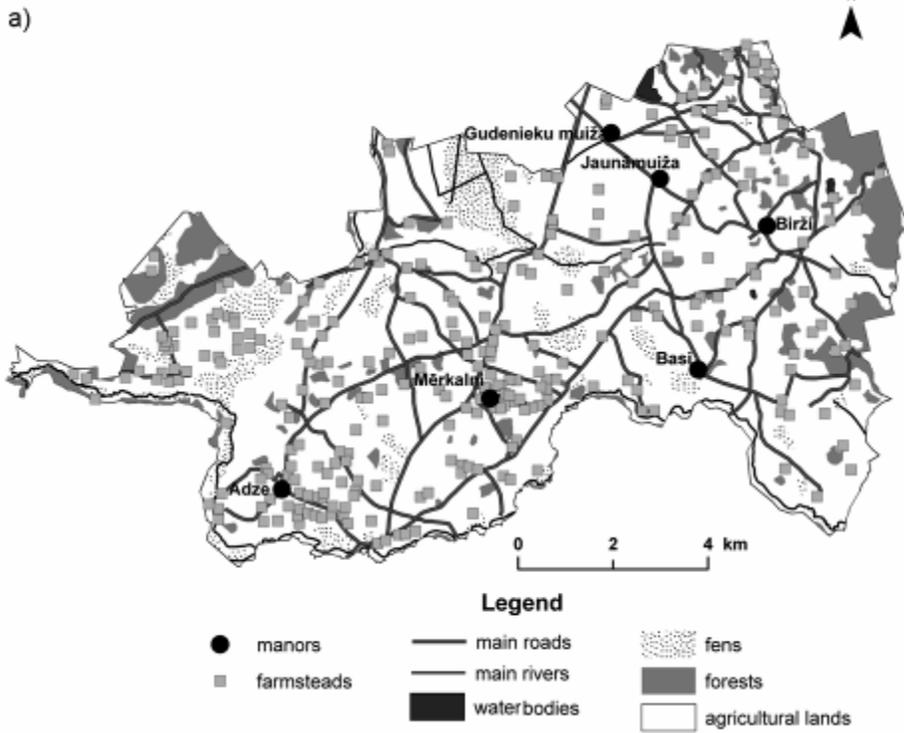
Changes in the rural landscape

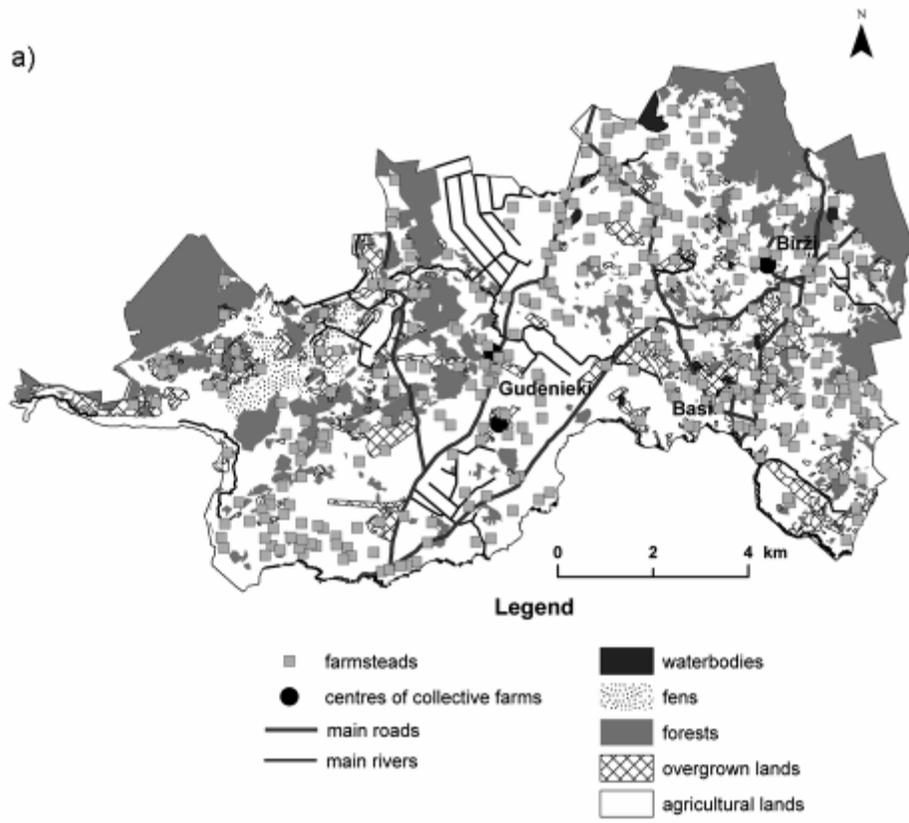
In the 20th century the percentage of forests in the Latvian landscape changed from 24% in 1929 to 44% in 2003. In the period between the two World Wars the dominant landscapes in Latvia were open agricultural spaces and enclosed forest landscapes with a mosaic-like structure, consisting of fields, meadows, forests, rivers, lakes and individual farmhouses (Melluma, 1994).

After the Second World War, the structure of Latvian landscape changed considerably. As a result of deportations of the Latvian inhabitants to Russia, collectivization, centralization of population, degradation of the farmhouse network, and land melioration, the amount of land under arable or pasture decreased, but forest area increased. Thus, large or smaller forest areas started to dominate the rural landscape, creating partly open or considerably enclosed landscapes. The changes in the Latvian landscape structure in the 20th century are well illustrated by the case of the Gudenieki *pagasts* (a rural district or municipality, also sometimes referred to as a “parish”). This area is where one of the focus groups took place. The three maps (Figs. 3a, 3b, 3c) show the landscape changes mainly as an increase in forest and a reduction in settlement.

At the beginning the 20th century there was only a small proportion of forest and many rural farmsteads were well distributed across the landscape. There were also some wetlands. In the 1960s, at the time of collectivisation, the amount of forests expanded and the pattern of rural houses changed. By the beginning of the 1990s when the collective farms ceased to exist and before land restitution, the forest areas had continued to expand. There were also, by then, significant numbers of derelict farmsteads.

The available data covers the period from 1900 to the 1990s but not the subsequent years up to the present. The maps show that there has been an expansion in forest area, from a very small percentage in around 1900 to almost 30% in the 1990s. It is known from visits to the area and discussions with staff at the *pagasts* administration that there is land abandonment and that some areas have continued to become reforested since the beginning of the 1990s. The result is that where the landscape was primarily open with extensive views across the slightly undulating landscape, many parts of the *pagasts* are now much more enclosed and the sense of scale and distance is no longer as strong.





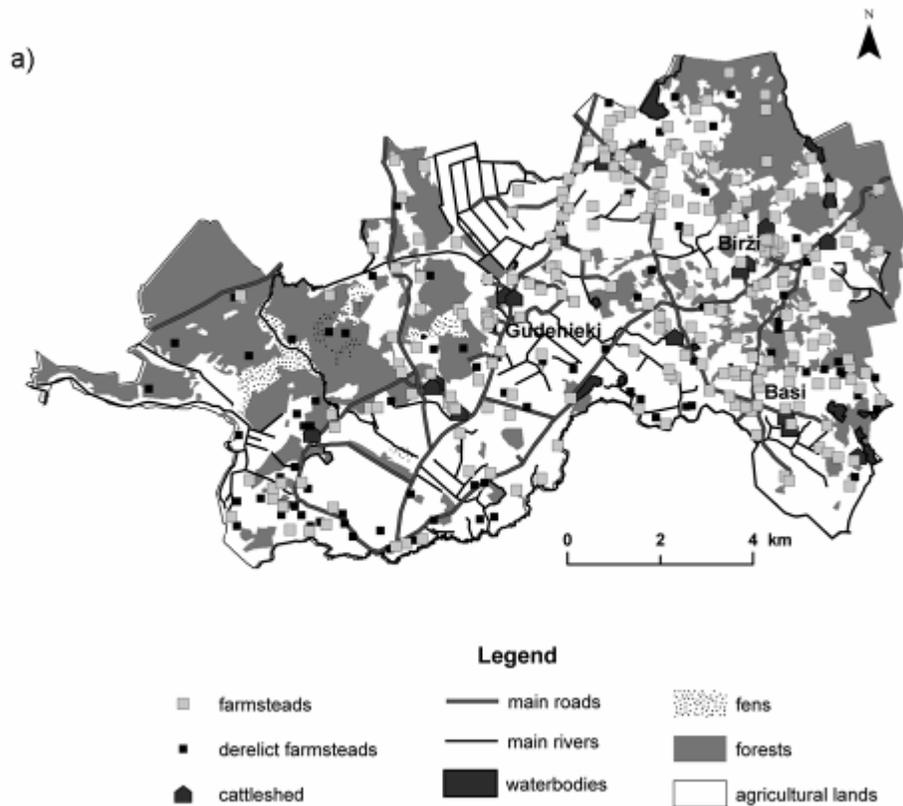


Figure 3: Land use change in the Gudenieki *pagasts* during the 20th century: a) at the beginning of the century; b) in the 1960s at the time of collectivisation; c) at the beginning of the 1990s.

The landscape is much emptier now, as the number of people living in the countryside has declined. The pattern of rural housing, which changed in the 1920s and 1930s as a result of land reform following the break up of the estates, became characterised by an increase in derelict houses throughout the Soviet period. This is the time when people were moved into apartment blocks constructed in the village centres by the Soviet regime under the “Resolution of 1961” (Lūse & Jakobsons, 1990; Grave & Lūse, 1990). Many of these old timber houses are now complete ruins. The loss of houses is also symptomatic of losses of other landscape features which go with them – the ponds, the orchards, the bath houses, gardens and barns - all of which contribute to the fabric of the countryside and which were all associated with the archetypal landscape described so powerfully in the focus groups.

At present, it is possible to observe several processes taking place in Latvia, which change the countryside landscape substantially. One of them is the abandonment of arable land and its colonisation by bushes. In 1995, there were 279000 ha unfarmed, but by 2002 this had increased to 524000 ha. During the last few years, the process has

become more stable. (Latvian Environmental Agency, 2004). The largest transformations can be observed in the uplands of the region of Vidzeme, in central and northern Latvia, where soils are less fertile and intensive farming is less suited to the edaphic and climatic conditions (Nikodemus *et al.*, 2005).

The analysis of the questionnaire shows that the respondents view the colonisation of agricultural lands as a serious threat to the visual value of the Latvia’s rural landscape. This view dominates among respondents of all ages. Their opinion is best illustrated by their responses to the statement “Turning agricultural lands into bush lands reduces the beauty of the rural landscape” (Fig. 4a).

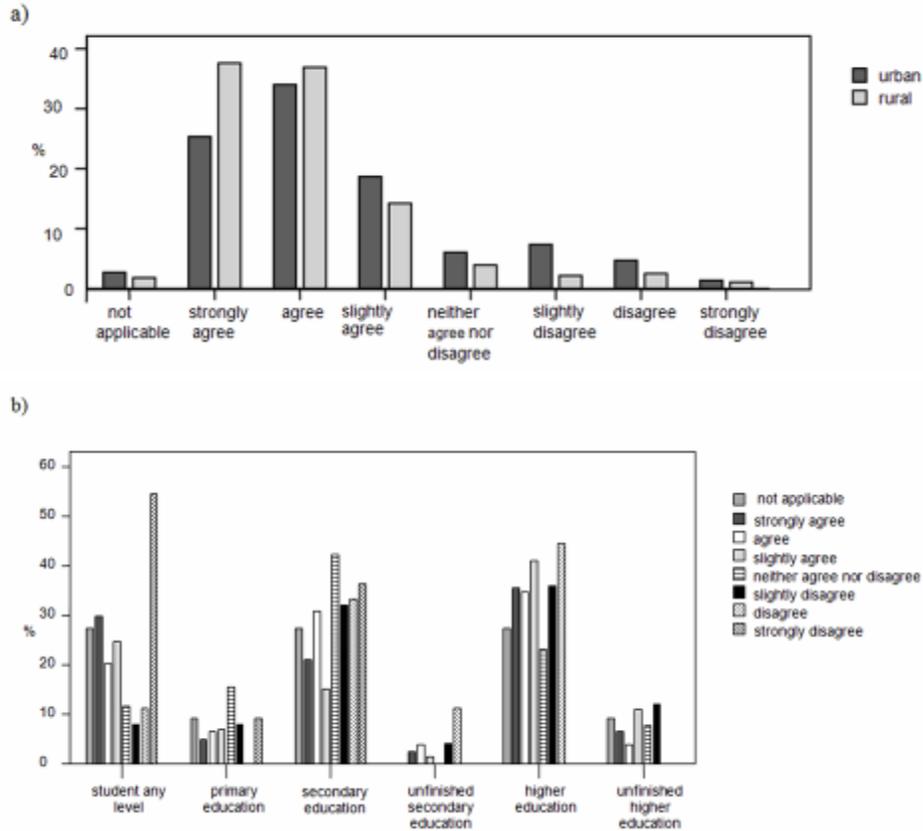


Figure 4: Responses to the statements: a) “Turning agricultural lands into brushlands reduces the beauty of rural landscape”. Histogram shows the distribution of each response among the urban and rural respondents; b) “Forest cutting spoils the rural landscape”. Histogram shows the distribution of each response among respondents with different level of education.

Analysis of the data shows that most people agree with this statement. However, rural respondents are stronger in their agreement than city people. This can be explained by the fact that city dwellers identify themselves with the countryside to a lesser degree than rural people (see above for a more detailed discussion of this aspect).

Another process, which visually influences the Latvian landscape, is the cutting of forests, which mainly happens in places with a developed road infrastructure, and can thus be observed by many inhabitants of Latvia as they travel around.

The respondents' opinions about this process are illustrated by their reactions to the statement "Forest-cutting spoils the rural landscape" (Fig. 4b).

Opinions differ between respondents with different levels of education. Respondents with higher education tend to agree with this statement. The university students also tend to agree, but they also constitute a large proportion of those who do not agree with this same statement. The respondents of other education level groups gave various responses.

It has to be noted that respondents with a higher level of education have also expressed similar views in the question about the role of landscape quality in the development of tourism (Fig. 2b). Thus, we can conclude that the higher the education level of the respondents, the more they care about the visual quality of their surroundings, the more they see nature and landscape as a source of long-term rather than immediate income. It is the result of their knowledge and a more comprehensive vision of life. Another way of looking at this data could be that those with lower education level may tend to see work in the forest as a relatively well-paid source of income and therefore their perceptions will be coloured by this fact (a key aspect of the transactional approach to landscape relationships which underpins this research), while the more educated want to be able to experience the landscape in their leisure time or as a place to live but not work.

The development of landscapes in the future

There are several possible solutions that might help change the countryside landscape and minimize future threats. One of them is to recognise and protect the balance between forest and open land by encouraging the cutting of meadows to prevent forest colonisation. This is now possible, depending on the floristic richness of the land, with financial support through the European Union under the Latvian Government's agricultural support framework. The other is the planned reforestation of the surplus arable land. Depending on how this is carried out or managed, the attractiveness and diversity of landscape can be improved, at least compared with the perceived unattractiveness of the abandoned land. Thus, the economic value of abandoned land would also rise. However, if too much land is forested, the result will be the opposite. The rural landscape will become more monotonous rather than diverse and thus, it will become less attractive and valuable. As a result, some areas might lose their advantages for development.

Wider analysis of the questionnaire data showed that the opinions of the respondents differ, which is well illustrated by their responses to the statement "Abandoned fields should be afforested" (Fig. 5a).

It has to be noted that these responses of the respondents aged below 19 and above 60 present a mirror image of the responses to the statement “There is too much forest in Latvia’s landscape” (Fig. 2c). Most of the respondents who strongly disagreed with the idea of afforesting abandoned land were older than 60. The group of respondents younger than 19 years also showed a rather negative attitude towards it. Logically, the group of the elder respondents constituted the majority of those agreeing with the statement that there are too many forests in the Latvian landscape. The youngest respondents also mostly agreed with this statement. The intermediate age group showed a contradictory diversity of opinions on whether land should be afforested. Previously, however, it was noted that these people tended to disagree with the statement that there are too many forests in the Latvian landscape. Obviously, these people are not so categorical in their judgement as the other respondents. Their opinions are perhaps not so much emotionally but rationally based, and they evaluate the advantages and disadvantages arising from a change in the landscape if unused arable lands were to be afforested.

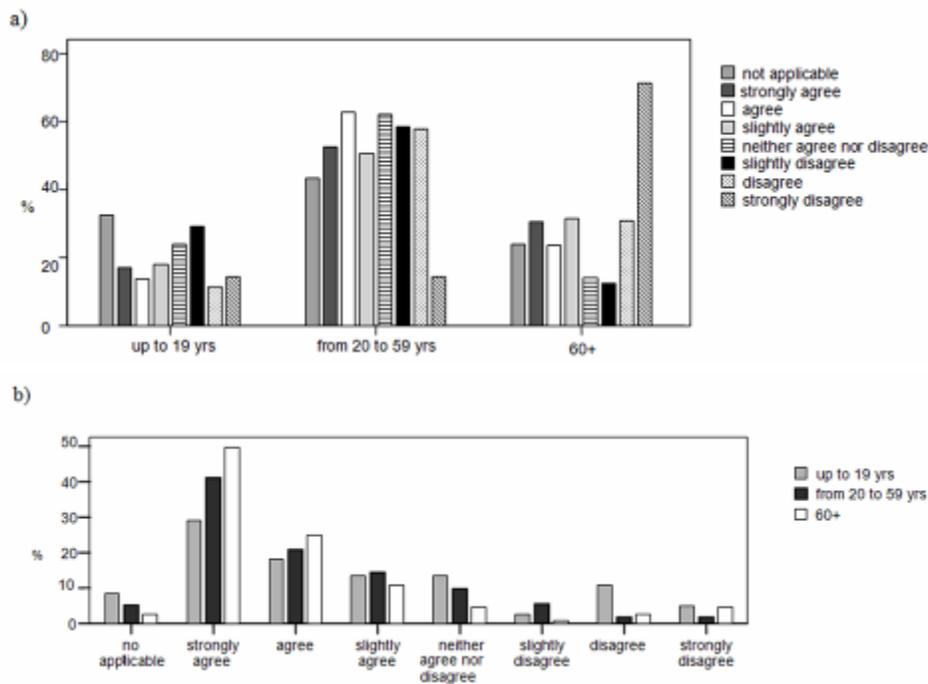


Figure 5: Responses to the statements: a) “Abandoned fields should be afforested”. Histogram shows the distribution of each response among different age groups; b) “Foreigners should not be allowed to buy Latvian farmland”. Histogram shows the distribution of each response among different age groups.

Now and in the future the role of foreign farmers who have started to buy up large farms in the more fertile parts of Latvia (the more open plains in the south) tends to increase the use of arable lands and the creation of the landscape connected with it. They are

technically better equipped than local farmers. Also, their financial capacity allows them to use modern agricultural technologies. Foreign farmers are interested in cultivating the most fertile arable lands. For example, in Gudenieki *pagasts*, 17% of arable lands are now owned by Danish farmers (Penēze *et al.*, 2004). This prevents the conversion of arable land into bushlands and maintains the large meliorated arable areas created in the Soviet times. Fig. 5b shows the respondents' view on foreign farmers as landowners and cultivators in Latvia.

Analysis of the data showed that all age groups tend to believe that land should not be sold to foreigners. Focus group discussions showed that this attitude is shaped by the opinion of the local rural people that most foreign farmers who acquire land are interested only in gaining income, but do not care about developing the typical Latvian rural cultural environment.

Local inhabitants believe that foreign farmers are mentally separated from the Latvian countryside. They do not have any connections with it, such as, for example, family roots, history or traditions. These people, like those living in exile, who have been described by Bunkše (1994), are psychologically unattached and indifferent towards the surroundings they live in at the moment. Besides, they live with a thought that it is only a temporary place and temporary occupation. This worries the local rural inhabitants, because foreign farmers are outsiders, alien to the local society and they are exploiting a natural resource belonging mentally to another nation. As emphasized by Smith (2002), natural resources, like one's native country, are important elements of the national identity. Land, in the eyes of local inhabitants, has a special meaning and it must not be used and exploited by strangers.

At present, the processes taking place in landscapes depend substantially on a person's own energy, and active or passive economic activities. Natural or socio-political conditions play a lesser role. This has been demonstrated by research carried out in the Vidzeme uplands (Nikodemus *et al.*, 2005) where, e.g., the transformation of arable land into brushland can be observed to be taking place in areas where the natural conditions are quite suitable for agriculture. This is the result of the fact that landowners either live far from their properties – in Riga or abroad – and are not cultivating it, or are old and not capable of cultivating their land properly any more. Many old and lonely people live in individual farms which are situated in the periphery of the *pagasts* or far from the main roads. Younger people have moved closer to the service centres. As the old people pass away, these areas are threatened with depopulation, which will show in the landscape as well – there will be more abandoned and ruined farmhouses, fruit gardens and orchards will disappear and fields will grow over with bushes. Thus, the future landscape directly depends on how many people will continue to live in the countryside and how capable they will be of bringing new changes to their surroundings. The analysis of our data showed that, in spite of various social difficulties existing in the countryside now, most rural respondents would also prefer to live there

in the future (Fig. 6a). They are mentally closer to the rural way of life than are the urban people.

That is one reason why perhaps most urban people do not connect their future with the countryside. The material and service comforts of the city (modern houses, shops, restaurants etc.), compared to the environmental advantages of rural life (clean air, peace and quiet), seem more acceptable to them. As noted before, they see the countryside as a place of relaxation, rather than place of life and work. Thus, we can conclude that the future rural landscape beyond the commuter regions will depend substantially on rural people themselves and their own vision.

Analyzing the data in more detail, we could conclude that opinions differ amongst the different age groups. Since most of the respondents were rural inhabitants, it is presumed that these results largely represent the opinion of rural people. The distribution of responses to the statement “The countryside is where I want to live also in the future” (Fig. 6b) clearly shows that most respondents in the active working age, *i.e.*, aged 20-59, connect their future life with countryside.

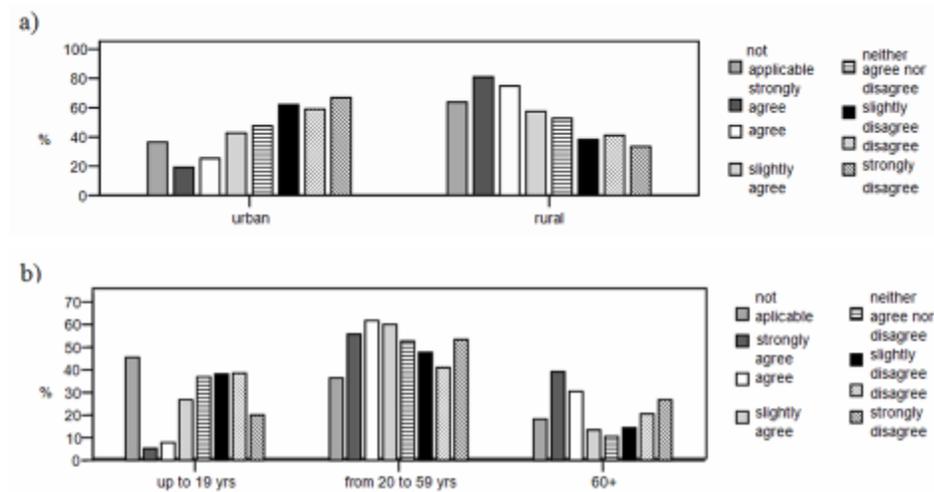


Figure 6: Responses to the statements: a) “The countryside is where I want to live also in the future”. Histogram shows the distribution of each response among urban and rural respondents; b) “The countryside is where I want to live also in the future”. Histogram shows the distribution of each response among different age groups.

It is possible that what attracts them to the countryside are the prospects offered by the European Union in the field of agriculture and employment, as well as their strong mental ties to their place of living. How the rural environment will be developed and what will be the quality of the landscape depends on the inhabitants of this age group now and in the future. The problem might be the lack of a younger generation and their working abilities in the more distant future. The results of the analysis show that a majority of younger respondents do not connect their future life with the countryside. The consequences of depopulation will negatively influence both the rural environment and the landscape. Thus, a question arises – will there be people capable of actively

shaping a harmonious rural environment and cultivating the Latvian rural landscape in the future, or will there be large forest areas instead of uncultivated arable land, and individual farmhouses, which used to reflect the unique Latvian landscape, will have disappeared?

CONCLUSIONS

The results of each strand of the research show that the Latvian countryside is perceived as an important aspect of Latvia and a contributor to a sense of identity for the Latvian population, both rural and urban. There is clearly an image of the countryside landscape which contains a particular series of elements in a coherent way, such as farmstead, pond, orchard, row of trees, stork's nest and so on.

This research has found that the recent changes to the landscape, especially the results of land abandonment, are perceived in a negative light. The rural landscape is an important contributor to the Latvian sense of identity and policy-makers need to pay more attention to the protection, management and restoration of the archetypal landscapes and landscape elements, many of which are at risk of disappearing.

While the challenge appears to be one of landscape management – prevention of natural forest colonisation by cutting fields, for example – in fact the root causes of the situation are largely socio-economic and demographic. To create and maintain a healthy and attractive rural landscape and to ensure that the balance of forest and open farmland is maintained, especially in that mosaic landscape of non-viable agriculture, a viable rural population is needed. This in turn requires better job opportunities, access to services and a more equitable wage level. The quality of the infrastructure is also important, especially regarding houses. Many of these are not only sub-standard or in poor repair, but they also represent part of the valuable cultural heritage. At present, no policies or programmes exist to identify, protect and provide financial support for their renovation. Without the houses, the other important elements of the archetypal landscape will also disappear. Only in a zone within commuting distance of Riga is it likely that houses will be renovated on a large scale to be used as residences by people who work in the city. Even here there is no guarantee that old, culturally valuable houses will be sensitively restored or modernised, since no protection or design guidelines exist.

While there is understandable concern over foreign farmers buying land and farming it more efficiently, these people do at least make some financial investments because they have access to capital, bring in modern technology and maintain the open landscape. However, their role may be confined to the large-scale open agricultural plains, where the threats to the typical landscape are not so great.

This research into the degree of landscape change, together with the results of the questionnaire, gives rise to concerns about the potential homogenization of the landscape and the loss of cultural as well as ecological diversity. This issue should also

be discussed in the context of the European Union as a whole, so that its policy for land use and nature and landscape protection would be developed to enhance the protection of typical and unique cultural landscapes for their important economic, ecological, aesthetic and cultural historical value across the whole of Europe.

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