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Basque country rural landscape through its actors: proposals for conservation and management

In order to underline the contributions of rural areas, Rural Development Agents of Basque Country started the project entitled “Landscape values of Atlantic rural environment: present and future” with the aim of valuing landscapes linked to Basque farmhouse activity. In this work, we synthesize and assess the results of this project, underlining the opportunities provided by the application of landscape assessment methodologies to inexperienced audiences.

I. METHOD: THE INHABITANTS OF THE RURAL AREA DEFINE HOW AND WHAT TO PROMOTE OF THEIR LANDSCAPE

The hypothesis of the investigation begun with the consideration that preservation and knowledge of each regional landscape, must be supported by the perception and opinions of its inhabitants.

Some of the different techniques for landscape analysis of a specific area are based on the participation of non-experts. Among them, some has been applied to the analysis of rural populations. The methodology developed by the European Council of Peoples and Small Cities (ECOVAST) meets the indicated requirements (Spiegler and Dower, 2012). As the authors underlined, this methodology fits with not versed people in these sort of techniques, oriented to the analysis of rural spaces. Furthermore, it is a simple technique, susceptible to be improved according to the goals pursued by each user. Moreover, it is explicitly designed for people who live

every landscape character and; therefore, to be used by the inhabitant of that landscape.

The method proposed is specified on a matrix which is distributed in ten different sections: surface materials, climate, relief, soil, vegetation, agriculture and forest, buildings and type of settlement, other types of construction (for example, infrastructures), historical elements, feelings and associations. The first four sections refer to the physical characteristics of the landscape, the following five are related to aspects of human activity and, finally, the last, tries to capture the emotional aspect of the landscape.

Once the matrix has been determined, the next step tries to adapt it to the reality. Each of the sections is simplified and, then, it is oriented to the participants through a series of questions that must answer in each case. The objective is to support the actor in the aspects in which he has to repair in his landscape analysis. The analysis is limited to the landscape seen. If the elements do not appear in the landscape, they do not have to be addressed. Another fundamental characteristic is the assessment that should be given to each element. It is necessary that everybody use the same scale of assessment. For this purpose, it is proposed to classify according to the degree of the dominant element presence (notorious, moderate or low).

The last steep faces the organization of different sessions in order to identify the most significant landscapes in the rural areas. Each Rural Development Agent of the Basque Country makes a call addressed both to agents that take part in the management of their rural land-

scapes and to the population that live in the environment, encouraging to join in in the discussion workshops, in which they will assess the landscape that surrounds them.

II. MEADOWS, FORESTS, HOUSEHOLDS AND SUMMITS, BASQUE RURAL LANDSCAPES

Based on the participation sessions and the compiled information, the project picks up the main values founded in the Basque rural landscapes. The main value is the the farmer. He is responsible for the care of the rural landscape and, because of his work, everybody can enjoy of wide green meadows and a forest characterized by the diversity of colors and textures. But it is also attributed to a sustainable use of natural resources and, as a result, the society considers its product as a high quality and beneficial for health. Among the values of the rural inhabitant, the project underlines his way to be collaborative, his respect for the environment and his architectural, heritage and cultural contribution.

Rural landscapes are also complemented with other values linked to the characteristics of their natural environment, such as high quality, peaks, humid climate, low degree of artificialization and, as a consequence, their possibilities as leisure space. Much of the values of the rural landscape are summarized in the generated feelings: pleasant smells and sounds, tranquility, silence, solitude, slow but continuous rhythm of nature, peace, memories, rest, relaxation...Thanks to the work of the farmer, the actors underline the feeling that the landscape of meadows and pastures generate in the rural habitants and in the visitor. The actors, also, highlight the balance between the human and his environment; conservation of infrastructures, care of the forest, cleaning and control of the environment ...

However, this project is supported only by the voluntary participation of the rural inhabitant and cannot be considered a comprehensive landscape study. To check it, the leader group of the project observes how the landscape of each area is reflected in different works of art. If we assume that one of the objectives of art is to transfer emotions, analyzing works by artists we can measure and meaning the importance of local rural landscapes. In general, these works reflect elements that are repeated, such as references to its climate, its relief, its peaks, its meadows or its forests. The same can be said about the feelings that this landscape generates; positive feelings, tranquility, balance and identity. A final aspect to be highlighted is the inspiring character

that the rural environment often generates and which can be seen in the works reviewed.

A second analyzed source was the different disclosures of advertise tourism in the Basque Country, from the local to the regional scale. The rural landscape is an important promotional reference in the Basque Country, especially its gastronomy, its natural spaces and, its farmers, like the person who generate those landscapes.

The exercise highlights the results of the working groups. On the one hand, the groups have identified the landscape of meadows, villages, hamlets and summits linked to a humid climate as typical of the Basque Country. The opinion of the rural inhabitant is; thus shared by a good part of society. On the other hand, the artistic works and the tourist promotion, favored by the distance of an already urban society, we can observe an idealization of a landscape that is more in the imagination than in the daily work.

III. CONSUME LOCAL TO ACTING ON THE LANDSCAPE, THE MOST HIGHLIGHTED ACTION

The leader group of the project consider necessary to organize new work sessions with local people to define actions. The seminar is aimed at providing a rain of actions, covering as many fields as possible, without paying attention to the order and preference that each idea may have.

Once the seminars are finished, the dynamic group analyzes the actions formulated in each area, trying to complete the local contributions with ideas highlighted in other areas and regions. The new proposal is sent to the agents requesting them to evaluate the new additions and to prioritize all the actions collected, according to a rating scale, with 1 being the lowest value and 5 being the maximum.

The proposed actions are classified according to the category of the action, coinciding with the groups already established, and based on the assessment provided. Within a range of high appreciation for all (between 3.5 and 4.5 out of 5) the actions groups, the actions who try to sensitize about the work done by farmers and to promote the consumption of local agricultural products are the most valued.

The leader group detects actions proposed in all the areas and actions that can be very suitable to be developed together. The highlighted actions reflect the type of contribution that has prevailed: the promotion of an agriculture model linked to the land, the environment and

the landscape of the place and, the kind of actions who involve the society (consume product, culture, landscape and guard of the territory). Local actors, to support to the farmer, propose different strategies such as tourism or awareness of different social groups, all of them with a high degree of value.

In order to complete the work, the actors suggested recommendations to make the proposal initiatives. Those recommendations are addressed to the three types of agents (institutions, farmers and society).

The main steps that institutions can make are linked to betting firmly in favor of the primary sector and investing in rural areas, following the values that society perceived in rural landscapes.

The actors ask to the farmer a production model that develops the conservation of the values of his environment. It means using natural resources in a sustainable manner, prioritizing the extensive use of land, respecting the architectural heritage and prioritizing the integration in the landscape of their actions.

Among the aspects that are in the hands of society, the first would be to become aware of its strength. This awareness would bring with it to take decisions according with their believed, especially as consumers.

IV. FROM PARTICIPATION TO ACTION: REVIEW OF THE RESULTS OF THE INVESTIGATION

After collecting the main results of the project, we considered necessary to perform an analysis as a critical judgment on the advisability of approaching projects based on citizen consultation from its initial phases. This exercise is addressed from two perspectives: from the

field of rural development and from the scientific field of geography.

The Rural Development agents consider participative methodologies necessary. The dissemination of the sessions has been appropriate (more than forty people in each area in a first session). However, the motivation flows from the second meeting, when the reduction of participants becomes real. Since that moment, a discussion group is generated around the rural landscape, easy to activate if it is considered necessary to continue working on the issue studied.

With respect to the values and actions proposed, none of those Agents have been able to underline any action that has surprised them. At the same time, they highlights the lack of specificity from one area to another. The effectiveness of local analysis is raised when the proposals are repetitive in all cases.

From Geography and Social Sciences, the method described is considered as an interesting exercise and rarely initiated in this field. At the same time, the applicability of the Spiegler and Dower methodology has been tested, characterized by its simplicity and its versatility, to be adapted to the needs of the project supported in the organization of consecutive sessions.

The commitment to open sessions, however, is appropriate if is accompanied by the ability to call, as well as the use of other techniques that contribute to strengthening the main methodology, in this case the seminar and the working groups.

At the same time, it is a realist exercise about the possibilities of participatory methodologies in order to achieve adequate results. The deductions can be biased according to the number and ideology of the participants if the groups are not representative of the whole sample.