

CONSTRUCTING CANADA OUTDOORS

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ABSTRACT

The 'culture of nature' has played an important part in the construction of Canadian national identity. Of equal importance is the need for Canada to develop what the ill-fated 1990 Green Plan called 'environmental citizenship' based upon the nurturing of 'environmental awareness', 'responsible action', and 'informed decision-making'. What it should also have called for was the cultivation of an 'environmental imagination'. That is, the understanding of, and empathy with, the environment as the all-enveloping context in which our societies and cultures have developed.

INTRODUCTION: AN ICONOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS OF LANDSCAPE AND NATURE

A discussion of the role of social science research in the planning and representing of the mission of parks and protected areas is a forward-looking concept. Long regarded in derogatory terms as 'soft science,' it is increasingly being understood that a better understanding of people's beliefs, values and priorities are crucial to their social, political and personal decision-making. These need to be understood in our approach to planning our natural and cultural heritage resources. Just as we understand the utility and rigour of ecosystem analysis and econometrics in positivist scientific terms, so also do we need to be analytical in deconstructing the meaning of nature for people.

For a long time, ecological science adopted the 'naturalist' and 'essentialist' view of nature as a separate, analyzable, objective reality studied in the isolated categories of geomorphology, soils, climate, flora and fauna, and reconstituted in the somewhat deterministic ecosystem models. More recently, social science has applied the power of hermeneutics, phenomenology, semiotics, iconography and discourse theory to the underpinnings of our social construction of nature that influence decision-making.

The term used by geographers for culturally loaded geographies is 'landscape'. As assemblages of humanly produced material forms, landscapes constitute cultural records arranged palimpsest-like through time and space that may be interrogated as material artifacts and symbolically loaded signifiers of meanings. From the initial, anthropology-driven perspective of landscape as an assemblage of material culture-traits and complexes, the focus has shifted to a more nuanced decoding of the symbolic meaning. In particular, the material rendering of social memory in a mythologized place trans-

forms landscape from an external phenomenon to be engaged visually, to a psychic terrain of internalized symbolic meaning: an inscape. These serve as emotional prompts for action in the present and their interpretation helps us understand its role in 'cultural practice' and as an instrument of 'power.'

CASE STUDY: CONSTRUCTING CANADA, OR, FROM ANISM TO ARTIFICE

The 'culture of nature' has played an important part in the construction of Canadian national identity in terms of symbolically charged views of the 'wilderness' and meta-narratives of historical processes of settlement and resource development. That is, constructions of Canadian Nature have long been bracketed by the icons of the *Group of Seven* and the staples of economic development theory. But what has not been to the fore has been a sense of 'environmental citizenship' based upon the nurturing of 'environmental awareness,' 'responsible action,' and 'informed decision-making,' all energised by an 'environmental imagination.' That is, a fuller appreciation of the interaction between societies and their environments and the contexts within which scientific, social and cultural frameworks are situated.

It may be argued that the human definition of Nature is always a social construction and never a totally objective entity completely external to us. That is, we remake Nature by defining it. For a richer understanding of how we interact with it, we need to unpack a series of kaleidoscopic images of a base-reality to effect a genealogy of the 'idea' of Nature. That is, an archaeology of consciousness to understand where we have come from, where we are, and where we are going. At any point in time, therefore, contemporary value systems are complex amalgams of past and present priorities. Thus, Canada's long history of human settlement and resource-use has witnessed several different eras of environmental consciousness, values, and praxis:

- as 'home' for Canada's First Nations who, ideally, sought ecological sustainability;
- as 'wilderness' for most Euro-Canadian settlers who attempted to transform Nature into a controlled and productive 'garden';
- as 'staple' for an expansive 'national policy' of resource-based economic development;
- as 'planned resource' with a growing awareness of the need to conserve the nation's natural wealth for future development; and,
- as 'aesthetic-spiritual' icon for the social cohesion of a nationalising state.

Rather than being a chronological series of successive stages, residual elements of all of these archetypal perspective still figure in contemporary discourses about Nature. Taken together, they underpin what Schama calls (1995) "*inherited landscape myths and memories*" that inform current preferences, actions and policy.

The modern Canadian perspective of Nature, therefore, is a complex interweaving of several threads of past encounters with Nature. But three dimensions seem to permeate modern discourses:

- scientific constructs underpin what are thought to be good management principles. The ecosystem with all of its assumed precision, clarity, and explanatory power has transcended mere empirical verification and modelling. It has now become a frame-of-mind and the

dominant paradigm that would be enhanced by integrating the cultural contexts in which science is formulated and practised;

- recent discourses of Nature are much influenced by several fresh perspectives: deep ecology; bio-regionalism; eco-feminism; non-western ontologies. Taken together, they challenge the capitalist-consumer-growth ethic that has underpinned much of our past encounter with Nature and reflect an appreciation of Nature for its 'intrinsic' contributions to the quality of life rather than an 'anthropocentric' assessment of its utility; but, nevertheless, Nature continues to be constructed as a 'consumer product' in a service-sector driven economy where the commodification of the ecological experience is expressed in marketing the wilderness experience or eco-tourism for the popular good or local economic development; and,
- finally, given the growing cosmopolitan character of the Canadian population, attention has to be directed to ensuring that our policies for parks and the outdoors accommodates non-western ways of looking at Nature. It belongs to them too.

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