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Vanneste, Dominique; Stoffelen, Arie

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# 4

## Integrating natural and cultural heritage assets for tourism: a critical reflection on bridging concepts for future research

*Dominique Vanneste and Arie Stoffelen*


### 1. Fragmentation of the natural and the cultural

Integrating natural and cultural heritage characteristics seems to be beneficial for both tourists and locals; for the former, in terms of richer tourism experiences (Aitchison et al., 2000) and for the latter, in terms of local development potential (Stoffelen et al., 2019). However, this seemingly straightforward reasoning cannot be taken for granted. Due to the increasing specialization of academic disciplines in the second half of the twentieth century, the ‘middle ground’ between the natural and cultural spheres in society and academia has been put under pressure, not least due to diverging epistemological positions of research in both fields (Castree, 2005). Applied to the study of heritage, Lowenthal (2005, p. 81) even posits that “[. . .] management of both [cultural and natural] heritages has many features in common, and both realms often share similar, if not the same, leaders and spokesmen, [but] relations between the two are marked less by cooperative amity than by envy and rivalry”.

The integrative heritage perspective outlined in the very first sentences of this chapter has become more mainstream in recent years. An example of the academic incorporation of integrated natural/cultural heritage values is the natural resource management literature that has come to stress the need of incorporating what are essentially cultural landscape values in nature conservation decision-making (Brown, 2013; Brown et al., 2015). The tourism landscape literature that tackles meaning creation and potential clashes of interests

in tourism commodification is also illustrative in this regard (e.g. Knudsen et al., 2008; Stoffelen & Vanneste, 2015; Terkenli, 2002). Regarding practical heritage conservation schemes, the UNESCO World Heritage designation forms a fascinating case. Even though UNESCO natural world heritage designations, in essence, focus solely on natural value protection, UNESCO uses an increasingly broad heritage definition that stresses the link between conservation of natural heritage and human activity:

The World Heritage Committee wanted to broaden the definition of World Heritage to better reflect the full spectrum of our world's cultural and natural treasures and to provide a comprehensive framework and operational methodology for implementing the World Heritage Convention. This new vision goes beyond the narrow definitions of heritage and strives to recognize and protect sites that are outstanding demonstrations of human coexistence with the land as well as human interactions, cultural coexistence, spirituality and creative expression. (UNESCO, 2019)

Simultaneously, figures from UNESCO show that, in early 2020, only 39 sites are categorized as 'mixed' World Heritage, compared to 213 natural and 869 cultural sites (UNESCO, 2020). Since 1979, not more than three mixed sites have been recognized per year. This illustrates the disconnection between theory and practice. Likewise, one can regularly observe a large gap in approach and focus between destinations with a predominant nature-based tourism development and others with a cultural tourism vocation. Therefore, despite UNESCO's increasingly integrated vision, gaps remain between natural and cultural values in both  heritage conservation and heritage tourism development.

In this chapter, we advocate an increasing awareness of the value of integrating natural and cultural values in heritage tourism. In Section 2, we first interpret the reason for existing challenges to integrate both heritage values in theory and practice. In Section 3, we reflect on geoparks and protected natural areas for emphasising the intrinsically cultural embedding of natural heritage tourism values. In Section 4, we approach urban areas as settings where the opposite takes place; where predominantly cultural heritage values are highlighted but where the physical-spatial embedding of these values has been underplayed in research and practice. We argue that the tendency of emphasizing the 'monument' (Benson, 2004; Smith, 2010) neglects the spatially embedded heritage values of urban cultural heritage even though this embedding is central for achieving a richer understanding of the role of heritage in the urban fabric. Finally, in Section 5, by bringing together previous sections, we argue that the concept of 'themed landscapes' could be at the basis of a holistic and spatially explicit conceptual framework for understanding natural and cultural heritage tourism development.

## 2. Incomplete paradigm changes in natural/cultural heritage perspectives

In 2005, David Lowenthal reconstructed how our approaches to natural and cultural heritage have changed over time. His main argument is that major differences have established **how** we view and manage our natural and cultural legacies, despite the fact that “it has become increasingly clear that heritage is everywhere mixed” (Lowenthal, 2005, p. 88). Lowenthal’s views provide an interesting context for applying Ashworth’s heritage classification. Ashworth identified three larger heritage paradigms: (i) the ‘preservation’ paradigm, which emphasizes the intrinsic value of heritage sites that needs to remain intact; (ii) the ‘conservation’ paradigm, which emphasizes the material forms of heritage but also its contemporary use and function, and (iii) the ‘heritage planning’ paradigm, which focuses on how meaning is ascribed to heritage and how narratives are selected on the basis of contemporary needs and interests (Ashworth, 2011). Lowenthal’s (2005) observation of the artificial split of heritage into separate natural and cultural spheres coincides with a positioning of these spheres in different heritage paradigms. Hence, in the words of Ashworth (2011), paradigm shifts in heritage studies and management are ‘incomplete’ in a sense that previous interpretations continue to linger and co-exist with new interpretations.

Practically, this embedding of natural and cultural heritage studies in different heritage paradigms (or perhaps more aptly, heritage discourses) causes confusion as to what constitutes heritage and how it should be protected in the future (Patiwael et al., 2019). While there is a time-lag in practice also among cultural heritage management (see, e.g. Patiwael et al. 2019 about the dominantly static and objectified preservation focus of ICOMOS world heritage impact assessment schemes), cultural heritage scholars broadly agree that heritage “relates to contemporary needs and experiences of people rather than to static objects or to objects of the past, that heritage visions are historically embedded and change over time, and that heritage interpretation is context-dependent” (Stoffelen, 2020, p. 100). In contrast, natural heritage is often approached with purist, objectified and nativist preferences linked to nostalgia for pre-industrial life and landscapes (Lowenthal, 2005). This approach is exemplified by national parks in many places around the globe, including the United States, which are seen as primordial, unchanged and people-free – a quintessentially yet often under-recognized cultural-political view on physical landscapes in its own right. As aptly phrased by Ross-Bryant (2013, p. 2), “the national park is nature that has become culture while claiming to be pure nature”.

### 3. Natural/cultural values of rural (tourism) landscapes

Ever since the cultural turn, geographers have predominantly understood landscape as “a synthetic and integrating concept that refers both to a material-physical reality, originating from a continuous dynamic interaction between natural processes and human activity, and to the immaterial existential values and symbols of which the landscape is the signifier” (Antrop, 2006, p. 188). In line with the quote on the mixed nature of heritage by Lowenthal (2005) in Section 2, this vision reflects the awareness that all landscapes, also predominantly natural ones, are to some degree cultural. Some scholars even argue that every location incorporates several landscapes: landscapes are formed by people interpreting a physical environment, with uneven power distribution among stakeholders determining which of these interpretations dominate in the public discourse (Greider & Garkovich, 1994). As such, meaning is not intrinsic to the landscape.


Applying this perspective to heritage tourism means that tourism value creation is essentially a cultural phenomenon, also in natural environments. Understanding which areas have potential as tourism destinations requires insights in the interaction between people and place; not just knowledge of the place or the (a)biotic landscape itself. Our affinity with places or landscapes, as residents or as tourists, “is not neutral or objective as our experiences, perceptions and knowledge of nature are always mediated through socially, culturally and politically institutionalized filters” (Stoffelen et al., 2019, p. 2). When combined with personal characteristics and individual memories of people, meaning is imbued in the landscape and, hence, tourism, heritage and personal identity values are created (Zube, 1987). Since the mentioned filters are for a large part given form through representation (Paasi, 2011), even natural heritage recognized as being ‘heritage’ and/or commodified for tourism is never neutral and always partly cultural – as shown with the earlier example of US national parks and as studied in detail for the representation of the British countryside as a heritage and tourism product (R. Butler, 1998; Urry, 1995; R. Williams, 1973).

Applying this frame to the biotic world requires looking at the natural resource management (NRM) literature. Despite being grounded in natural sciences, this field of research underwent a paradigm shift in the 1990s, after which the inextricable link between people and the natural environment has become widely accepted (Cantrill & Senecah, 2001). NRM “typically deals with conflicting interests of various stakeholders since they use the same resources

for different purposes” (Reed et al., 2009, p. 1935). The bottom line of this approach is that there is a need for incorporating holistic participative management different landscape values of stakeholder groups, including those of tourists attracted to the natural heritage values of certain landscapes. This ensures that conservation efforts are shared, inclusive, place-based and to the benefit of all affected actors instead of just the previously empowered groups (D. R. Williams & Stewart, 1998). These views have led to methodological innovation, including mental mapping (Brown, 2005), different types of stakeholder analysis (Reed et al., 2009) and the reconstruction of the ‘web of meanings’ among groups in natural heritage conservation areas popular for recreational and other economic use (Davenport & Anderson, 2005). For example, again referring to the (re)presentation of US national parks, the paradigm shift in NRM literature has raised the awareness that “the mandate to preserve the land unchanged, so the people can enjoy it inevitably leads to conflicts over use versus preservation” (Ross-Bryant, 2013, p. 5).

While NRM literature deals with the biotic world, geopark literature deals with the abiotic sphere of natural heritage. Geoparks are territorial organizations that deal with the protection and promotion of the ‘geoheritage’ of landscapes with the objective of place-based sustainable development (Stoffelen, 2020; UNESCO, 2017). Geotourism, in particular, is the tool through which visitors could be educated as to the geoheritage value of the landscape of the geopark (Azman et al., 2011). Geoheritage is most often interpreted as physical landforms with high geoscientific value (Brocx & Semeniuk, 2007; Panizza, 2009). A recent literature review showed that, in line with this definition of geoheritage, landscape visions at the basis of geopark studies are predominantly objectified. Reflection on the meaning-creation processes by residents and tourists, and potential mismatches with the expert-assessed geoheritage values, are largely absent (Stoffelen, 2020; Vanneste et al., 2016). Natural and cultural landscape values in the geopark literature are predominantly approached as fully separate. Similarly, many peripheral areas, looking into tourism as a lever for development, focus on nature-based tourism, leaving cultural heritage as well as the cultural embedding of natural heritage largely unconsidered (Adiyia et al., 2015; Hall & Boyd, 2005).

When comparing the heritage interpretation of natural (tourism) landscapes in NRM and geopark literatures, we see that the former is predominantly positioned in the ‘heritage planning’ discourse while the latter deals more with ‘preservation’ (Ashworth, 2011). While tourism is perceived to be one of several value-creating elements that should be included for successful and holistic NRM, natural heritage tourism is perceived as unequivocally positive in the context of the objectified abiotic world, with claims that “[w]hen geo-

tourists move to geoparks, the money moves in the same direction” (Farsani et al., 2011, p. 68). Essentially, these calls, rooted in the static and objectified vision at the basis of most abiotic natural heritage tourism and preservation approaches, are at odds with critical tourism geography and heritage tourism literature. For example, Bosak et al. (2010) show how the presentation of ostensibly neutral landscapes in geotourism maps between the United States and Canada ultimately serves the interests of well-established organizations. Hence, more transversally adopted attention to how natural and cultural values intersect in rural areas is still needed. This need manifests in both research and practice, in order to understand tourism value creation and the use of heritage tourism for sustainable development purpose 

#### 4. The physical-material embedding of urban cultural heritage

When looking at heritage (tourism) values in urban contexts, one can identify a similar separation between natural and cultural heritage. None of the most important study topics for the future identified in the Agenda for Urban Tourism Research (Edwards et al., 2008) refers to natural heritage within urban destinations. Looking into other studies, it appears that the natural component, or broader, the physical-spatial embedding of cultural heritage, remains underplayed in urban heritage contexts (Table 4.1).


In contrast to currently dominant perspectives, the classic historical geography has put more emphasis on the physical-spatial embedding of urban cultural heritage to understand how this heritage forms part of the urban fabric. For example, studies have pointed out the importance of the topography to understand the structure of street patterns and presence of urban agriculture in historical Tuscan cities (McGuillan, 1996); revealed ideas behind the high city (‘ville haute’) and low city (‘ville basse’) dichotomy to explain the spatial segregation of urban communities and types of built heritage (e.g. in Brussels) (Vanneste, 1985); looked into parks as expressions of former power relations and drivers for heritage economics in the present and future (e.g. London) (Licciardi & Amirtahmasebi, 2012); and have highlighted the impact of rivers and harbours on the social and built structure of cities (e.g. colonial cities) (Royle, 1996). The question is if these approaches, nowadays almost defunct because of criticism of their predominantly descriptive value, contribute to our broader understanding of urban cultural heritage or if they are an expression of a nostalgic interest in the (urban) landscape of the past  supporting the former argument, Holdsworth (2003) suggests that a holistic analysis of the

Table 4.1 Perspectives that reflect on natural heritage values in urban contexts

Content	Examples
Natural characteristics are not usually decisive visitor motivations in urban tourism; natural characteristics are related to non-urban areas and people	Newsome et al., 2012; Van den Berg et al., 1995
Natural beauty is to be found outside the city, to get away from urban life	Cartier & Lew, 2005; Roberts & Hall, 2004
Urban landscapes have modified natural areas or even destroyed the natural environment and, therefore, they lack natural characteristics	Colantonio, 2017; Newsome et al., 2012
Planning in natural resources-based tourism development can be adopted in the context of urban tourism destinations for environmental quality management	Jansen-Verbeke & Lievois, 1999; Kemp & Stephani, 2014
Integrative concepts that consider physical and cultural landscapes can mainly be found in studies on a supra-local scale	Briassoulis & Van der Straaten, 2000; Stoffelen & Vanneste, 2015

urban landscape, considering both natural and cultural elements, allows us to understand how the past structures the modern (urban) society and contributes to identity creation and cultural reproduction by and for residents and visitors.

Following this reasoning, the fragmentation of cultural urban heritage in separate tourism products reduces the possibility of discovering the city as a ‘système de pensée’ (literally translated: ‘system of thought’) (Courville, 1995) and to foster a dialogue between cultural and natural heritage by considering them jointly within a so-called heritage-scape. While the heritage-scape concept has the potential to combine the natural and cultural elements of urban heritage, there is confusion about its definition that currently limits its integrative role in academia. For example, Di Giovine (2009) defines a heritage-scape as “intangible in nature, existing in the minds of people [only]” (p. 11) and a UNESCO World Heritage-scape, being “a distinct, global cultural form [. . .] which is not geo-socially bounded” (p. 17). To highlight the contrast with the broader integrated heritage vision developed above, Manuel Castells (1997, p. 7) wrote that “individuals, social groups, and societies process all these materials [from history, from geography, from biology . . .], and rearrange their meaning, according to social determinations and cultural projects that are rooted in their social structure, and in their space/time framework”. Therefore, we adopt the adjusted definition of heritage-scapes of Gillot et al. (2013, p. 6):



“a ‘larger formation’, a landscape of its own that exists primarily as a product of the imagination *but with* roots in the physical world”. This definition has become widely used (Garden, 2006; Singh, 2010; Verbeke & Vanneste, 2018) and leans closely to the landscape definition used in Section 3.

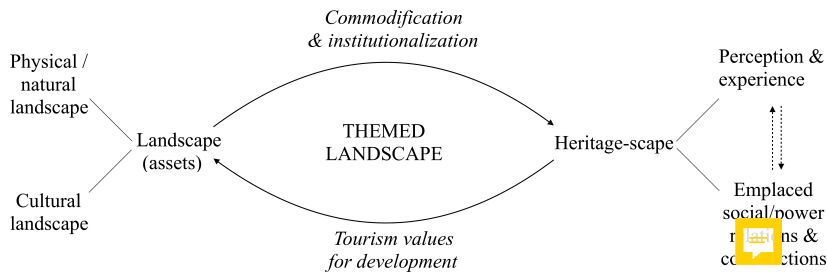
The concept of heritage-scapes needs to incorporate that **tourist stays** at a certain place are, per definition, limited in time. Therefore, a tourist might struggle with grasping the complexities of the (urban) landscape. Is an urban landscape able to contribute to the identity of a tourist or to his/her sense of place, beyond simple experience? The answer is not straightforward since it depends, among other things, on the way heritage is commodified for tourism purposes (Knudsen et al., 2008), and on the type of tourist, his/her motivation, and the level of participation (Ginting & Wahid, 2015; Prebensen et al., 2013). Research illustrates that a landscape is also a mediator for behaviour and attitudes by creating the right atmosphere (Friedrich, 2011; Vanneste & Neervoort, 2018). Hence, attention to the spatial embedding of cultural heritage could lead to not only satisfaction of visitors but may also render their support for the preservation of the landscape at stake (Vanneste & Neervoort, 2018).

The idea that sense of place could contribute to preservation/conservation preferences has **also been** studied in **rural settings** (e.g. Curtin & Kragh, 2014; Kaltborn & Bjerke, 2002). This perspective opens interesting paths but does not answer the question if visitors can grasp the complexity of (urban) heritage sites and develop meaning and empathy, due to the short duration of their visits. Traditional sense of place literature stresses the effect of time on strength of the affinity of people with places (Tuan, 1975). Some scholars claim that sense of place can, in fact, be stimulated with audio-visual materials (T. Butler, 2007) but this could also lead to the danger of fading into staged landscapes in which some elements might be over-emphasized or romanticized. To further complicate things, research in the historical city of Ghent (Belgium) shows that the behavioural difference between (a self-defined) creative tourist and a non-creative tourist is not significant and that both consider heritage the most important value of the place (Vanneste, 2013). Clearly, this relationship between heritage tourism, natural and cultural heritage values, and empathy or sense of place needs more research that incorporates insights in visitors’ experiences, management structures (such as co-creation) (Richards, 2011; Richards & Wilson, 2007; Sharpley & Stone, 2010) and the structuring role of space in meaning creation (Sampson & Goodrich, 2009).

## 5. Refection and recommendation for a research agenda

There is a long tradition of theoretical acceptance among critical heritage scholars that integrative perspectives between natural and cultural heritage values are valuable for heritage conservation and sustainable development processes (Pearce, 2001). Nevertheless, our comparison of research on natural and cultural heritage perspectives shows that these views are unevenly adopted over sectors and within academic disciplines. Views on how tourism values and landscapes influence each other have panned out differently in urban and rural contexts. Therefore, our final reflections revolve around establishing a conceptual framework that incorporates a broader geographical approach which bridges between natural and cultural values. We focus on a geographical approach not only because, in geography, natural and cultural elements are seen to be inextricably linked but because heritage is “inherently a spatial phenomenon” (Graham et al., 2000, p. 4). According to Graham et al., all heritage occurs somewhere. The relationship between a heritage object and its place matters. Besides, places are distinguished from each other by many elements that contribute to the identity and meaning attributed to them by different stakeholders. Heritage is one of these defining factors. Finally, turning to issues of regional development, spatial planning and tourism, “heritage constitutes a prime element in these processes and a principal component of the various strategies of policy implementation” (Graham et al., 2000, p. 5).

Therefore, a reinterpretation of the existing concept of ‘themed landscape’ might be useful for understanding natural and cultural heritage tourism development. Our interpretation of the concept does not equal the definition of themed spaces of Edensor and Kothari (2004, p. 196), who describe it as “particular kinds of stages upon which both tourists and tourist workers perform”. Rather, we follow Patico and Caldwell (2002, p. 290) to interpret the function of spatial settings “not as arbitrary symbols for cultural processes that could unfold autonomously, but rather as the very media through which social actors reconfigure their relationships to the world around them”. In this view, meaning is not intrinsic or a priori attributed to the landscape as it is the social actors who have to make a choice for, or selection of, natural or cultural elements. In other words, the concept of the ‘themed landscape’ points to the need to look at the physical-spatial embedding of cultural heritage and the cultural essence of the physical-spatial environment, also in a context of tourism development. In short, the themed landscape functions as a holistic and spatially explicit conceptual framework that connects the physical-material embedding of heritage and the social construction of heritage (Figure 4.1).





Source: Based on Stoffelen and Vanneste (2015, p. 555).

Figure 4.1 Themed landscapes at the centre of a conceptual model to integrate natural and cultural heritage values in tourism development

To illustrate the implications of the previous statements: when a certain architectural period within the urban tissue is chosen as a theme by involved stakeholders, one needs to research not only the theme itself but also how these stakeholders mobilize it for aesthetical enjoyment or learning, with or without tourism valorization. Similarly, when studying tourism development in national parks, the emphasis should move beyond natural or physical landscape characteristics and also incorporate the symbolism involved for visitors and locals. These examples point out that the spatial contextualization of natural/cultural heritage, embedded in the themed landscape concept, is of utmost importance for future research on heritage tourism development.

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