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PERCEPTION OF LANDSCAPE IN THE INFORMATION SOCIETY

key words: role of media, perception cultural landscape, Polish Carpathians

INTRODUCTION

Landscape studies lead to becoming familiar with the landscape evolution, projecting landscape changes occurring under human influence, landscape indexation, methods of protection and spatial management. In the Polish Carpathians environmental protection schemes were undertaken as a consequence of increasing negative impact of deforestation, unfavourable changes of hydrologic conditions caused by engineering works, decrease in population of some species of flora and fauna (Szafer, 1933; Treter, Leszczycki, 1934; Leszczycki, 1937; Grodzińska, Szarek-Łukaszewska, 1997; Soja, 2002; Wyżga, 2003; Plit, 2004). The factors destroying cultural heritage include inappropriately located, chaotic and ethnographically unmatching housing, unplanned development of communication tracks as well as improper land-use management (Lach, 1984; Górka, 1995; Węclawowicz, 1998). Spiritual cultural heritage has been endangered by the lack of continuity in cultural tradition, or even the lack of basic knowledge of it, as well as inappropriate approach to the environment in both cognitive and ethical sense.

AIM OF STUDY

The study objective was to learn how the inhabitants of southern Poland perceive landscape of the Polish Carpathians and how they look for information about landscape transformations and protection.

Why should we investigate how landscape is perceived by the information society?

First of all, landscape preservation requires acceptance of the society. Secondly, landscape transformation and creation requires information and knowledge. Thirdly, we live in the times of wide access to information, on the one hand, and excessive abundance of information, on the other.

The studies are based on the assumption that a wide access of local communities to information about pro-ecological activities, values of the natural environment, evaluation of investments impact on the environment and responsibility of local authorities, may contribute to active society's participation in discussions on planned investments, expressing opinions, participation in a decision-making process and responsibility for changes in the landscape. It has been assumed that objects and phenomena are difficult to be protected from adverse (unfavourable) transformations, as we may even be unable to notice some of them. The work aspired to answer the questions of what the perception of the surrounding natural-cultural environment depends on, as well as to what extent our vision of the world is determining our attitude towards the issue of environmental protection.

METHOD

A survey was distributed among 560 respondents, inhabitants of 12 towns and 28 villages. The questionnaire consisted of 16 questions concerning, among other things, indexation of the Carpathian landscape and neighbourhood, reliability and use of information sources (including books, lessons, TV, Internet), methods of contacts with natural and cultural landscapes (including excursions, books, TV, Internet). A survey was distributed among inhabitants the Polish Carpathian Mts. - south Poland. This area was chosen due to feature great variations in the land use being closely linked with the land relief diversification and the history of settlement. Centuries of harmonious existence of villages and towns in the diverse Carpathian geographical regions contrast harshly with the adverse landscape transformation the area experienced during the last fifty years, as a result of rapid settlement expansion. During the last fifty years, landscape suffered adverse changes as a result of chaotic settlement processes (Bogdanowski, 1998; Kowicki, 2004; Pietrzak, 2005; Starkel, Pietrzak, Łajczak, 2007). Towns were developed rapidly, many surrounding villages were turned into suburbs. There also took place processes of rural infrastructure thickening, emerging of numerous hamlets, creating touristic settlements like service, technical, traffic facilities etc., as well as detached summer cottages.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The most frequently indicated circumstances of getting familiar with natural and cultural landscape were walks and excursions (fig. 1). Moderately frequently respon-

dents watch films on TV as well as they read books and magazines showing different landscapes. Fairly seldom the respondents become familiar with landscapes through watching films and photos on Internet and surfing Goggle Earth.

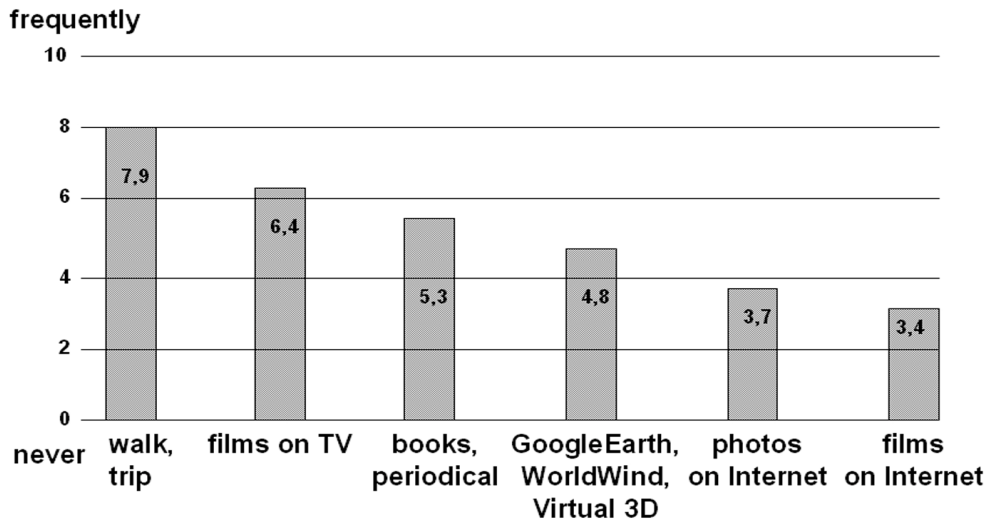


Fig.1. Circumstances of getting to know natural and cultural landscapes. *Source: dates from anonymous questionnaire carried by author.*

It results from the studies that the nearest surrounding of the place of residence: up to 500 m from home, is usually perceived as less attractive than the whole settlement unit, i.e. town and village. Village inhabitants assess more highly their landscape than town inhabitants (fig. 2). Town inhabitants perceive very negatively the landscape of large housing estates where they live.

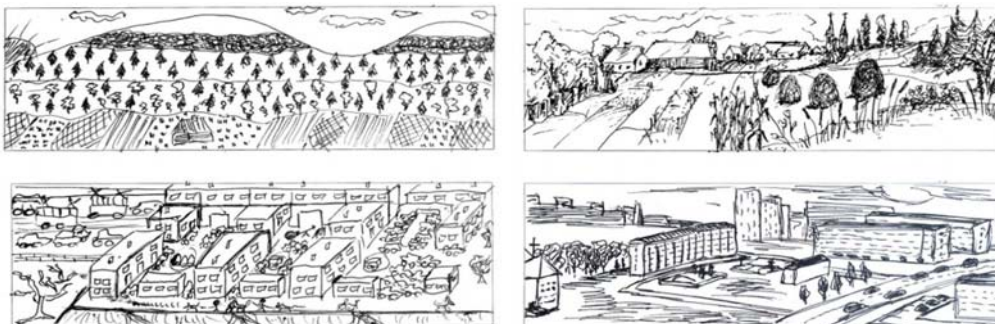


Fig.2. Perception of the landscape of the Polish Carpathians by residents of southern Poland (respondent's sketches). *Source: drawing dates from anonymous questionnaire carried by author.*

In the respondents' opinion, uniqueness and exceptionality are factors decisive about beauty and other landscape values. At the foothills they value more harmony, whereas in high mountains they appreciate diversity and seasonal changes. Irrespective of the fact whether the landscape of the place of residence is perceived as attractive or unattractive, the respondents said that it is worth protecting. However, they regarded elements of the natural environment as more protection worthy than of the cultural environment.

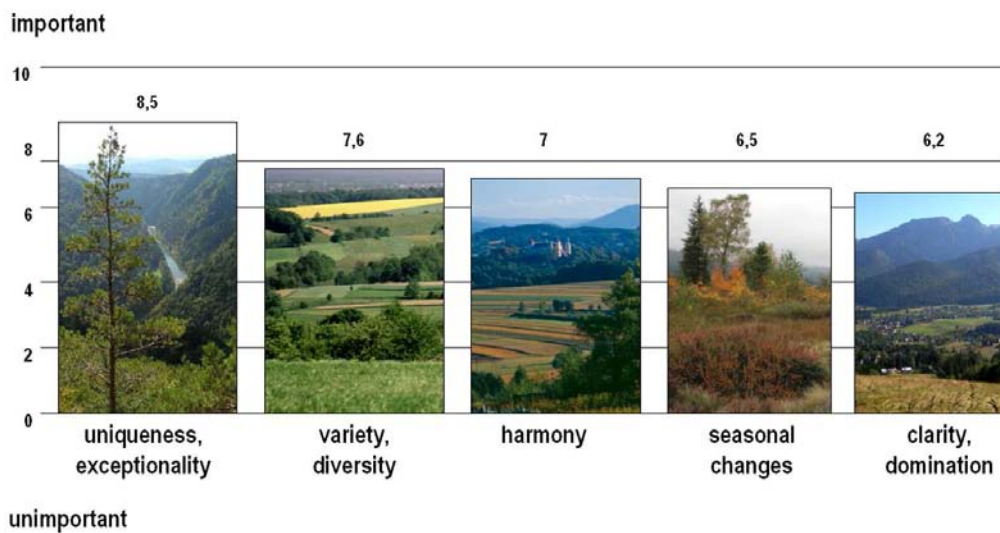


Fig. 3. Evaluation of values decisive about beauty and high landscape values. *Source: by author.*

The other aspect of landscape perception, namely, is knowledge about the surrounding landscape. Being close to nature or cultural products only does not cause shaping a pro-ecological attitude or responsibility for landscape transformations as a result of human intervention. Knowledge should accompany ties with the "Small Homeland" and the sense of responsibility.

The main source of knowledge (information) about interesting cultural and natural objects, as well as landscape evolution and degradation is television, radio and newspapers. When evaluating the frequency of using various information sources, the respondents admitted that they do not use any sources too frequently, which was confirmed in the response to the question about the amount of time spent on becoming familiar with information about transformations and natural and cultural environmental protection. At this point, I would like to draw your attention to the possibility of using computer games in ecological education. Although historic

and business games enjoy high popularity, there is a lack of an attractive offer (apart from applications attached to school books) addressed to young people. It results from our studies that young people spend a lot of time in front of their computers and surf the Internet, however, this does not translate into raising the level of their knowledge or skills related to using information and communication technologies.

In contrast with acquiring information from various sources is evaluation of their reliability. Generally, reliable sources of environmental information, in the respondents' opinion, include books and professional periodicals, whereas they regard lessons, courses, TV and radio programmes, everyday newspapers and Internet as moderately reliable sources. The respondents admitted that they use reliable sources rarely, and they refer to moderately reliable ones much more frequently. Those results confirm the problem with medial education described in literature; it is treated marginally, and the consequence of such a state of affairs is the lack of multimedia-based teaching models.

More than 90 per cent of the surveyed would protect wildlife, rare vegetation, streams, lakes, peaks and glades. It is worrying that most of the respondents omitted from the Carpathian landscape human settlement harmoniously blended with the environment. As a result there were no requests for the preservation of traditional villages, historic patterns of small towns or remains of ancient towns. It is interesting to observe the fact of human's exceptional responsibility for animals, forests, and all inanimate nature, together with the lack of care for the objects created by people themselves. Our attitude can be characterised as overprotective as far as nature is concerned and irresponsible when it comes to the outcomes of our actions (Pietrzak, 2006).

Almost 1/3 of the respondents spend 10 minutes a week at most on becoming acquainted with information about transformations and protection of natural and cultural landscape; slightly more than 1/3 of the respondents spend up to 30 minutes, 18% spend up to 60 minutes, 12%: up to 3 hours, 3.5% up to 10 hours, whereas 1.5% more than 10 hours. Although the respondents stated that they spend little time on issues related to landscape protection, it results from the drawings and responses in the questionnaire that they observe the landscape carefully and that it affects strongly their perception of the world.

In the respondents' opinion, beautiful landscape has the biggest influence on tourism development, life quality and shaping ties with the history of the region (fig. 6). Influence of beautiful landscape upon growth of local entrepreneurship and locating business investments received the lowest score.

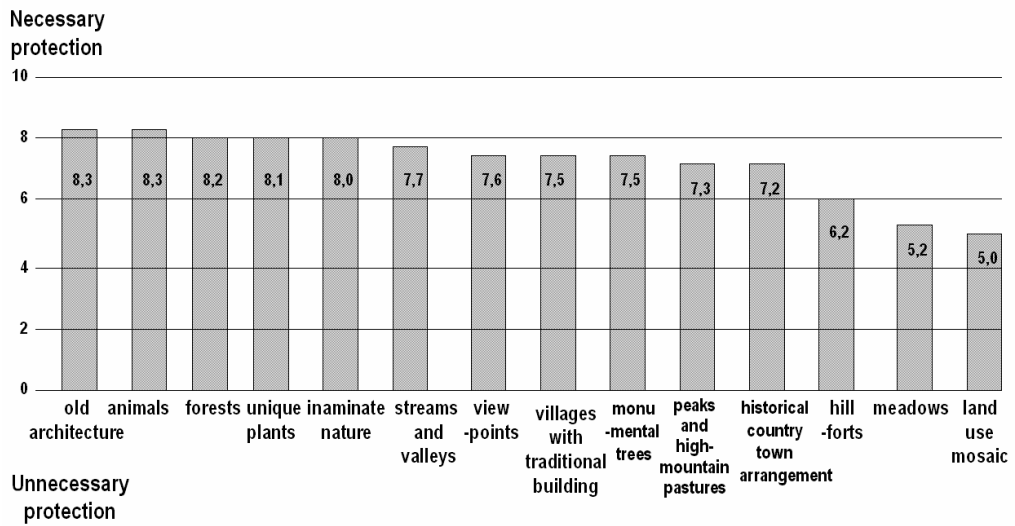


Fig. 4. Evaluation of the need to protect natural and cultural landscape. *Source: data from anonymous questionnaire carried by author.*

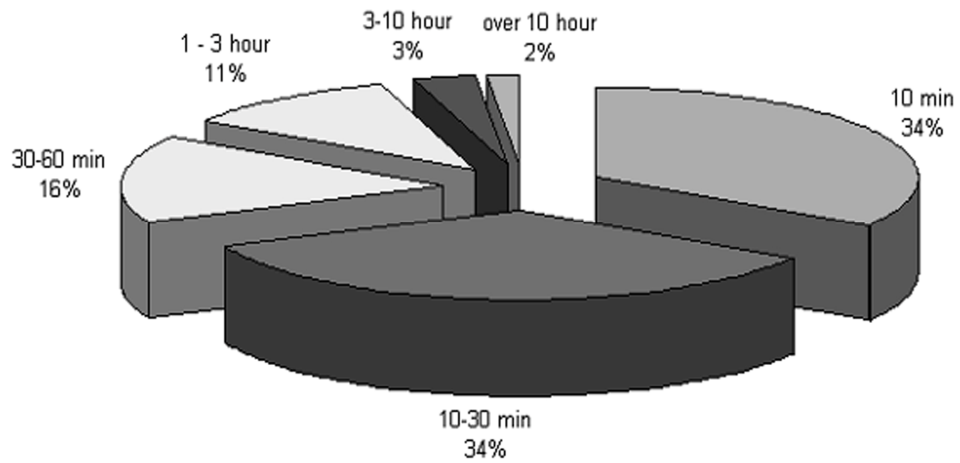


Fig. 5. Time spent on becoming familiar with information about transformations and environmental protection. *Source: data from anonymous questionnaire carried by author.*

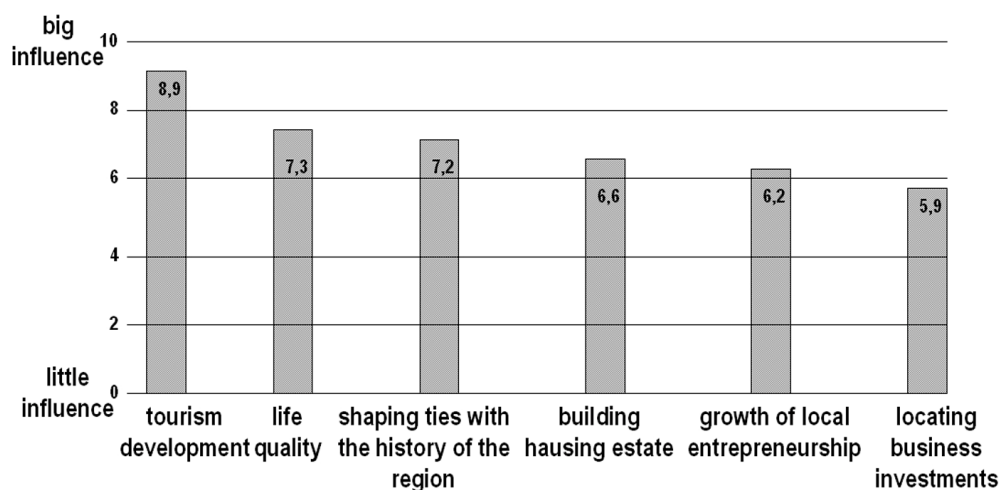


Fig. 6. Evaluation of beautiful landscape influence upon various spheres of life. *Source: dates from anonymous questionnaire carried by author.*

The respondents see the need of placing information about the programme of landscape protection in various sources of information. They considered it necessary to put such information on local TV and radio programmes and magazines; they believe that book publishing is equally important. The need for including information on Internet and passing it during lessons, courses and training was regarded as very important as well.

CONCLUSION

What should be done to protect the Carpathian landscape? The essence of lasting natural and cultural heritage depends on three factors: our attitude, knowledge and skills.

1. Attitude: Knowing the landscape through excursions and direct contacts causes that the society feels tied to the history of the region and sees the need to protect the landscape.

One should reinforce the process of creating an emotional attitude, in which the following motives are dominant: customs, as well as patriotic and religious aspects.

2. Knowledge: No time to obtain information about landscape transformations and use of moderately reliable sources leads to insufficient knowledge in this scope. One needs to strengthen creation of the rational attitude, in which the following motives are dominant: scientific, economic and legalistic.

3. Skills: Lack of knowledge about Internet resources and lack of skills related to using the Internet constitutes the main barrier to the development of the information society. One should create a multimedia education model.

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SUMMARY

The paper presents results of the survey carried out in a group of 560 respondents, the aim of which was to study perception of the landscape of the Polish Carpathians by residents of southern Poland, and methods of obtaining information regarding transformation and protection of the landscape (books, lessons, TV, Internet, trips, Google Earth etc.). Nearly 1/3 of the respondents spend no more than 10 minutes per week studying information about transformation and protection of the natural and cultural landscape, slightly over 1/3 spend up to 30 minutes, and the rest up to 3 hours. Most frequently, the respondents have contact with various landscapes during walks and trips, then by means of programs Google-Earth, Virtual 3D, Wind-World. Television, radio and newspapers are main sources of information regarding landscapes. The Internet was behind, but still the surveyed get more information from there than from lessons or specialist magazines, although the latter are appreciated for their credibility of information. The survey shows that protection of wildlife and historic object of architecture is the most important in the Polish Carpathians, followed by protection of rare species of plants and woods. Respondents would rather protect our natural landscape that cultural one, as they do not appreciate the value of protection of historically preserved whole scenic structures. The main obstacle in development of the information society is awareness of the potential of the Internet and skills in using it.