

Public and publicity for landscape processes



This picture is from the 1920s in Germany. It was a time when windmills were being pulled down because they were being replaced by motorized mills. Some issues in the picture are remarkable:

- There are a lot of children, I presume despite the four adults on the mill the rest are all children. The photo reminds me of pictures from India, Brazil or China today. It is the age of urbanization with the increase in population and migration into the cities occurring in only two or three decades.
- You can see the curiosity of the children and their interest in technical things like a photograph or a windmill demolition. But you also realize that there isn't a growing public that is critically discussing its own socioeconomic framework of landscape development. It's more a generation in the midst of gaining experiences than a public that is having discussions.

From my point of view creating publicity for landscape processes is the main challenge for environmental societies.

That's because public discourses as a concept of the modern societies prevail over the legitimacy of human activity. Public interest and discourse is often more important than the democratic election itself. In the discourses agreements are made, as to what issues are important and how to tackle them.

And there is a methodical challenge: The concept of publicity is an urban concept. Should it be used for landscape forming processes, two conditions would apply:

- The urbanites have to be interested in what is happening on the land. They should not be satisfied with Arcadian pictures and magazines but must be interested in the socio-economic tensions of rural areas. The modern consumer protection policy is insufficient for these challenges because it handles the problem just as one of consumption. But landscape is more than a range of products. There are a lot of research approaches that try to fit its phenomena into such a marketing framework but I often doubt it would work.
- The ruralites have to constitute their own publicity. The idea of the bourgeois public sphere is that people can participate in public disputes without their personal affairs playing a role. In modern

urban publicity you are more likely to be able to make an argument without being judged for your personal affairs. In the country this is much more difficult - the distinction between one's private sphere and one's argument is not always possible. Even the newspapers in rural areas work differently from the cities. I would say they work within the landscape but they only sometimes form a critical publicity.

How can we overcome these obstacles? My work is addressed mainly to this problem. I would like to give you some examples.

I would first like to say that I can't give you satisfying facts about the success of our efforts. We cannot measure if what we are doing really works.

There is some evidence that more and more people participate in the discourses we try to initiate, for example the visits on our websites and the differences between the various downloads of special material, also visitors of our activities and presentations.

But these facts give us only a hint. Our partners in research often ask with impatience for a measurable effect. I always have to disappoint them. We haven't got means for these investigations and moreover I would challenge the possibility of an overly strong causality.

In the end the input into discourses are an effort to qualify the level of thinking and arguing in landscape development. And that is a project that takes you long way.



Here we planned and presented a bicycle route through our landscape, the Oderbruch. It seems to be just a nice subject, but actually it is the existential issue of the whole landscape because it is a river polder that is always under threat of a destroying flood and the land use also is based on daily drainage. That project was an attempt to combine tourism with local public discourses.

In marketing words you could say we tried to combine two audiences or target groups – the local residents and the urbanites, above all from Berlin, who are just looking for a bicycle route on a sunny Sunday.

On that route we linked together nine points that show something about the special relationship the Oderbruch landscape has to the water – the drainage history, the settlement forms, ditches and dykes and all the tension that is in the landscape because of the strong human engagement.

It was printed as a map with commentaries that can also be downloaded from our website. The map is downloaded about 200 times a month. Sometimes I meet people with bicycles in the train that are going to use the route. And the nearby University in Eberswalde regularly makes study trips on it.

For us it was important to find a usable form for this historical and technical knowledge and to keep the users aware of the contradictions in the landscape.

Environmental education often tends to expel these contradictions. I'd always say: open-end questions should be handled as open-end questions!



That photo was taken during the presentation of four scenarios we made for the further development of the Oderbruch – the so called “Oderbruch fiction”.

We tried to draft different future possibilities to make clear the rising conflicts in the aims for the landscape:

The ongoing intensification of land use technologies and the change of agricultural structures are contrasted by a lingering extensification due to beaver activity, which is a general crisis in managing the drainage system and a demographic outflow.

On the other hand there are still a lot of cultural projects and immense readiness for political initiatives where long time residents and newcomers often walk hand in hand. And still there is a collective fear because of the flood danger twice a year. After a flood disaster the status of the Oderbruch could change and result in a different balance between the region and the state.

However, we wrote these scenarios as newspaper articles over the next 40 years and published them in a flyer and on these advertising pillars.

It was all shown in a local theatre, in schools and in town homes. As you see we combined the presentation with lectures, photos and with music.

The debate over the scenarios was keen. Many of the older residents even challenged the legitimacy of the different presented futures. Others enjoyed the debate and experienced it as a release. It was the first time we got high media feedback outside the Oderbruch in newspapers, on the radio and journalists even liked the scenarios very much.

The download rates are still high for the scenarios – it varies as to which scenario is on top depending on what the current event in the landscape is.

What really worries me is the actual development in the landscape since this time. That was in 2008 and since then a lot of our fiction became reality. The fight against the beaver activity has risen, there were two very acute flood situations, many parts of the landscape were wet for months after strong rainfalls, the industrial usage of wind energy and carbon storage increased but at least the people really tried to make a UNESCO world heritage of their landscape.

The fictitious scenarios were the most controversial project we have done until now.



Here you see me and my partner Lars on stage. It was a kind of collage made of texts, photos, sounds and scenes.

The aim was to show the changing relation between the landscape region and the state in the last 200 years.

We tried to describe the former economic tie between Oderbruch and Berlin and the special patronage the government had over the landscape in the last centuries.

All is connected in a story frame where two people try to write speeches for a public event - one for the residents and one for the government.

We staged the play in theatres, churches, town halls and pubs.

People of all ages and backgrounds came to see it. Because the end is left open, they sometimes were confused.

Only the old women in the Letschin home museum enjoyed it so much that it really surprised us.

For two years we tried to convince politicians to visit the play – they never did.

So in the end I would say the project was a success but we didn't reach all the people we wanted to reach out to.



After six years of working on the Oderbruch framework we had the impression that it would be good to try an intermediate result. We wanted to fix some experiences and to reach another audience.

So we made a small exhibition in a car garage where we showed a small agenda of what would be the most important for landscape development there.

It was combined with eight elements that would allow a simple but complex narration of the Oderbruch: a bottle with water from the river Oder, a bottle with drain water from the ditches, a glass of the typical clay soil, a sandbag, a crane's feather, a beaver stick, a typical roof tile of the old houses and a piece of asbestos, still used for agricultural buildings and sheds since GDR-times.

It was completed by photo compositions, posters and banners with simple slogans.

Afterwards we printed the exhibition on boards and showed it in different places, including churches and town halls.

The exhibitions were important because we were able to have discussions with the visitors and get feedback from them.

In the end I'd say that the effect of the exhibition was more for our self assessment. I don't know what the people remembered in the end but since that time it was easier for me to find my own political position in landscape arguments.



I will never forget the song contest we made in a pub hall in the Oderbruch. We invited people to sing a song for or about their landscape. The attendance was overwhelming. Choirs, bands, songwriters, children groups took part in the event. They were newcomers and old residents and they all had a lot of fun.

We wanted to motivate the people to only focus on their own landscape and that succeeded. In the end everyone wanted a follow-up to this event; so we might do that again in a couple of years. On the other hand I don't know if it would be possible at all to bring together all these different styles and approaches continuously - although there were playback singers and rock bands playing on this same day on the same stage. Maybe some of them might have said –just this once might be ok but I wouldn't do it again soon – I don't know.

However, to use other media and forms other than just lectures or a workshop is necessary if you want to break the often redundant political language. So the information, the knowledge and the political argument have to be understood in new languages and afterwards they can circulate in the public discourses.



I would like at least to show you the welcome page of our website Oderbruchpavillon. Here we collect articles about the landscape and try to motivate people to contribute their knowledge and add their perspective to it. And of course we document all projects we do ourselves.

The structure of the website is based on our main assumption: there are nine different approaches and they all have their legitimacy: farming, nature conservation, living, arts, research and so on.

The aim is to make the collected landscape material as transparent as possible, to enrich it and to use it again and again in different projects and media.

We want to bring it into the growing environmental society just like a currency – the more people use it the better the discourse will be – that is at least our expectation.

In the future we would like to build a landscape studio where all important debates could have a good place to take place in and where all the different perspectives are shared.

We don't know how long the project will last because we do not get political support for it – but that just creates an important potential for freedom in it that is absolutely essential for public discourses.

But the question whether it is possible at all to anchor civil society's discourses in rural landscapes that are not bound in communities is still open for me.

Maybe the expectation is wrong and open discourses are just a thing from the cities.

Then the land would have no chance of finding a self organized way as regional development. You'd have only local communities – and the rest would be steered by the state.

How do you see these possibilities? Is there a rural publicity in Great Britain? And how does it work?