

# THE PARADOX OF BEAUTIFUL LANDSCAPES

## GeoNight 2023



**Royal Geographical Society of South Australia**

Wilpena Pound ramparts, Flinders Ranges, South Australia



# THE PARADOX OF LANDSCAPE

Why is it about certain landscapes that appeal to us?

What is it about landscapes that convey attraction, beauty, interest, even love of a scene?

Is there something inherent in the landscape that appeals or is it something in us which responds to the landscape?

Does the appeal of landscapes lie before or behind our eyes?



Marlborough Sound, New Zealand

[de.wikipedia.org](https://de.wikipedia.org)

*It was an exquisite day. It was one of those days so clear, so still, so silent, you almost feel the earth itself has stopped in astonishment of its own beauty.*

Katherine Mansfield, 1922, *On the Marlborough Sounds* (New Zealand)

# WHAT IS LANDSCAPE BEAUTY?

What do we mean by landscape beauty? This is actually a somewhat antiquated and restricted term, and it is preferable to use the phrase, *landscape quality*.

In contrast to *landscape beauty*, *landscape quality* covers the full range of aesthetic quality, from low to high, not just outstanding landscape quality.

*Landscape quality*, may be used interchangeably with terms such as *landscape aesthetics*, *scenic beauty*, and *scenic quality* which is often used in the US.

## Definition of landscape quality:

*Landscape quality* is the human subjective perception, both positive and negative, of the physical landscape, responding to its land forms, land cover, land uses, the presence of water, and other attributes.



Cummins Monument coast, Eyre Peninsula, South Australia



# WHAT IS LANDSCAPE QUALITY?

It is commonly believed that as “beauty lies in the eyes of the beholder”, scenic quality is a subjective quality and therefore it is not possible to objectively measure and understand it.

Because landscape quality derives from our senses, our perceptions, it is inherently subjective. However, this does not mean that it cannot be measured and understood objectively.



# WHAT IS LANDSCAPE QUALITY?

Philosophers have long enquired into three ultimate values: truth, goodness and beauty. Landscapes are one of the many aesthetic objects such as art, music, sculpture and human faces.

From the time of the Greek philosophers, Plato and Aristotle, philosophers believed beauty lay in the object itself - that there was a physical component called beauty.

However, from the 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards, philosophers such as Hume, Burke and Kant saw beauty as being in the mind, a subjective quality instead of an objective entity.

Landscape quality is not the physical contents of the landscape but rather our mind's interpretation of it. Rather than say, "It is a beautiful landscape", we should say, "I *think* it is a beautiful landscape."

*All beauty is relative to the sense of the mind perceiving it.*

Francis Hutcheson, 1726

*Beauty is no quality in things themselves. It exists merely in the mind which contemplates them...*

David Hume, 1757

*I have had a dispute lately with Mr. Lock on an absurd vulgar opinion which he holds – that we see with our eyes, whereas I assert, that our eyes are only mere glass windows, and we see with our imagination.*

William Gilpin, 1769



# CHARACTERISTICS OF LANDSCAPE QUALITY

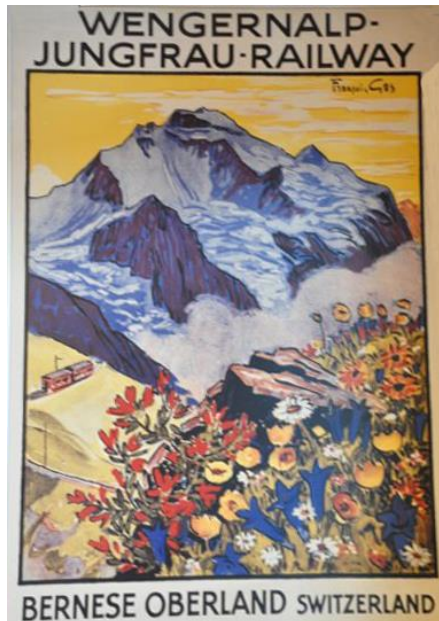
## 1. IT IS A PUBLIC GOOD, NOT PRIVATELY OWNED

A scene that we find beautiful is like other environmental goods such as air, wind, water and biodiversity – it is a public good, not owned by any one person. Because of this it does not enter the market place as a commodity except where it benefits a property.

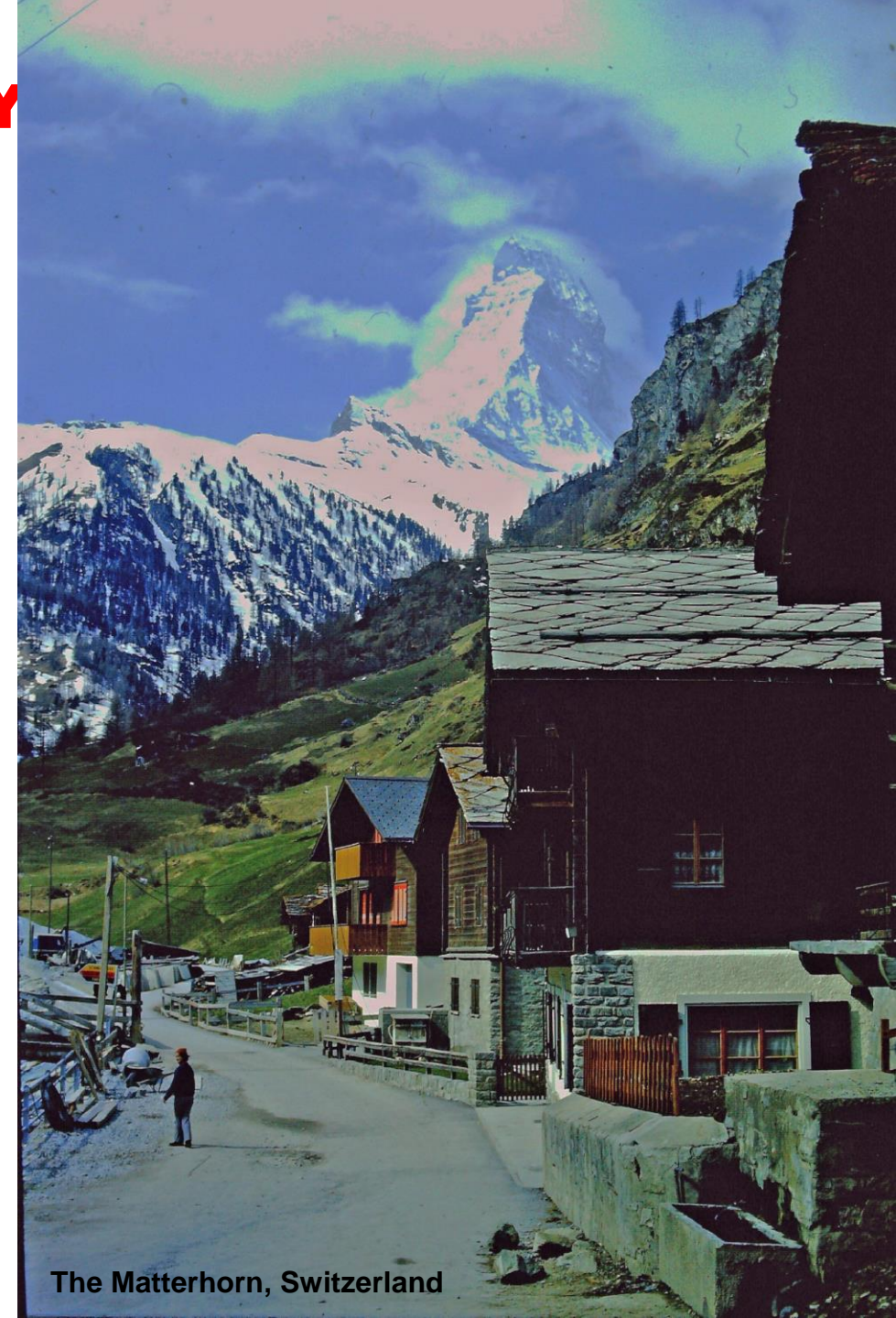
Properties are often located so as to gain the advantage of a beautiful view. The value of their property will reflect this view and the value the community place upon it. This may be 10 – 15% of the property value.

However, they do not own the view – only the right to view it from a particular vantage point.

**Tourism capitalises on the public's love of landscapes that they see as beautiful**



Swiss Railways



The Matterhorn, Switzerland



# CHARACTERISTICS OF LANDSCAPE QUALITY

## 2. IT IS NOT DIMINISHED BY USE

Like air, water or the wind, landscape quality can be viewed by many people but this is non-consumptive, it does not diminish the total stock in any way. Niagara Falls have been viewed by countless people but it continues to pour over the ledge undiminished by this viewing. This contrasts with resources such as minerals, fish and soils which can be diminished by use, or, in the case of soils, by erosion.



Niagara Falls, Canada & United States



# CHARACTERISTICS OF LANDSCAPE QUALITY

## 3. LANDSCAPE QUALITY CAN BE CHANGED BUT IS NEVER DESTROYED

As a perceptual quality, landscape quality exists even in a small degree in every landscape. It may be degraded through abuse such as erosion, pollution or scarring by quarrying but a certain measure of quality remains.

Landscapes comprising flat gibber plains in arid Australia which are characterized as having no variation in terrain, being barren without trees or other land cover, with no land use, with uniform colour and texture, still average 3 – 4 on a 1 (low) – 10 (high) point scale of landscape quality. Indeed some people rate them as 10 as they are quite striking landscapes in their own right.



# CHARACTERISTICS OF LANDSCAPE QUALITY

## 3. LANDSCAPE QUALITY CAN BE CHANGED BUT IS NEVER DESTROYED

Among other things, wind farms have been criticised for lowering the perceived landscape quality. Studies in Britain and Australia have shown this to be true.

Participants in a survey have rated the perceived landscape quality of the same scene with and without a wind farm, randomised in the survey. Inevitably the results show the landscape quality has diminished by the presence of the wind farm.



Rating without the wind farm 6.42



Rating with the wind farm 5.02

Mt Mercer Wind Farm, Victoria

Rating scale 1 (low) – 10 (high) perceived landscape quality



# CHARACTERISTICS OF LANDSCAPE QUALITY

## 4. IT IS A QUALITATIVE RESOURCE AND IS THEREFORE DEPENDENT OF HUMAN PERCEPTION

A qualitative resource contrasts with a quantitative resource which can be measured by conventional means – e.g. length, breadth, depth. A qualitative resource can only be measured by people assessing its quality.

Environmental economics asserts that some environmental features such as whales and Antarctica have existence value: people are willing to contribute to their preservation even though they do not expect to necessarily see them personally. The same concept applies to landscape: their worth is not necessarily dependent on people viewing them.



# CHARACTERISTICS OF LANDSCAPE QUALITY

## 4. IT IS A QUALITATIVE RESOURCE AND IS THEREFORE DEPENDENT OF HUMAN PERCEPTION

The conventional wisdom is that if an area can not be seen, it does not matter whether it is degraded. Thus a quarry or a wind farm might be justified on the basis that no one will see it. However, we do not know today what access to the site there may be in the future and that people may view it even today by a variety of means – walking, jogging, mountain bikes, hang gliding, flying, boats; not just by cars.



Bungle Bungles – Purnululu National Park

There are areas such as the Bungle Bungles in north-west Australia which were virtually unknown to anyone but the locals until 1983. Now the area is visited and appreciated by many people and many more have seen photographs of it in calendars, magazines and books.



# CHARACTERISTICS OF LANDSCAPE QUALITY

## 5. LANDSCAPE RESOURCES ARE AN ENVIRONMENTAL RESOURCE OF IMMENSE COMMUNITY VALUE

Soil, land, water, biodiversity, wilderness, and heritage features are regarded as environmental resources that the community treasures.

Landscape quality is also an environmental resource equally valued by the community as worth looking after.

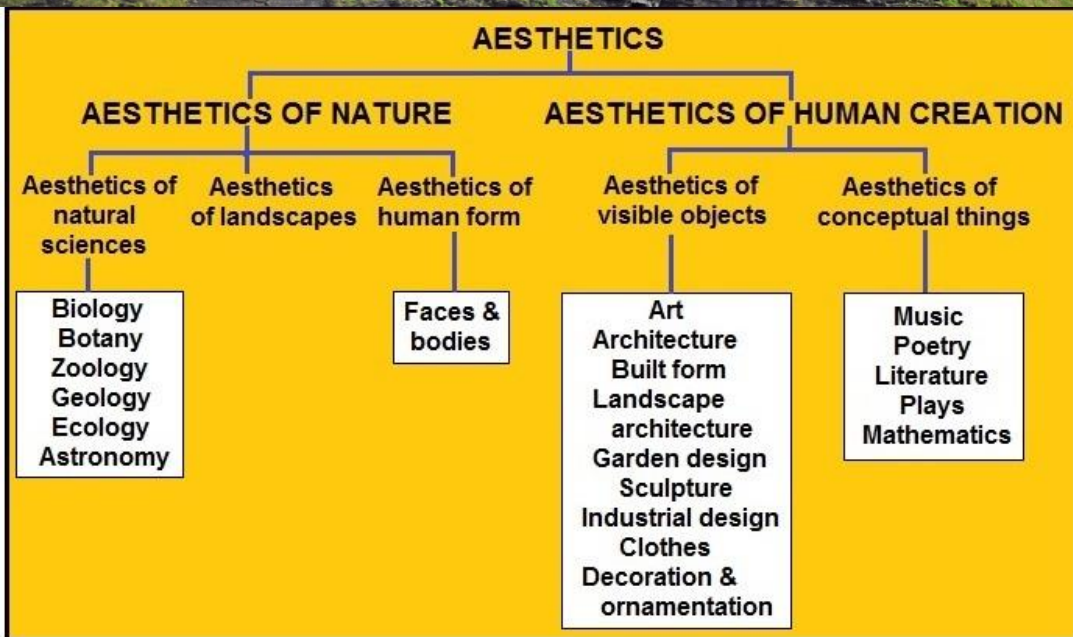
Zion National Park, United States





# WHERE DO LANDSCAPES FIT IN AESTHETICS?

Although landscapes are shown in the chart as part of the aesthetics of nature, agricultural landscapes can also include aesthetics of human creation





# ARE SCENIC RESOURCES WORTH LOOKING AFTER?

## 1. RECREATION AND TOURISM ATTRACTION

Tourism promotional literature of virtually any place presents the area's scenic quality as a major attraction. A century ago, it was estimated that Switzerland gained between US\$10,000 – \$40,000 per square mile from its scenery per year. What is it today?

In terms of the expenditure of visitors it attracts, the wine growing Barossa Valley region in South Australia is worth A\$60,000 per square km annually or around \$160/sq km per day, a fair proportion of it due to the perceived attractiveness of its landscape.

Annual visits by 20 million people to the Lake District in England are worth £420,000/sq km or £1300/sq km per day.



Viewing Lake Wakatipu, Queenstown, New Zealand



# ARE SCENIC RESOURCES WORTH LOOKING AFTER?

## 2. ENHANCED QUALITY OF LIFE

Landscapes contribute to the quality of life in a similar way as art, music, cultural activities and a host of other activities which provide enjoyment and fulfillment for participants.

Aroona Valley, Flinders Ranges, South Australia



# ARE SCENIC RESOURCES WORTH LOOKING AFTER?

## 3. ENHANCED PROPERTY VALUES

Houses built in locations with a good view fetch a higher price, other features being equal, than houses without the view. There have been many studies quantifying this value. These indicate that a good view will add 10 – 15% to the property value – this can mean hundreds of thousands of dollars per property and for a town, millions of dollars.



Holiday houses along River Murray, South Australia capitalising on proximity to the water view



# ARE SCENIC RESOURCES WORTH LOOKING AFTER?

## 4. GREATER HEALTH AND RESTORATIVE BENEFITS

*Everybody needs beauty as well as bread, a place to play in and pray in, where Nature may heal and cheer and give strength to the body and soul alike. John Muir*



Amadio vineyards, Kersbrook, South Australia

**Soaking in a landscape that you find beautiful is therapeutic, relaxing, fulfilling. Taking a holiday amidst lovely landscapes allows one to absorb them and be regenerated through the experience. Research over recent decades have established the significant health and restorative benefits that exposure of nature and landscapes provides.**



# ARE SCENIC RESOURCES WORTH LOOKING AFTER?

## 5. IMAGE OF A COUNTRY

Australians are proud of the beauty of their country, its beaches and coast, its outback and even its cities. A glance in a bookshop reveals dozens of books, calendars, videos, and other publications about Australia with landscapes featured prominently. Writers and poets have waxed lyrical about Australia's landscapes.

Poets such as Wordsworth, Coleridge and Southey together with the painters Turner, Constable and Girtin transformed the image of the Lake District to the English in the 18th century.



Uluru, Central Australia



# **ARE SCENIC RESOURCES WORTH LOOKING AFTER?**

## **6. A SIGNIFICANT ENVIRONMENTAL, ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL RESOURCE**

**Scenic quality has value to the community and should be recognized as a significant resource in its own right. Planners, engineers and councils often pay lip service to the perceived beauty of their area and include in their planning and development documents high sounding words about the importance of its beauty. This is not enough, they need to actually measure, map and manage it.**



**Mt Lofty Ranges overlooking Adelaide – Designated Hills Face Zone**



# THE PARADOX OF BEAUTIFUL LANDSCAPES SUMMARY

*Landscape quality* is the human subjective perception, both positive and negative, of the physical landscape, responding to its land forms, land cover, land uses, the presence of water, and other attributes.

The paradox is that rather than being a physical entity in the landscape, our perception of its beauty lies in our mind.

## **Characteristics of landscape quality:**

1. It is a public good, not privately owned
2. It is not diminished by use
3. Landscape quality can be changed but is never destroyed
4. It is a qualitative resource and is therefore dependent of human perception
5. Landscape resources are an environmental resource of immense community value

## **Are scenic resources worth looking after?**

1. Recreation and tourism attraction
2. Enhanced quality of life
3. Enhanced property values
4. Greater health and restorative benefits
5. Image of a country

Pennington Bay, Kangaroo Island, South Australia.





**Big Bend, River Murray, South Australia**

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All photographs by Andrew Lothian unless otherwise specified.**