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Social perception of the landscape and the Atlases

Claudia Cassatella

'Landscape means an area, as perceived by people'. Inclusion of this assertion in the European landscape convention has made social perception a *sine qua non* in landscape planning. It seems to demonstrate that the political significance of the landscape lies in the perceptive (or sensitive) dimension, which distinguishes it conceptually from land. It permits, in fact, consideration of both the sectorial values attributed by the experts and those ascribed by 'common feelings' stemming from memory and tradition, use, including production, enjoyment, and aesthetic appreciation. Social perception of landscapes is a very broad field of enquiry requiring appropriate methods, still in the experimental stage, with which to indicate those who should be consulted and how (it is not always clear what is to be sought from their involvement: ingenious or window-dressing operations are by no means rare), as well as the way in which expert and non-expert knowledge should be put together in the drafting of policies. Surveys of this kind are faced with problems concerning their level and moment (identification, evaluation, choice of strategies), and especially the groups of subjects. The regional scale now de rigueur in landscape planning is particularly problematical. Determination of the landscapes that confer its identity on a region presupposes the existence of a feeling of belonging to and identification with a territorial ambit, which is relatively new in Italy. Yet this feeling of belonging and identity is not the only reference value for a landscape. Suffice it to think of its aesthetic value, often

perceived and defended by "outsiders", even against the local population. Consideration of the landscapes regarded as 'World heritage sites' will show the need for case-by-case definition of the field of attention, including the identification of groups representing different points of view, both within and without the area in question. The *Atlante dei paesaggi piemontesi* (Diter 2007), addresses the question of the social perception of landscapes through the experimentation of several enquiry methods on different scales. Numerous enquiries have been compared on the local scale: the scenic-perceptive setting (expert analysis), the landscape represented in guides, the landscape 'pushed' by tourist bureaux and local authorities, the presence of landscapes on Internet sites (for a potentially planetary public), and a 'landscape preferences game' played by five populations. Each enquiry has its own specific nature and its own limits, which means that it is best to have several approaches on hand. Comparison is the easiest if the contents are referred by interpretation to a set of preselected landscape values. To promote the usability of the enquiries in landscape planning, reference is made to the values cited by the *Cultural heritage code* (morphological, naturalistic, historical, cultural, aesthetic), with the addition of the socioeconomic or use value, and the negative value. Examination of representations, especially those in tourist guides and other publications, has the advantage of being also applicable on a large scale in cases where the undertaking of direct surveys is rendered more complicated by the amplitude and selection of the sample. For the

Piedmont as a whole, two groups of pictures have been chosen to represent the viewpoints of insiders and outsiders. That of the local community is illustrated by the representations produced by the *Regional tourist board* for its communication and land promotion operations, that of the national community by those of Piedmont in the guides and books of the Italian Touring club, which has distinguished itself in promotion of knowledge of the Italian cultural and landscape heritage since its foundation at the end of 19th century. Both sources, of course, mainly offer stereotype landscapes. Even so, interesting observations arise from the comparison of the two groups.