

Energyscapes Conference Report: Fraser Wallace (Scottish Environment LINK)

Conference dates 27th- 3rd October

27th: Discussion of the Implementation of the European Landscapes Convention across Europe.

The first day of the conference started out with an introduction from Frau Inge Botzmann, detailing the activities of CivilScapes over the last year, alongside Herr Dirk Gotzmann, and Dr Gerhardt Ermischer

The principle focus of events had the following aims:

Strengthening of links with the Council of Europe

And) connecting with members of the European Parliament, two of which sought to attend the Energyscapes conference (as it turned out, one could not due to inclement weather affecting travel arrangements).

Civilscapes is also involved with the 'European Grid Network', which is looking at the new European Grid, and 'Marine Spatial Planning', as Germany is currently seeking to install 40GW of offshore wind (which would have significant impacts on Wild Land)

Following this, there were details of the financial affairs of civilscapes. Concern was raised by the treasurer over late payment by constituent members of membership fees.

The energyscapes conference was then invited to hold the next General Assembly in 'Flavelands', Holland.

In the afternoon there were presentations with regard to the ELC. A brief summary follows:

The ELC has, according to the presentations given on the 27th been implemented in a highly varied fashion across Europe. Whilst some countries, such as the Netherlands, have created specific landscape policies, and financed local authorities to enact them, other countries, such as Germany and Austria have not ratified the convention at all. Ms Valerie Carter, of ECOVAST, highlighted the promising steps England had taken as early as 1994 to map the 'Natural' qualities of their landscapes. Other countries had ratified the treaty, such as Greece, but were principally hampered by a lack of civic motivation to protect landscapes. It was interesting to note that Cyprus too, was paying lip-service to the ELC, principally by, as the presenter, Dr Nick Symonds stated, inserting 'and landscape' into its list of material considerations, but he did not feel it was getting proper weighting in Cyprus's decision making process.

All in all, there are some countries in Europe which are taking significant steps forwards, yet delivery of the ELC appears to be uneven.

28th: Field Trip;

The field trip was most enjoyable. The broad schedule was initially looking at open cast coal mining, wind farms, coal power plants, a traditional 'hammer mill' on the river, for producing iron tools using hydraulically-powered mechanical action hammers, a large hydro dam and a local biomass project.

The scale of the change caused to landscapes through energy developments in Germany has been enormous. The 'bucket excavator' at the first site 'Jackerath' was enormous- it resembled it mining equipment in the film 'Avatar' to give you an idea of its appearance. Standing 100m tall, it was one of a number of such excavators on site. The pit was perhaps over 5km from where the group stood to the far side. There was 200 million tonnes of overburden excavated for every 40 million tonnes of coal. The coal at this site was lignite, or brown coal. This was transported to the nearby coal power plants, which play a significant role in energy production here in Germany's industrial hub.

The pit is so large that it affects the ground hydrology all the way to Paris!

The open-cast operation had been going on since the 1930's. As such, the excavation of coal had slowly shifted the mine, as sources of coal were exhausted and the edge was excavated further into abundant seams and the motorway has been shifted several times to accommodate the expansion of the open cast coal site. Indeed, infrastructure has not been the only built development effected by the mine. Whole villages have been shifted, and indeed, we were shown a picture of a medieval church being shifted (intact) so that it would remain as a focal point of the new town, paid for by the coal company. A key point I heard raised was the sheer power granted to business leaders who owned such plants, as the investment in them has been significant. As such, it is hard for government to ignore their wishes in changing energy policy.

We then moved to a 'wind park' built on farmland immediately next to the coal pit. The development was built on ground with no coal underneath it. A number of the wind farms are owned by the coal company, in part to create a perception of a more 'environmentally benign corporate face.

Following this, we looked at RWE's 'Neurath-Grevenbroich' lignite power station. RWE claim that it is Germany's 'most efficient' coal power plant, in terms of limiting environmental impact. However, this comparison only stands when the base line is an older lignite plant! As such, the impact of mercury emissions on human health from the lignite plants is about a billion euros per year. This must be considered, however, as one delegate pointed out, in the context of the number of people in the local area who use the coal-fired electricity from this plant.

We moved onto a traditional 'hammermil'. This effectively was a large water wheel powering a large hammer which was used for beating metal into shape. The principle matters discussed here were the fact that economies move to sites where energy is freely available, and this can be seen from the location of such traditional mills in Germany.

From small scale water-wheels to large hydro dams, we moved onto a dam where an entire village had been subsumed by water levels raised by the construction of the 'Agger Dam'. This is now a tourist attraction for divers. The landscape had again been changed substantially by the construction of the agger dam, and the artificial waterline was clear as we drove to the next site. However, it was clear that the water did indeed attract many tourists, and, as such, seemed to have been accepted into the landscape as a positive asset.

The final stop was a wood-chip power station in the village of Lieberhausen. The village, of around 400, had slashed bills to houses by around 700 euros annually. The local forests supply 80% of the material, and the rest is brought in. Solar panels have been affixed to the roof of the power station.

There was discussion over the organisation of small scale energy schemes, and, how in larger metropolitan areas, organisation of such efforts usually is removed from the immediate locals, as larger groups find it harder to achieve consensus on aims, and means to achieve them.

29th: Civil Participation in Europe

On the 29th participants were given the opportunity to present on issues concerning civil participation in Europe.

30th: Best Practice examples of interaction with civil society in Europe.

The conference: European Parliament and Council of Europe delegates

(the following is taken from a delegates wider report on the conference:)

On the 29th, CivilScape's president, Inge Gotzmann, by the president of BHU opened the forum and introduced Axel Voss, member of the European Parliament for the constituency Mittelrhein, who introduced the central issues

“According to the European Union's target for 2020, the proportion of final energy consumption from renewable sources has to be increased to 20% at the same time that greenhouse gas emissions should be reduced by 20%. But the transition from fossil fuels to renewable energy is posing new challenges to our countries” Mr. Voss said. “Energy production is shifting from centralised, highly efficient power plans to a more decentralised, weather-dependent, wide-scattered array of energy sources and this is going to have an enormous impact on the way we transport and store energy that will therefore change the elements of our cultural landscape”.

Maguelonne Dejeant-Pons, head of the Council of Europe's Cultural Heritage, Landscape and Spatial Planning Division, gave an overview about how the ELC can be used both in assessing new guidelines for spatial planning in times of energy transition and in strengthening civil society participation.

Quoting the final document of the 2009 Council of Europe's Workshop of Workshops (“Landscape driven forces”, Malmö, Sweden 2009) Dejeant-Pons underlined how the end of the fossil fuels era will inevitably create new landscapes and therefore it will force us “to change our perception, to rethink the use of the territory” but it also will create the need “of understanding how energy landscapes of the past were created”.

The conference: a mosaic of experiences from all over Europe

The conference introduced stakeholder experiences from Portugal to Macedonia, from Sweden to Italy, from the Netherlands to Germany and everywhere in between. The thirty-five speakers at the Bonn conference contributed to the discussion with an impressive, highly interesting array of studies, experiences, approaches and insights. A variety of stories about how the growth of renewable energy production is shaping – and sometimes shaking – the European cultural landscapes and how the participation of citizens in the planning processes is still a controversial matter in many countries. Most cases brought to the attention of the audience focussed on the impact of wind turbines and solar panels but the competition between food and biofuels production were also highlighted in the debate. Several peculiar regional projects (for instance the transition from one lignite-fired power plant to solar fields in the Macedonian province of Bertola) were presented side by side with an international initiative for a new distribution grid that should include 3500 km new lines linking consumers through an extended ‘supergrid’.

Good examples in which the implementation of the ELC significantly assisted mitigation of conflicts between residents and authorities were described together with cases where any form of civil participation are deemed by planners and decision-makers as an intolerable annoyance.

The idea that the transition to renewable energy should be seen more as a step back in the past instead of a leap into the future it was also discussed. The exploitation of wood, wind, water or biomasses for energy supply has been a constant throughout human history and it has been responsible for the creation of many of the landscapes we are now so used to. Many times in history the balance within energy consumption and production has been close to collapse and the conflicts, even wars, that has emerged have so much in common to those ones we are going to face in the future.

Conclusions: thinking creative, working in networks

In the last conference day, the results that emerged from two parallel workshops on best practice examples from civil society in Europe seemed to indicate a common trend: As at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, with the transition from fossil fuels to renewable energy Europe is facing a new era of dramatic, intensive changes that once again are transforming the landscapes. These changes appear to citizens mostly as imposed by economical interests rather than inspired by ecological or social needs. Everywhere in Europe the conflict between residents at one side and decision-makers at the other, seems to have similar reasons: citizens do not see local benefits for using renewable energy, they feared the impact of the new infrastructures on tourism or agriculture, they feel themselves excluded by the planning process, they think the new plants are inefficient. Giving the situation above, here are some of the proposals that emerged from the closing debate.

- Changes cannot be stopped but they could be slowed down and civil participation should be included, since the very beginning, in the planning process of new infrastructures.

- Co-ownership which allows citizens to be involved even economically in the construction of the new plants could be a solution but also an effort in changing the way projects are presented to the public (using 3D design instead of maps, for instance) can make a difference when even aesthetical or emotional elements must be taken into account.
- Spatial planning has to include a more holistic approach where economic, environmental but even cultural and emotional issues could play a roll.
- Special landscapes need tailor made solutions and the variety of issues that emerge with every single project needs a creative approach for inventing suitable form of public participation.
- Solar panels and wind turbines look the same everywhere without any respect for the peculiar elements of the landscape in which they are installed. This kind of standardization should be avoided in promoting industrial design and a more flexible technology.
- Biomasses, wind, photovoltaic might not be the only possible options. Knowledge about other alternatives has to be fostered.
- An online database for good practises should be created.
- With few exceptions, spatial planning processes are top-down initiatives where public participation has a minor, irrelevant roll. Civil organisations should network to strengthen their change of truly bringing landscape issues into the political agendas.
- IT and communication technology (social media, participative web, etc.) can be used to invent new tools for increase civil participation and networking.

During the next weeks the results of this conference will be discussed in a number of workshops in Austria, Czech Republic, Italy, Scotland and Sweden.