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Analysing Visual Quality in Relation to Landscape Change Scenarios: An Assessment of the Requirements

The project aimed to raise the capacity of the Macaulay Institute to undertake interdisciplinary work in the field of landscape preferences, drawing on complementary skills and expertise offered in landscape architecture, by supporting the visit of a social scientist (landscape architect) from Sweden to a research group focusing upon natural sciences to:

- Develop a common understanding of key issues associated with landscape value and visual quality (where landscape value refers to the relative importance attached to a landscape by designations or the preferences of people, and visual quality refers to the character and condition of a landscape as perceived by people).
- Identify gaps in knowledge or activities in relation to visual quality.
- Produce a prototype set of methods for analysing and testing visual concepts, such as 'stewardship' and naturalness'.
- Contribute towards a proposal to a full call on issues of landscape quality.

The capacity building project brought together expertise in landscape and computer modelling from the United Kingdom with landscape architecture and interpretation from Sweden. In combination, these skills have enabled a study of preferences people express for landscapes. Specific factors, highlighted in the scientific literature (e.g. complexity and abandonment of land) as being of potential significance, were represented in computer visualisations and tested using PC or internet-based surveys.

The results show that the highest preference values were given to landscapes with few and large patches of woodland, a high level of abandonment (and hence a high level of naturalness) and a medium level of shape complexity, and that country of residence was a significant factor in the preferences expressed.

Members of the public, including schools, participated in the surveys, and comprised audiences to presentations in which the means of communicating issues associated with landscape change were outlined and explained. Stakeholders with professional interests in landscape planning and management have contributed to development of the imagery used and feedback from the different types of audience has informed the style and approach to communicating such issues in further fora, including at a demonstration in the Scottish Parliament in 2005.

Other issues of significance identified during the project included a need for greater public awareness and understanding of drivers of landscape change, and the potential consequences of such change on the landscape as heard and experienced, in addition to what can be seen.

The timing of the research and engagement activities fitted with that of the development of strategic plans that take account of landscape issues (e.g. for the new national parks in Scotland), indicators of change in landscape quality (Scottish Natural Heritage), and the management of specific rural areas (e.g. new areas of native woodland expansion at Clashindarroch Forest, Huntly). It is hoped that the

network of researchers and stakeholders formed through the project discussions will aid in the dissemination of knowledge relating to landscape change with respect to the conservation or enhancement of specific areas (e.g. Scottish Forest Alliance sites at Clashindarroch, Huntly; and Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park). The media and techniques for collecting quantitative and qualitative information about landscape change (e.g. using the visualisation tools) have been used in practice, and demonstrated to elected representatives (e.g. Members of the Scottish Parliament at Holyrood), with a view to illustrating some means of consultation during development phases of policy and implementation. Specific outcomes from this type of activity may be evident in the revisions to planning policy currently underway in Scotland.