



## **The Importance of National Landscape Character Survey in Landscape Protection**

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**Abstract:** One of the main requirements of the European Landscape Convention is the survey of national landscapes. Although the treaty has entered into force in Hungary in 2008, this work has not started yet. The paper reviews the main problems of the current system of development control, and provides potential solution on how a national landscape character survey could help to resolve these.

**Keywords:** European Landscape Convention, impact on landscape character, planning policies, development control

### **1. Introduction**

Following on from the ratification of the European Landscape Convention, the treaty has entered into force in 2008 in Hungary. As part of the treaty, each participating country undertook to "identify its own landscapes throughout its territory", with regard to their characteristics and the forces and pressures transforming them. Although preparation of this work has started, the implementation in Hungary is still in initial phase. Before a national landscape character survey is launched, it is important to review its importance, and set the scope and clear professional objectives.

The most obvious benefit of such a project is that a character based inventory of our landscapes will be prepared. Although there are existing landscape related surveys for the country, these focus on specific fields (botany, archeology etc.), and even the most complex register of micro regions is based on a geographical approach [4]. The theoretical importance of a landscape character survey is that it provides a database through the integration of these particular aspects, establishing the key features of the landscape with an emphasis on spatial patterns and visual appearance.

Nevertheless, in order to achieve the most benefits, the survey should go beyond this theoretical level, and practical applications should also be taken into consideration from the very beginning of the process. According to Julie Martin Associates and Swanwick [6] these applications may be classified into two categories, either related to planning or to landscape conservation and management. In my paper, I focus on the planning issues, and provide an overview how a national landscape character survey could support the protection of our landscapes, if the results are applied in development control.

## **2. Materials and Methods**

The ratification of the European Landscape Convention was welcomed and its relevance discussed by several authors. Regarding the national survey of landscape character, it was the University of West Hungary, where the Western European examples were first studied [8], and a pilot project launched [9], based on the UK methodology [10]. Research at the Corvinus University of Budapest focuses on the characterization of specific landscape types [2, 3, 5], and there was also a significant GIS database development made [1] related to the topic. Nevertheless, the goals and practical applications of a projected national landscape character survey have not been discussed and established yet. In the paper, I highlight the existing problems of development control, and set forward the main considerations for the integration of landscape character considerations into the planning system. Description of the problems was informed by my planning experience. The model proposed for development control is based on the Scottish example [7], adapted to the Hungarian situation.

## **3. Results and discussions**

Due to the political and economical transition in Hungary, our landscapes were exposed to significant development pressure in the past two decades. As a result, some of them have suffered significant loss of their historical character. The reasons of these negative changes could be summarised as:

- lack of efficient landscape protection policy,
- insufficient control of development in non-designated landscapes,
- weak authorities versus strong investor lobbies,
- lack of recognised qualities of the landscapes,
- low public awareness of landscape protection.

The roots of the problems are related to the fact that the legal system does not provide sufficient level of protection of the landscapes against development. The current instruments were introduced in relation to nature protection policies. Since the treaty has come into force, declaring that each Party undertakes “to integrate landscape into its regional and town planning policies and in its cultural, environmental, agricultural, social and economic policies, as well as in any other policies with possible direct or indirect impact on landscape” (Article 5, General measures), the legal system has not been revised accordingly. As a consequence, the aspect of landscape protection is not taken into consideration from the very beginning of formulating the various policies affecting the landscape. Appearing only at a later stage, it seems to represent an obstacle, hostile to some “progressive” political measure or physical development.

The problems are even more severe in the case of non-designated landscapes. Although they may not have so outstanding values that would entitle them for a national designation, many of them have a unique character specific to a region or location. While for the designated areas there are relatively clear policies established and a strict development control applied, non-designated land is more exposed to unwanted development.

No wonder that the weakness of the authorities responsible for landscape protection is outstanding in such areas. Having only a consultative role, they are mostly observers of the processes in non-designated landscapes. As a result, the economical interest of strong investor lobbies many times prevails against landscape protection.

On the other hand, investors may complain that the decisions of the authorities are unpredictable and not necessarily supported by exact arguments. This takes us to another problem, namely the lack of recognised qualities of the landscapes. Without a national inventory of the landscapes based on a standardised methodology, the same investment proposed for similar landscape conditions may be seen and judged differently by the regional authorities concerned. This also provides a basis for the investor to enter into time consuming legal processes against the decisions made.

Finally, it is important to mention the low public awareness of the importance of landscapes. While some developments effecting natural habitats have provoked significant protests (see the case of the wetland habitat in Dunakeszi threatened by the projected car park extension of Auchan supermarket), the impacts on the

landscape seem to raise less public interest. This is mainly due to the lack of knowing and understanding the importance of the local landscape character.

As an international treaty, the European Landscape Convention provides increased support for the protection of our landscapes, and its requirement of a national survey of landscapes could be particularly useful for resolving the above mentioned problems. First of all, the results of a well-established survey would be recognised landscape character descriptions, available as standardised bases for a transparent control of the authorities. Covering the whole area of the country, it would also provide an opportunity for improved protection of non-designated land. Moreover, it is a potential tool for raising public awareness. Although the surveys should be prepared by professionals, there are various options for public participation in the process. Involvement of local communities could help them to recognise the importance of their landscapes.

In order to achieve the potential benefits for development control, relevant policies must be adjusted so that the results of the national landscape character survey are accommodated. Currently development control in Hungary exists at two levels: for individual development proposals and at the strategic level of local and regional plans. In both cases there is a requirement to assess the potential environmental impacts, although in the case of individual developments this applies only to the listed ones which are expected to have a significant impact. Impacts on the landscape are examined as part of these assessment procedures.

The problem with the recent system is the lack of explicit declaration on when development permission should be refused for the sake of landscape protection. Therefore it would be important to establish by law that any development having a significant impact on the landscape character should not be permitted unless mitigation of the impact would be possible. This would then provide a clear basis for the assessment of impacts.

Finally, let us see how the results of landscape character survey could support the relevant authorities in the process of development control. As written above, the basis of decision would be whether the development has a significant impact on landscape character. This is easier to judge if there is a study that tells what the key considerations should be for a specific landscape.

Landscape character studies prepared for the country should therefore go beyond a simple description of the character. Setting the landscape character objectives (as required by the European Landscape Convention) and listing the key sensitivities for the landscapes concerned are essential contents for practical applications of the studies. Checking the development proposal against these, the level of impact is easier to establish. If it is significant, the developer must provide

a solution to reduce this impact to an acceptable level. If this is not possible, the permission should then be refused.

#### 4. Conclusion

The quality of the landscapes depends on the political and economical status of a country to a great extent. Regarding Hungary, landscape protection policy is currently not a main priority. Although the country has joined the European Landscape Convention, we are far from meeting some of its requirements. Professionals therefore need to use all opportunities to draw attention to the topic, convince decision makers of the importance of a reformed landscape policy, and call for urgent action in order to launch the necessary national programmes.

One of the important tasks will be the preparation of a national landscape character survey. In order to achieve its potential benefits, this requires preparatory research of landscape professionals. My paper provides important considerations for the practical application of the survey. I established that the aspects of landscape character protection are possible to integrate into the current system of development control. Nevertheless this requires that exact criteria are set for the decisions on development proposals. Authorities would be significantly supported in this work, if landscape character surveys also include information on the qualities and sensitivity of the landscapes described.

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