

Rural social landscapes: from curiosity to fashion accessory

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Once upon a time a researcher stumbled upon some land market transaction data. In a fit of curiosity, and in total disregard for project imperatives, he built an indicator that compared land values with the value of agriculture produced from that land. From the indicator grew a story (or narrative for the post-modernists out there). The story spread as an intellectual infection, and eventually infiltrated the project management system. The researcher was then required to transform the narrative into a map and a series of statistical indicators. This presentation tells how this transformation was achieved, the statistics and indicators used and the frustrations with inadequate data. There will inevitably be an explanation of the concepts of 'production landscape', 'rural amenity landscape', 'transition landscape' and a few others you may have not yet encountered. You will see the use of techniques such as principal components analysis, varimax rotation, hierarchical cluster analysis, geostatistical analysis and a dose of segmentation black art. Despite this, when someone next asks you 'How many social landscapes are there?', you won't be sure of the answer. You will also see a number of different maps of rural social landscapes, thus confirming the post-modernist prejudice that there is no objective truth, particularly in rural sociology. A more charitable interpretation might be that the world is always more complex than a simple narrative, despite the narrative's obvious powers of seduction.

