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Landscape as an Integrating Framework for Rural Policy and Planning

Many future decisions about the British countryside will be made in a landscape context. Several landscape based characterisation/ assessment methods are gaining currency as means of identifying areas in which to analyse environmental processes, valorise local assets, devise policy, target expenditure, forge partnerships and engage stakeholders. Whilst 'landscape' has often been treated as an afterthought in land use decisions, it can more positively be viewed as an over-arching framework for comprehending and interpreting patterns and processes of countryside change.

This Development Activity investigated the concept of 'landscape' as an interdisciplinary and integrated basis for intervening in rural conservation and sustainable development. It entailed a literature review, workshop and exploration of an outline model. The literature review synthesised evidence on how a landscape-based approach could help to achieve joined-up action in relation to policy targeting, formation of partnerships, stakeholder participation, data capture, research and promotion of sustainability. In particular, it reviewed the scope for instilling a virtuous circle between landscape stewardship and economic development, in ways that helped simultaneously to sustain countryside character and quality of life. A model was sought for more detailed investigation of this mutually beneficial relationship, and two approaches were considered: one based on qualitative analysis of feedback loops within rural systems; and one drawing upon theories about the resilience of 'socioecological systems'. The workshop reflected on these issues, and drew together academics and practitioners both within and beyond the RELU community, including participants from continental Europe. The Development Activity concluded that there are important future lines of enquiry relating to the detailed operation of virtuous circles, and to the scope for increased local activity to achieve particular landscape objectives within a wider context of globalisation.