

Journal of Sustainable Tourism Book Review

A Review of “The science of scenery: how we view scenic beauty, what it is, why we love it, and how to measure and map it”, by Andrew Lothian

San Bernardino, CA, CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2017, xii + 480 pp., \$98.23 (paperback), ISBN 1534609865

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Pages 1-2 | Published online: 21 Apr 2017

This heavily illustrated volume – over 800 photographs spread across less than 500 pages – presents a wide-reaching review of landscape aesthetics, focused upon Western perspectives, which considers scenic beauty as “an environmental, social and economic resource for a nation” (p. 469). Coupled with that review of landscape aesthetics, the text includes a description of Lothian's “The Community Preferences Method”, a research methodology for scientifically measuring, and mapping, scenic beauty. Generally, the text presents those topics through engagement with practical research activities – making it a more attractive volume to those interested in research methodologies than a purely theoretical overview of the topic.

Discussions of landscape and aesthetics within the text are developed by drawing upon research that Lothian has undertaken in regions of Australia, and the Lake District in England. That experience is integrated with commentary about existing critical literature, spread over themed introductory chapters. Lothian ensures that the text provides a global perspective on the issues treated – so the settings of that background research are not generally limiting factors to the text's appeal. The primary contribution to our knowledge of tourism-related processes within this text lays in the way that the volume interacts with existing frameworks for considering, and assessing, the value of landscapes as resources, and in Lothian's alternate framework for that process.

Central to Lothian's argument, and the text's proposed method for assessing landscape aesthetics, is the notion that while judgments about landscape aesthetics are subjective, and those judgments can be linked to the life experiences of individuals who make them, an objective judgment about the quality of landscape aesthetics can be obtained through surveying groups. Contrasting with some earlier works on the evaluation of landscape aesthetics – which relied heavily on the evaluation of landscape features by experts, Lothian's approach is arguably more user friendly, and could be employed by a much broader cross section of researchers. Consequently, Lothian's detailed presentation of “The Community Preferences Method” becomes central to the value of the text.

The initial 19 chapters of the text – about 390 pages -- focus on unpacking current critical understandings of aesthetics, and particularly landscape aesthetics – including both natural and built landscapes from a variety of theoretical stances. Features such as heritage buildings and elements, or units, within a landscape, are considered as individual variables within the discussion. While unpacking critical stances, themes explored by the text range from the influence of culture on interpreting landscapes to the place of art, philosophy and psychoanalysis, in determining the perspective value of a landscape. Those critical lenses then lead Lothian towards examining the notion of designer/designed landscapes, and, flowing neatly from that, decoding economic value from scenic beauty.

Each of the 19 preliminary chapters, which cover individual perspectives of current critical thought about landscape aesthetics, remains only a broad overview its specific lens. As such, these introductory chapters do not provide readers with the detailed analysis that more focused studies of their topics may. However, while the academic contribution of those early chapters may seem superficial, they progressively build towards shaping an understanding

of the breadth of landscape and aesthetics theory that underpins the landscape analysis methodology that is presented later in the text – and in that way function as preparatory material. Lothian addresses perceived shortcomings in his discussions of those topics through the provision of well-stocked bibliographies to ease further investigations.

Following that lengthy critical introduction, Lothian presents a full account of “The Community Preference Method”. He notes – based upon example projects that he has undertaken and published -- that “The Community Preferences Method” is a time-intensive methodology for analyzing landscapes, with a typical project taking approximately 1500 hours of work to complete. The method is one involving the electronic surveying of opinion based upon designated landscape units within a geographic area, and then analyzing and mapping the results to build a statistical understanding of the collectively agreed value of a landscape, or of zones within a landscape.

Notably, as with most other survey-based methodologies, Lothian explains that much of the time investment required by “The Community Preference Method” sits within categorizing the various landscape units within the area to be analyzed, collecting and preparing appropriate photographs, and then building and conducting surveys -- with only a small fraction (about 50 hours) of that time budget spent on data analysis (p. 398). Following an outline of the method, the text includes a sound sample of survey instruments for readers to adapt, along with information about data management and a discussion of ways that collected data might be analyzed and the results mapped.

Recognizing that the quality of survey responses, within this method, relies largely on the benchmark photographs taken and selected by the researcher, Lothian also provides a discussion of current literature on, and thinking about, photography as it relates to the study and evaluation of landscapes. He outlines techniques to ensure that the sample of photographs used in studies are standardized, and presented in neutral forms. Through a relatively detailed discussion he considers a range of factors – such as the angle of the sun, composition, color and the classification of photographs under landscape units.

In all, the research methodology is well presented and enough detail is provided for it to be readily used. The inclusion of a full example study, using the methodology, may have further bolstered the text – yet references are listed within the work’s bibliographies to the studies already undertaken by Lothian, and there are examples from his studies are drawn upon regularly.

The book's arguments are both easily followed and logically structured. It provides a useful and practically oriented framework for the further analysis and evaluation of landscape quality. Bibliographies for each section leave readers with a sound list of references for further exploration. As such, it is a welcome addition to the field that prompts further discussion and thought. The Forward, by Ian Bishop, compliments the text well, and highlights several points of interest about the text for readers new to the field of landscape aesthetic analysis. The text generally, and Lothian's methodology specifically, holds merit as a framework that is of interest to the needs of both tourism developers and landscape conservation -- in identifying “landscape quality as a resource” (p. 8), which accordingly aids both the valuing of landscapes as spaces for profit, and conserving and protecting them as elements of importance, and collectively understood beauty, within our natural heritage.

While it is, unfortunately, only available through Amazon.com as a print-on-demand publication, I would recommend this book to both those who are broadly interested in the field of landscape aesthetics and to those looking for a methodology for assessing the quality of landscapes.