

GUIDELINES FOR DEVELOPING AN IN-SITU EXPERT VISUAL QUALITY ASSESSMENT ON AGRICULTURAL LANDSCAPES

Ana Medeiros · Cláudia Fernandes · João F. Gonçalves · Paulo Farinha-Marques

University of Porto

Visual landscape assessment is nowadays crucial in landscape planning. However, scenic beauty remains difficult to assess as the wide range and complexity of expert assessment frameworks available can hinder the task. This paper gathers some basic guidelines for the elaboration of a visual quality study carried out by experts and focuses on in situ assessments of agricultural landscapes.

A rapid systematic search of the literature was performed on Scopus and ISI Web of Science, using the snowballing method to search for other pertinent seminal papers on the issue. The search words include visual quality, scenic, beauty and landscape assessment or evaluation. A total of 900 records were retrieved and 354 were considered for further reading after applying exclusion criteria.

It was found that seven main assessment decisions should be considered:

1. what is the goal of the evaluation – the first step in developing a visual assessment is to understand the assessment context: education (inform population), application (planning) or litigation (more interested in the process itself or methodology);
2. who will evaluate – if the assessment context is community planning, broader participation of residents in the dialogue is preferable and the user should be a key actor from the start. If the context is litigation, then it is advisable to use a diverse group of experts;
3. how to select the landscape – the landscape selection depends on the goal, for instance, impact assessment, or designation of protected areas. Several other issues mentioned are related to boundary selection and how to adapt the extent and number of areas to the size of the territory studied;
4. what framework should be adopted – three general approaches are usually considered: expert approach (ecological and formal aesthetics models), psychophysical approach (psychophysical and surrogate component models), and public preference approach (public preference models. The most widely applied practical frameworks for analysing visual qualities by experts are discussed;
5. which criteria and indicators to select – this decision is also crucial and should follow a sequence of filters: have a clear theoretical base, be transferable, quantifiable, mappable, available, and relevant;
6. how to choose the viewpoints and vistas;
7. how to analyse the data – various landscape sampling methods and instructions for taking panoramic photos are presented, as well as the appropriate survey methods.

The evaluation of visual quality is a complex exercise, with many different goals. Despite the diversity of approaches and frameworks for expert visual quality evaluation, this paper summarises the main guidelines to consider when developing a new study on agricultural landscapes. Following clear guidelines can simplify the task of creating visual assessments, empower new researchers into this type of assessments and boost the standardization of knowledge in this scientific area.