

The Cultural and Social Values of Plants and Landscapes

Black Environment Network is established to promote equality of opportunity within the ethnic communities in the preservation, protection, and development of the environment.

I am often asked, “Why does BEN exist ? Are you not separating ethnic communities off ? “ The answer to that is that ethnic communities have already been separated off. BEN seeks to highlight that we exist, and that we wish to be put back. BEN is working for integrated participation with a focus on the environment.

The background to this paper

This paper aims to share the cultural and social values of plants and landscapes which have been uncovered through the work of Black Environment Network (BEN). Most of the black and white ethnic communities across the UK lead deprived and city bound lives, divorced from contact with nature at large. BEN has worked with them to establish opportunities for them to be in touch with plants and with the landscape. Some of the significant aspects of our work are :

To enable access by ethnic communities to nature at large, through visits to the nearby countryside and further afield.

To establish contact with elements of nature by ethnic communities within the urban setting.

To facilitate opportunities for ethnic communities to create points of contact with nature, through the creation of elements of nature in their neighbourhood and symbolic links to nature.

To influence the multi-cultural interpretation of the British landscape.

To create opportunities for the multi-cultural use of plants and landscapes.

To share the cultural and social values of plants and landscapes specific to ethnic cultures with others.

Full integration in environmental participation

Environmental organisations have an implicit remit to be open to everyone. Yet, until BEN highlighted the need to include ethnic communities within their agenda, this has not been so.

BEN has moved away from using the term ethnic minorities to ethnic communities. Although as an average, ethnic communities make up only 5.5 % of the population of the UK, the local reality is of significant populations, whose missing contribution to the celebration and care of the environment is yet to be realised. From the publication “Multi-ethnic Britain : Facts and Trends”, Runnymede Trust, we see that in London Borough of Brent 44.9 % of the population belong to ethnic communities. In Birmingham 21.5 % of the population equals 206,800 people, more than the population of Blackburn, which stands at about 136,400.

Within the current efforts towards sustainable development, we can only move forward effectively as an integrated multi-cultural society. There is much to give to each other. Ethnic communities are different, but only through qualities which are accessible and expressive of the development of a particular range of human potential. Through working towards an integrated society, we reclaim for ourselves the access to our full range of human potential.

Much of the work of BEN will be found to be relevant and of significant use in forging ways of working with groups within society other than ethnic communities. Many specific groups which do not participate fully in environmental matters have much in common with the social, economic and environmental context in which ethnic communities find themselves.

1. *The impact of access to landscape on ethnic communities as socially and culturally distinct groups within Britain*

Within nature, human beings are unique in experiencing nature not only as a setting for survival. We attribute meaning to the elements around us. We associate personal and socio-historical experience with scenarios. We forge symbols.

Plants may be experienced as individual specimens, as cut flowers in arrangements, in groups in gardens or parkland, as the components of wilderness, but most powerfully of all it is as the landscape of the countryside. What we call the countryside combines the modified agricultural landscape and accessible areas of nature at large. It is where landscape is most associated with human experience through the ages.

Under certain circumstances, age old ways of life can seem to come to an abrupt end, creating an aching emptiness. The movement of people is such a circumstance, especially forced displacement far afield enough to initiate total culture shock. Within the phenomenon of displacement, people are literally ripped out of a landscape.

Many of the ethnic communities within the UK stem from the rural areas of their birth country. Most of them are now urban bound, living in the concrete jungle of the council estates of the inner cities.

BEN ran a programme of countryside trip grants for the disadvantaged groups within ethnic communities and uncovered the some of the social and cultural values of access, first time experience and connection to the countryside.

1.1 A sense of ownership

Many ethnic groups feel trapped within the inner cities where they live and work. For too many, the map of Britain in a sense is an unreal piece of paper. Access to the countryside has the powerful effect of engendering a sense of ownership of this country which is now supposed to be also theirs.

1.2 A sense of integration versus isolation

Many individual reports point to the feeling of a sense of 'integration versus isolation' as an important feeling that has emerged as a result of going into the countryside. The sense of being able to be in touch with people and space in a free and random way gives a sense of being received into somewhere that is infinite and whole.

1.3 A re-union with nature

Various groups have found the countryside experience to be one of re-union with nature.

Many ethnic groups come from rural backgrounds, and, settling in the bleak concrete jungles of inner cities, the separation from nature is felt as a keen loss. Nature's common denominators provide a familiarity that initiates a feeling of being in touch with what was lost.

1.4 The awakening of a sense of possibility

The experience of breaking out beyond the further limited areas within the urban landscape, of seeing the horizon instead of more houses at the end of a street, seems to create a feeling of an important new sense of possibility within life. For many it confirms that there can be more to living than the repeated smallness of life within limited space. Mobility gives a sense of the availability of what is there on the map, infusing life with a vital sense of the possibility of fuller participation in the context of British citizenship.

1.5 The natural landscape as respite from the urban landscape and the stresses of survival

For many ethnic groups leaving the harsh urban landscape, symbolising their struggle, behind and entering the more gentle undemanding space of landscape is restorative of mind and heart. They return to their urban landscapes refreshed.

1.6 A sense of personal power in the manipulation of landscape through environmental participation

For many disempowered and vulnerable persons within the ethnic communities, who feel that they have no influence over their lives, to gain access to the countryside is already a powerful experience symbolic of the reclaiming rights and of aspects of life which were felt to be 'not for the likes of us'. To further acquire skills and begin to be enabled to influence and manipulate elements of the wider landscape is experienced as embarking on a journey of the emergence of personal power.

2. *The impact of the presence of ethnic communities in the landscape as visitors to the countryside*

2.1 Moving towards a multi-cultural identity for Britain

Access to the British countryside has a vital impact on social change with regard to the consciousness of the rural population of the physical reality of the presence of ethnic communities within Britain. As ethnic groups gain access to the countryside, there will be a further awakening to the British identity for what it is - a multi-cultural identity.

2.2 The reality of diversity

The reality of a range of personalities from ethnic communities being present in the wider landscape of Britain breaks down the simplification of vast numbers of people with diverse histories and origins into stereotypes gleaned from the sensationalised and selected coverage from the press and media.

The increasing presence of ethnic groups in the countryside will contribute to individuals from ethnic communities being seen as individuals, who are the same but different, and, at the same time, different but the same as any other human being.

3. *The multi-cultural interpretation of landscape*

3.1 A unique landscape at a point in time

Landscape, people and culture are constantly evolving quantities. They are also inter-related, especially in the small islands of the British Isles. Here, since centuries past, manipulation of the landscape has been essential to the livelihood of people. Invasions, migration and trade brought about inter-continental exchange of elements of value, including plants. These served to provide sources of food, medicine, building materials and fuel, and as ornamentation. All this leads to the landscape being the result of the natural processes of nature as well as human activity in multi-cultural terms.

In a sense, the landscape is therefore always a multi-cultural landscape. Pick up any small book on the trees of Britain and it will begin by stating that less than 10% of the commonly seen species are native to Britain. The entire image of this landscape is perceived as the landscape of home by the British people before they dissect the origins and history of its elements.

How then is a landscape unique ? Rather than being defined by solely unique elements, it is defined by being a unique regional combination of unique and non-unique characteristics at a point in time, expressive of a state of nature at that time and indicative of the impact of the multi-cultural activities of that time.

3.2 The manipulation and interpretation of landscape

It needs to be recognised and conveyed that multi-cultural elements are present in the British landscape. There is a new field of work within the research and expression of the multi-cultural fact of Britain's landscape. There is a growing consciousness that a shift in thinking needs to take place, away from a mono-culturally exclusive interpretation and management of British landscape, in order to make landscape interpretation relevant to the British contemporary multi-cultural society. There is a resistance against this trend.

With the present as a point in time, we can look at the landscape of Britain as uniquely expressive of the culture of Britain now. What we see tells us something about the social and cultural values of where Britain is as a society.

It is significant to note that the tendency is for the majority culture to dominate and interpret society as a mono-culture, and to reject the reality of its multi-cultural components.

The dominant culture often expresses a strong need to believe in a mythical uniqueness that is discontinuous with everyone else. There is a resistance against identifying itself as a part of anything else. It feels threatened by the multi-cultural elements which are part of itself.

Within a world which is increasingly recognising that we need to work together and that we are interdependent and part of each other, such attitudes of division are counter-productive. We need to embrace the idea of being a multi-cultural Britain, of being part of Europe, and moving beyond that, part of one world. We need to recognise that we are all simply human, sharing with each other the particular range of human potential which we have developed.

Within Britain, much of the power for the manipulation of perceived culture, elements of landscape and artefacts lie within a sphere which promotes a dominant mono-culture exclusively.

In too many cases, the normal consequence of the historical recent arrivals of present day ethnic British citizens and their desired manipulations of the landscape are seen, not as part of the normal components of present day culture, but intrusions into a mythical unique and continuous culture that is deemed to be valuable in the context of a manipulated illusional non-changingness.

The clash and union of multiple visions and the relative power of the manipulators of landscape and cultural visions is in flux.

The outcome of the manipulation and interpretation of the elements of landscape, which should tell the story of the cultural and social associations of plants, can mean the facilitation or cutting off of a link to cultural and historical identity for generations to come. Because of the multi-cultural nature of these tasks, it will influence the outlook and relationship of generations to the world.

3.3 The common denominators of landscape

The continuity of the identity of significant landscape components is an important unifying factor for seeing the world as one landscape. For those isolated from landscape in the urban trap, and for those who have left their landscape of childhood behind, this continuity enables an emotional homecoming.

Grass can always be recognised as grass, trees are trees no matter how different. Greenness puts us in touch with a vibrant sense of growing things, and of being cradled by the earth. Animate and inanimate elements provide access to associated experience. Rock, water, soil - for those who have missed living within nature they are particularly emotional quantities. Fields of grain symbolise the way of life of generations.

Plants in combination with other elements of landscape are even more powerful when one is within countries of similar latitudes. Indeed one can be quite overcome by particular landscapes which seem to mimic exact landscapes of memory. I have seen calendar photographs of areas of China which look like the wooded snowscapes of Scotland, or the deep wide sculpted canyons of North America.

A cliff with typically stunted vegetation resembling the coastal cliffs of Turkey enabled a Turkish group to relive their past. They sang traditional songs and danced. A Bosnian refugee group visiting a national forest for the first time, said emotionally, 'This is like home.'

On seeing a black cow, one old Vietnamese gentleman said, 'When I was a little boy, I took care

of and rode the fastest water buffalo in the village.’ Many ethnic communities relive the associations with landscape of their country of origin through aspects of the British landscape.

3.4 A spiritual ownership of landscape

For many ethnic communities which stem from countries or sections of society whose history has been to work the land for a living, displacement from ancestral land engenders an unbearable sense of the loss of the right to life itself, of the right to be who one thought one was. This suffering does not revolve around the legal ownership of the land, or the right to rent and physically work the land. It centres on a deep sense of the spiritual ownership of the land. The concept of land and landscape holds our relationship to our way of life.

For those of us who do not belong to the farming community and have lost the closeness to the land, we still awaken occasionally to the fact that we owe our aliveness to the earth, and that the marks upon it holds our history and origins.

In Britain there are legal definitions of ownership of what we can call ours, but over and over again, movements arise which reach instinctively for this deep sense that because we are born on this earth, there has to be available avenues through which we can have the spiritual sense that the land is ours. The Ramblers fight for rights of way and express our wish to walk upon land, walk within landscape, and have access to take the essence of experience of landscape. The campaign ‘The Land is Ours’ struggle for our deep sense of having a right to say what happens to land.

Beyond the physical and legal ownership of land, we have a need to feel that we have a spiritual ownership of the landscape.

4. *The symbolic power of plants*

4.1 The Cultural Garden as a recognition of presence and a statement of presence

A powerful and meaningful BEN project is The Cultural Garden, in which plants from the country of origin of particular ethnic communities are planted. Initiated by particular parties, it makes a statement of recognition or a statement of presence. There are now hundreds of variations of cultural gardens in the UK.

For example, initiated by a school, it touches on several significant aspects - children acquire the feeling of being recognised as having a special history. Growing up within a setting of recognition, they see their being different as a positive quality and are provided with a focus for sharing their experience. It is of significance that one is linked in one’s everyday setting by living growing things to one’s country of origin.

Initiated by a local authority, a multi-cultural garden within a municipal park, such as Burgess Park in Southwark, London, is a public statement of the recognition and acceptance of the presence of the multi-ethnic population which it is catering for. It provides a setting for cross-cultural interest. Parkland can give significant impetus to cultural festivals and cross-cultural events which affirm ethnic cultures and promote intercultural understanding and awareness. Here, the cultural garden is a statement of the recognition of Britain as a multi-cultural society.

Ethnic community groups, council estate associations or youth clubs can reinforce their cultural or multi-cultural identity and make a public statement of presence through creating a cultural garden, or they can do so through having selected individual plants, including indoor plants or greenhouse plants from various countries of origin of its members.

4.2 The Cultural Garden and the global and local theme

The cultural garden can be used to symbolise our consciousness of the wholeness of the earth.

It can accentuate what we have in common and demonstrate 'the continuity of the unique'. Instead of selecting plants to represent different countries, we can choose to represent regions of the earth or select plants which occur across all the countries of particular latitudes, for example Columbine. We can include families of plants showing the variations and relationships of plants in their diversity and relatedness. This approach unifies the local with the global and contributes to our sense of belonging to one earth.

Certain national community forests are considering creating arboretums, with particular attention to the demonstration of families of trees across the world, and with consideration of the composition of local ethnic communities.

4.3 Ritual and cultural activities using plants

The Caribbean Hindu society actually flies over deep frozen packets of the real leaves of the Neen tree for their festival, linking them emotionally and physically to their country of origin, and claiming a continuity in ritual and culture.

It is well to remember that all traditions were at one time newly invented, and that we can continue to choose plants and associate new meanings with them, creating our own cultural events as it is possible where we are. So it is that an ethnic group can symbolically plant a plant from their country of origin and set a particular recurring date for the celebration of this planting.

The movement of plants is a natural phenomenon. Sometimes plants are moved by people for economic, agricultural or ornamental purposes. Some plants integrate into the ecology of the country to which they are moved and are accepted as native plants. Buddleia is one such plant. Originating from China, it is valued as a native plant and is lovingly called the butterfly bush. It is commonplace in gardens and wild areas.

For Chinese groups to discover this makes it a symbol of integration and acceptance. Local schools in Kings Cross planted it symbolically in Camley Street Natural Park, an inner city nature reserve, and celebrated with a dragon procession.

Cut flowers play an important role in our lives. We send red roses to those we love. The Christian Church has very specific arrangements of colours and flowers for certain religious days. Christmas trees have been popularised for a season of goodwill. Research has been done in an area of London where many Asian people live. It was discovered that all the florists shops have had requests for culture-specific designs of flower arrangements, particularly for weddings.

4.4 An affirmation of personal identity

Having a culturally representative garden area or growing individual plants from one's country of origin within the home is an psychological affirmation of the multi-faceted identity of British individuals with unique personal cultural histories. It is particularly significant for first generation immigrants who have memories associated with the selected plants. It makes a visible and tangible link to the fact of one's personal history. It provides a focus for the social sharing of experience.

4.5 A living link to an ancestral place

There is a powerful emotional significance in having something living and growing from the faraway country of one's origin here in one's neighbourhood, school or home. For the subsequent generations of British citizens with a country of origin that is not Britain, it provides a living link which stimulates the exploration of the meaning of one's ancestral culture.

Those whose countries of origin have similar climates to their new setting have the privilege of easily having 'a a living bit of ancestral home' in their garden. Others need to create conservatories or greenhouses. Still others who do not have the facilities or space or money to do this find the botanical gardens wonderful places to visit a little bit of the ancestral home.

4.6 The native and alien plants issue

By its very phrasing the 'native and alien plants' issue is an emotive one for ethnic communities. It would benefit everyone if it were re-named more accurately the 'invasive plants issue' with sub-sections 'invasive native plants' and 'invasive alien plants'. The principles of sound science

should be explained so that the conditions created by human beings through which certain plants become destructive can be effectively managed.

The mistaken symbolic message of the 'native and alien plants issue' is that native plants are never problematic and that alien plants carry potential dangers. It encourages a distorted popular classification of plants into good native plants and bad non-native plants. It is then only too easily emotively extrapolated to link the perception of plants and people, especially when the terminology used coincides with the language of immigration.

In the 2nd September '96 issue of the newspaper *The Independent*, there was a full page article with the headline "British creatures fight for survival in rivers and meadows as aliens stage invasion of the wild".

How can plants and animals 'stage an invasion'? The sadness is that such headlines express, through projection onto motiveless animals and plants, the feelings of insecurity of the members of a multi-cultural society who cannot come to terms with who they are because they need to cling onto the idea of an illusional mono-culture.

The fact is that non-native plants are everywhere in our lives. Less than 10% of trees in Britain are native. Britain takes pride in its tradition of intrepid plant hunters. This country harbours millions of non-native plants and their cultivars in its city streets, gardens, stately homes, botanical gardens, vegetable allotments, woods, parkland, pine plantations and countryside. Our living rooms are full of indoor plants, which survive with little light because they originate from the shadows of the great forests of the world. What an essential role non-native plants play to give us pleasure in our daily lives !

Surrounded by all this, how many of us witness acts of destruction by non-native plants in our daily lives ? A generalised campaign against all 'non-native plants' is tinged with hysteria, for which cause we should look beyond the field of nature conservation.

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