

# *Semantic ecotones: moving towards the middle in a world of extremes<sup>1</sup>*

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THE CONVENTIONAL SEPARATION of nature and culture in landscape management is characterised as an expression of the violence in modern American society. Using Yosemite as an example, an alternative formulation of the middle ground as a rich ecotone is presented.

IN OUR LANGUAGE AND THOUGHT, the notions of nature and culture are situated at opposite ends of a spectrum (Sauer 1925; Appleton 1975; Blouet and Lawson 1975). At one end lies wilderness and nature; that which is supposedly free of human intervention and influence. This primeval landscape is often viewed as the embodiment of good and righteous thought and action (Nevius 1976). It is an extreme position endowed with a clarity of purpose and the ability to make right that which has been despoiled by civilisation (Thayer 1994). In its most simplistic terms, nature is the unattainable goal, the home from which we have been cast, the Eden of fallen humanity.

At the other end of this spectrum lies the power and creativity of culture; that which is created purposefully and decidedly by people. It may be material or immaterial, but it represents the numerous and often uncatalogued actions of individuals. While some might interpret all culture as 'high culture', such as fine art, symphony orchestras, and the wisdom of the poet laureate, it can also be considered more simply—as it is in this paper—as the result of the deliberate act of the rational human, set apart from and above the naked wilderness (Wilson 1991).

Long familiarity with the Cartesian type of dualism tends to make us comfortable at the extremes of ideas. We are less comfortable, however, in the middle of the spectrum. This preference for the apparent certainty of dualism is clear among land managing agencies and those charged with landscape preservation (natural and cultural), who all too often base their actions upon management constructs that polarise differentials of nature and culture in landscape, rather than upon constructs that might reveal and celebrate the common ground, and work with its potential.

In this paper, I review the separation of nature and culture in landscape management, with a particular focus on the Yosemite Valley in California, and explore whether the idea of a 'semantic ecotone' may help overcome the 'violence' of that separation. I argue that the ecological metaphor of an ecotone provides an opportunity to celebrate the complex differentials of managed landscapes, particularly those which lie in the middle ground between ideas of nature and culture.

## *A violent separation*

The idea that nature and culture are in opposition is essentially a violent concept, for it establishes an adversarial relationship between those who first consider natural systems and those who first consider cultural systems. In its

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REPORT

extreme, this construct fails to recognise legitimate management differences between natural and cultural resources while overemphasising erroneous conflicts. Additionally, by legitimising polar opposites, it encourages 'landscape violence', an extension of the American tendency towards violence which pervades our society.

The role of violence in American history and throughout American society has been well documented (Brown 1994). A key development over many years has been the law's recognition that Americans have 'no duty to retreat' in the face of a threat or attack.<sup>2</sup> It follows that the potential for considerate thought and rational response to difficult situations is reduced.

The American acceptance of violence also encourages a lack of consideration for the details of a landscape, and a belief that power equals right. An obvious illustration is our choosing to build in locations such as overhanging cliffs, floodplains and hurricane alleys. The power of technology breeds a hubris of violence towards the natural forces and elements of the landscape. Our myths speak of conquering the landscape, and honour those forbears who overcame great odds to establish cities, towns, farms and villages. Such images do not reflect a nostalgic view of the past; they recognise that modern technology has enabled us to overcome the limits which the landscape had formerly established. In this vision, by extension, landscape development which sets culture against nature is rarely seen as an act of violence; rather it is represented as an act of courage and perseverance. The adversarial relationship between people and place is implicit in the way we talk and think about the land, our continued refusal to retreat in the face of reasonable odds, and the associated glorification of the violent vigilantism that is displayed by our disregard for natural systems in the American landscape.

### *Yosemite Valley*

The dichotomy of land resource management is evident in the history of one of the world's best known glacier-carved canyons: the Yosemite Valley in California's Sierra mountains and part of what is now known as Yosemite National Park. Its history is as much about landscape abuse and violence as it is about landscape use. First set aside and 'reserved' by the State of California in 1864, the valley, sometimes called the 'Incomparable Valley', has been the subject of much writing, along with Mariposa Big Tree Grove, the battles of Hetch Hetchy, and what has become of this remarkable wilderness. Alfred Runte (1990), Roderick Nash (1989), François Matthes (1950), Carl Russell (1959/1992) and others (eg Hutchings 1886/1990; Clark 1910; Foley 1912; Orland 1985; Demars 1991) have taught us to understand what Yosemite means to Americans as a people and as a group of peoples. The photographs of Carleton Watkins, George Fiske and Ansel Adams, to name a few, have set the landscape of Yosemite concretely in our collective construct of wilderness, western-ness and nature. Along with that other great icon of the American west, Yellowstone, Yosemite has been both revered and criticised, honoured and desecrated, attended to and neglected, as an essentially 'natural' landscape.

### NATURE . . .

There are many prominent natural features of Yosemite which explain its cultural prominence as a natural landscape, as well as our apparent inclination to downplay its cultural history (Geological Survey of California 1869). Formed

by alpine glaciers moving through the Merced River canyon, the U-shaped Yosemite Valley emerged over millions of years. Sloping ridges and asymmetrical rock outcrops of granite dominate views of the valley walls (Matthes 1950). Its broad, flat floor, sheer granite walls and domes, lush green meadows and spectacular waterfalls are familiar scenes well-documented in literature, painting and photography.

Major geological features, such as El Capitan (1096 metres), Half Dome (2697 metres) and Sentinel Rock (2147 metres), dominate many valley views and present an imposing facade of natural strength and fortitude (Hall 1921). It is no wonder that the first non-native peoples to see this valley were awed by its sheer magnitude. It was unlike anything they or any of their colleagues had seen before (Matthes 1950; Russell 1959/1992).

Water is a major element of the valley. The Merced and its tributaries wind their way through the valley floor. Waterfalls inspire wonder over their power and variety. The wetlands provide habitat for wildlife as well as wildflower displays of seasonal interest.

Alternating between open meadowland and dense groves of trees, valley vegetation includes wildflowers, flowering shrubs, oak woodlands and mixed-conifer forests of ponderosa pine, incense cedar and Douglas fir. The patterns of vegetation create an ever-changing series of landscape spaces and moods, a vital influence on the character of the valley.

#### . . . AND CULTURE

The 11 meadows comprise one of the most sensitive ecosystems in the valley. However, they are not pristinely natural. The relationship between forest and meadowland is dynamic, not only subject to seasonal and annual fluctuations in available moisture, and catastrophic weather, but also influenced by patterns of pedestrian and vehicular traffic, and National Park Service programmes such as clearing and planting (Hill 1916).

Over the years, human alteration to the natural channel of the Merced has lowered the water table and changed the composition of the vegetation in the meadows. Intentional introduction of non-native species has affected native plant communities. The landscape of the meadows, far less dramatic than that of El Capitan and Half Dome, was readily sacrificed for the flood control necessary to protect human features. The 'wilderness' landscape was modified, and then modified again to protect the previous investments.

It is clear that in practice this is a landscape to be used, and not always protected for its natural values. It is not a landscape of seclusion, nor one being rejuvenated incrementally. Through its multiple uses, inspired by the intense needs of so many visitors so far from other vestiges of western civilisation, Yosemite Valley has become what in any other setting we would term a 'cultural' landscape.

Controlled views of the dramatic geological formations, waterfalls, meadows and the Merced River can be gained from many points in the valley. These points are critical to the experience of the average visitor, and, as with many other aspects of Yosemite, through the years the experience has been programmed and controlled. It is no accident that at one time Kodak engaged in tree cutting, clearing and trimming (with the active consent of the National Park Service) to ensure that classic photo opportunities would always be available. The landscape of Bierstadt and Adams can now be personally

reproduced and displayed in photo albums, slide shows and home videos, along with images of other great California icons.

The notion of interpretation—showing the visitor what they are seeing so that they may better appreciate it—is fundamental to the experience of this landscape. Throughout the valley, along its roads, trails and bike paths, and within the developed areas, views of supreme natural wonders are carefully framed, described and made available to the visitor (Stornoway 1888; United States Department of the Interior 1931). While nature is something to behold, especially here, it is also a prize to be captured—and then revealed again and again in the comfort of one's home. More than anything, the idea that we 'take' pictures has a special meaning in this landscape. It reflects the profound need to mark ourselves in this space, so that we—and others—may be sure that we were actually here. Marking oneself in a special place through taking photos, rather than writing or poetry or memories in our minds, is one of the great sports of our century. It is the fox hunt of civilised America, with a reward which proves to all that we have been 'here' (Orsi, Runte and Smith-Baranzini 1993).

Yet, despite this history of control and manipulation, we continue to categorise Yosemite as natural.

### *Finding the middle ground*

How then do we reconcile the need to protect natural systems with the seemingly unrelenting impulse to transform them into human systems? Reconciliation comes, perhaps, through non-linear modes of thinking about nature, culture and landscape, and through an inclusive view of nature and culture as more than merely 'two sides of the same coin'.

I offer the term 'semantic ecotone' for this fertile but complex middle ground. Much like its counterpart in ecological systems, the semantic ecotone represents an opportunity for diverse and rich consideration of a variety of landscapes. It provides a model for recognising that thought, ideas and actions, much like landscapes, are complex constructions of overlapping layers of meaning. These defining world views of nature and culture are most limited when they lead to a vision that is too narrowly framed.

An example for examining the metaphor of ecotone comes from the coastal waters of several continents: the oceanic tidepool. The tidepool contains organisms which not only thrive both in and out of water, but actually rely upon the cyclical regularity of the varying tides for nourishment and sustenance. In language, as well as in thought, we could learn from this concept, so that our understanding of nature and culture in the landscape might benefit from a set of variable conditions, rather than a fixed position (Bahre 1991). We could then think of a landscape as a tidepool of the mind, ecologically rich and biologically diverse in a variety of settings, rather than limited to solid ground or robust ocean, but never the edge between them.

This 'ecotone' is regularly modified through human interaction with the landscape. The notion that some cultures address land management with a pure heart, while others only willingly destroy them, is grounded largely upon an overly romantic view of the past (Cronon 1983; Silver 1990). Of course, we may consider the past as 'a foreign country', when landscape was appreciated, perceived and altered differently; however, it is the modes of those actions

which mark the differences between past and present (Lowenthal 1985). The excessively narrow paradigm of landscape that institutionalises the separation of nature and culture stems less from the realities of the landscape than from a construct, both common and elite, which seeks to maintain an overly simplistic view of nature and culture.

### *Management implications*

Recognising the richness of the middle ground requires us to readdress two aspects of management: the way we categorise and talk about the landscape, and the actions we take. As a first step, there is opportunity to develop a new vocabulary that recognises the distinctive 'natural' qualities of managed landscapes as valuable in their own right, and not an inferior shadow of a pure 'ideal'. Similarly, well considered cultural dimensions are not interventions but integral to the landscape as it is.

In turn, this semantic repositioning can lead to richer opportunities for diverse action, unfettered by the former conceptual polarities—celebrating, for example, managed meadows as valuable landscape systems in their own right.

### *Conclusions*

Land managers and design professionals—through short-term need, professional impulse, or codified expectations—have come to rely upon narrowly defined versions of understanding landscape values. The opportunity is available, however, to recognise that broader and more complex understanding of these values will, in turn, support a richer and more satisfying process for determining and protecting landscape values. If we recognise 'landscape' as the integrating force for nature and culture, then we will present ourselves with the opportunity to move beyond staked positions at the extremes of a landscape differential and towards the inclusive and dynamic ground of the semantic ecotone. As with an ecological ecotone, a semantic ecotone enables us to look beyond the limited values of a singular view (or landscape type) towards an understanding of temporal and resource based changes in both the virtual and actual landscape.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This article is based on a paper presented to the Languages of Landscape Architecture Conference, Lincoln University, in March 1995.

<sup>2</sup> In marked contrast, the English common law is clear on the requirement to move away or retreat from attack, all the way 'to the wall' if necessary, prior to using force (Brown 1994).

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