

Recommendations for secure and sustainable European cultural landscapes

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Following its final conference that took place in Brussels on 4 October 2016, the EU HERCULES consortium has provided stakeholders with a detailed set of policy recommendations that will preserve Europe's diverse heritage in cultural landscapes.

Over millennia, we have created and maintained cultural landscapes. They provide us with a variety of values and services that are essential for human societies to function and grow. These include cultural and recreational facilities, tourism opportunities, ecological and environmental knowledge, the ability to grow food, use medicinal resources, and extract raw materials. Cultural landscapes adapt over time, though with the dawn of the modern age, many have changed rapidly through factors such as deforestation and urbanisation. This has impacted their sustainability and raised concerns over the need to effectively preserve [cultural heritage](#).

The three-year HERCULES project was formed to empower public and private actors to protect, manage, and plan for sustainable landscapes of significant cultural, historical, and archaeological value at local, national, and pan-European scales. But what exactly is a cultural landscape? The HERCULES project utilised the definition of landscape within the Council of Europe's European Landscape Convention (ELC): 'An area as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or [human factors](#).' At the heart of the ELC therefore is the premise that all places – be they natural, rural, urban and marine – are 'cultural landscapes', and are inherently dynamic.

A landscape approach to governance

Through their research, the HERCULES project team found that Europeans tend to feel that their landscapes are threatened, culturally, economically and environmentally. In Europe there tends to be a natural sense of conservatism with regards to the landscape and how it changes. Even in cases where landscapes were/are more or less stable, the team found that people still tended to believe that their landscape was threatened.

This is one of the key reasons as to why the project recommends a

'landscape approach' to environmental governance, an approach which is participative and transdisciplinary. This avoids the pitfalls of single-sector or single-discipline approaches and encourages the active participation of local citizens in finding the best means to not only protect and preserve their environment but also to help them embrace positive change to their landscapes.

Specifically from a policy perspective, the project recommends that EU policies impacting all land (urban, rural and marine) should be harmonised to avoid the ineffectiveness of policies that concentrate too narrowly on single sectors of economic land use, or that impact on sections of society that are too narrowly defined. HERCULES also advocates that the landscape approach should be considered at every stage of the policy and decision-making process. This includes the development of policy areas and tools that have a direct or indirect bearing on the natural and/or human factors of the landscape.

A HERCULES Knowledge Hub to inform policymaking

The project team arrived at these recommendations by setting up nine 'study landscapes' that were located across Europe. They were selected to ensure a balanced representation of environmental and land use gradients within Europe and to encompass diverse European cultural landscapes. The data collected was also fed into the HERCULES 'Knowledge Hub', an online two-component system that allows users to view, explore, extrapolate and interact with the data collected from the nine sites.

The Hub also contains a wealth of further information that will be of great benefit to policymakers and other stakeholders, including examples of best practices for cultural landscape management, the lessons learnt from the 'Cultural Landscape Days' organised in five of the study

landscapes, and evaluations of the potential threats to European cultural landscapes on a European scale.

With the project due to end in November 2016, HERCULES has been successful in bringing back landscapes to the forefront of the political agenda, arguing that an interdisciplinary and inclusive landscape approach is the best means to preserve Europe's vast cultural heritage and diverse environments.

Indeed the project has acted as a trailblazer, with further calls within the Horizon 2020 programme due in the near future for large demonstration projects linking heritage and landscape preservation.

More information: For further information, please see: www.hercules-landscapes.eu/

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