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The end of consensus? The impact of participatory initiatives on conceptions of conservation and the countryside in the United Kingdom

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Abstract. In recent years, local participation has come increasingly to the forefront of the strategies, language, and practices adopted by conservation organisations in the United Kingdom. In this paper I explore what impact the process of participation is having in reshaping conceptions of conservation and the countryside. Based on empirical research in Southeast England, I argue that participation may reveal a new, but contradictory, arena of conservation concern centred on the relevance of place. In laying claim to its own knowledge, language, and values, this concern for place provides a legitimate authority for local people to challenge outside representations of their space. As a result, I suggest that the practice of participation may be bringing about a retreat from the national vision of traditional conservation and a fragmentation of conservation ideas.

Introduction

The UK statutory conservation agencies[1] were established after the Second World War in an age when public trust in the role of the detached and enlightened expert was at its height (Dwyer, 1991; Hennessey, 1992; Matless, 1989; Veldman, 1994). With a remit to protect wildlife and landscapes as a public good on behalf of the nation, their authority has historically lay in the deployment of their role as expert witnesses "talking truth to power" (Blaikie, 1996, page 81). In recent years, however, there has been an underlying change in tone, strategy, and practice from conservation organisations, both governmental and nongovernmental, with the idea of greater community participation in decisionmaking coming to the fore. As the National Trust, one of the United Kingdom's oldest conservation bodies, observes, "Conservation is no longer an activity undertaken by specialists on behalf of society. People want to be involved and have an increasing influence in determining what is special about places and is in need of protection" (NT, 1995, page 28).

The emergence of community participation in conservation can be seen as set within the larger context of a renegotiation of relations between the institutions of government and civil society (Misztal, 1996). Concerns over the unwieldiness and unaccountability of government bureaucracy intertwined with fiscal crisis have seen a 'hollowing out' of the state. As a result, businesses, voluntary organisations, local communities, and individuals have been encouraged to take over elements of what were previously publicly provided services (Burns et al, 1994; CC, 1991; Jessop, 1991). At the same time, there has been an increased focus on the role of the individual within society and a heightened concern with localism, particularly in response to the increasingly documented impact of globalisation upon society (Buttel, 1993; Giddens, 1990; Hall, 1991; Harvey, 1990). This fading of the universalist vision has run in tandem with a populist campaign to counter the assumed elitism and monopoly of expert professions and to make public

[1] In England, English Nature (EN) and the Countryside Commission (CC) are the current successors of the original statutory agencies created after the Second World War (see Sheail, 1976, and Adams, 1986, for a detailed account of the creation and development of the agencies).

bodies more accountable and responsive to the needs and wishes of the broader populace (Burns et al, 1994). It is in this context that local participation has come to the forefront of policy debate and academic research (Levi, 1993; Misztal, 1996, page 4) and the relationship between social actors and spheres of decisionmaking has made issues of local participation of central concern to geographers. In particular, with "locality now loom[ing] large, both as the context and the substantive focus of much activity in civil society" (Gyford, 1991, page 27) there has been a burgeoning geographical interest in the origins and implications of what Crouch and Matless (1996, page 237) call the "emerging cultural politics of the local" (see, for example, Gorz, 1993; Hall, 1991; Harvey, 1993; hooks, 1991; Keith and Pile, 1993).

Within the sphere of environmental policy, the concern with local participation has been given added impetus by the debate which surrounds environmental sustainability and which emerged from Agenda 21, which is incorporated into the Rio Declaration, to which the UK government is a signatory (Voisey et al, 1996). Agenda 21 argues that local involvement in decisionmaking is both necessary and desirable in meeting environmental objectives. Local participation is seen as moving the locus of decisionmaking power away from bureaucrats and experts outside of the community to the people who actually have to live with the results of their decisions (Rural Action Steering Group and National Development Team, 1992; Warburton, 1995). In this respect, it is seen as a *desirable* process. By aiming to break out of the privilege of concern of professional and political elites, the greater involvement of 'ordinary' people in local decisionmaking is intimately linked to notions of equity and social justice (Agyeman, 1990; Bottomore, 1976; Brock, 1994; Hain, 1980; Midgely, 1986). Local participation is also seen as a *necessary* process in solving environmental problems through a perception of its ability to develop greater public understanding and awareness of issues and to encourage local people to contribute to the achievement of agreed objectives. With evidence of an underlying public mistrust of authoritative institutions in society and increasing ambivalence towards the role of expertise, it is suggested that there is a danger that expertly informed, top-down plans to advance environmental initiatives may be interpreted by the public as bureaucratic or professional self-interest, thus further alienating local people (Brooke and Rown, 1996; Fenton, 1989; Macnaghten and Jacobs, 1997; Mather, 1993). By opening up a space for dialogue, local participation in conservation initiatives is perceived to break down the barriers between outside experts and the wider public and, in doing so, it extends the constituency of individuals sympathetic to, and supportive of, conservation organisations and their objectives (CC, 1993a; DoE, 1994; 1995; EN, 1995a; 1995b; CC/EH/EN, 1996; NT, 1995).

The assumption that the deployment of local participation will help mobilise support for national conservation organisations and ideas is underpinned by a view of conservation as consensual notion. It implies that an absence of public support for conservation objectives is a reflection not of dissent from, or distrust of, conservation expertise but represents a lack of understanding of conservation resulting from conservationists' lack of interest or inability in educating the public (Wynne, 1993). This ignores the problem of conservation as a socially constructed discourse. Yet it is now well recognised that conservation, as well as being an activity that affects the physical environment, is also culturally constructed through both language and symbols (Redclift, 1996; Short, 1991; Williams, 1973). As a result, conservation cannot be simply seen as an unambiguous notion from which precise environmental implications and prescriptions automatically follow.

Anderson and Gale (1992, page 7) suggest that the cultural process by which people construct their understanding of the world is an inherently geographic concern in which "in the course of generating new meanings and decoding existing ones, people

construct spaces, places, landscapes, regions and environments. In short, they construct geographies". Similarly, Said (1993, page 6) argues that, "none of us is completely free from the struggle over geography. That struggle is complex and interesting because it is not only about soldiers and cannons but also about ideas, about forms, about images and imagining". Said's description of geography as an enterprise emerging from the interplay of forms, images, and imaginings echoes Lefebvre's conceptualisation of the emergence of spatial practices. Lefebvre (1991) sees space as being produced in three ways: the way space is used and experienced ('material spatial practices'); the way space is talked about and understood ('representations of space'); and the way space is imagined or envisioned ('spaces of representation'). He characterises these as 'experience', 'perception', and 'imagination'. Spatial practices are the result of the interplay between these elements, being both product and producer of perceptions and imaginings of space. Conservationists, both in conflict with others, as well as in trying to create an overarching conservation ideal, can also be conceptualised as fighting battles, not just over land-use practices, but also battles of perception and imagination in relation to space.

Hall (1977) argues that the exercise of ideological power and its acceptance as common sense has to be won, reproduced, and sustained. For Miller (1987, cited in Crouch, 1992, page 232), this introduces "the possibility of consensus being checked, fractured." A process of participation implies, to some degree at least, a relinquishing of power by conservation professionals hitherto responsible for directing conservation as a national project. By allowing for the possibility of strategic action on the part of individuals and communities, local participation can be seen as creating just such an arena of renegotiation and reinterpretation which may allow national interventions and ideas to be redefined, challenged, and accorded new meaning at the local level (Little and Austin, 1996; Nuijten, 1992). Although the participatory process may be perceived as politically desirable, it is also seen by some as potentially dangerous, as it changes the expectations of local people and, as a result, undermines the existing consensus currently mediated through the authority of expertise. As Goodin (1992, page 168) suggests, "to advocate democracy is to advocate procedures, to advocate environmentalism is to advocate substantive outcomes: what guarantee can we have that the former procedures will yield the latter sorts of outcomes?". In this context, the introduction of participatory programmes by UK national conservation organisations can be seen as an important case study in exploring how the practice of participation mediates the relationship between authoritative 'external' institutions and civic society and the implications that such an organisational change has upon spatial practices and ideas.

Research context and methodology

My research, outlined in this paper, explores the impact that the process of participation has in reshaping conceptions of conservation and the countryside. It does so by drawing upon conversations[2] with local participants in the range of participatory conservation initiatives funded and sponsored by both statutory and nongovernmental conservation organisations in the county of Kent[3] in Southeast England and with national and regional conservation professionals responsible for devising and implementing such programmes. The schemes covered by the research were Rural Action (RA), the Parish

[2] The term 'conversation' is used to emphasise the fact that, in this case, the research interview is viewed as a contingent social situation in which the researcher's questions are seen as active and constructive and not as passive and neutral (Potter and Wetherell, 1987).

[3] The Kent area was chosen chiefly because it has examples of all of the schemes under research and because the regional authorities responsible for their coordination had been involved in their implementation from an early stage. As a result, the interview respondents had a history of working on such initiatives.

Paths Partnership (PPP), Countryside Management Projects (CMPs), and a variety of initiatives part-funded by national and regional conservation agencies under the generic title Local Agenda 21 (LA21). Local projects have been initiated under these schemes across the region and my research reflected this through my choice of respondents.

The schemes

Launched by the UK government at the end of 1992, RA aims to help people in rural communities to take locally defined action to protect and improve their local environment and to promote "environmental action as a means of strengthening communities" (Rural Action Steering Group and National Development Team, 1992, page 7). It comprises two main elements: first, funding for the formation of county-based networks of environmental organisations to provide a support infrastructure to local projects and, second, the provision of advice, training, information, and small grants to local communities wishing to undertake a broad range of local conservation projects.

The PPP, also launched in 1992 by the UK government, aims to enable local people to make the most of the network of public footpaths in their area whilst also establishing "efficient, effective and economic ways of ensuring the rights of way network is open and in use" (CC, 1994, page 1). Primarily, the scheme awards grants to local parish councils or local groups to fund work identified and undertaken by local people on the public footpaths network in their area.

CMPs were pioneered by the CC in the 1970s with the aim of developing and implementing localised conservation management plans and to raise local awareness by using a catalytic facilitating style working with and through local communities, landowners, land managers and public bodies (CC, 1993b). More recently the role of CMPs has been seen as increasingly important in stimulating and supporting direct environmental action by local people through their role in providing support, advice, and encouragement for local involvement in the PPP and RA programmes as well as for other local conservation initiatives undertaken under the auspices of LA21.

Last, LA21 is the international local government initiative in support of sustainable development which emerged from the Rio Earth Summit of 1992. In practical terms, under the generic title of LA21, national conservation organisations in the United Kingdom have become involved, in partnership with local authorities, in part-funding and supporting a number of local initiatives. This has included the establishment of environmental forums and the development of local environmental action plans (CC/EH/EN, 1996; Ruth Allen, 1996). The statutory agencies have also supported local authority LA21 programmes through their funding of local environmental initiatives such as parish mapping exercises and village design statements. These seek to draw out local expressions of environmental significance. Some of these projects have been part-funded through RA grants and, in this respect, RA can be regarded as part of the LA21 initiative. Similarly, the PPP is also seen by the statutory conservation agencies as coming under the LA21 umbrella (CC/EH/EN, 1996).

The long interview

Conversations with respondents were organised along the lines of the long interview format (see McCracken, 1988). My aim in this research was to open up, investigate, and explore the different perceptions, understandings, and experiences of conservation and local participation with each respondent. The concern with meaning required an approach that allowed respondents to talk freely about, and make sense of, their experiences and perceptions. The technique of the long interview collects data by means of structured conversations using open-ended questions and follow-up prompts to encourage a deeper exploration of topics raised by the respondents (Kempton, 1991). My methodology does not seek to identify how many or what kinds

of people hold these categories and assumptions, merely that they exist (Potter and Wetherell, 1987) and the selection of respondents reflected this. In drawing attention to cultural phenomena and pointing to implications and problems rather than making any quantitative judgements on its pervasiveness, the approach of the research outlined in this paper follows that of Overholser (1986), McCracken (1988), and Hinchliffe (1996).[4]

Forty-one conversations were completed and later analysed for this research. The conversations were undertaken with three groups: local participants in local conservation initiatives (twenty-nine respondents); conservation professionals working at a regional level (six respondents); and, conservation professionals working for national conservation organisations in the development of national policy (three respondents from the statutory agencies and five from national conservation NGOs). The national respondents selected were conservation managers known to be involved in national policy development. Regional respondents were selected as regional representatives of either national conservation organisations, or as conservation managers working for regional government or regional conservation groups in implementing participatory conservation initiatives. Local respondents were chosen from comprehensive lists of local participants[5] provided by regional groups responsible for initiating or implementing participatory programmes in the region. In table 1 I give details of those local respondents interviewed.

Table 1. Characteristics of local respondents interviewed.

Characteristic	Number of respondents	Characteristic	Number of respondents
Gender		Length of residence in locality (in years)	
male	14	<5	2
female	15	5–19	17
Age		20+	6
21–30	0	whole life	4
31–40	4	Housing tenure	
41–50	11	owner-occupier	20
51–60	7	renting	6
61+	7	Source of funding for project	
Broad occupational status		Rural Action	12
professional	11	Parish Paths Partnership	9
manual	2	Countryside Management Project	4
self-employed	4	other	4
retired	7		
housewife/husband	5		

[4] For a fuller discussion on the theoretical and methodological background to this work, see Goodwin (1997).

[5] My research focused on local people who were, or had, participated in the relevant conservation projects. In this respect the research did not explicitly seek out those local people who had not, to date, participated in such schemes. Although this may represent a limitation, it did meet the aims of the research which were to explore the dynamics between *participants'* understandings, expectations, and experience of participation and to evaluate the implications that participation has for conservation policy and practice. Although in this study I did seek to explore the issue of representatives of current schemes, the research methodology failed to draw any real insights from the responses of local respondents, largely because it sought the views of existing participants and therefore failed to seek out explicitly those marginalised groups currently not participating. This represents a shortcoming in the research and one that the author readily acknowledges merits further attention.

Through an analysis of these conversations[6] I suggest that in its concern with place, participation allows alternative expressions of conservation and the countryside to stand alongside traditional conservation concerns. Drawing upon Lefebvre's ideas on the production of space, I explore the differences in motivations, perceptions, and experience that characterise such different arenas of concern (see figure 1). I then go on to examine how through encouraging the articulation of such separate domains of conservation thinking local participation may, in turn, contribute to a breakdown in the unifying vision of traditional conservation and a potential fragmentation of conservation ideas. The research detailed in this paper is part of a growing body of work that explores human interactions with the environment from a cultural perspective (see, for example, Cloke et al, 1994; Milton, 1996; Redclift, 1987; 1993; Simmons, 1992) which concerns itself with the issues of knowledge, values, and beliefs, and how they influence sociopolitical processes. Such an approach is justified by the argument that decisions about the rural environment "embrace a particular set of priorities which in turn are derived from a particular (and often very specific) view of the rural" (Little and Austin, 1996, page 101). In seeking to uncover how participatory programmes may redefine

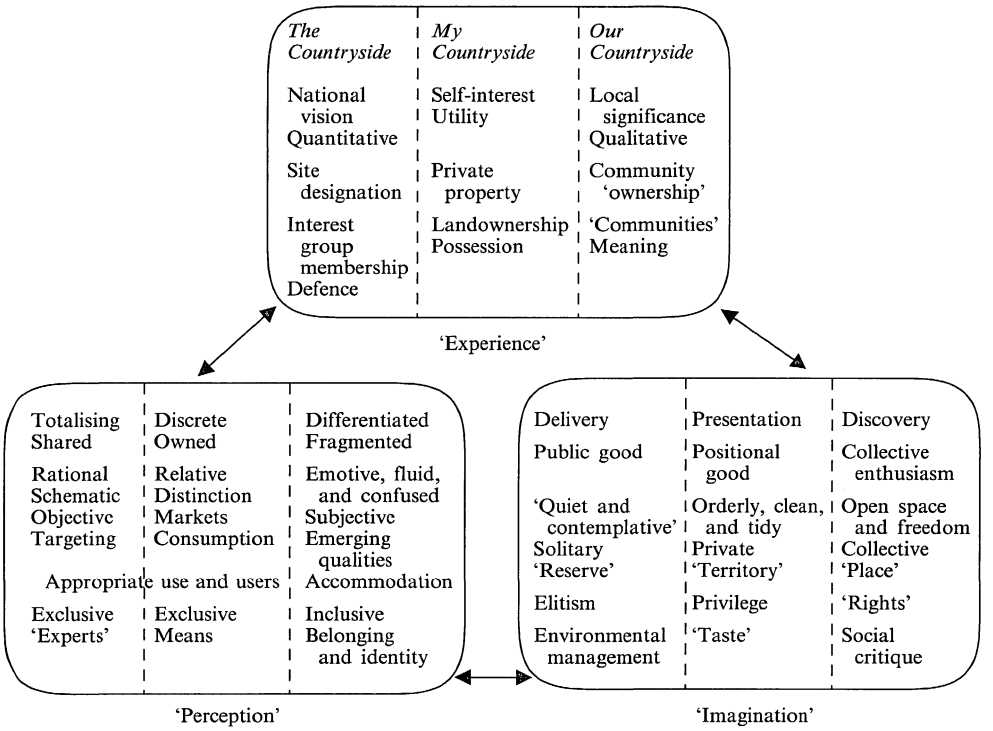

Figure 1. Experiences, perceptions, and imaginings of conservation.

[6] Any quotations presented in this paper are word-for-word transcriptions from tapes, except that redundant pauses, repetitions, and false starts have been removed. They contain the non-standard grammar and word choice used in everyday speech, marked with '[*sic*]' when they might otherwise cause confusion. Ellipsis points (...) indicate material that has been deleted and underlining indicates emphasis by the informant. Square brackets denote nonspoken, contextual information added postinterview and either derived from previous statements by the informant or from intonation. A series of full stops indicate significant pauses. Speakers are introduced by their names (all respondents have been given pseudonyms) followed by a colon. These notes and conventions follow Kempton (1991) and Hinchliffe (1996).

rural space, this research helps to reveal and evaluate the influence of such programmes on negotiating the future of environmental objectives and practices.

From '*The* Countryside' to '*My* countryside': the links between public and private notions of conservation

The countryside of what might be called traditional conservation established in the United Kingdom after the Second World War was founded upon a view of the countryside as a public good protected on behalf of the nation. This linked a number of disparate elements:

first, the common currency of romantically informed ideas of landscape beauty;
second, the preservation of historical continuity through established patterns of property rights and land-use management;
third, notions of social reform through the provision of public goods; and,
fourth, the protection of wildlife based on scientific objectivity (see Adams, 1986; 1996; Cox, 1988; Lowe et al, 1986).

Such a national view of conservation, as an abstract resource divided between areas of greater and lesser importance, required a *totalising vision* of 'The Countryside'. Conservation space, be it landscape or habitat, is secured according to expert definition and subsequently experienced as a separate and distinct land-use practice through the use of site designation. For Bourdieu (1977, page 106), 'the privilege of totalisation' secures "the means for apprehending the logic of the system which a partial or discrete view would miss." However, this requires space to be objectified, classified, and homogenised in order to create a fixed schema and relative scale. Such a process submerges the subjective, fluid, and confused world of everyday experience into rationalised configurations (Harvey, 1990). The result, as seen in the institutionalisation of conservation objectives, is that it treats one set of value judgements—which emerge from particular notions of what the rural environment should look like, how it should be managed, about property rights and the directing hand of 'expertise'—as 'real', objective measurements (Grove-White and Michaels, 1993).

Maintaining the widespread acceptance of such objectivity requires the maintenance of the power and authority of a specialist knowledge (Sibley, 1995). In doing so, knowledge must be compartmentalised and kept within secure boundaries: "Forms of knowledge must always be well-insulated from each other: there must be no sparking across the forms with unpredictable outcomes. Specialisation makes knowledge safe and protects the vital principles of social order" (Bernstein, cited in Atkinson, 1985, page 28). Those forms of knowledge which are widely accessible have to be viewed negatively, or decreed 'unscientific', in order to maintain the knowledge hierarchy and its power (Sibley, 1995). Such a control of knowledge "allows the perpetuation of the dominant value system—within a discipline, a subarea or specialism, or an institution" (1995, page 125). As a result, maintaining such a 'totalising' vision requires constant surveillance and control (Harvey, 1990). Any knowledge, or 'ways of seeing', that do not fit with the classification risk undermining it and may therefore be seen as "'dangerous knowledge', to be suppressed, ignored or rejected" (Sibley, 1995, page 80). This is as true of conservation as of many other specialisms. In presenting themselves as guardians of a national vision of conservation as a public good and as expert arbiters of value, conservation organisations appear sensitive to the risks of letting local communities have too much say in the direction of conservation activity. For conservation professionals, the cohesive planning of the wider conservation resource is dependent upon central coordination, set within a framework of knowledge and values informed by an expert rationality.

Maintaining an ideological hegemony ultimately depends upon an ability to control the material and social context of personal and social experience (Harvey, 1990). As Foucault (1972) suggests, there is an intimate relation between the 'systems of knowledge' which codify techniques and practices for the exercise of social control and patterns of domination within particular localised contexts. In seeking to maintain a unifying vision of The Countryside, 'successful' participatory initiatives were described by conservation professionals as ones which reinforced adherence to a given set of perceptions and values surrounding the use of rural space. As a result, they perpetuate a prescribed experience of the local environment and maintain existing sets of spatial practices and institutions. For example, described by one conservation professional as "good community stuff," the PPP essentially limits local experience of participation to the implementation of nationally determined objectives. It does so through a given set of spatial practices, the public rights of way network. With local participation limited to footpaths maintenance—"keeping things clean and tidy" in the words of one local participant—such a scheme plays upon what Cox (1988) calls middle-class ideas of a 'tame' countryside. It reinforces existing notions of property rights and consolidates an interpretation of appropriate use and users of the countryside amongst local people which, in turn, reinforces the social expectations attached to where and when actions and activities occur In this case, spatial practice defines appropriate use as 'quiet and contemplative' enjoyment and appropriate users as walkers. Through the PPP, these notions are carried into a prescriptive participatory framework which "replicate the social order by assigning social meanings to space" (Harvey, 1990, page 216). Rose, for example, a local organiser of the PPP in the village of Harbledown, described local participation in such an initiative as "deciding things they want to do, really, keeping things as they are which is the same thing in a sense isn't it." As a result, the unified vision of conservation and of the countryside as an homogeneous space is maintained.

In Luhmann's (1969, cited in Lyotard, 1984, page 62) terminology, such participatory schemes can be seen as a form of 'quasi-apprenticeship' in which administrative procedures guide individual aspirations so that individuals 'want' what the system needs. The PPP, for example, channels local interest into acceptable forms and maintains the established romantic and passive view of rural space where "the implicit notion of the use of the countryside is a place where people go ... to walk their dogs, or look at the beauty of it" (Macnaghten, 1995). Such representations of space amount to a form of social control which aim to regulate and constrain the behaviour and thinking of local people (Sibley, 1995). For Mary, a local participant in a RA project in the village of Broomfield, it was this kind of unreflective participation, with local people's 'objectives' constrained to questions of delivery of an externally devised vision of The Countryside, that restricted any challenge to conservation thinking. People remain cut off from conservation concern except where it affects the commodified world of property and view:

> Mary: "At the moment I think the trouble is because people are not involved in decisionmaking they don't have any objectives. A lot of people just don't think about it, full stop ... but whereas, if they, when they put the Thanet Way through here, well, they've started to do it, everybody was, well, a lot of people were up in arms about it. And it's on your doorstep, I mean, it is this NIMBY factor, it does come into it and why shouldn't it really?"

Similarly, for Ann, the local organiser of the PPP in the village of Underiver, local participation in conservation was perceived as focused on private rather than public goals—in this case, in maintaining privileged access to a consumption of the environment as private property and view:

> Ann: "I don't think there's actually huge public spirit for the good of the public. People are interested in their own patch and they're interested in conservation, sometimes in quite a woolly way but I don't think there's a great longing to let the public in .... They're interested in it as far as it relates to themselves."

Indifferent to the altruism of public-good notions of traditional conservation, such a conservation concern is experienced as motivated by self-interest, measured in terms of individual utility and capitalised through the value of property (see figure 1). In contrast to the shared public-good notion of The Countryside, this might be termed 'My Countryside', the countryside of self, by definition inward-looking and parochial. Yet, in terms of its opposition to development and the exclusiveness of its views on appropriate use and users of the countryside, the conservation of My Countryside shares a number of important characteristics with traditional conservation. Although having different justifications (the public versus the private) and different scales of concern (the national versus the local), those with privileged access to the rural environment, either through expertise or private 'means', are tied together through a shared view of the appropriate use of rural space and the justifiable exclusion of unwanted 'others'. The fears of undesirable 'intrusions' into rural space continue to unite them. Both The Countryside and My Countryside are experienced and deployed as spaces of exclusion—on the one hand through site designation, and on the other through private property ownership. The result is a vision of conservation as an essentially narrowly defined and defensive activity stemming from a desire, as one local participant suggested, to "keep things as they are."

Based on ideas of an unchanging countryside with strict demarcations on land use and strong property rights, conservation organisations' appeals to historical continuity through the use of notions of 'heritage' fit neatly with many people's self-interested pursuance of the positional goods of rural location and rural 'way of life'. Harvey (1990, pages 78–79) argues that "the most successful ideological effects are those which have no words, and ask no more than complicitous silence." By perpetuating ideas of who and what are appropriate in the countryside and linking ideas of a valued common inheritance from the past to the consumption demands of the present, notions of heritage serve to maintain an elite countryside for those with either the privilege of 'education' or 'means'. In providing greater legitimacy to those 'local voices' seeking to protect My Countryside, local participation, allied to notions of heritage, also helps maintain a national vision of The Countryside. Thus, the harnessing of local participation in the production of positional goods serves an important ideological function because, as Harvey (1990, page 79) comments, "the mechanisms through which it contributes to the perpetuation of the established order remain hidden." In doing so, however, it also serves to institutionalise the process of defending positionality by providing the political means by which private concerns can be converted into collective action. As a result, local participation in conservation also enhances the possibility of the commodification of place by promoting private agendas.

New knowledge, new language: the role of participation in challenging the conservation vision

Norgaard (1994, page 51) suggests that knowledge is a social process: "what is eventually known is determined by the nature of that process. What becomes known is not predetermined. Who participates and how they are allowed to participate determines the type of questions raised, information brought to the discourse, and judgements made and encouraged upon others to make. The participants and process determine the product." The concerns of those seeking to defend My Countryside rest largely in a maintenance of existing spatial practices in the countryside. By harnessing such

concerns, existing participatory initiatives could be seen as perpetuating an expectation of what will occur in the countryside and, as a result, constraining any challenges to the conservation ideas which underpin the conservation consensus. The deployment of a heritage ideology both legitimates the positions of those who maintain a privileged position in the countryside and, at the same time, constrains the legitimacy of any claims that other interests may have over rural space. In short, such representations of space serve to limit the scope of the conservation debate by restricting local ideas, demands, and expectations.

However, to argue that the motivation for local involvement is purely positional, or structured solely according to the directing hand of traditional conservation concerns, is insufficient. By uncovering and developing a relationship between people and their locality, local participation can also be seen as creating a separate scale of conservation concern. Such a concern is derived from the personal countryside of place rather than from the national vision of conservation as a public good defined by experts. Although it emphasises personal concerns, this new domain of conservation interest is guided not simply by the possession, territoriality, and exclusion surrounding positional arguments over space. Instead it represents a collective and shared experience of locality linked to questions of personal meaning and identity—"a dedication feeling. The feeling of belonging to your village" as one local respondent commented. Critically, in contrast to the positional motivations associated with My Countryside, such a conservation concern arises from an inclusive sense of collective responsibility and ownership. Framed by local significance, such a conservation is defined through the subjective, qualitative and shared enthusiasms of local communities (see figure 1). This is the unbounded and shared conservation of place, or what might be termed, 'Our Countryside'. Sylvia, a participant in a RA project in the town of Whitstable, described her vision of conservation in these terms:

> Sylvia: "Conservation has to be sort of, you know, nature, for want of a better word, and people working hand in hand to their mutual benefit, doesn't it? Because there's nothing worse than if you get bits of land or something that's done and then they can't go in there because, 'no, you can't, no, no entry', you know, 'because we're growing wild orchids and we don't want them pinched', or something like this, so you can't go through. That doesn't really turn people on at all, in fact, the opposite, you know, they think, 'oh, well, that's another bit we've been denied', you know, or something like that. So its really got to be compatible with people."

Similarly, in the village of Sturry, a local site in the middle of a housing estate was purchased by the parish council with the help of a RA grant because of the desire to protect *and share* the unusual 'sense of countryside' to be found there. As Peter, a local parish councillor explained:

> Peter: "the reason we bought it is because we want to involve the wider community in it. So I suppose that was the only kind of guideline we had. We felt we wanted to get people in there somehow."

In this sense, it is not simply the notion of collective action that differentiates the conservation of My Countryside from the conservation of Our Countryside. As Lowe and Goyder (1983) comment, although securing consumption of positional goods depends upon personal means, rarely can its continued possession be secured through private action alone but often depends upon a collective response. Indeed they and commentators such as Newby (1985) suggest that the burgeoning number of local environmental societies is evidence of such a defence of positionality. However, the collective concerns of Our Countryside are set apart from the commodified and privatised arguments of positional interests by their inclusiveness, allied to a sense of emerging and nonmaterial significance.

Although participation may give rise to this new arena of conservation concern, so far it has been suggested that experiences and perceptions of My Countryside and The Countryside unite powerfully to constrain local people's understandings of, and demands upon, conservation and rural space. However, a participatory conservation gives rise to two tendencies which make maintaining a unified conservation vision more problematic for national conservation organisations. First, local participation seems to increase local people's expectations of their right to be 'heard' *and* responded to. Second, by facilitating the development of local knowledge, local participation generates a local awareness which, with its concentration on personal significance and value, provides a new way of talking about conservation. This may be encouraging diverging ways of perceiving and defining rural space.

Against a background of environmental loss, political pressure and a perceived failure of traditional conservation strategies, conservation professionals seeking to defend The Countryside tended to view local participation as primarily an instrumentalist mechanism that facilitates the more effective delivery of a set of predetermined conservation objectives. In contrast, those concerned with Our Countryside described it as a *process of discovery*. By creating the potential to explore local values and significance and encouraging the development of a deepening and emotive relationship with place, "landmarks become no longer geographic but biographical and personal" (Berger, 1987, cited in Crouch, 1990, page 14). Importantly, such a process bypasses the interpretations of expertise and creates a boundary of uncertainty in relation to the maintenance of a hegemonic conservation ideal.

By refocusing on the minutiae of local definition and the subjectivity of local experience, participation threatens to fragment the unifying vision of The Countryside by placing an emphasis upon people's 'direct engagement' with their local environment, "with its effective, associative, even numinous dimensions" (Grove-White, 1995). It provides the potential for a breakdown in the distinction between the material and the metaphorical, the objective and the subjective (Keith and Pile, 1993), and so "trangresses the arrangement of life into discrete realms of cognition, ethics and aesthetics" (Crouch and Matless, 1996, page 239). As a result, it sets up a new dynamic in the way space is experienced, perceived, and imagined. For example, Caroline, a local resident involved in a RA-funded parish maps initiative in the village of Chiddingstone, described the significance of her local environment in very personal, symbolic, and even animistic ways:

> Caroline: "I see it very much as something which is not really tangible but it is very much an interaction between the people and the environment and therefore it is very, it's not so easy to pinpoint .... I know for me that it's my own personal experience in a place, it's very much, its very strongly linked to how I feel about it and, strangely, I mean its places where I've fallen and injured myself, or something ridiculous, where I actually then end up having a huge respect for the tree I fell out of, or whatever it is, but it's very, it's very much to do with personal experience."

For Jill, similarly involvement in the parish maps initiative in Langton Green had uncovered a personal awareness of the conservation significance of her locality which she described as emerging from the background of daily life and her everyday surroundings. For her, conservation significance was rooted in a shared and emotional relationship with her local environment and its communities:

> Jill: "local distinctiveness to me is just what the village is. It's people and what the place itself is and as opposed to information, I suppose, that came out originally, that spoke about the everyday things and I must admit that has brought it home to me and reminded me about things that I was accepting, taking for granted. So I

think just talking about local distinctiveness brings it to the fore. Brings the everyday things to the fore, rather than just letting them sit there and we walk past them and forget them."

Facilitating such different 'ways of seeing' and, to some extent at least, recreating locality as a more fluid, sensuous, qualitative, and emerging environment, local participation may allow conservation to be perceived and justified by local people in diverging ways. By encouraging the articulation of subjective values and being inclusive in its interpretation of local significance, it undermines the notion of objective and relative scale and marginalises the role of the expert in defining local conservation value. Furthermore, in stimulating new and differentiated ways of speaking about and representing space, any demands, expectations, and wishes that may arise from such a participatory process cannot be guaranteed to emerge from, or fit within, the overarching goals of conservation expertise. Thus, instead of serving to functionalise support for traditional conservation objectives, local participation may create a diverse range of local demands and expectations associated with the eclectic and collective enthusiasms of Our Countryside rather than the more exclusive and constrained aspirations of those seeking traditional and positional conservation objectives. Where national organisations are unable to respond, the two groups may become polarised, involved in a dialogue in which, through divergent language and objectives, neither hears not understands what the other is saying (Becher, 1989).

Fragments and fractures: the future of conservation

Despite facing a large-scale development threat, local people in the village of Bobbing were unable to enlist the support of conservation organisations in their fight against developers and regional and national planning authorities. The local perception was that, for national organisations, there was nothing of conservation importance in their locality. As Paul, the local chairman of the parish council, suggested "You get the impression that people come along and they think, 'well, you know, what do you want to save it for?'." For Paul, the importance of his village and its surroundings were marginalised by the objective schema of those concerned with The Countryside which failed to assign it value. With the expertly informed vision of The Countryside failing to recognise anything of significance, local participation in a RA-funded parish maps exercise allowed local people to discover and articulate their own values and objectives:

Paul: "I mean, the whole thing with the parish map, was to let other people know what we had and *to give us, and to give them, the impression of our identity and how we saw ourselves and not only them but other people*" (emphasis added).

Concerned with exploring and expressing the identity of 'their place', such a process fell outside the discourse of expertise. The open-endedness of this process saw the conservation debate stretched outside those of traditional concerns so that conservation was seen to be not just about wildlife, property, and landscape, but also about the sustainability of their village as a viable community. By a process of exploring the identity of their place they had arrived at a set of local objectives for the future of their village, produced in a document entitled *Vision '97: After the By-pass*, which were felt, as Paul suggested, to be about radically different conservation concerns from those of national organisations:

Paul: "on a local level we're just trying to survive as a rural community. And they don't recognise that we need to be a rural community ... so their conservation aims don't relate to what we want at all and they don't, they're changing on to a broader scale. We want local things."

This sense of the local and national being on diverging paths in terms of their conservation perceptions and concerns was also present in responses from other villages taking part in this research. For many of those interviewed, the local objectives arising out of participatory initiatives focused largely on securing greater public access to the surrounding countryside: the opening up of local fields and woods, the creation of circular walks around the village, the establishment of new footpaths to other villages. For the purveyors of a national conservation vision such expressions of desire may not seem particularly problematic. First, the ideas tend to be very small-scale and often seem constrained by accepted views on property rights. In addition, although people were prepared to express objectives in informal conversations, it is impossible to extrapolate from such articulations of desire to the suggestion that local people will actually demand the fulfilment of such objectives. What may be more problematic, however, is the sense that, through the inclusiveness of their projects, such local initiatives may be serving to articulate a redefinition of appropriateness in relation to rural space. In a LA21-funded community woodland initiative in Wingham, for example, this local residents' description of Our Countryside as a shared and collective space, was of a countryside serving as a backdrop to what might otherwise be considered suburban pursuits:

> James: "first of all, then, how we're going to develop the management of it and then how we're going to involve the community in its use .... I'm pretty certain they would because we would see to it that certain activities, be it only a boot fair, would take place in the community wood. I mean, we've got a clearing already in the middle of it where we propose to build 'rustic' places where people could shelter if need be or where we could have one or two functions."

Similarly, in a number of other villages 'conservation' areas were envisaged as being collective spaces where people would share in community events. In the village of Staple, for example, they intend to hold barbecues in their community woodland; in Chartham, to hold summer events with their neighbouring parish in the community orchard. In Broomfield they have revived a local fair around their pond site, all to stand alongside what were projected as nature conservation objectives. With such an assortment of objectives the 'communities of interest' represented within such local projects are, as Crouch and Hennessey (1995, page 39) comment, "in flux, not fixed, as in some imagined past." The broad range of appropriate users, the inclusiveness of such multiple and fluctuating interests, makes ideas of The Countryside, rooted in the continuities of heritage, more difficult to maintain. Here, where 'boot fairs' and 'functions' occupy the same space as conservation management, the eclectic mix of collective enthusiasm represents a change in perception of what 'a rural experience' should be and a redefinition of appropriate use of what might traditionally have been an exclusive conservation space.

For traditional conservationists, these perceptions of rural space, as either a 'tamed' environment or as a backdrop to other leisure pursuits, devalue the 'natural' experience of the countryside. One local conservation manager lamented what he saw as local people's desire for a 'clean and tidy' countryside in which conservation becomes just another "out of town consumer experience." However, such claims to authenticity surrounding definitions of particular kinds of 'countryside' are not easy to sustain. For Denise, a local resident in the village of Hothfield, it was conservation management itself which undermined the authenticity of her rural experience by creating a generated and interpreted countryside. This clashed with her perception of the rural as a space of discovery which throws up random experiences:

Denise: "I don't like, I like to feel there should be freedom and people can walk without feeling that they're being led every step of the way in an organised fashion. What they're [conservation professionals] doing is creating a plastic countryside. I don't want to see everything structured and planned, I like it to seem wild."

With local participation bringing a questioning of what is significant within a locality, there is a growing public perception that the claims to an objective conservation vision are based upon certain value judgements about the desirable 'natural' state that a site should remain in. As Denise commented on the conservation management of a heathland site adjacent to her house in Hothfield,

Denise: "I still think there are fashions going back to what was considered conservation in the Common ten years ago as to what is considered conservation now. I think, it quite often depends on who is maybe managing the particular project and their particular pet interest really dictates as to the way the management is undertaken."

For Denise, arguments surrounding authenticity based upon notions of historicity are seen as relating purely to the desirability of capturing certain ecological moments. A recognition that such claims to authenticity are socially constructed undermines 'objective' conservation arguments represents a legitimate interface for local people to challenge conservation judgements. Denise, for example, rejected the presentation of the 'objective' arguments of those conservation professionals seeking to protect The Countryside as only one set of opinions and interests which she could legitimately dispute. Such a refusal to accept or be informed by the knowledge of conservation expertise represents a rejection of one of the assumptions upon which national organisations deploy local participation—that local people are willing receivers of an expertly defined conservation knowledge. Yet it is on such a premise that local participation is seen as being able to bridge the gap between local people and conservation experts and so mobilise consent and support for a national vision of The Countryside. Instead, by encouraging a personal relationship with place and an awareness of local significance, participation may serve merely to highlight any externally imposed change as an erosion of locally attached place value (Okeley, cited in Crouch, 1990). As a result, the appropriation of space by those seeking to conserve The Countryside represents an undermining of local values through assigning "*their* landscape with a different meaning" (Crouch, 1990, page 19). The implication is that where people are particularly conscious of local significance, they may be more inclined to contest and resist the imposition of any externally imposed vision in '*their* place'. By creating the framework from which such local significance may emerge and by creating the grounds upon which local people feel they can contest national conservation arguments, the problem for national organisations is that local participation may create the context for greater conflict rather than consensus. In reflecting upon the benefits of local participation for his community, Jack, a resident of the village of Wingham and coordinator of a LA21 funded community woodlands project, suggested that

Jack: "Its a bit early to say but I would rather like to think that you would, when they come up, when the big national organisations come up with ideas because you've been involved and you know a bit more about it, you could argue back, whether or not what they're actually saying is really true. Or, 'oh that's fine but it doesn't apply here, it might apply down in Dorset or something or other but it doesn't apply here'."

Conclusions: challenging the 'stories' about conservation

It is now widely acknowledged that social identities associated with communities of place are complex and often conflictual (White, 1996). In practice, however, the deployment

of participatory conservation initiatives suggests that conservation organisations still attempt to operate as if the discourses surrounding the conservation of place are shared and consensual (Crouch and Matless, 1996). By characterising the notions of My Countryside and Our Countryside, I seek to highlight the different discourses associated with the conservation of place. Representing distinctive domains of conservation concern, these reveal what Crouch and Matless (1996, page 237) describe as "the contradictory politics of place ... inhabited by both the conservative and transformative, the radical and the reactionary." On the one hand, in emerging from the defensive protection of positional goods, My Countryside represents a desire to protect and exclude based on a view of the countryside as providing symbolic value to those who can maintain possession. On the other hand, the more radical vision of Our Countryside focuses on the inclusiveness of the uncommodified, collective enthusiasms of "the countryside as a diverse home accessible to all and not embossed with private property and policed by keep out notices" (Halfacree, 1995).

These representations of space are quite different in terms of their relationship with, and potential outcomes for, traditional conservation thinking and action. Through shared ideas of appropriate use and users of rural space, the motivations for defending My Countryside are easily functionalised into and thereby reconciled with a defence of a national and expertly defined vision of The Countryside. By contrast, operating outside the commodified property relationships of My Countryside, the conservation of Our Countryside encourages an exploration of personal and communal significance. In doing so, it legitimates a new source of conservation knowledge and language emerging from the subjectivity of an emotional relationship between people and their environment. Critically, this knowledge lies outside the scope of expertise and, in uncovering a new conservation discourse, such a vision of the countryside provides a means of changing "the stories told about contested spaces" (Keith and Pile, 1993, page 39). In doing so, it establishes the grounds upon which local people have the right and ability to challenge the dominant representations of space represented by traditional notions of The Countryside. As a result, not only might local people and conservation professionals end up talking a radically different and, indeed, incompatible conservation discourse but, in appeals to place, local people uncover a newfound authority by which they can reject an expert vision of conservation.

For conservation organisations, the problem in deploying participatory mechanisms as a means of engaging public support for national environmental objectives and programmes is that they do so against a background of mistrust of authoritative institutions in society and of a more general ambivalence towards the role of expertise (Brook and Rown, 1996; Harrison and Burgess, 1994; Macnaghten and Jacobs, 1997; Macnaghten et al, 1995; Ruth Allen, 1996). By seeking to maintain the hegemony of the expert discourse, the risk is that people are only alienated further. As a result, conservationists are in danger of continuing the 'currency of exclusion' of conservation language rather than creating a link across social differences (Brook and Rown, 1996; Burgess et al, 1993; Macnaghten et al, 1995). Whereas local participation has been envisaged by conservation organisations as a process of consensus-building, the responses of local participants in this study suggest that, on the contrary, it may merely have served to expose a multifarious number of conflictual positions both between national and local objectives as well as within communities over their various private and collective concerns.

Urry (1995) contends that competition over physical space in the countryside, as well as the symbolic token of what constitutes 'the rural', is increasingly complex. I suggest that by legitimating a new conservation discourse participation in conservation initiatives may serve to reveal and expose that complexity further with the interface

between conservation professionals and local people emerging as even more elaborate and fragmented. Although the old notions of rural space may not have disappeared, the ratchet of empowerment *implied* by participatory programmes suggests that, first, conservation organisations can no longer assume that people have trust in a conservation resource produced and accorded value through traditional means and that, second, their vision of The Countryside cannot be easily imposed upon the collective enthusiasms of Our Countryside. In this sense, the deployment of local participation in conservation, based around the relevance of place, may make the maintenance of a national conservation vision of The Countryside, and therefore the legitimacy of conservation organisations and their ideas, more, rather than less, difficult to maintain. As a result, addressing the problem of public support, understanding, and *responsibility* for conservation requires an acknowledgment that conservation issues can only be in part expertly described and that, in defining conservation objectives, "all members of society are beginning to feel their way collectively in an exploratory manner, using the best scientific knowledge available, but neither cocooned nor enslaved by it" (Macnaghten et al, 1995, page 80). This requires institutional mechanisms which encourage a real sense of public inclusion and which also give people a sense that they are able and effective enough to act on local issues if conservation organisations are to overcome public apathy and alienation, to encourage public responsibility, and to define a new set of alliances from which a genuine public interest can be built (see Hinchliffe, 1996; Lowe et al, 1995). As a result, what may be required is greater institutional reflexivity which by embracing the various conservation discourses allows for a reconceptualisation of what both participation *and* conservation are about. Importantly, this implies a shift away from an emphasis on participation as a management tool to achieve a product predetermined by the values of expertise and towards a focus on participation as a process, in which the objectives and actions are not settled in advance but emerge from the act of participation itself.

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