

Looking at landscapes – whose view will do?

A.F.P. Smith

^A CSIRO Sustainable Ecosystems, Pvt Bag 5, PO Wembley, Western Australia 6913

Humans tend to look at landscapes from a human perspective. While this statement is neither surprising nor, arguably, inappropriate, in some situations – such as when we are aiming to conserve biodiversity - it can be decidedly unhelpful. Other biota do not perceive landscapes in the same way as people do. They operate at different scales to us (e.g. ants). They use different sensory systems to us (e.g. bats). And they utilise different resources within the landscape to us (e.g. leeches). These things combine to make many different ways of ‘viewing’ landscapes and valuing them in terms of biodiversity conservation. Humans must learn to look at landscapes through the eyes of other organisms if we are to properly understand, model and design landscapes for biodiversity outcomes.

Work in the agricultural landscapes of Australia reinforces our understanding that different taxa – even from within the same Family of organisms – can have strikingly different needs for persistence in a landscape. Different organisms can respond in completely different ways to the same landscape change, some for better, some for worse. The notion that a landscape can have – or at some time in the past has had – a state that is “best” is fanciful. One must always ask “best for what” for as soon as a change is made to improve the lot of one group or taxon, another will suffer.

Whenever we seek to map, model, ‘design’ or in anyway understand landscapes we need to ask ourselves “whose view will do?”. If our objective is a landscape that is ‘best’ for humans then our task is (relatively) easy. We already think like humans, perceive the landscape like humans and value its components like humans. But if our objective is a landscape that is ‘best’ for non-human biodiversity then our task becomes much more difficult. Which bits of biodiversity do we mean? The plants? If so which ones? The natives or the exotics? The annuals or the perennials? The inbreeders or the outbreeders? Or what about the reptiles? Would that be the arboreal geckos or the perhaps the burrowing skinks? The point is that there is no ‘right’ answer, there is no ‘best’ outcome. We simply must be clear about our landscape objective and then do our best to ‘view’ the landscape with the appropriate – likely multiple – perspective/s.