

Understanding place and agreeing purpose: environmental visualisation and other tools

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Place is a complex concept. We might limit our thinking to a pair of geographic coordinate or we may seek to understand how a place came to be, what processes are happening in it now, or what options exist for its future. To really know a place we should be aware of all these aspects. Some people, based on prior training or life experience, have an ability to 'read' places and immediately understand the geological forces, erosional process, ecological succession, human activities and climatic constraints which together define character and provide opportunities. Others are not so blessed, and yet agreement on purpose depends upon this prior understanding. Therefore, to reach consensus on land management and policy drivers, we require tools which help all stakeholders to understand what makes a place the way it is and what changes are sustainable. This paper presents recent and on-going work in environmental visualisation and other tools such as agent-based modelling and reviews their demonstrated and potential contribution to understanding and agreement. In particular, work which automates the creation of landscape models, links these to environmental process simulators for scenario testing and make these available as collaborative virtual places will be illustrated.