

The Jerusalem Institute for Israel Studies
The Center for Environmental Policy
Established by the Charles H. Revson Foundation

**Open Rural Landscape in Israel's
Central District: Images and Reality**

Larisa Fleishman
Eran Feitelson

2007

The Center for Environmental Policy Studies Series no. 23

**Open Rural Landscape in Israel's Central District:
Images and Reality**

Larisa Fleishman

Eran Feitelson

This research was supported by Nekudat Chen – Rational Land Use
for Agricultural Open Space for the Advancement of Landscape
and Environmental Values in Israel.

This publication was made possible through funding by
the Charles H. Revson Foundation.

The statements made and the views expressed are solely the responsibility
of the author.

© 2007, The Jerusalem Institute for Israel Studies

The Hay Elyachar House
20 Radak St. 92186 Jerusalem

<http://www.jiis.org.il>
E-mail: machon@jiis.org.il

Summary

Most of the open spaces in the central district of Israel are farmland. As a result of institutional and policy changes in the early nineties, heavy pressures to develop are now felt in the agricultural sector. Increasing concern of environmentalists and planners regarding the severe implications of growth has led to the new rationales that are being proposed to legitimize countryside conservation, as seen in new plans and documents (National Master Plan 31, Central District Master Plan 21/3). These rationales focus on averting the loss of rural landscape, which is relevant given the importance of tourism as a significant source of income in rural areas, rather than on the productive capacity of land for its agriculture yields. They employ new planning terminology, and seek to characterize aspects of what is viewed as open space, or 'rural open landscape'.

In order to manage the farmland as rural open landscape, there is a necessity to clarify its operative content. It is also worthy to characterize this concept as perceived by an outside observer. Rural tourism has been identified as a vehicle for safeguarding the integrity of the countryside as a resource, enhancing the rural economy and maintaining rural ways of life (Robert and Hall, 2001; Garrod et al., 2006). Since rural tourism is one of the principal occupations among non-agricultural enterprises in the countryside, it is important to explore what it is that people look for in rural tourism, and what the opposing development patterns are.

The purpose of this study is to identify and to characterize the essence and the content of the concept 'open rural landscape' as it is perceived by various segments of the population, and also to analyze the demand for recreational activity in the countryside of the central district.

From the subject population of the study, which consisted of Israeli residents, including planners, we extracted several samples: administrative staff and students of the Hebrew University (including students with professional, geographical or agricultural background), and planners (members of the Israeli Association of Planners). The analysis was conducted by means of three surveys, of different types. The first was a mail survey of the administrative staff, conducted in August and in September 2004 (116 effective questionnaires); the second was an on-site survey of students, which was conducted in December and in January 2004/2005

(184 effective questionnaires); the third was an internet survey of the planners conducted in November 2005 (56 effective questionnaires). The main research tool was a visual one: a set of pictures portraying different types of rural landscapes in the central district, including buildings designated for both agricultural and non-agricultural purposes. These pictures were the focal point of the questionnaires.

Main findings

The study reveals that respondents from all the groups questioned have considerable interest in the countryside, especially in the following realms: insight into the concept of 'open rural landscape', awareness of the importance of preserving the rural atmosphere in the countryside, and interest in rural tourism, particularly in potential recreation opportunities at farms.

a) The degree of correlation of different countryside components to the image of the 'open rural landscape'

On the one hand, there is a general consensus on the design components of rural area (such as dairy farming or season hothouses as the proper elements of rural landscape). On the other hand, some differences in the perceptions of different groups of respondents are revealed. In particular, the planners are more judgmental in their landscapes' evaluation: by contrast to other respondents, the planners consider the farm constructions as a part of rural landscape only when they are attached to countryside settlements. The findings show that respondents' perception of different elements of the landscape depends not only on the character and purpose of these elements, but also on their location within the spatial layout of other components and landscapes.

b) Countryside as an 'open rural landscape' vs. the 'area of recreational opportunities'

The study revealed some dissimilarities between the visual image of 'open rural landscape' (from the viewpoint of an observer) and its perception as an area of recreational usage (from the viewpoint of a tourist). For example, different farm

buildings (such as hothouses) which were perceived as supporting the rural image of countryside are not necessarily perceived as elements supporting rural tourism. By contrast, the buildings dealing with the processing of agriculture products fit both the image of rural landscape and, mainly, the recreational opportunities within the countryside.

c) Demand for recreation activity in the countryside

The findings revealed considerable interest by the respondents in recreational activity within the countryside, such as hiking, dune buggy and jeep trips, and especially activities connected to visiting farms.

A substantial gap between the potential and real demand was found. The main reason for this gap is the shortage of available activities, means, infrastructure and attractive areas in the countryside.

Main conclusions and recommendations

1. In the light of the general consensus on the defining components of rural area as revealed in this study, our findings can be used as a basis for the planners' decision-making regarding the design of the countryside.
2. Considering the differences in respondents' perceptions of the rural landscape image, mainly professional vs. non-professional opinions, it is advisable to include the public in the planning process.
3. Concerning the zoning method to be used in the protected areas, it would be advisable to base the zoning of the countryside on the major purposes of its protection distinguishing between areas of rural landscape for the protection of visual aspects, and areas for rural tourist development, which would emphasize protection for recreational opportunities.
4. Our findings may be used by farmers as reason to desist promoting new commercial projects on non-agricultural land within the rural areas, and to re-think the concept of their farms as a kind of “capital asset” of the rural tourism industry.

5. The findings on the latent demand for recreational activity in the countryside can be used for planning purposes. Namely, it seems to be worthwhile to develop those types of recreational activities in the countryside that may be destructive within ecologically sensitive natural areas, but would be practically harmless within rural areas.

This study can be viewed as the first attempt to clarify the operative content of the new rationale to protect farmlands as open spaces ('open rural landscape'), as it is perceived by different interest groups. The findings of the current study show preliminary signs of a real opportunity to benefits all elements interested in this sphere — those interested in the sustainable development of the countryside, and its protection from over-development, and the agriculturalists, who may find new sources of income from an awareness of the possibilities for tourism and recreation within their surroundings.