Learning Objectives

Upon completion of this unit, students should be able to:

1. Examine how environment shapes people and how people shape environments.
2. Determine the relationship between place-making, culture, and power relations.
3. Compare cultural identities and status categories and how they influence the understanding and shaping of landscapes.
4. Describe the process known as semiotics and how it signifies important information about landscapes.
5. Assess the difference between modernity and postmodernity, and describe how globalization has occurred in parallel.

Written Lecture

Landscapes

When you hear the word, landscape, you probably have visions of mountains, waterfalls, or maybe even neatly manicured trees and shrubbery. In other words, physical elements of landforms are usually visualized. But there are other landscapes – cultural landscapes, political landscapes, urban landscapes, living landscapes, desert landscapes, islands and coastal landscapes, tropical rainforests, and agricultural landscapes.

This unit focuses on landscapes as one of the ways people perceive their environment. Landscapes comprise the visible features of an area of land. The character and quality of a landscape helps to define the image of a region and its sense of place that distinguishes it from other regions.

According to Knox and Marston (2012), “landscape can be coded through elements like design, use of space, light, and topography, with a profound impact on the viewer” (p. 185). The power of landscape is an interesting phenomenon within the subject of sociology; it creates perceptions, values, and behaviors within people as individuals work to understand landscapes, create landscapes around themselves, and operate within them as well.

The term “cultural landscape” is used to mean a way of looking at landscapes because all landscapes have been affected in some way by human action or perception. According to the California Department of Parks and Recreation (2012a), the term represents human use and modification of various natural resources over time through such means as “agricultural, mining, ranching and settlement activities, or traditional Native American cultural practices” (para. 1).

The national parks of the United States hold a variety of cultural landscapes within their locations. One of the most dramatic examples is Bodie State Historic Park, located east of the Sierra Nevada mountain range and slightly Northeast
from the San Francisco metro area (on the Nevada border). Consider this excerpt as it paints the picture of a historic cultural landscape:

The wide range of historic properties located within its boundaries portrays western mining history of the late 1800s and early 1900s. At the core of the landscape is the town site itself, now only a relatively small collection of vernacular buildings and structures preserved in a state of "arrested decay." But the town tells only a part of the story. It is in the surrounding high-desert terrain where we find the physical remains of nearly 100 years of mining extraction and processing activities – mineshafts, road traces, mill sites, tunnels, tailings, ponds, and artifacts scattered. (California Department of Parks and Recreation, 2012b, para. 2).

Probably, one of the best known cultural landscapes throughout the world is Mount Rushmore. It is the internationally recognized symbol representing the ideals of freedom and democracy for all. It is visited by nearly three million people each year. They come to marvel at this spectacular engineering achievement, as well as the majestic beauty of the Black Hills of South Dakota. This brings visitors face to face with the rich heritage we all share.

Australia has some of the world's most characteristic and varied natural environments, including unique wildlife, and spectacular landscapes. Their many national parks and World Heritage Areas capture the essence of their country. It is home to the world's oldest living culture - the Indigenous people of Australia. Internationally, these assets make Australia a desirable visitor destination.

Although not one of the largest states in the country, nearly every part of New York is blessed with an abundance of unique and beautiful scenic natural wonders. No matter where you are in New York, there are inspiring features of geologic interest. For example, Niagara Falls is one of the greatest natural wonders in the world. It straddles the international border between Canada and New York, and the flow of water over Niagara is roughly 1.5 million gallons per half second.

**Effects of globalization on cultural landscapes**

This unit also emphasizes the effects of globalization on cultural landscapes. Globalization is a process in which the interconnectedness of the world is speeding up, deepening, and becoming broader as the technology and knowledge to support it grows. This interconnectedness occurs within all aspects of life, not just within the financial or business world. This process is a combination of economic, technological, socio-cultural, and political forces. It is a movement of people, goods, capital, and ideas due to increased economic integration.

Globalization has completely changed the way in which the world operates. It shows how the paradigm is shifting with the new opportunities and challenges created by new technologies. The barriers that once hindered our ability to communicate and interact with people across the world have diminished.

Globalization has presented itself in many different forms. It has affected nearly everyone on the planet. But, its benefits of globalization are not always shared by all. Change is a characteristic of landscape, but the transformation connected to globalization establishes a loss of significance regarding local culture.
One of the most controversial aspects of globalization is the worldwide spread and dominance of American culture. Just as goods from the United States flooded world markets in the post-World War II era, the U.S. culture is now visible in every continent. Not only has the U.S. culture spread through the impressive growth of mass communications such as music, television, films, and the Internet, but the penetration of American corporations into foreign countries as well. For example, no matter where you are in the world, you can find Starbucks, McDonalds, and Coca-Cola products. Leaders from many countries have expressed concern that the “American Hegemony” may lead to the destruction of their own culture, economy, and religious traditions.

Even though developing countries need the potential benefits of globalization the most, they are often the losers. They experience what some see as the dark side of globalization – the strong relationship between poverty or social justice and globalization. It introduces a lower quality in everyday life and weakens the landscape diversity.

References


Learning Activities (Non-Graded)

Reflective Question

Interpreting Places and Landscapes

Think of all the places that you have visited or lived. Pick three places that hold special meaning for you. Explain why the place evokes a sense of emotion, pride, or special feelings. What is the coded meaning of each place in relationship to you as an individual?

Your response should be approximately 250 words. Please keep in mind that learning activities are designed to expand your knowledge about the course.

This is a non-graded activity, so you do not have to submit it.