

“These are not trees, these are weeds”: representations of plantation forestry within a contested rural landscape

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Introduction

Public acceptance is necessary for a land use to persist. One factor implicated in judgments of acceptability is the meanings attributed to a place and expectations for activities within that place. While the link between contested place meaning and land use conflict is well recognized, the way place meaning contributes to evaluations of acceptability is not as well understood.

In Australia, change in rural land use from traditional agriculture to large scale plantation forestry has at times been contentious. Previous research indicates a range of beliefs about the likely economic, environmental and social impacts of plantation forestry. Why there is such a range of beliefs however is not clear. Drawing on environmental and social psychological concepts of place and social representation theory this paper investigates how diverse representations of commercial scale plantation forestry relate to place meanings in Tasmania, Australia.

Methods

Thirty-one structured interviews were conducted with rural and urban residents of north-west Tasmania to identify meanings attributed to rural landscapes and representations of plantation forestry. A purposive sampling strategy was adopted to recruit participants likely to hold divergent views on plantation forestry. Photo-based Q-methodology was used to identify shared views or internal representations of rural landscapes. Participants ranked thirty-five photographs according to how well the scene reflected their idea of an ideal rural landscape. Participants were also asked their views on the role of plantation forestry within those landscapes.

Results and discussion

Q-sort analysis identified four main groupings of shared meanings attributed to rural landscapes. Rural landscapes were variously perceived as: a multifunctional space; a space for agricultural production; a productive space defined by evaluations of stewardship; and as a space requiring balance between production and the protection of biodiversity and ecosystem structures.

Thematic analysis identified four representations of plantation forestry. Plantation forestry was differentially represented in terms of social, environmental and economic risk and benefit, as well as representations in terms of legitimacy and process. Representations of plantation forestry varied between place meaning groups. Participants attributing multifunctional meanings to rural landscapes tended to represent plantation forestry as posing unacceptable risk, whereas those valuing stewardship represented plantations as more benign. Within the productive group plantation forestry was represented as both risk and as offering some benefits to farmers.

These results suggest meanings attributed to place provides a social context in which new or unfamiliar land uses such as plantation forestry are interpreted, evaluated and ultimately represented. Such a finding indicates one way different place meanings may be implicated and actively involved in evaluations of public acceptance of a resource use. A postal questionnaire is being developed to further investigate the relationship between place meanings and representations of plantation forestry.