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Taskscapes of Rural Estonia: Examples from four Peripheral Regions

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Abstract

On the basis of case studies in four peripheral regions and inspired by Ingold's concept of the taskscape, the paper describes the changing taskscapes of rural Estonia in a time of post-productivism and consumption-oriented spatial practices. As agricultural affordances become increasingly obsolete, hitherto concealed natural and cultural affordances are now being realized in order to deal with the problem of rural peripheralization and offer new experiences on the fields of recreation, rural tourism and local traditional culture.

Key words

Taskscapes, Estonia, peripheral areas, local culture, rural tourism, post-productivism.

Introduction

As other rural areas today, Estonian rural areas are facing processes of peripheralization resulting from the gradual decline in the importance of agricultural production. Building on Ingold's (2000) concept of taskscapes defined as dwelling activities that (trans)form local landscapes, the aim of this paper is to provide an overview of the focus shift in Estonian rural taskscapes – from

Old farm houses in the landscapes of Saaremaa (photo H. Sooväli-Sepping).

agricultural activities to tourism and recreation. The article is based on field research conducted by the authors in the Western Estonian island of Saaremaa (Sooväli 2004) and the historical region of Setomaa in Southeastern Estonia (Plüschke-Altof 2018), and supported by secondary literature from Kihnu Island (Grootens 2018, Kuutma 2007) and Võru County (Bardone et al. 2003, Võsu and Kaaristo 2009). With the help of vignettes from these four peripheral regions (figure 1), we will show strategies of rural areas dealing with the so-called post-productivist change by relying on either cultural or natural affordances of the landscape.

Figure 1. Case Study Map. Compiled by M. Vainu (p. 84).

The Temporality of Rural Landscapes: Concepts of Affordances and Taskscapes

In his paper on *"The Temporality of the Landscape"* Ingold (1993) famously pointed to the temporal qualities of landscapes, which are always in becoming (Fairclough 2017, Hicks 2016). In an array of related tasks, defined by Ingold as constitutive acts of dwelling or "practical operations, carried out by a skilled agent in an environment" (Sooväli et al. 2005), people are actively creating taskscapes. These are reflected in the landscape that is never complete, "neither built nor unbuilt" but perpetually "under construction" (Ingold 2000, 199). Taskscapes can thus be understood as an entire ensemble of related activities, which are (trans)forming a landscape that is:

"constituted as an enduring record of ... the lives and works of past generations who have dwelt within it, and in doing so, have left something of themselves [...] – the congealed form of the taskscape" (Hicks 2016, 8).

The relationship between landscapes and taskscapes is mutual. On one hand, taskscapes are changing the landscape. On the other, actual tasks carried out by locals are also highly dependent on the affordances of the landscape. In the context of this paper, affordances can be described as the properties of the landscape that define its possible use. In other terms we can speak of "spatial potentialities" that are enabling or disabling certain activities in the landscape (Võsu and Kaaristo 2009, 76). This means that affordances are dependent on the physical properties of the landscape. But at the same time they are also "relative to someone's perception" (Võsu and Kaaristo 2009, 77). This means that only selected properties are actually made use of in the everyday practices of the individuals living and working in the landscape.

In the rural areas studied here, landscape affordances providing agricultural activities are increasingly replaced by affordances related to place consumption and commodification. This shift has also come to be known as the "post-productivism era" where rural land use is gradually shifting from a focus on agricultural production to a diversification of rural economic activities (Mather et al. 2006, 442). Due to this shift, agricultural affordances are becoming to some extent obsolete in European including Estonian rural areas while at the same time new hitherto "concealed affordances" (Võsu and Kaaristo 2009, 78) are gaining relevance. In the long term this also alters the taskscape, which only exists so long as people are actually engaged in the specific activities of dwelling (Ingold 2000). The changing rural taskscapes show that the use of affordances provided by the material and mental landscapes is deeply embedded in the social, cultural, political histories and contemporarities of a specific region (Palang and Fry 2003, cited in Sooväli et al. 2005). This means that the actual use of affordances can change when the socio-cultural situation changes – a temporality which according to Ingold (1993) is an immanent quality of the landscape (Hicks 2016).

Changing Rural Taskscapes: The Era of Post-Productivism

Rural taskscapes have been subject to a tremendous change brought about by this focus shift from agricultural production, which

is increasingly subject to automatization, towards activities that are more consumption-oriented like tourism and recreation (Fischer-Tahir and Naumann 2013, Mather et al. 2006). In Central-Eastern European rural space in general (Kay et al. 2012) and Estonia in particular, this shift has been deepened by the post-socialist restructuring of the rural economy (Annist 2016/17). With the regaining of Estonia's independence in 1991, the former Soviet system of state and collective farms (*sovkhoses* and *kolkhozes*) was quickly dissolved, planned economy replaced by market economy and the Estonian market opened to Western producers (*ibid.*). This resulted in a rapid drop in levels of agricultural production and the proportion of population involved in it (see table 1), triggering a down-ward spiral of rural unemployment and impoverishment.

Table 1. Employment in Agriculture (in 5-year intervals). Source: Statistics Estonia, Database TT207 (all economic sectors combined = 100%) (p. 85).

On one hand, this decrease in agricultural activities has resulted in the ongoing peripheralization of Estonian rural areas. As the latest population census (2011) has shown, the population density in rural areas is decreasing while at the same time urban areas are gaining residents (see table 2). Often this outward-migration does not stop in Estonia, but continues abroad (Annist 2016/17).

Table 2. Population Density in Urban and Rural Areas in Estonia. Source: Statistics Estonia, Population Census 2011 (p. 85).

On the other hand, the loss of agricultural importance has also encouraged a diversification of rural economies to include the fields of recreation, rural tourism and local traditional culture. These have gained importance in many rural development strategies (Annist 2013, Bardone et al. 2013, Võsu and Kaaristo 2009), even more so since Estonia joined the European Union in 2004 and thereby became part of its regional development program. As a result, the number of rural inhabitants in Estonia relying on the income from tourism rose gradually during the second half of the 1990s and the beginning of 2000s (Bardone et al. 2013). Prominent developments are the growing importance of rural place branding incl. regional product labelling (Kašková and Chromý 2014, Kalle et al. 2015) or the commodification of rural life experiences and local traditional culture, as for example in tourist farms (Annist 2013, Bardone et al. 2013, Võsu and Kaaristo 2009). Hence, in order to

accommodate for the decrease in agricultural production, Estonian rural areas have started to use the natural and cultural affordances provided by the landscape. Bardone et al. (2013, 205) have described these changing rural taskscapes as follows:

"The contemporary multifunctional countryside has become the site of diverse tourist attractions and leisure activities, where both natural and cultural elements – landscapes, buildings, traditions and people – acquire new features in the context of commodification" (Bardone et al. 2013, 205, own emphasis).

The following vignettes of rural taskscapes in Estonia show that the four peripheral regions introduced here deal with these changes by using local affordances beyond agriculture. The Island of Saaremaa in Western Estonia and Võru County in Southern-Estonia have been focusing more on natural affordances, especially the scenic landscapes (Bardone et al. 2013, Sooväli 2004, Sooväli et al. 2005, Võsu and Kaaristo 2009). Kihnu Island in Southwestern and the historical region of Setomaa in Southeastern Estonia however have become prominent examples for the use of cultural affordances such as folklore and traditional singing that have been listed by UNESCO in the Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage (Annist 2013, Grootens 2018, Kuutma 2007, Plüschke-Altöf 2018). In creating these new taskscapes, all regions have been drawing on hitherto concealed affordances of their material and mental landscapes. But they also benefit from the shifting meaning of rurality, which has come to be associated with more than 'just' agricultural production or a (normative) lack of urban properties (Cloke 2006, for the case of Estonia, see: Plüschke-Altöf 2016), but also with:

"certain lifestyle values, privacy, peace and silence (contrasted with urban noise), the beauty and purity of the natural environment (as opposed to artificial, urban environments) and with heritage (both cultural and natural)" (Cloke 2006, cited in Võsu and Kaaristo 2009, 75).

Making Use of Cultural Affordances: The Cases of Kihnu and Setomaa

As in every taskscape, also in Kihnu and Setomaa there is "a range of affordances potentially available" (Võsu and Kaaristo 2009, 78). Among them are properties related to the local nature, agriculture and fishery and handicraft (Grootens 2018, Sooväli et al. 2005). Recently however, activities related

to folklore and cultural heritage have come to shape the taskscapes of these two regions incl. institutional frameworks based on networking, lobbying, publicity and image-making that were built in order to effectively use local cultural affordances (Annist 2013, Grootens 2018, Plüschke-Altöf 2018).

These newly formed cultural taskscapes are deeply embedded in the local landscapes. Both, the land-scape of Kihnu as an island and of Setomaa at the Southeast-Estonian border, are defined by a spatial peripherality that has to a certain extent enabled the preservation of traditional culture such as folk costumes, singing and dancing traditions, historic farm architecture or religious rituals "which have mostly been preserved exactly *because* of their spatially peripheral position" (Grootens 2018, 210 (own emphasis), Sooväli et al. 2005). Moreover, historically both landscapes were characterized by socio-economic hardship and a hindered agricultural development (also due to low fertility of soil), leaving them among the poorest regions in the country (Annist 2013, Sooväli et al. 2005, Valk and Särg 2015). These historical conditions as well as the post-productivist changes today have led to a situation where agricultural properties become more obsolete. They have now gradually been replaced by cultural affordances, which built on the regions' mental landscapes such as Kihnu's matriarchic society, or the Christian Orthodox religion and specific dialect of Seto people (Rüütel et al. 2013, Valk and Särg 2015). Both regions have learned to use these particularities that historically placed them as *others* to the Estonian Self to their advantage, which culminated in UNESCO's acknowledgement of Kihnu's cultural space and of the ancient polyphonic singing tradition of Seto women called *Leo* (figure 2).

Figure 2. Women from Setomaa singing in traditional folk costumes. Photo T. Talpsep (p. 87).

But these new taskscapes have not only made use of the landscape properties. They have in turn also shaped the current landscape through investments in the touristic infrastructure such as observation towers or signposting (for example Setomaa's cultural-touristic road "*Külavüü*"), annual events such as Kihnu Sea Festival (figure 3) and the Seto Kingdom Day, or the presence of new culture-based entrepreneurial spaces as for example handicraft stores or cafés offering local cuisine (Grootens 2018, Raagmaa et al. 2012). Finally, these changes have also resulted in culturally interested people coming (or returning) to the regions due to the new

taskscape. Especially Setomaa has become a destination for people who "romanticise the Seto culture, go to Seto language courses and try to live in harmony with the Seto customs" (Sooväli et al. 2005). Thereby they have also put new life into old farm houses that were left empty after the post-socialist outward-migration.

Figure 3. Women from Kihnu singing in traditional folk costumes. Photo T. Talpsep (p. 88).

By making changes to the landscape, the new taskscape based on local culture might however also limit other activities. This can lead to a situation of a cultural hegemony (Annist 2013) creating a kind of living museum (Kuutma 2007) that in the end inhibits the use of other affordances – may they be fishery, agriculturally, or otherwise based (Plüschke-Altof 2018). And this inevitably raises the issue of unevenly distributed benefits of a culturally dominated taskscape. Nevertheless, the cases of Kihnu and Setomaa show that turning to cultural activities might offer new opportunities to (at least partly) overcome the rural peripheralization processes caused by the post-productivist shift in rural economy.

Making Use of Natural Affordances: The Cases of Võru and Saaremaa

While also offering both, cultural and natural affordances, the post-productivist reshaping of the rural landscapes in Võru and Saaremaa mainly draws on the latter. Both regions are known for their scenic landscapes. Whereas for the Island of Saaremaa the "idyllic intimate landscape with juniper shrubs, windmills and pastures" is characteristic (Sooväli et al. 2005), tourists visiting Võrumaa appreciate the southern Estonian landscape, which differs from the rest of Estonia "because of its many forests, lakes and hilly countryside" (Võsu and Kaaristo 2009, 80). Also these both regions were heavily affected by the post-productivist changes since the 1990s. To substitute for the shrinking importance of agricultural production, local people and tourist entrepreneurs turned to the natural affordances of the local landscape.

In Saaremaa these have become realized in popular Spa and yacht tourism and the island's prominence as a summerhouse destination for people from Finland and Northern Estonia (Sooväli 2004). In Võru County, farm tourism has come to play a crucial role, which uses natural properties for recreational activities such as canoeing, cycling, snowshoeing, horseback riding, sleigh rides, fishing, hunt-

ing, and guided hikes (Võsu and Kaaristo 2009, Bardone et al. 2012). Another central affordance of the rural landscape is the experience of silence (Võsu and Kaaristo 2009). Next to these recreational possibilities, the changing taskscapes also make use of local natural products. Most commonly can this be observed on the field of regional food culture such as juniper cheese, syrup or vodka in Saaremaa and sauna-smoked meat and fish in Võrumaa (Kalle et al. 2015, Sooväli 2004, Võsu and Kaaristo 2009). But also the gathering of medicinal herbs during hikes is a natural affordance offered to tourists in Võru County (Võsu and Kaaristo 2009).

In both regions, the changes in the rural taskscape have had impact on the respective landscapes. Examples can be found in the (re) building of tourism farms (from old production farms), spa resorts and summerhouses (figures 4, 5), the construction of hiking trails or the exploitation of natural resources such as juniper for the commodification of regional food products. In Võrumaa, the use of natural properties has been connected to the local culture that was "(re)discovered both by tourists and the locals themselves" (Võsu and Kaaristo 2009, 80). Tourism farmers, for instance, offer experiences in customary crafts such as blacksmithing or local traditions such as the popular smoke-sauna (Võsu and Kaaristo 2009, Võsu and Sooväli-Seping 2012). In Saaremaa however, local customs were "often not seen important to be taken into account" by tourism developers and new summer house owners, particularly in the time of "poorly organized mass tourism" in the 1990s with negative impact on the natural and cultural landscape (Sooväli et al. 2005).

Figure 4. Old farm houses in the landscapes of Saaremaa. Photo H. Sooväli-Seping (p. 89).

Figure 5. Old farm houses in the landscapes of Võrumaa. Photo H. Sooväli-Seping (p. 90).

By changing the local landscape, also the reliance on natural affordances raises important questions. On one hand, there is the question of 'how much is too much' nature-based tourism, as affordances provided by the natural environment are only enjoyable as long as the environment stays intact. As one of the local tourism farmers in Võrumaa puts it: "if we were to build god knows what sort of big hotels here, then people might discover that it's not a place they wanted to visit anymore" (local informant, cited in Võsu and Kaaristo 2009, 75). The same goes for the commod-

ification of locally embedded traditions such as the smoke-sauna (Võsu and Sooväli-Seping 2012). On the other hand, there is the question 'for whom' these affordances are being actualized as Lowenthal (2007, 646) described the risk of creating "rural theme parks for urban middle classes". At the same time, the cases of Saaremaa and Võru County convey that the changed rural taskscape based on natural properties provides possibilities for dealing with rural peripheralization in the time of post-productivism. Beyond that, rural tourism might also help to rediscover local natural landscapes that would otherwise become desolate.

Conclusion

On the case of four peripheral regions in Estonia, the paper has illustrated how rural inhabitants and entrepreneurs use local affordances in order to shape new taskscapes. Faced with a situation of fading importance of agricultural production, which was predominantly shaping rural landscapes until the regaining of Estonian independence in the 1990s, they have turned to the commodification of cultural heritage and rural tourism. Influenced by the global trend of post-productivist and consumption-oriented practices in rural areas, they make use of the cultural and natural potentialities of the local landscape.

Drawing on examples from Setomaa and Võrumaa in Southern Estonian as well as the Islands of Kihnu and Saaremaa in Western Estonia, the paper conveyed how these new dwelling activities are shaped by hitherto concealed affordances of the local landscape that are coming to use in a time when agricultural properties are becoming more obsolete. While being embedded in the landscapes and their affordances, these changes in the rural taskscape also alters the landscape itself for example through the construction of touristic infrastructures.

On one hand, making use of 'new' affordances of the landscapes offers opportunities for dealing with the problem of rural peripheralization caused by the decreasing importance of agriculture. On the other, the used properties of the landscape are necessarily selective, drawing on different "significant elements of rurality" (Bardone et al. 2012, 222). They thereby create taskscapes, which are either dominated by cultural or natural affordances. Such a domination could lead to a situation in which the use of some affordances is disabled (or at least limited) while others are overexploited. And this results in challenges to the 'authenticity' of the cultural heritage or 'purity' of the nature experience. Despite these challenges, all four cases show the multi-layered potentialities of Estonian rural landscapes that can serve as a beacon of hope in times of increasing rural peripheralization.

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