

'Companion Stones' –

research question – what place does art have in national park landscapes?

This research investigates the role of art in national park contexts by:

- **Defining what public art is**, especially its potential to be a contentious part of the ‘cultural landscape’
- Providing an overview of **how public art is managed** across UK national parks, by surveying existing **policy** and the **provision** of different arts projects
- Presenting a **case study** of one recent project - ‘Companion Stones’ - in the Peak District National Park.

The case study **methodology** includes:

- **interviews** with cultural heritage professionals (Ken Smith – PDNPA), artists (Charles Monkhouse)
- **on-site surveys of national parks users** (25 surveys so far, conducted with individuals, pairs and small groups of visitors to 4 different Companion Stones sites)
- analysis of **commentary and publications** (for example emails to the artist, reviews)

Findings inform parks policy and arts practitioners by providing an example of how one art project has been produced and perceived. This may strengthen strategies for creating works which achieve the national parks aim of ‘Promot[ing] public understanding and enjoyment of their special qualities’.

public art

“The spectrum of artistic practice represented by the term ‘public art’ encompasses art commissioned as a response to the notion of place, art commissioned as part of the designed environment and process-based artistic practice that does not rely on the production of an art object. When searching for a definition, it is helpful to regard public art as the process of artists responding to the public realm.” (Ixia, 2012).

The perception of public art is something which draws into the spotlight the very purpose of it. It is a way of defining place, of sparking debate and at its best displays creativity, collaboration and inclusion of the best kind: “One of the things that we do in arts development is you’re constantly trying to get across that this isn’t just sort of an entertainment thing, it’s not just on the periphery, we are trying to get to the heart of developing society and this is one way of doing it” (p346, Pollock, Paddison, 2010).

Often designed to provoke and cause debate, a piece of art can never really please everyone, which in many cases is deliberate. Another issue is that art can feel unapproachable from the perspective of someone who knows nothing about it: “In trying to embed the work socially, an additional problem is that the public may perceive art as elitist or feel that they lack an awareness or understanding that would enable them to engage with the artwork” (p352, Pollock, Paddison, 2010).

In short, public art has the potential to encourage belonging (to community and to place), but it also has the potential to prompt opposition.

landscape perception

How is the landscape perceived? Can artworks and cultural projects develop/ create opportunities for increased and more accessible points of contact for this perception to occur?

The landscape we live and go walking in is rich with artefacts of previous times, these help us to interpret the landscape in the way that other people may have used the land before us: “The quality of the English countryside has helped shape the English character just as that same countryside has shaped much of England’s art.” (p84, Lowenthal, Binney, 1981).

It is quite common for the landscape to be perceived as being ‘natural’ something far removed from the messy actions of humans and traces of contemporary technology. In the majority of cases, this could not be further from the truth: “Rural scenes are popularly labelled natural when a small amount of reflection on the matter would quickly reveal that they are to a large extent the result of man’s activities” (p10, Bourassa, 1991).

In short, art is one means of interpreting the cultural landscape and increasing our understanding of its rich history.



Britain’s National Parks webpage, the Companion Stones publication



“art is really one way, it’s just a form of communication between people, that’s all”

(Monkhouse, 2012)

national park policy

All National Parks in the UK are governed first and foremost by the Environment Act of 1995:

“conserve and enhance the natural beauty, wildlife and cultural heritage; and promote opportunities for the understanding and enjoyment of the special qualities of National Parks by the public.”

(National Parks, Britain’s Breathing Spaces, 2012)

It’s under these guiding principles that National Parks must form policy and strategies to manage the land. Part of creating ‘opportunities for the understanding and enjoyment’ of a National Park is about interpretation; something which artworks could contribute to.

However, provision of arts policy (whether that is a dedicated policy or even a brief mention) is something which is seriously lacking. Through analysis of publications made by the National Parks Authorities, there is evidence to suggest that out of 15 British National Parks, only one (Dartmoor) has a specific policy and strategy outline for the arts. They suggest in their ‘Looking after cultural heritage’ document that they are keen to “support, promote and enhance” (2012) creative endeavour. However, this policy remains fairly cautious and even non-committal, stating firmly that the Parks Authority is “not primarily an arts organisation”.

Several of the other Parks have produced ‘Interpretation’ or ‘Cultural Heritage’ policy documents; which touch on the arts as an area of interest. These include the Peak District, Brecon Beacons, New Forest and North York Moors National Parks. The policy documents touch broadly on how a park might use “innovative interpretation” (New Forest National Park Management Plan, 2012), including how sculpture might be used to “Provoke, Relate, Reveal” (Brecon Beacons ‘Our Strategies’, 2012) new understanding and enjoyment of the landscape. North York moors mentions directly “Sculpture” and “Art” (‘What We Do’, 2012), but only briefly as part of a bullet pointed interpretation scheme.

Despite this apparent lack of formal support and engagement within the arts, National Parks (regardless of policy) remain inspiring and creatively rich landscapes. Many interesting creative ventures are evident within National Parks, among them ‘8 stones, 8 artists’ in the Brecon Beacons, ‘Where Long Shadows Fall’ in Caimgorms and of course ‘Companion Stones’ in the Peak District (which will be covered in a more detailed case study).

companion stones – a case study

“towards the future”

(Companion Stones publication, 2010)



Longshaw Park Companion Stone



White Edge Companion Stone - in its ‘wilderness’ location



Poetry and weathering on the Ball Cross Companion Stone near Chatsworth



Visitor inspecting Ball Cross Companion Stone

Companion Stones (2010), curated by Charles Monkhouse as part of ‘Arts in the Peak’, is an arts project in association with the Peak District National Park Authority. This series of twelve stone sculptures, designed by eighteen Peak District artists and poets are situated as companions to the Peak District’s historic guide stoops.

Derbyshire’s guide stoops are part of the Peaks rich cultural heritage; these gritstone artefacts are found on historic rights of way, carved with the names and distances of the nearest market towns; an early form of sign post, providing direction for travellers across the wilderness of the moors.

Funding for the project came from a number of different stakeholders: Arts Council England, Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, Duke of Devonshire’s Charitable Trust, National Trust, Moors for the Future Partnership, Heritage Stoneworks, Stancliffe Stone, Birchover Quarry and private individuals, were all involved in helping the design and implementation of these pieces come to fruition, at a total cost of £43,325. It is this sense of collaboration which lends a sense of gravity to the project; it was always about so much more than the physical aspect of twelve stone sculptures.

Carved from sandstone by local stonemasons at Heritage Stoneworks and sculptor Amanda Wray, each stone is carved with site specific poetry.

A publication for the project was created with help from the National Trust, this consisted of a folded paper leaflet containing information about each of the stones, a full copy of the poems, images of each stone and a map displaying stone and stoop locations.