

The MEDSCAPES Initiative

Landscape Character Assessment as a tool for the Conservation of Natural Values in the Eastern Mediterranean

Landscapes result from the way different components of our environment – both natural and cultural – interact together and are perceived and understood by people (European Landscape Convention)

Project Description and Aims

MedScapes is a project that aims at the scientific recording and mapping of landscapes in the eastern Mediterranean. Its target is to contribute towards a comprehensive mapping of landscapes conducting a systematic and integrated use of spatial data available, by all stakeholders in the participating countries, contributing towards the protection and sustainable development of the various landscapes of the region. The outcomes of the project would be useful both for research and decision-making, while the overarching goal is to develop a method that will act as an advisory tool for drawing sustainable development strategies in the participating countries and beyond.

The MedScapes project is a two-year collaboration between Cyprus, Greece, Jordan and the Lebanon. A total of four universities and four non-governmental organisations (NGOs), one each from the above countries participate in the project, led by the *Laona Foundation for the Conservation and Regeneration of the Cypriot Countryside*. The Cyprus Department of Town Planning and Housing, responsible for the coordination of the implementation of the European Landscape Convention in Cyprus, is an associate partner of the project. MedScapes is funded by the European Neighbourhood and Partnership instrument (ENPI)¹ for initiatives between EU and other Mediterranean countries.

By developing landscape maps as a tool, the project aims to provide support to decision-makers responsible for land use and regional planning in the four participating countries, while raising awareness about the character of local landscapes and the natural environments they support.



¹ The 2007-2013 ENPI CBC Mediterranean Sea Basin Programme is a multilateral Cross-Border Cooperation initiative funded by the European Neighbourhood and Partnership instrument (ENPI). The Programme objective is to promote the sustainable and harmonious cooperation process at the Mediterranean Basin level by dealing with the common challenges and enhancing its endogenous potential. It finances cooperation projects as a contribution to the economic, social, environmental and cultural development of the Mediterranean region. The following 14 countries participate in the Programme: Cyprus, Egypt, France, Greece, Israel, Italy, Jordan, Lebanon, Malta, Palestine, Portugal, Spain, Syria (participation currently suspended) and Tunisia. The Joint Managing Authority (JMA) is the Autonomous Region of Sardinia (Italy). Official Programme languages are Arabic, English and French (www.enpicbmed.eu). Total budget is €1.1M (with 90% EU contribution).

Given that the eastern Mediterranean landscapes have special characteristics shared by the countries of the region, the project aims to produce a common methodology for mapping and assessing landscapes which can be used by decision makers and taught in universities. Mapping will include the cultural, ecological, geological, spatial and other elements of the landscape. In this way, a holistic understanding of the dynamics at play in different areas of a country or region will be provided, so as to better appreciate and manage the ever-evolving nature of landscapes. This knowledge will allow new methods to be developed to identify, assess and preserve essential core aspects of landscape character. Moreover, various elements of the project, such as the publication of a best practice methodology, the elaboration of a community participative process and a risk assessment tool, the establishment of a Landscape Observatory and the production of educational material, will help develop and enrich the concept of landscape and its role in the eastern Mediterranean. A significant part of this process is that MedScapes will involve local people and other stakeholders in influencing the evolution of the landscapes in which they live.



Milestones in Project Implementation

The first meeting of the project was held in March 2014 in Limassol, Cyprus, bringing together in collaboration the four universities and four NGOs from Greece, Cyprus, Jordan and the Lebanon, all project partners for the protection and enhancement of the eastern Mediterranean region's landscapes.² This marked the project's inception, which among others, aims at the scientific recording and mapping of the unique landscapes of the eastern Mediterranean. The meeting was attended by a total of 25 representatives from partner countries. Among the participants were representatives of the national and European managing authorities, as well as the Cyprus Department of Town Planning and Housing, an associate partner of the project.

During the meeting, participants prepared the ground for a better implementation and organised the first activities of this ambitious two-year project, which will contribute towards the compilation of landscape maps in order to make better use of topographic and other landscape-related data by all stakeholders in the countries involved. The landscape character assessment (LCA) mapping that will be produced during the project will help the protection and sustainable development of diverse areas and regions, based on their landscape character. It should be noted that the project was evaluated both by Cyprus government and European bodies as one of the best initiatives for cross-border cooperation on environmental and development thematic areas. Additionally, from its inception, the project sought to identify stakeholders and secure an understanding of how stakeholders perceive landscape, its uses and the usefulness of public participation.

Immediately after the kick-off meeting, a cross-border conference was held, attended by a total of thirty scientists, professionals and experts in the area of landscape characterisation from European and eastern

² The Laona Foundation for the Conservation and Regeneration of the Cypriot Countryside and the Open University of Cyprus (Cyprus); the Mediterranean Institute for Nature and Anthropos (MedINA) and the University of the Aegean (Greece); the Royal Society for the Conservation of Nature and the German Jordanian University (Jordan); the Society for the Protection of Nature and the American University of Beirut (Lebanon).

Mediterranean countries. The aim was to exchange expertise and previous experience in landscape characterisation, with civil participation during the process. The Conference was organised by the Laona Foundation, in collaboration with the University of Reading and the Cyprus Department of Town Planning and Housing. During the Conference, the best application and similar practices from England, Italy, Portugal and Spain were presented, in order to be implemented during the process of landscape character assessment mapping in Cyprus Greece, Jordan and the Lebanon. In addition to the project partners, government and regional authority representatives from Cyprus, Greece and the Lebanon also participated in the discussion.

In April 2014, 22 experts from all the project's partners and the Cyprus Department of Town Planning and Housing attended a five-day training course in Nicosia, in order to develop a common understanding of the methodology for the characterisation, data collection, desk work, map preparation and field validation processes to be used to map their respective landscapes. The training was led by the Open University of Cyprus in collaboration with Dr Geoffrey Griffiths of Reading University (UK) and experts Steven Warnock and Nick Symons. Participants had the opportunity to conduct field validation trips to land description units prepared during the classwork. The methodology of the LCA is explicitly explained in the training manual that was produced for the need of this training workshop. All representatives are expected to work closely together during the implementation of the LCA methodology in their regions.

By May 2014, teams in the four participating countries had started work on the process of mapping their respective landscapes, initially by using digitized maps and later by validating findings in the field. Level 1 maps (mapping of landscapes at a smaller detail and at 1:250,000 scale) as well as Level 2 maps (greater detail at 1:50,000 scale) will be produced during the project for the whole island of Cyprus and selected pilot areas in Greece, Jordan and the Lebanon. During the desk work stage, a time-consuming process of data acquisition and development precedes the development of provisional land description units (LDUs), the basic landscape types that are subsequently confirmed and refined during the field validation process that follows. At the same time, the project website (www.enpi-medscapes.org) was prepared and launched by the Open University of Cyprus in collaboration with all other partners, with information about the project and its partners, news about the progress of work, photographs, supporting material etc. At a later stage, an electronic platform based on the website will be created to support the operation of the envisaged “*Landscape Observatory of the Eastern Mediterranean,*” a valuable consultative and networking tool for sustainable development in the region.



Photos from the Wine Villages workshop in Cyprus on participative landscape survey (November 2014)

In November 2014, MedScapes representatives attended a workshop organised by the Local Development Pilot Project of the Wine Villages of Limassol³, entitled “*Identification, assessment and management of*

³ The project is part of the wider programme of the Council of Europe under the thematic area “*Local Development Pilot Projects: the contribution of heritage to local and regional development*”. This collaboration will provide selected local authorities with an innovative regional development plan, based on the local distinctive characteristics of the area, focusing on its cultural heritage and landscapes, while at the same time enabling the Cyprus Department of Town Planning and Housing to

the Landscape Survey.” Among its other objectives, the Wine Villages’ Pilot Project attempts to identify and map the vineyards landscape of Limassol District in Cyprus and thus MedScapes experts attended to contribute to this effort. The purpose of the workshop was to explore the different methodologies for identifying landscapes and training participants in landscape identification and character assessment, with a specific focus on a **participatory** approach for the sustainable management of cultural and natural heritage. The MedScapes methodology was presented and discussed at the workshop on the first day, while the second day was devoted to the discussion of ‘participatory landscape management’ with the local residents and community leaders.



Photos from the Byblos workshop in the Lebanon on the *Hima* land stewardship system (February 2015)

The MedScapes project aims to implement pioneering landscape management methods, involving local communities and their residents in the sustainable management and protection of these landscapes. While the Wine Villages experience in Cyprus helped explore the participatory approach in a southern European context, a respective participatory methodology was studied in a Middle Eastern context. Thus, in February 2015, a MedScapes workshop was organised in the Lebanese historic town of Byblos, with the participation of all eight partners. Training focused on the traditional landscape management method of “*Hima*,” a system practiced in the Arab world, in many ways similar to the European **land stewardship** concept. *Hima* means ‘protected area’ in Arabic; it involves a community-based approach used for the conservation of sites, species and habitats, managed by local communities in order to achieve the sustainable use of natural resources. It originated more than 1,500 years ago and spread across the Arabian Peninsula as a tribal system of sustainable management of natural resources in fragile desert ecosystems. It was applied as a system for organising, maintaining, regulating, and utilising natural pasture and rangelands in a way that was fitting with local practices, further evolving to encompass rules and ethical values, with all decisions made by the local communities themselves.

In May 2015, the Centre for the Study of Natural and Cultural Heritage in Jordan, in collaboration with the Royal Society for the Conservation of Nature held a day-long stakeholder meeting for the MedScapes project at the Royal Academy for Nature Conservation in the castle-town of Ajloun. The meeting, attended by project partners as well as about 30 academics, local, regional and national level officials in the sectors of local government, water management, environment and agriculture, highlighted the importance of the project to the Jordanian stakeholders, how the landscape character assessment was applied to the pilot study areas in the Yarmouk River Basin, in the north of the country, and Mujib, extending west of the Jordan Rift Valley, as well as how the traditional concept of *Hima* can be successful in a modern perspective and how it is used for sustainable management in a natural context. The meeting concluded with a lively debate about how LCA could be used and the need for further development of the technique, as well as how to integrate it into the spatial planning process.

More recently, in September 2015, the project partner University of the Aegean, organised an international summer school course titled *Training in Landscape Character Assessment Methods and Tools*, on the island of Lesbos in Greece. This was aimed at training students, educators and

investigate new approaches in spatial planning with an emphasis on the public’s involvement and to benefit from the experience of participating countries and experts.

professionals involved in landscape issues, on assessment tools and methods, as well as landscape character mapping, risk assessment and participatory management of landscape as a public good, specifically with regard to the wider region of the eastern Mediterranean, on thematic fields and skills related to the assessment and mapping of landscape character at regional and national levels; the implementation and use of risk assessment models for landscapes; and participatory governance and management of the landscape as a common public good, at local community level.

The MedScapes final conference is planned to take place in Jordan, in early December 2015.

The Cyprus Team and Project Dynamics



Photos from the Limassol inception conference and field work in Cyprus (March-April 2014)

The NGO *Laona Foundation for the Conservation and Regeneration of the Cypriot Countryside* coordinates the project, ensuring it is implemented within its time schedule and budget, and striving for the best possible outcome of its actions. According to the Foundation's executive director, Dr Artemis Yiordamli, MedScapes will help protect the countryside by highlighting that landscape, besides its aesthetic value, is the appropriate space-frame in which to take decisions on regional development, planning and land use. The risk assessment tool that will be developed under the project will provide a comprehensive package that can be used in order to predict (and avoid) plans or developments with negative effects on the landscape, as well as the natural and cultural heritage it accompanies. The communication campaign of the project will contribute towards raising awareness among the general public and stakeholders, while the training package to be developed will contribute to the education of university graduates in landscape mapping and evaluation.

The main role of the Open University of Cyprus is the coordination of work related to the implementation of landscape character assessment (LCA) in the Eastern Mediterranean context. This includes mapping of landscapes and educating project partners in this mapping process, developing a protocol for LCA mapping, coordinating mapping work in Cyprus and creating the project's website. According to the University's team leader, Dr Ioannis Vogiatzakis, due to its particular climate and millennial history, the Mediterranean Basin saw the emergence of many civilizations, supported by a rich natural environment and a wealth of cultural influences. The MedScapes project will provide a common framework for the assessment and management of landscape in this unique region of the world, where cultural and natural heritage are so inextricably linked.

This paper was compiled and edited, on the basis of material provided by the MedScapes team, by Phaedon Enotiades, spatial planning expert at the Department of Town Planning and Housing of the Cyprus Ministry of the Interior, an associate partner and final beneficiary of the MedScapes project.