

## 'ENHANCING NATURAL BEAUTY' OR 'POEMS THRUST IN MY FACE'? PERCEPTIONS OF ARTWORKS IN 'WILD' LANDSCAPE SETTINGS

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What role can (or should) artworks play in landscapes that are perceived as 'wild'? Conceptions of natural landscapes are a part of cultural discourse, and consequently artworks can both reflect and affect concepts of wilderness. Site-specific physical artworks situated in remote settings offer unique opportunities for interpreting relationships between culture and nature, time and place, and are used to communicate a range of environmental and heritage values. However, the appropriateness of placing cultural artefacts in protected and sensitive landscapes is subject to debate. How do contemporary art objects impact the experience and understanding of 'wild' landscapes, especially if the people drawn to such landscapes value those very same landscapes for their timeless and non-human qualities?

To explore these tensions, this study investigates the role of art in UK national parks, as evidenced through one recent project, *Companion Stones*, situated in the Peak District National Park. Following a brief review of the role of public art in relation to national parks policies, a case study of *Companion Stones* assesses how the works physical presence is perceived by stakeholders and the wider public.

### National Parks and public art policy context

Whether urban or non-urban, public art can incorporate tangible on-site artefacts, for example temporary or permanent sculptures, as well as a diverse range of off-site or non-object oriented practices, for example community engagement workshops, performances, oral histories, artist residencies and gallery exhibitions in various media. A body of precedent and research evidence demonstrates how public art programmes in urban landscapes are part of contemporary regeneration projects, where they perform numerous roles including place making,

heritage interpretation, enhancing community identity and city branding.<sup>1</sup> Beyond the urban context, award-winning initiatives such as the Watershed Landscape Project (South Pennines, 2010–2013) and Yorkshire Sculpture Park (Wakefield, established 1977) demonstrate the multiple benefits of cultural programmes which bring local communities, art and landscapes together.<sup>2</sup>

While issues of identity, place and change are common to all landscapes, the way that these are expressed and managed in national park landscapes is governed by statutory controls which seek to offer increased levels of planning protection<sup>3</sup>. National Parks in the UK encompass a spectrum of landscape settings and experiences, ranging from human settlements and infrastructure (towns, houses, roads, reservoirs, forestry), through to agricultural landscapes, countryside, public rights of way and more remote and wild environments of ecological importance. The purpose of designating landscapes as National Parks, as articulated in the 1995 Environment Act, clearly sets out the combination of natural *and* cultural landscape values associated with such settings and the dual aims of conservation and promotion of use by the public that direct their ongoing management<sup>4</sup>. These are:

conserve and enhance the natural beauty, wildlife and cultural heritage;

promote opportunities for the understanding and enjoyment of the special qualities of National Parks by the public (where this purpose is in conflict with conservation, conservation takes priority.)

This statutory context is important when considering the role of public art within national parks, which present specific opportunities and challenges for arts practice when compared to other public landscapes. Policies addressing

the need to promote 'opportunities for the understanding and enjoyment' of national parks invariably include natural and heritage landscape interpretation strategies, which in turn relate to the communicative and interpretive potential of arts practices and artworks. Although no UK-wide arts policy exists for national parks, most individual parks' interpretation and cultural heritage policies touch on the arts as a means of promoting certain landscape values and themes; for example, Brecon Beacons encourages 'creative on-site interpretation', defined as '2 and 3D installations such as seating, sculpture and specially designed waymarking, incorporating creative use of the arts' as part of its interpretation strategy. As of 2012, Dartmoor was the only national park to have an arts specific policy and implementation strategy, which explicitly sought to 'encourage, support, promote and enhance' creative endeavor, whilst noting that the Parks Authority is 'not primarily an arts organisation' and as such was not in a position to fund or commission works to a large extent.<sup>5</sup>

Reflecting this policy context, each national park features a variety of approaches toward arts-based landscape interpretation, and to date the amount of physical artwork occurring 'on the ground' differs from park to park. Of several projects identified during a desktop review of national parks web sites in 2012, common features include an emphasis on communication/ interpretation of landscape 'special qualities', expressing connections to the environment (both ecological and cultural), the use of natural and local materials, and applying community involvement and artist / stakeholder collaboration processes. Parks featured some permanent physical structures / objects (sculpture) but more often employed temporary installations, performances and exhibitions which left no physical impact on the landscape *per se*. Projects were almost invariably funded via a combination of charitable sources, and were very rarely funded by National Park Authorities themselves.

Irrespective of its purpose, location, medium or content, public art is – by its very public nature – often 'deeply contested'<sup>6</sup>. In the case of national park landscapes, its presence is further contested due to the fact that countryside is often perceived as 'natural'; as such the presence of any signs of contemporary life, be it wind farms, tourism developments, infrastructure, or sculpture, is contentious.<sup>7</sup> Given that the introduction of art *in* the landscape can be at

odds with the experience of nature-based remote settings, the potential for contested views and values is increased.

### Companion Stones case study

*Companion Stones* was produced by Arts in the Peak, led by local artist / curator Charles Monkhouse and designed collaboratively by Peak District artists, poets and stonemasons in 2010. The work consists of 14 poem-inscribed sandstone sculptures located in more and less remote parts of the park, on private and publicly owned land, ranging from agricultural fields to moorland, valleys and ridges (see figure 1). Each stone is situated as a companion to a guide stoup; 18<sup>th</sup> century gritstone artefacts found on historic rights of way which are carved with the names and distances of the nearest market towns. Historically, guide stoops provided direction for travelers across the wilderness of the moors.<sup>8</sup> As explained in detail on the project web site, *Companion Stones* bare inscriptions that guide audiences not to a physical destination but 'toward the future [...] to draw attention to the moors and the tricky environmental terrain we have yet to navigate [...] a meditation between past, present and future priorities' (see figure 2).<sup>9</sup> The £43,000 project was funded by a number of stakeholders, and received in-kind support from the Peak District National Park Authority (PDNPA). Planning permission was granted on the basis that the works would remain *in situ* for 5 years, though no plans or arrangements for their removal or relocation have been formalized.

### Methodology

The study consisted of interviews with key stakeholders, a review of secondary material about the project, and a short survey capturing park user expectations, interpretations and value judgments about *Companion Stones*, along with demographic data. Surveys were conducted over six non-consecutive weekdays and weekends during the summer of 2012 and 2013. Each survey occurred on-site, sampling of 7 of the 14 artworks (see fig. 3 - E1, E2, W3, E6, E7, E8, E9). These ranged in landscape context from the more remote to those sited close to existing roads and visitor facilities. Survey data was limited due to difficulties obtaining results across all sites: No results were obtained at the most remote or 'wild' moorland location (E3) as no potential participants passed by during survey collection times, whereas the majority of responses were obtained at sites adjacent to trail head car parks and facilities with greater

fool fall (E1, E7). If only one individual survey was collected; in practice these represent the views of approximately a hundred park users, as most surveys occurred with pairs or groups of walkers who engaged in informal small group discussions with the researcher when addressing the survey questions.

#### *Stakeholder commentary*

According to professionals involved in the management of areas where artworks are located, reactions to *Companion Stones* have been mixed. Ken Smith, Cultural Heritage Manager at PDNPA, felt that the project as a whole made a positive contribution to heritage interpretation by focusing attention on the existing guide stoops and 'opening a window into the past'.<sup>10</sup> The work complemented Smith's approach to heritage management whereby 'conservation, from my perspective that's managing change, it acknowledges that there's always change occurring, if there wasn't everything would stagnate', however he was aware that any form of change or new additions to the landscape were not always consistent with notions of conservation in the Peak District landscape given that 'a lot of people see what is in effect a heavily managed, a heavily manicured landscape, they see it as a wilderness'. Smith had observed that 'everyone brings their own perspectives and their own perceptions to it, a dozen people will see the same piece of art in a dozen different ways', including his colleagues in PDNPA who variously supported and opposed the project. One particular feature of the stones – the www address inscribed in small lettering to enable audiences to find out more about the project – was cited by Smith as something which people didn't like, however he believed that 'once the shock of the new has disappeared, and people have got used to them' that the stones presence would be generally accepted, or ignored.

Katherine Clarke, Visitor Services Manager of Eastern Moors Partnership, reported anecdotal evidence of 'quite extreme mixed opinions' about the work amongst visitors, volunteers and staff of Eastern Moors, where six of the stones are located.<sup>11</sup> Eastern Moors offers an accessible moorland experience, a metaphoric 'moorland with handrails' as Clarke described it; owing to easy vehicular access and its safety the site is 'nowhere near your proper wilderness, but it is a step in that direction.' Nevertheless, consultation undertaken previously by Eastern Moors Partnership indicates 'people have a sense of

the Eastern Moors as being a wild and open site and they don't want that to be compromised [...] when you're in the middle of it you feel like you're in the middle of nowhere and people don't want to lose that.' Clarke stated that the high percentage of repeat visitors they receive 'have a real connection to the place, feel very precious about it because they have such an association with it over time' and that 'with that passion there is a very big sense of ownership and responsibility [...] to protect it and look after it, but of course with that it also brings strongly held opinions about management and change.' The strongest evidence of objection to the work was expressed through vandalism: Clarke reported that one stone (E6) kept getting pushed down the bank (an act that would require planning to execute); wardens repeatedly reinstated it before eventually leaving it to rest amongst vegetation several meters from its designed location. In her own assessment, Clarke viewed each companion stone according to its landscape context, stating that each has a different feel about it depending on how remote the setting is. She made the distinction between works at Curbar head near a car park (E7) or Longshaw Estate entry (E1) that 'feel more comfortable' and 'don't stand out' compared to ones where 'you come across it in the middle of the moor' (for example E3 and E6).

Lead artist Charles Monkhouse received a small amount of email correspondence from members of the public between 2010 and 2012, both praising and criticizing the stones<sup>12</sup>. Two correspondents praised the work for its beauty and unexpectedness: 'My friend and I found the stone on Ramsley moor quite by accident [part of Eastern Moors]. Think they are beautiful / We came across a couple of the Companion Stones on the Longshaw Estate whilst we were out walking with some friends today, they were both really beautiful and they are a wonderful idea.' These comments suggest that the presence of aesthetically pleasing crafted objects in a contrasting remote landscape context contributes to their appeal and effect.

Three wrote to oppose the presence of the stones, raising numerous detailed objections and questions. Notably, two of the three correspondents related their comments to the stone at the wildest moor site (E3). Common themes arising were the lack of meaningful relevance / relationship between the stones and the guide stoops, inappropriate design and the inappropriate siting of the work at a micro scale. General statements such as 'an unfortunate

*distraction and quite out of sympathy with the environment / seemed quite incongruous/ detracted from rather than enhanced the natural and ancient features of the area / Ancient features in their natural settings do not need modern abortions for companionship'* articulate the strongly held view that contemporary artwork does not belong in this setting. Particular design concerns included the choice of sandstone and its method of presentation, for example *'the smoothly dressed, light coloured sandstone is quite alien to the area of rough dark gritstone and the precisely chiseled inscriptions bear no resemblance to the crudely marked guide stoops.'* The quality and content of the poems were questioned; *'Making any sense of the inscriptions is virtually impossible / Do these poems have any relevance with the [guide stoops]?'* The siting of stones, either because they were at a distance from walking paths, or from the guide stoops,<sup>13</sup> or because they did not physically gesture toward them in some form was critiqued; *'One or two of the stones seem to have been haphazardly dumped and any connection with a guide stoop or way-maker is unlikely to be made.'* Finally, although one correspondent welcomed such interpretive projects in principle, others suggested money would *'be better spent'* on other landscape priorities.

The criticisms outlined above reflect a feeling that the artwork is an unwelcome imposition on the wildness of the landscape experience which is enjoyed by regular visitors, a view summed up

by the email comment: *'For years I have enjoyed getting away from it all walking in the Peak. It is likely that I speak for others when I say that I would prefer not to have other people's poems, carved in rock, thrust in my face while I am out walking.'*

The following section presents the results of on-site surveys which seek to determine the extent to which the views expressed above reflect wider public attitudes.

#### *Survey results*

##### Demographics

Demographic data identified two main variables: Age (under 18, 18–30, 31–50, 50+), and familiarity with the landscape based on frequency of visitation (living / working in the park, frequent visitor, occasional visitor, been a few times, first time visitor). This data indicated over two thirds of visitors surveyed were over 50. Pattern matching did not identify any noticeable correlation between age and the response to the

artwork. Almost two thirds of respondents were very familiar with the landscape (living, working or being 'frequent' visitors) and just over a quarter were 'regular' visitors, with the remaining minority having encountered the landscape rarely or for the first time. Similarly no statistically significant correlation was evident between familiarity and type of response to the artwork, although the more detailed interpretive responses and highly disapproving responses were from local / regular visitors not first time visitors. Given the small quantity of responses from under 50s and / or from infrequent / first time visitors, more detailed correlative analysis was not viable. These demographics are consistent with visitor data collected by the Peak District.

#### What messages, ideas or values do you think the piece is conveying?

Over a third of all responses to this question was *'I don't know / no idea'*. Such responses can be attributed to three factors. Firstly, that the interpretive value of the artwork is low / difficult to access (due to the knowledge of viewer, the ambiguity of the work, or both – something that was exacerbated for some by the abstract wording of the poetry). Secondly it tended to reflect hesitancy on the part of those respondents to express a view (several exclaimed *'I don't know anything about art'* etc). Thirdly, this response can be attributed to the limited amount of time spent engaging with the work, as researchers observed that almost half of all respondents walked past the stones and did not approach for a closer look (i.e. not reading the poetry inscribed on the stone), only taking time to physically approach and consider the piece once engaged in the research survey discussion.

Interpretations of the work tended to fall into two categories: A third of all respondents made comments that associated the stone with a similarly shaped object, *'a cow trough / sail of a yacht / burial tomb/ fallen object'*; some of these descriptions echo comments about the works offered by the artists themselves and others do not. The other third of comments offered a range of responses that generally associated the stone with its environmental or historic landscape setting as a site of contemplation *'a sense of location / makes you think / to appreciate the history of the area / countryside'*. One respondent was able to identify the guide stoop itself, and relate this to the artwork, and a second had previously accessed the project web site.

These responses suggest the stated meaning of *Companion Stones* remains latent in the works to a significant extent. Although the underlying themes of the guide stoop heritage, time, place and navigating an 'environmental terrain' may not be immediately read by the majority of respondents, where subsequent explanations of the intention of *Companion Stones* were offered by researchers the respondents generally welcomed such explanation. Several suggested this information should be available with the artwork on site, i.e. '*needs more explanation about what they are*'.

Do you like / dislike *Companion Stones*? What do you like / dislike about it?

Value judgments about the project were varied amongst the respondents, revealing several opposing views.

The most frequent response to the artwork was neutral – neither supporting or objecting to it – with nearly half of all respondents choosing not to comment or making statements such as '*I think I approve / like*'. Less than one in ten stated they definitely did not like the work, a similarly small number strongly liked the work, and the remainder simply 'liked' the work. Notably, several positive comments were expressed as a double negative, for example '*nothing wrong with it/ not disharmonious/ not too obtrusive/ not distracting or garish*', implying a lack of being offended rather than an actual endorsement (a point raised in later responses.)

The form and materiality of the stones were mentioned by numerous respondents. Several stated they liked '*the shape / works I have seen blend well into the landscape and augments what's there*' and that '*stone is a nice colour / stone, natural materials*'. An equal number disliked the shape(s), especially at work E3 (one of the more angular, taller stones) which was described as '*regular lines, too smooth, the opposite [of the stoop] / stripes are too straight*'. Two survey groups noted the material '*doesn't relate to older stone - sandstone vs. gritstone*', though others suggested that '*erosion and weathering will improve them*'. The extent to which the works contrasted with their landscape setting was itself seen as a positive as well as a negative, with responses such as '*contrived / doesn't really fit in*' being expressed in the negative by some and '*novelty / contrast is good/ juxtaposition [between guide stoop and new work] is good / surprising*' being expressed by others.

Underlying the comments about formal qualities of the work were feelings about the general effect and intent of *Companion Stones*. Several respondents expressed appreciation for the contemporary ideas and practices the work introduces to the landscape, for example '*thought provoking, interesting / brings something about the future, creativity / it's for the future / nice to see local artists and poets working in this area*'. Two comments made reference to the accessibility that such items add to the landscape for families and urban visitors, stating '*you can plan a walk, provide interest for the kids / coming from the city, it's an alien environment - these welcome you in*'. By comparison, others were strongly opposed to art in the park, stating '*I am against all modern interventions / don't agree with them, the countryside should be left / not something I'd take a photo of, they don't have a place here/ nature gives so much, there's no need for anything [to be added]*'.

#### What are your thoughts about cultural projects like these in National Parks in general?

The final survey question prompted respondents to make general comments about the value or appropriateness of situating artworks in National Parks landscapes. This prompted a similar mix of positive and negative responses in keeping with the project specific views outlined above, however when asked for general opinions an important unifying trend emerged. Of those who approved of art in national parks, almost all were very cautious and qualified their approval with a number of important conditions. Key words such as 'subtle, natural, fit in' were repeatedly used to describe the kind of works that they endorse. A consistently recurring theme was one of relating sympathetically to natural landscape qualities; '*depends how subtle / shouldn't be too big / as long as they complement their surroundings / I don't object, good if in keeping with surroundings / yes, if they do it in a natural way, not too outlandish / not too garish/ as long as they aren't spoiling*'. Location was raised on several occasions, referring to the need for '*appropriate places, chosen carefully / some better than others*'. Limiting the quantity of projects was an issue, with respondents remarking '*too many would be bad, one off works are nice / the odd unexpected one is good / limited*'.

#### **Conclusions**

This case study reveals that art (specifically sculpture) in national park landscapes provokes

a wide range of responses from park users, from positive approval and appreciation, through to neutral feelings, and strong objections. Responses vary irrespective of age or landscape knowledge, though repeat / local park users (who are greater in number) tend to articulate more detailed critiques than less frequent visitors. Several key issues that consistently arose were the quantity of works, the choice of location, materials and forms. On-site survey respondents were more inclined to have a neutral response compared to those whose strong objections to, or support / praise of *Companion Stones* had been expressed previously via correspondence to the artist.

Many park users are able to articulate what they like or dislike about artworks, especially as part of generalized discussions compared to critiquing a specific object / work. When asked about art in national parks landscapes the most consistently recurring message was 'I approve but it has to be appropriate' where 'appropriate' typically means subtle, infrequent, and in keeping with existing (mainly natural) landscape characteristics.

The effectiveness of sculpture and poetry as an interpretative device which may 'promote understanding' of national park landscapes is a complex outcome to assess. The intended meaning of *Companion Stones* was not interpreted by many respondents. However, while the exact communication of meaning through the artwork proved to be problematic if one is seeking to convey a specific idea such as heritage interpretation (in this case an appreciation of guide stoops), other responses suggest that such media are nevertheless capable of evoking a range of ideas and valuable positive associations. This example suggests that without detailed explanation, art works may contribute more to landscape 'enjoyment' rather than 'understanding' per se, expanding the scope of landscape experience(s) rather than clarifying specific messages.

Where opposition to the works was expressed, this reflected a concern with the negative impact that the works had on experiences of the existing landscape and its associated remoteness and naturalness. Evidence suggests that the location of art in more remote landscapes provokes more negative responses, or strictly qualified approval. Although a straightforward means of avoiding this negative impact would be to limit the location of artworks to less remote landscape settings (for example near existing visitor centres or car parks), this would potentially compromise

some of the positive impacts experienced by others when encountering artworks in remote landscape locations. In this case, the meaning and import of the stones derives from their physical co-location and dialogue with existing heritage landscape artefacts, and the experience of finding an 'unexpected' and 'beautiful' object in a remote setting was cited by some park users as part of their appeal. Making artworks temporary (as with the *Companion Stones* 5 year installation) limits landscape impact in the longer term as the physical impact is reversed, however this compromises the potential of the artwork to age, weather and 'fit in' with the landscape, a key criteria in ensuring 'appropriateness' according to most park users.

It is an inevitable part of public art practice, as perhaps it is in national parks management generally, that judgments about landscape change, values, and experience will be subjective and varied; in short, you cannot please everyone. This study reflects how opinions about the appropriateness / inappropriateness of artworks in landscapes are illustrative of wider concerns about landscape management and change in areas which are perceived as 'wild', whether they are wild or not. The different responses to *Companion Stones* illustrate how an artefact that is perceived as a place-specific enhancement to one park user can be an out-of-place intrusion to another. In a society where art is not an integral part of daily life, an unresolved tension exists between two equally valid aesthetic experiences – experiencing the beauty of remote landscapes and experiencing the beauty of art – and there is no easy means of reconciling them.

Studying perceptions of existing art works can inform policy-makers (and artists) as they seek to achieve the national parks aim of 'Promot[ing] public understanding and enjoyment of their special qualities'. Translating this understanding into general advice or policy, however, is problematic: The mix of responses and interpretations evidenced by *Companion Stones* suggests that each project and each landscape is different, and a very nuanced and context-specific response is essential. The need for well crafted quality work which demonstrates attention to site-specific detail and a strong conceptual, formal, material and spatial relationship to the landscape is a must – though ultimately individual park users will interpret such relationships differently according to their own points-of-view.



Endnotes

(Encnotes)

1 See Venca Lou se Po ock & Ronan Pacc son (2010): 'Embedding Public Art: Practice, Policy and Problems', *Journal of Urban Design*, 15:3, 335-356; Public Arts Think Tank 'IXIA' (various publications), available at <http://x-a-n-i-o.com/> [accessed July 2012].

2 See Watershed Landscape Project <http://www.watershedlandscape.co.uk/>; Yorkshire Sculpture Park Museum of the Year 2014, available at <http://www.ysp.co.uk/page/museum-of-the-year-2014/10> [accessed December 2014].

3 The UK's 15 National Parks are controlled by separate National Park Authorities (NPAs), which are subject to specific conditions within the National Policy Planning Framework (NPPF). See Department for Communities and Local Government (2012), National Policy Planning Framework, London, pp 26 – 27, available at [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/60772/16950.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/60772/16950.pdf) [accessed October 2014].

4 National Parks UK (2014), National Parks – Britain's Breathing Spaces, available at <http://www.nationalparks.gov.uk/aboutus> [accessed December 2014].

5 Dartmoor National Park Authority (2010), Dartmoor National Park Authority Arts Policy, available at <http://www.dartmoor-npa.gov.uk/looknagle/artist-cultural-heritage/artist> [accessed June 2012]

6 Hall & Robertson, cited in Pollock & Paddison, op. cit., p 337.

7 In the UK, 'Rural scenes are popularly labeled 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', Bourassa, S. (1997), *The Aesthetics of Landscape*. London: Benvillen Press, p 10.

8 See Howard Smith (2009), *Culture Sprints of Derbyshire*, Landmark Collector's Library, Ashbourne, Derbyshire.

9 Companion Stones web site, available at <http://www.companionstones.org.uk/home/about1.htm> [accessed June 2012].

10 Comments made during interview with Ken Smith on 2 August 2012.

11 Comments made during interview with Katherine

Clarke 9 August 2013.

12 Anonymized and undated email correspondence supplied by Charles Monkhouse, July 2012.

13 In some instances this was due to environmental planning permission being refused for sites immediately adjacent to some remote guide stoops. However, this was at times perceived as an advantageous design outcome: Diana Snyder, poet for the E6 stone, commented 'It is stilling that the companion stones are placed on a path at some distance from the guide stoop, showing the traveler he is close, but not intruding on his eventual experience of being alone with the original stone in its atmospheric setting'. See Artists talking – exposing contemporary visual artists' practice (2010), available at [http://www.artists.org.uk/artists\\_talking/article/707000](http://www.artists.org.uk/artists_talking/article/707000) [accessed July 2012].

Figures



Figure 1 – Image of Companion Stone 'E1' (Longshaw gale location), poet Jo Bell and designer Kate Genever. Photo by author.



Figure 2 – Companion Stones web page, including inset image of an historic guide stoop <http://www.companionstones.org.uk/home/home1.htm> [accessed December 2014] \*



Figure 3 - Companion Stones location map. <http://www.companionstones.org.uk/home/CompanionStonesMap1.pdf>

[accessed December 2014]\*

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