Interpreting major industrial landscapes: Social follow-up on meanings, the case of two aluminium smelters, Alcan (Alma, Canada) and Pechiney (Dunkirk, France)

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Received 10 September 2004; revised 1 June 2006; accepted 8 June 2006.
Available online 4 August 2006.

Abstract

Landscape is becoming an object of growing social concern and, as such, an object of mediation between major industrial producers and local communities. The question of the capacity of environmental assessment to address this issue is thus raised. Until now, landscape studies have focused on visual aspects, although subjective dimensions such as perceptions and meanings have been recognised. The research in this article concerns the subjective dimensions, and is presented with a view to further the understanding of the process of the social interpretation of landscape as it relates to heavy industrial sites. Within a socioconstructivist perspective, two case studies (a longitudinal follow-up and an ex-post) of two aluminum smelters, one in Alma (Quebec, Canada) and the other in Dunkirk (France) were conducted. The results show that nearby residents' interpretations of landscape varied according to three sets of factors related to 1) the dynamics of regional development and the historical place of industry in the community, 2) the relationship between residents and the industry and local governance capacities, and 3) the social impacts experienced. To conclude, three ways of using qualitative methodologies for social and environmental follow-up in a socioconstructivist approach to landscape are proposed.

Keywords: Landscape assessment; Landscape meaning; Social follow-up; Industrial megaproject; Methodology