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Title:

An interpretation of nature: creating resources in a local woodland area

Abstract:

Around 10 years ago, a local community group based in the north-east of England, decided to take charge of an old and run-down woodland area. An unattractively polluted stream traversed the woodland; no fish had been spotted for years. It was virtually inaccessible, environmentally degraded and dominated by the cattle that sheltered from the winter in the valley. Today, this area is a local nature reserve; part of an inland-to-coast circuit and ecological diversity has been restored.

In this paper, I propose an account of the process that led to the conversion of the area based on people's constructed conception of what is natural in this environment. I suggest that the notion of what nature is and how it should 'look' is central both in defining what is perceived as a resource and in the practices for safeguarding it. Drawing on ethnographic-based work, I look into the ways the community group collectively ascribes meaning and value to their local environment as a whole and to some of its features in particular (the stream and the quality of the water, for instance). I point out that the notion of nature that the group shares evolves from a context where cultural, social and historical factors interplay and, crucially, that that notion is reinforced by the group's management and conservation practices.

My conclusion indicates that 'local resources' can often be the product of contextual factors. It was the underlying, all-encompassing cultural notions shared by the members of the group that determined the reconfiguration of the local woodland and its problems into an asset.