INTRODUCTION
EUROPE’S LIVING LANDSCAPES
AT A TURNING POINT

Landscape is one of the most fascinating assets of Europe. Its great diversity reflects a multitude of historical layers in an intricate spatial pattern. It means that, even in our globalised era, one evolves according to where one has grown up: a Greek fishing village gives us a different identity from growing up in the English countryside. Our sense of belonging is very much determined by the environment to which we are accustomed, and our perception of the landscape is thus an essential component of a community’s well-being, and of visitors’ enjoyment.

However, this diverse landscape is in a deep crisis. Today a walk through Europe’s countryside can be a disturbing experience. What were once beautiful, living landscapes have been seriously debased over the past 50 years: from the coastal zone between Faro and the Spanish border in Portugal, over the water starved Great Plain of Hungary, through alpine meadows and along river sides, the story is the same. The old activities, still reflected in the landscape, are no longer efficient and new functions tend to be dominated by agricultural intensification, fragmentation by roads and urbanisation, and abandonment; all stimulated by national and European policies. These result in homogenisation, banality, and finally in ghost landscapes. This is all the more alarming because a weak sense of belonging leads to a lack of attachment, to social problems and to vandalism.

This book treats the current crisis in landscape quality as a challenge for action and research; in agreement with the European Landscape Convention, which stresses the importance of safeguarding all landscapes, not just the beautiful ones. To counteract global trends initiatives are being taken in many places, in conjunction with local efforts, to allow new living landscapes to emerge on the basis of the existing values.

A CONCERN FOR LANDSCAPE

Landscape consciousness from Petrarca to Mansholt

When, in April 1336, Francesco Petrarca climbed Mont Ventoux near Avignon in France, he felt like a king as he gazed over the land from on high as is beautifully described by Simon Schama (1995). As Petrarca himself recorded, he just wanted to see what such a high prospect could offer him: a notion alien to most in late Medieval times. Landscape as a concept did not yet exist in the minds of people; it was simply a commonplace part of the everyday world, in which they were constrained to work for their survival. Petrarca was one of the first authors in western civilisation to consciously take a distant perspective on objects that concerned him, and, emancipated from the everyday world, he enjoyed the view of the landscape from the top of Mont Ventoux. This event marks the start of a development of consciousness in which the human mind takes an increasingly independent position from the merely physical earth. This was reflected in the gradually evolving fashion for depicting landscapes in paintings; first as a background in allegorical pictures, later as a subject in its own right (Casey 2002).

The prospect of freeing oneself from relentless mundanity opened abounding possibilities for developing new techniques and manipulating the physical world for the benefit of individual prosperity and societal progress. As a consequence, opportunities other than working the land emerged. Modern civilisation is the result of this. A global market made the functional relationships that had built our cultural landscapes for centuries change radically. The European Economic Community’s Agricultural Policy in the 1960’s – whose great advocate was the EEC’s vice-chairman Sicco Mansholt – aimed at freeing thousands of poor peasants from the rural areas. They would earn much better wages in industry, and agriculture could develop in a more intensive and productive way. Only much later did Mansholt realise that his very successful policy also led to a loss of identity in many rural areas of Europe (Van Merriënboer 2006).