CHAPTER 12

Histories and Ideologies of Nature in Argyll

Karen Lykke Syse

Abstract

This chapter will explore how nature writing, and Romanticism in particular, has been influential in the construction of national parks, Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) and nature reserves in Scotland. These culturally constructed but natural places are the result of fairly recent ideas about nature that were influenced by certain literary genres. Yet people who have a working relationship with these same parks, sites and reserves, this same nature, regard them in a utilitarian manner. The following chapter presents some results from a larger research project exploring the landscape perceptions of farmers, foresters, gamekeepers and shepherds in Argyll in Scotland.

Keywords


1 Introduction

This chapter presents results from a larger ethnographic research project exploring the landscape perceptions of farmers, foresters, gamekeepers and shepherds in Argyll on the west coast of Scotland in Britain (Figure 12.1). Interdisciplinary methods and analyses trace the development of two conflicting ways of regarding nature in rural Scotland. The chapter is based on an ethnographic investigation of land use and changing perceptions of landscape among farmers, foresters and land laborers in Argyll from 1945 to 2005. In the following sections I will explore how a Romantic literary tradition of nature representation, evocation and use has been influential in the construction of national parks, Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) and nature reserves in Scotland. These culturally constructed but natural places are the result of fairly recent ideas about nature that were influenced by literary genres. Yet people who have a working relationship with these same parks, sites and reserves, this same nature, regard them in a utilitarian manner (Syse 2010). To investigate these issues, informants representing a cross section of social classes from
labourers to gentry were interviewed. The interviewees were all male (however issues of gender are beyond the scope of this particular text). Ten were farmers, of whom two were crofters and two were tenant farmers. The farm sizes varied between 500 and 5000 acres. To better understand the conflict which emerged in these interviews, a second set of interviews was conducted incorporating employees of the Scottish government’s environmental agency Scottish Natural Heritage (hereafter SNH), agricultural advisers, researchers, curators and museum board members. See Table 12.1 for more details on the interviewees. All the informants have been given fictive names, and are referred to in the text by their fictive names, yet with their actual occupations.

Writing about environmental issues is a reflexive exercise for an academic belonging to the humanities. The humanities’ concern is what is, or what makes us, human. At the same time humans – or human influence – is sometimes