

ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES TO ASSESSING THE AESTHETIC QUALITY OF THE ENVIRONMENT

The Environment Agency has a duty under the Environment Act (1995) to compile information to enable it “to form an opinion of the general state of pollution of the environment.” The Agency set out its strategy for developing a national environmental monitoring framework in its consultation document “Viewpoints on the Environment.” This publication recognises that in addition to the traditional means of measuring specific environment quality attributes, the general public is often more concerned with the more subjective and aesthetic aspects of environmental quality.

This R & D project aimed to investigate the essentially subjective features of for example landscape, litter and noise, which influence our broad enjoyment of the environment.

The overall objective of the project was to gain an understanding of the elements of environmental quality of general concern in the community in order to develop a classification system, which reflects it.

Other specific objectives were:

- To develop an integrated holistic classification scheme for the aspects of aesthetic quality identified by the public;
- To develop standard methodologies for the sampling, analysis and data handling;
- To advise on the selection of a network of representative sites across England and Wales at which aesthetic assessments could be made.

Initially a literature review was carried out in order to establish the currently available level of understanding. Simplistically an assessment of aesthetic quality seeks to answer the question “do I like the environment I am with?” The review fed into a suite of focus group discussions which aimed to establish:

- The aesthetic issues which the public immediately recognised;
- The public's understanding of the concept of viewing their environment in aesthetic terms;
- The most appropriate terminology.

Once the relevant questions to ask were identified a questionnaire was drawn up in order to score different environments. Ultimately, once a range of tested questionnaires was available the project sought to identify the methods of data analysis and issues relating to the selection of a representative sample.

Two distinct phases of pilot testing has allowed for alternative data collection techniques to be tested and has indicated that:-

- The public are able to critically appraise a location;
- Their ability to appraise such locations is greater in the built environment;
- The respondent must be fully familiar with the location;
- An ‘on-street’ questionnaire is a viable alternative to in home surveys;
- Independent expert appraisal may compliment the primary source of public opinion;

Members of the public are able to identify areas of different aesthetic quality based on the aesthetic components of sight, sound and smell. The environment needs to be sub-divided into broad types of facilitate assessment with data collected separately for rural, residential, town/city centre commercial and industrial/commercial estate areas.

A seven point descriptive scale encompassing both direction and degree of aesthetic impact offers the most effective means of capturing public assessments.

The use of selective ‘expert’ assessment in addition to in street and in home questionnaire formats as appropriate should yield the most robust results.

The Agency has proposed a new way of looking at the environment through six “Viewpoints” and the aesthetic element will represent the publics’ perception of quality in its broadest terms.

In the year 2000 the Agency will be conducting a major “Millennium Survey” of the state of the environment. It is proposed that subject to approval, a Phase 2 implementation project will be carried out. External consultants will, therefore, be sought in order to apply the methods developed by Entec in this report.

This R & D Technical Summary relates to information from Project E1-048 contained in the following outputs:

R & D Technical Report E100: Alternative Approaches To Assessing The Aesthetic Quality Of The Environment. ISBN: 1 857 05228 5

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Copies of the Technical Report are available from each Regional Information Centre (Library) or the National Information Centre in Bristol, and externally from the Environment Agency R&D dissemination Centre, c/o WRc, Frankland Road, Blagrove, Swindon, Wiltshire SN5 8YF, Tel: 01793 865012, Fax 01793 513562

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