

Emily Brady is Professor of Philosophy at Texas A&M University, specialising in environmental ethics and landscape aesthetics. Before that she was Professor of Environment and Philosophy at the University of Edinburgh. She talks about her relationship with the Lake District and what makes it such a special place – even in Texas.

How did you get to know the Lake District?

Like many other people, I fell in love with the Lake District through time spent hill-walking. I taught at Lancaster University for ten years, during which time I came to know many of the fells and dales (Sergeant Man, Helvellyn, Scafell, and I have a particular fondness for Easedale and Wasdale). I was lucky enough to be able to hike throughout the year, even in the snow!

I also value the cultural and philosophical contributions of Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Ruskin, all of whom knew the Lake District well. They have influenced my ideas and featured in my academic writings. I should also mention an important mentor, the late Ronald W. Hepburn, who helped me to appreciate the Lakes in terms of culture and landscape. His deep love for the Lake District was inseparable from his philosophical reflections about aesthetic values and meanings in relation to nature.

“ *The Lake District is a place that I often long for.* ”

Having moved from the UK to Texas a few years ago, personally, the Lake District is a place that I often long for, alongside the Scottish Highlands. My professional background includes academic expertise in environmental philosophy and aesthetics which I developed largely within the UK context, as the majority of my career was spent there before the recent move. So, the examples and cases that I've mentioned over the years in teaching or publications refer to this context; and from the Lake District, e.g., changes to Yew Tree Tarn and rewilding efforts such as Wild Ennerdale. I've reflected upon changes to landscapes and places from an aesthetic perspective, and the Lake District often comes to mind in so far as its landscapes have a unique beauty that is shaped by cultural and natural forces working together. It's no surprise to me that it is now recognised as a World Heritage site.

Isn't natural beauty – landscape aesthetics - a purely subjective term?

Environmental and landscape aesthetics - as an area of philosophical study - studies the combination of sensory, emotional, imaginative, and knowledge-based experiences that people have when they appreciate natural and semi-natural places. One of the key questions that philosophers consider is the extent to which people's aesthetic judgments

are subjective, objective or intersubjective. Over the years, in my work, I have argued that such judgments are intersubjective, and that we often arrive at intersubjective agreements about things that we find to be beautiful. This means that we can provide reasons and evidence for our judgments, and we bring this aesthetic form of evidence to bear upon our discussions with others about what we find to be beautiful (or not). I prefer this approach because it speaks to the particular character of places and their particular qualities.

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Therefore, my position is that landscape aesthetics is an intersubjective matter and not a subjective matter. We are individuals coming from different perspectives who often find agreement when it comes to aesthetic values and meanings in the landscape. Some philosophers would argue that we can find an objective basis for our aesthetic judgments, too. Whether intersubjective or objective, this means that aesthetic values can form the basis of an informed and reasonable grasp of the values of any particular place and play a role in guiding policy. If this were not the case,

then it would be difficult to understand how UNESCO arrived at their designation of the Lake District as a World Heritage site which is recognised not least for its ‘harmonious beauty’. There are many UK landscape and other conservation designations which historically and, still, today, include aesthetic values as contributing to the grounds of such designations. Consider ‘Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty’ or ‘Landscape Character Assessments’ in the UK and ‘National Park’ designations in the UK and globally.

Isn't natural beauty a concept used by elites so they can shape an environment in their own image?

Is there an elite aesthetics? Well, there can be when it comes to expensive cars or houses enjoyed only by the rich. When it comes to the kinds of landscape designations that I've mentioned, the point of these is to provide protection of, say, the harmonious beauty of a place and its natural or natural-cultural features. As such, the aim of a designation such as a national park is to conserve a landscape and its integrity for the benefit of **all**.

You may be interested in watching a film about natural beauty and what philosophers have to say about this topic. The film is ‘Au Nom de la Beauté’, directed and produced by Pascale Smeesters and Bao Dang (2019).

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fOI9ynFNUOo>

If the relationship between humans and the landscape is a process, does that mean anything goes, because it's part of a process?

Absolutely not. Why? Well, consider that many processes are intentionally managed when it comes to the conservation of landscapes or ecologies. Again, I mention UNESCO because the World Heritage site designation is based upon a set of qualities and values unique to the Lake District. That designation explicitly mentions threats to those unique qualities and values such as 'climate change, development pressures, changing agricultural practices and diseases, and tourism' (UNESCO 2021). Addressing those threats means that it's not the case that 'anything goes'. The place-based and particular human-nature relationship of agro-pastoralism exemplified in the fells and dales of the Lakes is distinctive, managed, and conserved for a reason.

Is there an aesthetic value to abandoned quarries and mines? Or can they be regarded as an invitation to industrial-style behaviour?

Yes, certainly, there is an aesthetic aspect which combines natural and cultural features intertwined or in relationship. We might consider what the overall aesthetic character or aesthetic integrity is of

a particular abandoned mine or quarry and ask how that should be managed. There will be many meanings and values associated with abandoned quarries and mines, such as historical and cultural values related to community, work, and place. Aesthetic values in such semi-natural places (where nature has returned to some extent to the abandoned site) will feature alongside these other meanings and values.

“*Just because there has been small scale industrial work in the past - mines and quarries - it does not follow that further industrial interventions are desirable or appropriate.*”

The Lake District is shaped by both natural and cultural forces, but just because there has been small scale industrial work in the past - mines and quarries - it does not follow that further industrial interventions are desirable or appropriate. In other parts of the UK, for example, we have seen that communities may decide to protect the history and landscape of industrial heritage or protect that heritage as part of the creation of a new park.

In terms of landscape aesthetics, how would you see motor vehicles on hill tracks?

Given my answers to the questions above, I would argue that motor vehicles on hill tracks would most likely disrupt the aesthetic character of the places where such activity is found. In order to protect the UNESCO-recognised agro-pastoral character of the Lake District, some farming vehicles are no doubt necessary but other uses would not align with the overall integrity and landscape character of the Lake District.