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# 3 Community Development and Natural Landscapes

*Alan W. Barton and Theresa Selfa*

**BEHAVIOR OBJECTIVES**

After studying this chapter and completing the online learning activities, students should be able to

1. Describe ways in which community development is influenced by the natural environment.
2. Define “landscape."
3. Explain how landscapes shape and reinforce the characteristics of the culture of the people who use them.
4. Explain how a landscape becomes a commodity, and identify some of the ramifications of this process.
5. Explain how a landscape can reinforce stratification in a community.
6. Explain what it means to say that landscapes are historically produced, and provide examples of how this process operates.
7. Explain how landscapes can be used to bring community factions together.
8. Explain how the values of a landscape can be marketed as an economic development tool.

## Introduction

Social scientists have long debated the extent to which nature and society interact. One line of thought, proposed by Émile Durkheim (1895/1982), suggests that social consequences have social causes. According to this view, to understand how humans interact in a community context, only social factors offer a valid explanation. So, for example, to understand why some people in a community are suspicious of individual achievement, it is more valid to argue that a relative lack of differentiation in social roles leads people to value homogeneity, rather than to suggest that living in a hot climate suppresses people’s desire to achieve.

Those who believe that social behavior is best explained by social causes generally pay little attention to the natural context. Others, however, argue that human behavior is always embedded in nature (Burch, 1971/1997; Buttel & Humphrey, 2002; Firey, 1960/1999; Wilson, 1978). Humans are, after all, biological beings whose behavior is controlled at least in part by genetic codes and chemical reactions. Furthermore, human groups live in a natural context, within ecosystems that establish boundaries within which people must operate to construct and reproduce social systems. Humans frequently find meaning in the natural environment and use natural elements in processes of social construction. Under this approach, humans cannot escape nature, even analytically, and social scientists should consider the natural environment when studying social behavior.

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### Theory Is an Essential Ingredient to Community Development

Community developers often look to social theory to help guide their actions, but community development is a more applied enterprise. Community developers are not limited by the rules of social science methodology. Theories of social behavior can help community developers set goals and perhaps predict with some accuracy the consequences of decisions and actions. But community developers also must take into account the real-world circumstances of their own communities. At any given time, the unique historical trajectory of each community creates a set of circumstances that includes economic opportunity, political feasibility, and social capacity, which combine to produce a limited set of options. Sometimes ignored, but always important, are the natural conditions as well. In this chapter, we examine some of the ways in which natural ecosystems and landscapes interact with community structure and culture to create opportunities and constraints for community developers.

## Natural Resources and Community Development

How do natural conditions play a role in communities? For one thing, communities draw on natural resources to sustain themselves economically. Indeed, the term *resource* is commonly used to describe the plants, animals, minerals, and water that make up natural communities, particularly those that humans use to satisfy their needs and wants. This approach suggests that nature is separate from human communities, and its primary function is to provide for humans as inputs in a productive process.

Also, natural resources serve communities in other ways. They shape community development by opening up opportunities for some community groups, and imposing constraints on other groups. Sometimes overlooked are the characteristics of the resources

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themselves, such as the frequency of harvest, whether the resource is stationary or mobile, whether it is renewable or nonrenewable, and the endowment of a resource in a particular area. All of these directly influence how individual communities interact with resources. Soil quality and structure, topography, and vulnerability to natural disasters vary by location and shape the opportunities and worldviews available to people and communities. The social institutions that emerge can organize and control social relations with resources. For example, some institutions allocate property rights and control access, use, and disposal to specific plots of land and the trees, soil, water, wildlife, minerals, and buildings on the land.

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In some cases, natural resources come to define communities. Farming towns, ranching towns, logging towns, fishing villages, mining towns, hunting camps, and resort towns are closely tied to one dominant industry, and each type of community brings to mind particular cultural markers, such as the architecture, apparel, cuisine, political preferences, and organizational proclivities typical of each. These cultural elements support and sustain the local industry by shaping the worldviews and identities of residents and ensuring that at least some members of each generation will choose to pursue their livelihoods in the community's industry. Understanding the cultural functions of resources broadens the relationship between human communities and nature, but resources are still conceptualized as individual entities that function primarily to service humans.

### Landscape: A New Vision of Communities and Nature

In recent years, a new vision has emerged that offers a different conception of how nature and communities are related. Rather than focusing on specific resources and their role in production, today many analysts use the concept of *landscape* to highlight that communities and nature are linked in complex and multifaceted ways (Greider & Garkovich, 1994; Hinrichs, 1996; Petrzelka, 2004; Walker & Fortmann, 2003). Landscapes are extensive tracts of land and all that is on them—trees, rivers, beaches, mountains, crops, wildlife, buildings, roads, and, of course, people. The concepts of community and landscape have commonalities in that both are emergent properties. Communities are more than aggregates of people—they have their own reality that forms a community identity that may reflect the individual identities of community members, but that has its own essence as well. Likewise, landscapes are more than aggregates of natural elements. They also have their own reality and identity. Landscapes are composed of physical and biological components, but fundamentally, they are social and cultural constructs (Greider & Garkovich, 1994). They take on meaning as people interact with them, and that meaning becomes part of how people see themselves, as attached to and shaped by a particular place.

As social and cultural constructs, landscapes contribute to the creation of meaning, the foundation and development of communities, the construction and reproduction of social institutions, and the formation and internalization of social hierarchies. As humans interact, they assign social meaning to places and use these meanings as symbolic markers that facilitate mutual understanding through shared interpretation of worldly settings and events. Over time, these meanings become ingrained and take on their own independent form; as sociologists like to say, they take on "a life of their own." They begin to shape how people view themselves and others around them. People also contest these meanings and try to shape them to enhance their own individual well-being. Thus, even as these institutional forms facilitate social interaction, they also produce conflict between social groups, each of which interprets the meaning assigned to nature and landscape differently.

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Community developers contribute to these processes by helping communities develop these shared markers, and community developers that work with landscapes in particular aim to construct and convey institutions that allow people to share meaningfully in the natural elements that surround and comprise the places where their communities are located. The natural characteristics of a particular place influence how community developers might approach the process of constructing meaning on landscapes.

### The Landscape as Commodity

The way in which people shape landscapes often reflects the dominant culture. In a highly commercialized setting such as the United States, it is not surprising that many landscapes are seen as commodities. In other words, they are valued because of their market potential. Residents develop an identity in part based on how the landscape can generate income for the community (Silver, 1993). This process involves more than the conversion of the natural elements into commodities (Shepherd, 2002). The landscape itself, including the people and their sense of self, take on the form of a commodity. Over time, the landscape identity can evolve into a sort of "logo" that can be used to sell the stories of the landscape. Thus, California's "wine country," Florida's "sun coast," or South Dakota's "badlands" shape how both outsiders and residents perceive a place, and these labels build a set of expectations associated with the culture of those who live there.

*Tourism Is Derived From Some Landscapes.* A significant motivator for viewing landscapes as commodities is the establishment of tourism, a community development strategy that many rural areas are adopting. The narratives that people create to understand their landscapes come to be viewed as marketable entities and a source of income for residents. Landscapes with a strong place identity have an advantage in marketing to tourists, as it is relatively easy to compartmentalize and market their narratives. Such places may have disadvantages as well, however (Krannich & Petrzelka, 2003). If place identity is tied to a particular industry, local residents may feel strongly attached to the definitions of place that stem from involvement in that industry, and they may resist losing that identity in favor of one based on a tourism industry (Walker & Fortmann, 2003). People rooted in landscape may feel close ties to other community members and may resent the incursion of outsiders whom they believe are different and challenge their common identity. Finally, local residents may feel that this process reduces their identities to mere commercial transactions, and they may believe they sacrifice what is unique and special about their place.

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## Constructing Landscapes

How do landscapes become commodities? We examine two case studies that illustrate these processes. First, we consider the case of the Mississippi Delta, a region that has been characterized by internal divisions over racial identity. These divisions have produced very different perceptions of the meaning of the landscape. For many white residents, the land is a source of wealth. For many black

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residents, it represents oppression. An emerging tourism industry has the potential to unite these groups. We then examine the construction of landscape identity in the Flint Hills region of Kansas, a case that shows how interaction with outside forces can galvanize community action and reshape a region's identity. In Kansas, opposition to the federal government united local residents, but then efforts to reshape the landscape brought about an alliance with the government and a new sense of meaning to local residents.Finally, we describe a service-learning project in the Delta that aimed to reshape perceptions of the landscape and bring about racial reconciliation.

## The Mississippi Delta: Race and Landscape

Landscapes take on different meanings for different groups, meanings that are historically produced. Community developers generally can work more effectively if they understand the historical conditions in the communities they serve. For example, in places with strong cultural divides, the meaning that competing groups assign to the landscape can serve to accentuate the differences between the groups.

The Mississippi Delta is a 7,000-square-mile floodplain in the northwest corner of the state of Mississippi. The Delta's culture is rooted in cotton production and plantation agriculture (Cobb, 1992). This was, perhaps, inevitable, given the region's natural history and the level of technology available at the time the land was first settled. For millennia, the waters of the Mississippi River spread out across the Delta landscape during its periodic flood phase, depositing rich and extraordinarily deep alluvial topsoils and carving the unusually flat landscape. The floods shaped the vegetative cover, consisting of bottomland hardwood forests dominated by species such as oak, sweet gum, cottonwood, willow, and bald cypress, and thick patches of bamboo-like plants known as cane breaks (Eyre, 1980). The dense vegetation inhibited human settlement, as did the threat of diseases such as malaria and yellow fever, and the dangers posed by wild animals. Most difficult, however, was the frequent flooding (Saikku, 2005). As Asch (2008) described it,

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> Clearing the land required excruciating, time-consuming labor with handsaws and axes (not until the 1940s did gas-powered chain saws come into use). Teams of men and mules struggled to drain the bogs, saw down centuries-old cypress trees, and burn the remaining stumps to prepare the land for cotton cultivation. (p. 67)

It was hard to get a foothold and survive at a level above hunting and gathering in this swampy landscape.

As a result, farming arrived to the Delta late in the country's history. After the cotton gin was introduced in 1793, cotton production became highly profitable and expanded rapidly around the South. The plantation system was firmly entrenched at this point, although most farms were still small, family-run efforts. But planters, who had slaves to do the hard labor of clearing the Delta's forest, moved into the region in the 1820s and 1830s, first settling the high lands near the Mississippi River (Tompkins, 1901). They expanded across the landscape and organized to build an increasingly sophisticated series of levies to hold the river's floodwaters at bay beginning around the middle of the 19th century. African American labor was crucial to clearing the forests and building and maintaining the levees. Even after slavery was abolished, forest clearing and levee building continued, and African American tenants continued to supply the labor to carry out these rigorous tasks.

The plantation system shaped not only the region's demographics, but also its distribution of status, wealth, and power. The African descendants formed the majority of the population from the beginning. The plantations established a rigid system of polarized stratification, in which the vast majority of the fruits of the slave labor went to the white planters. Each plantation operated as a small empire, outside the system of rational law and administration that was developing elsewhere. Following emancipation and a brief period of reconstruction, a long period of repression ensued to maintain the rigid race-based hierarchy in the Delta, which supported the local system of production (Blackmon, 2008; Cobb, 1992). Black residents were relegated to sharecropping or tenant farming, and Jim Crow law and politics ensured that African Americans stayed on the plantations as cheap labor. The Jim Crow system was enforced by the white elite, using a mixture of paternalism, violence, and a rigged legal system, which invariably ceded to the will of the planters (Asch, 2008). The plantations served to concentrate substantial power and influence in the hands of the landowners, and consistently marginalized the black labor force by systematically denying rights and opportunities.

The conditions produced by this system shaped perceptions of the land and nature in the Delta. Today, race relations remain strained. A report on the region prepared by the Housing Assistance Council (2002) described the situation:

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> The experience of enslaved Africans and of generations of African Americans in the region is in many ways the defining characteristic of the Delta. Wealthy landowners bought African slaves to cultivate the land in order to make a fortune in the cotton industry. For enslaved Africans, the Delta was notoriously the worst place in America to be a slave... White landowners ... were forced to coexist with a people they both feared and depended on for their wealth. This uneasy situation, racial animosity combined with forced proximity, set the tone for tense race relations in the Delta. (p. 84)

Although the civil rights movement has made many gains, and today African Americans hold most of the local and county political offices around the Delta, racial stratification and racial bigotry remain. Wealth is highly polarized, and the region has one of the highest rates of poverty in the United States, with African Americans at high risk of poverty. Substantial power is still concentrated in land ownership, and perceptions and beliefs about the landscape continue to reflect the region's history in many ways. The challenging natural landscape shaped the course of history in the Delta, leading to the polarizing parallel racial cultures found in the Delta today (Duncan, 1999). The service-learning case study discussed later illustrates how racial identity is embedded in the landscape and shapes people's interactions, and highlights how nature tourism could serve as a uniting force in the Delta.

*Tourism in the Delta.* In the early 21st century, the Delta is in the process of building a tourism industry. This may seem strange for an area that is poor, isolated, and rural, as these characteristics are probably not what most tourists are looking for. But the Delta's unusual and at times tragic history has produced a number of compelling stories of triumph over adversity, as well as highly marketable commodities. Most significant is the region's reputation as the "birthplace of the blues," a musical form that recounted many of the hardships that African Americans experienced in the plantation system. Blues stories shaped the identity of the Delta and today resonate with many potential tourists, who also are willing to visit blues clubs and purchase blues recordings. The State of Mississippi

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has embraced blues tourism with a series of special historic markers along a Blues Heritage Trail, and with a number of blues-oriented museums and events throughout the year.

Blues stories are intimately woven into the cultural fabric of the Delta and provide a unique opportunity to attract tourists to the region. But the blues stories in many ways derive directly from the landscape, which spurred the plantation system. Other natural features in the landscape are ripe for tourism development as well. The Mississippi River along the western boundary of the Delta is a substantial draw and closely tied to the regional identity. The Delta also provides world-class hunting and fishing experiences, and the story of cotton cultivation provides many opportunities for agricultural tourism. All relate directly to the landscape and the identity of the residents, a fact that community developers can build on in cultivating a tourism industry in the region.

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## The Flint Hills: Constructing a Common Landscape

As in the Mississippi Delta, the population of most rural counties in the state of Kansas has been declining steadily throughout the 20th century. Since the 1980s farm crisis, low prices for agricultural commodities have furthered ongoing farm loss, farm consolidation, and economic decline. In addition, resource extractive industries (especially oil) have been in decline, contributing to dramatic population losses across the Great Plains (Johnson & Rathge, 2006). As a result, many rural communities in Kansas face school consolidation, inadequate access to health and social services, and loss of local businesses (Hamilton, Hamilton, Duncan, & Colocousis, 2008).

Many of these communities are eager to reinvigorate their local economies, and some are trying to capitalize on the unique cultural and natural amenities their region offers. The Flint Hills landscape in north central Kansas offers an instructive case study of one such effort at revitalization. Historically, the prairies of the Flint Hills region were valued for their productive qualities, but more recently, changing values have converted the Flint Hills into an object of visual "consumption" and made the region into an object for tourism and local economic development.

This transition cannot be understood without reviewing the context that produced the current conditions (Table 3.1). The region first became known as the Flint Hills in the early 19th century, named for the flint-like chert stones that glinted through the tall prairie grasses. In this nearly treeless region, big bluestem grass nourished by minerals in the limestone grew so tall as to obscure the horizon (Middendorf, Cline, & Bloomquist, 2008). The lush grass drew herds of buffalo that the native hunters followed, but beginning in the mid-1800s, cattle rapidly replaced the buffalo and homesteaders displaced the Indians. Because its rocky soil made plowing difficult but cattle grazing was viable, the Flint Hills region retained much of its original character (Middendorf et al., 2008).

Ecologists have had a long-standing interest in the Flint Hills because they contain the largest contiguous tract of tall-grass prairie left in North America. Recently, others have taken notice as well. In April 2007, *National Geographic* magazine featured the Flint Hills in a cover story titled "Splendor of the Grass" (Klinkenborg, 2007). Soon thereafter, an article in the *New York Times* travel section described the region as follows: "Seemingly endless, the landscape offers up isolated images—a wind-whipped cottonwood tree, a rusted cattle pen, a spindly windmill, an abandoned limestone schoolhouse, the metal-gated entrance to a hilltop cemetery" (Rubiner, 2007). *National Geographic* photographer and local booster Jim Richardson proclaimed, "The Flint Hills should never play second fiddle to our nation's most recognized landmark landscapes" (Kansas Department of Commerce, 2008).

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Table 3.1 **Time Line of Important Dates in Flint Hills**

| Date | Event | Principal Actors |
|---|---|---|
| 1920s–1950s | Ongoing modest efforts to establish a prairie park | Conservationists, ecologists |
| 1960s | Opposition to national prairie park due to antigovernment sentiments | Local Flint Hills residents, especially those who were displaced by earlier federal projects |
| 1970s | Proposal for legislation to create a prairie park is opposed | Governor of Kansas, environmental groups support prairie park; Kansas Livestock Association opposes it |
| 1970s | Manhattan Citizens for Tallgrass National Park is formed and lobbies for a landmark commemorating ranching heritage and preserving area for conservation | Environmentalists, local citizens |
| 1970s | Kansas Grassroots Association (KGA) is formed to oppose any park idea | Ranchers and landowners |
| 1975 | Kansas legislature passes bill requesting U.S. Congress to reject authorization of a Tallgrass Prairie Park in Flint Hills, while support among conservationists grows | Kansas legislature, with support of KGA, continues to express antigovernment involvement |
| 1988 | Private conservation organization offers to buy ranch in Flint Hills to establish a park, with National Park Service (NPS) as manager; locals agree to private ownership; National Park Trust (public-private entity) is formed | Audubon Society; National Park Service |
| 1996 | Tallgrass Prairie Preserve is designated; National Park Trust created | National Park Service and conservation organization |
| 2004 | The Nature Conservancy (TNC) purchases land; management will be joint public-private | TNC owns land; TNC, NPS, and KS Park Trust jointly manage land |
| 2005 | Flint Hills Scenic Byway created; Scottish Power proposes industrial wind | Flint Hills Tourism Coalition, along with KS Department of |

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|---|---|---|
| | farm; "Protect the Flint Hills" campaign and Flint Hills tourism begins | Transportation; 22 counties in Flint Hills |
| 2009 | Flint Hills Heritage Conference is held; local organizations come together to promote the Flint Hills landscape as international tourist destination | Many local governments and tourism groups |

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Local interest in preserving and promoting the Flint Hills landscape would have been unpredictable based on past history. Battles between local residents, between conservation and agriculture interests, and between state and federal agencies were ongoing throughout the 20th century over the costs and benefits of preserving the prairie. The battle lines were drawn between those who wanted the Flint Hills to remain in private ownership for productive uses versus those who wanted to preserve it as a public good. In short, the cleavages divided agriculture and environmental interests, and local and national interests. How these groups came together and now are jointly promoting the landscape provides an interesting case study in community development.

Starting in the 1920s, natural scientists expressed alarm at how quickly the ecologically important prairie ecosystem was disappearing. Their concerns were overshadowed by the more pressing issues of the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl, however, and efforts to establish a "prairie park" were thwarted (Conard, 1998). Modest efforts continued in the subsequent decades but again were sidelined by more important issues, such as World War II. Between the 1930s and the 1950s, advocates focused their attention on tallgrass prairie—what they viewed as "true prairie"—and considered various sites across the Great Plains to establish a prairie national park.

By 1960, the National Park Service recommended developing a large park near Manhattan, Kansas, based on several criteria: acreage; the topography, drainage systems, vegetation, and wildlife species were typical of a prairie ecosystem; the site was free of intrusions; and the site had sufficiently scenic qualities. Even at this early stage, local residents began to take sides for or against the establishment of the prairie park. The opposition was shaped in part by an earlier flood control dam project, which some locals perceived as a federal land grab. Ranchers and farmers also felt the National Park Service had excluded them from the planning process for the dam. Thus, the dam project pitted many locals against the federal government in general. Over the ensuing years, several park proposal bills were defeated in subcommittees by opposition from local landowners and congressmen from western states. Although public interest in the prairie park was growing, no further federal legislation was introduced in the 1960s.

In 1970, the governor of Kansas appointed an advisory committee, which brought environmental groups, the Prairie National Park Natural History Association, universities, newspapers, and many individuals together to ask for the introduction of legislation to create a prairie park. The Kansas Livestock Association led the opposition and instead proposed a 600-mile "prairie parkway" driving tour along existing highways in the Flint Hills. In an effort to unite agriculturalists and environmentalists, the Manhattan Citizens for Tallgrass National Park was formed and lobbied for creating a landmark commemorating the ranching heritage of the region along with a prairie ecosystem preserve. An alternate proposal of an "integrated park system" was put forth by a Kansas representative who thought that a large expanse of prairie park alone would not attract enough tourists to offset the loss of property tax revenue. This idea further polarized the opposing sides, with environmentalists favoring the park while ranchers and landowners organized against it, forming a group they called the Kansas Grassroots Association (KGA).

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Throughout the 1970s, Kansas remained divided over the issue, and in 1975, the Kansas legislature overwhelmingly passed a bill requesting that Congress reject authorization of a tallgrass prairie park in the Flint Hills. Again, there was a strong antigovernment rationale for opposing the park; opponents claimed that the federal government already controlled large amounts of property in the state (apparently military reservations and reservoirs) and that a national park would remove too much land from property tax collection. Meanwhile, support for a prairie park was growing throughout the rest of the country, as national environmental and conservation organizations began to galvanize around the idea. In a major concession to agriculture interests, the legislation proposed creation of a "tourway-parkway" that the federal government would not acquire directly, but would jointly manage with state and local government and private conservation organizations. These proposals were still rejected by the KGA, whose members stated: "Preserve, reserve or whatever it's called, it's a park. We oppose a national park in Kansas," and "the Flint Hills would either become an 'uninhabited no-man's land' or a 'tourist trap complete with curio shops and hot dog stands' if H.R. 5592 passed" (Conard, 1998, p. 28). They continued to express serious reservations about additional federal land ownership in the state.

In 1988, the idea of a prairie park resurfaced with proposals that highlighted public-private management partnerships. The National Audubon Society offered to purchase a 10,000-acre historic ranch in the Flint Hills and share management responsibilities with the National Park Service. Ranchers agreed to private ownership of the land but were still wary of federal involvement. A spokesperson for the Kansas Livestock Association stated, "There is just a deep-seated philosophy in the Flint Hills that the government should not own land" (Conard, 1998, p. 33). Over the next few years, as the National Park Service funded a feasibility study, the KGA, the Kansas Livestock Association, and the Farm Bureau escalated opposition to federal landownership. The National Parks and Conservation Organization entered the arena by creating the National Park Trust, a nonprofit land trust that would keep the ranch in private ownership but enter into a relationship to have the National Park Service manage the property. But to do so, the federal government needed to own a minimum of 180 acres, so in 1996, the 180-acre Tallgrass Prairie Preserve was designated. Various interest groups were organized into an advisory committee to make recommendations concerning the management and development of the Tallgrass Preserve. In 2004, the Nature Conservancy purchased the land and assumed ownership of the preserve, with the National Park Service maintaining management control. This unique public-private partnership coordinates land management responsibilities between the Nature Conservancy, the National Park Service, and the Kansas Park Trust (The Nature Conservancy, 2009).

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Since the Tallgrass National Preserve was finally established in 1996, the growth in the number of organizations devoted to the preservation and commoditization of the Flint Hills landscape has been phenomenal. The Flint Hills Scenic Byway was designated in 2005. Then, a proposal in 2005 by Scottish Power to install industrial-scale wind farms in the Flint Hills was fought vociferously by locals, national environmental organizations (especially the Nature Conservancy), and the state government, and galvanized them to form the "Protect the Flint Hills" campaign. The proposal was withdrawn, and opposition remains strong to any development of wind farms in the Flint Hills. Maintaining an undeveloped Flint Hills landscape for its scenic value and the public good has become the dominant objective in this region that was long dominated by commercial interests and the value of private property rights.

In 2005, the Flint Hills Tourism Coalition began with a mission of increasing "the economic base of the region and the state through the promotion and marketing of the Kansas Flint Hills" (Flint Hills Tourism Coalition, 2008, p. 48). The organization promotes the

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the promotion and marketing of the Kansas Flint Hills" (Flint Hills Tourism Coalition, 2008, p. 48). The organization promotes the Flint Hills as "one of the few places left in the world that hasn't changed since [the dawn of time]" and "an unblemished experience of nature's magnificence" (Flint Hills Tourism Coalition, 2008, pp. 16-17). The organization is now working with the Kansas Department of Transportation in the design and creation of gateway monuments, and is exploring the feasibility of establishing a visitor's center and a national heritage site. A Flint Hills Heritage Conference was held in 2009 to bring together local groups to "identify the common threads of our shared heritage" (Flint Hills Tourism Coalition, 2009, p. 1). The Flint Hills Tourism Council has branded the Kansas Flint Hills as "The Grassroots of America," placing large markers along highways to signal you have entered the region. Twenty-two counties in central Kansas now claim to be located in the Flint Hills region and are attempting, through the Flint Hills Tourism Coalition, to promote the Kansas Flint Hills as an "international tourism destination as a means of economic development of our region" (Flint Hills Tourism Coalition, 2009, p. 4).

The Flint Hills case illustrates how conflicting visions of development can be drawn together by focusing on landscape. Historically, the region was divided between advocates of productive versus consumptive uses, public versus private ownership, or local versus federal control, but the designation of a national prairie preserve offers a new conception of landscape as a conservation area that highlights the ranching heritage of the region. By shifting focus to a landscape that incorporated a variety of resources, organizers were able to craft a partnership that included public and private interests and national and local voices, which afforded a compromise between long-standing opposing interests. Now residents are able to capitalize on the landscape for local economic development.

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## Service-Learning

Both the Flint Hills of Kansas and the Delta region of Mississippi are creating tourism industries, but efforts have been complicated by conflicting interpretations of local heritage and differing visions of how to best develop local resources. Both have settled on public-private partnerships—the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve, created in 1996, and the Mississippi Delta National Heritage Area, another federal public-private format, designated in early 2009. In the Delta, small-scale tourism development efforts focusing on the blues and civil rights have incorporated racial reconciliation as a key goal.Here we illustrate how racial differences in attitudes are shaped by the natural landscape, using a case study of three communities near a small national wildlife refuge in the northwestern Delta. Insights about race and landscape were generated from a service-learning project carried out by graduate students studying sustainable development at a nearby university. Service-learning involves using community service to provide learners with practical experience, engage them in active learning, illustrate important concepts, and bring particular learning objectives to life. As Simons and Cleary (2006) note, service-learning is distinguished from community service, volunteerism, and other forms of experiential learning by the intention to benefit learners and service recipients equally. The case illustrates how race becomes acculturated and shapes interactions with the landscape.

The service-learning project was carried out in conjunction with the Dahomey National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) and a nonprofit "friends group" that collaborates with the refuge on educational projects. This federally protected sanctuary conserves 9,691 acres of forest and wetland ecosystems, including the largest remaining tract of bottomland hardwood forest in the northern Mississippi Delta (U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, 2009). The refuge provides habitat for migratory waterfowl species and other wildlife, and opportunities for day hikes, hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, and photography. The refuge manager periodically engages students and teachers in educational activities and has a variety of materials that are available to local teachers (Barton & Atchison, 2007).

Dahomey NWR was designated in 1990, and prior to this, the land was occupied by the Benoit Hunting Club, a private facility that was widely known by residents in the area. Like many facilities in the Mississippi Delta in the past, the Benoit Hunting Club admitted only whites to hunt on its lands, even though 63% of the county population was African American in 1990 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). White residents still recall the hunt club fondly; one said, "you can't believe the amount of money [the hunt club] brought into this area. People from all over came here to hunt!" (Barton & Atchison, 2007, p. 4). Before the Benoit Hunting Club, the area belonged to the Dahomey Plantation, originally established in the 1830s. A portion of the Dahomey Plantation still exists today. The image of the plantation serves as a reminder to local black residents of an oppressive past.

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The project was conducted in three communities surrounding Dahomey NWR. Partnering groups included the refuge manager, a friends group dedicated to the refuge, and the campus geospatial information technologies (GIT) lab. Each student worked with classmates in one of the three communities, but within each community, each student had a unique role, and students also worked with those who had the same role in the two other communities. The community coordinator established ties with community leaders and developed a strategy to collect data in the community, including demographic data. The goal was to assess how community members perceived Dahomey NWR, although specific research questions were left up to the three community coordinators working together. The community coordinators used focus group interviews to gather information from community members. The education coordinator contacted teachers and school personnel to assess the potential for collaboration between schools and Dahomey NWR. Education coordinators in the three communities worked together to identify common themes and collect a common set of data. The environment coordinator collaborated with the refuge manager at Dahomey NWR and with the Friends of Dahomey to identify areas of concern and opportunities for local communities at the refuge. Dahomey refuge is small, so it was important to understand how much interaction between the refuge and surrounding communities was possible and desirable. The geographic information systems (GIS) coordinators were responsible for pulling together the information from the other group members, organizing it into a GIS database, and developing ways of communicating findings to communities and to refuge personnel. A GIS course was set up to provide access to the GIT lab and the instructors, and it was recommended that the GIS coordinators sign up for this course. Students also had the opportunity to sign up for a regular GIS instructional course to learn more about using geospatial information technologies.

Findings from the service-learning project revealed a substantial amount of resentment toward the wildlife refuge among community residents. This is not unusual, as protected areas frequently provoke strong feelings in nearby communities. What was interesting was how attitudes about the refuge carried racial meaning. Recent research suggests that African Americans visit federal protected areas less than other racial and ethnic groups (Johnson, Bowker, Green, & Cordell, 2007; Mangun, Degia, & Davenport, 2009). This finding also holds true generally for the Mississippi Delta (Barton, 2007), as shown in Table 3.2. In a 2005 telephone survey of randomly selected residents of 11 Delta counties, black respondents reported visiting both state and federal protected areas at a significantly lower rate than white respondents. The same result held for private hunting clubs, as well as for one type of cultural site, those related to literature and authors. There was no significant racial difference in visits to other heritage tourism sites, such as historic churches, or

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blues-related sites such as clubs, festivals, and museums. African American respondents reported visiting civil rights sites at a significantly higher rate than whites.

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Table 3.2 Percent of Residents of 11 Delta Counties Who Have Visited Various Heritage Tourism Sites at Least Once in the Past Year

| | *Blues Club or Blues Festival* | *Blues Museum or Other Blues Site* | *Literary Museum or Literary Site* | *Civil Rights Museum or Site* | *Historic Church* | *Private Hunting Club* | *National Park, Forest, or Wildlife Refuge* | *State Park, Forest, or Wildlife Management Area* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| All Respondents | 32.0 | 22.6 | 17.9 | 26.4 | 22.8 | 15.1 | 30.3 | 52.9 |
| White | 32.6 | 23.4 | 22.7 | 19.9 | 20.9 | 33.3 | 37.3 | 66.9 |
| Black | 31.3 | 21.6 | 15.2 | 30.3 | 23.4 | 4.4 | 25.3 | 44.4 |

SOURCE: From a telephone survey conducted in February 2005 (Barton, 2007).

In the communities near Dahomey, almost all of the community leaders, residents, and educators who were interviewed were aware of the refuge, but knowledge of the refuge's purpose varied. A common perception was that the refuge continued to exclude African Americans and other minorities. As one informant expressed, "I've always thought it was a private hunting club where just white guys could go" (Barton & Atchison, 2007, p. 4). Historic patterns of exclusion persisted in residents' minds, even more than a decade and a half after the refuge was established. The federal government certainly bears some responsibility for this. Naming the refuge after a local plantation certainly did not show sensitivity to the area's majority population. In addition, as one informant noted, "When you drive through and see the no trespassing signs posted, it's obvious they don't want you there" (Barton & Atchison, 2007, p. 5). The refuge manager and friends group have taken up this challenge and are coordinating community outreach efforts to include more local residents, particularly schoolchildren, in the refuge's activities. In addition, the results from this project motivated a service-learning project in another class that aimed to increase environmental education in one of the study communities. Continued efforts like this are necessary to build a climate that is conducive to nature-based tourism in the region.

### Preparing Students for Community Development

Activities carried out in university classes are often overlooked as community development, yet how instructors prepare students i perhaps one of the strongest forms of community development. More and more, students are seeking opportunities to engage in service and instructors can encourage this by incorporating service activities into their courses (Rimer, 2008). As illustrated here, service learning provides opportunities to better understand the linkages between landscape and community, and can also serve to strengthen those linkages. The results of this service-learning project were presented at a public meeting held on campus at the end of the semester. Students also collaborated to prepare a report detailing the results to distribute to the schools, communities, and the refuge. The professor organized the results into a poster, which has shown at regional conferences. The instructor has also used this project as a case study in conference presentations on the scholarship of teaching and learning. Educational projects like this can serve a broader community development agenda if results are distributed to participants and others.

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## Conclusions

Community development is fundamentally a process of building relationships, institutions, and culture, which shapes the personalities, worldviews, and identities of community members. But communities are located in places and are influenced by the specific characteristics of the landscape on which the community is embedded. Landscapes both shape and reflect the local culture, as illustrated in the case studies on Kansas's Flint Hills and the Mississippi Delta. The meaning that groups assign to landscapes can serve to produce conflict and suppress efforts at community development, or landscapes can serve as uniting features and produce a sense of shared meaning and community among various groups. Community developers can enhance opportunities and possibilities if they recognize that landscapes unite diverse resources and take on their own meaning, and work to produce common meanings that unite landscape and community.

Public officials have many tools that they can use to shape people's understanding and perception of landscapes, but traditional tools such as legislation and regulation are coercive in nature. When a public entity designates a park, wildlife reserve, or conservation area, they not only affect the natural resources in the area, they also affect local residents and communities. Protected areas have economic impacts, but also alter how residents think about their home. Community developers who work for public agencies must use these tools carefully, as shown in the Kansas case study, because they risk alienating local populations and eroding the legitimacy of government if their actions are perceived as abusive. Partnering with local private organizations has made federal interventions more palatable in both the Kansas and Mississippi cases.

Community developers who work for private organizations face different issues. Local businesses and nonprofit groups often enjoy support from residents as they are seen as representing and defending local interests. But they may only represent the interests of th dominant group, at the expense of marginalized groups, as the Delta case illustrates. The Benoit Hunting Club and Dahomey Plantatio enjoyed substantial support among the region's white residents, but because these groups were built on fundamentally unfair principle that systematically excluded most of the area's residents based on the color of their skin, they engendered a deep and long-standing resentment that has carried over to the federal agency that now manages the same land.Private organizations by their nature represent

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the interests of specific groups, but exist in broader communities and must recognize the broader implications of their activities. Community developers in private organizations must be aware of the larger context and incorporate these insights into the decisions and activities of their organizations.

Landscapes can serve important functions as the basis of community identity, which can be marketed to tourists. The development of a tourism industry can offer many economic development opportunities, but as the case studies reviewed here emphasize, tourism also brings opportunities for community development. Tourism frequently relies on an identification with landscape, which motivates people to look beyond historic conflicts and draw together based on both their own and their community's interests. In designing community development strategies, organizers can enhance their efforts by constructing new visions of the local landscape.

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