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2 The Marsh of Modernity

The Bog in our Brains and Bowels

Edward H. Huijbens & Gisli Palsson

Abstract
Wetlands occur practically everywhere, on every continent, in every zone and biome, in all shapes and sizes. Despite their massive scale, they have usually remained marginal in social discourse. This is reflected in the fact that in only a century humans have reduced global wetland areas by 50%, in the name of modernization and progress, without much concern or debate. Towards the end of the 20th century, however, wetland areas began to be recognized as constituting some of the most sensitive and useful areas on Earth. This chapter focuses on the social history and understandings of wetlands in Iceland. Through literature reviews, map analysis and field work in four wetland areas in Iceland, the research here presented aims at linking current environmental discourse with wetlands and how they have been understood and dealt with through history. The conclusion is that nature is increasingly being remade through technology, becoming more and more made by and through human activities. This fact is becoming ever more pertinent with current issues of climate change. Therefore attention has to be paid to the analysis of the perceptions, attitudes, and relations of those who are in close contact with nature in order to unravel this constitution. This chapter seeks to contribute this type of analysis in terms of wetlands, a key climate change indicator.

Keywords: landscape biography, Iceland, landscapes, wetlands, modernism

Introduction

Nature is unruly, continually causing problems through flooded rivers and perfect storms and, of course, receding glaciers and global warming. In the modernist language of mainstream ecology, things spin out of control, beyond steady states and tipping points. While some of these events may be less surprising than they used to be, they often pose spectacular problems for human society and, as a result, demand close attention and concerted action. Wetlands have repeatedly provided apt examples, refusing to “behave”. Representing a substantial part of the earth’s land surface (about 6%), wetlands occur practically everywhere, on every continent (except Antarctica), in every zone and biome, in all shapes and sizes. Two wetland areas are in excess of 1 million km², seven are in the order of 100,000 to 400,000 km², other wetland areas are smaller. Despite their massive scale, wetlands have usually remained marginal or liminal in social discourse. This is reflected in the fact that in only a century humans have reduced global wetland areas by 50% (Fraser & Keddy, 2005, p. 448), without much discussion. Towards the end of the 20th century, however, wetland areas began to be recognized as constituting some of the most sensitive and useful areas on Earth. Focusing on Iceland, this chapter discusses the social history and understanding of wetlands (for the comparative literature on wetlands, see e.g. Giblett, 1996; Strang, 2005).

In an attempt to move beyond modernist definitions of ecosystems highlighting linearity and equilibria, the ecologists Fikret Berkes and Carl Folke suggest a definition which ‘emphasizes conditions in which disturbances (or perturbations) can flip a system from one equilibrium state to another. In this case, the important measure of resilience is the magnitude or scale of disturbance that can be absorbed before the system changes in structure by the change of variables and processes that control system behaviour’ (Berkes & Folke, 1998, p. 12; for a fuller discussion see: Hastrup, 2009). While such a definition in terms of systemic states is still somewhat modernist, it does allow for uncertainty and fleeting boundaries. One thing to note is precisely the openness and relativity of any demarcation of environmental systems. After all, environmental interactions and ecological processes usually eschew geographical confinement and, inevitably, systemic boundaries are somewhat arbitrarily defined for specific human purposes rather than ‘written’ in the organic world. Not only are the boundaries of ecosystems relative, depending on the scale of action and observation, but they also stretch across both natural and social space, conflating the key terms of dualist, modernist thought.
(Descola & Palsson, 1996; Palsson, 2006). Once seen as entirely beyond the human domain, climate is now known to become increasingly artificial, a byproduct of human activities. The floods in the wake of hurricane Katrina, partly at least the result of human engagement with the marshes of Louisiana, is a case in point. Any discussion of wetlands, we suggest, and of environmental issues more generally, needs to move beyond narrow definitions of the ecosystem, taking into account the mutual interdependence of human activities and the communities and environments in which they are embedded.

Nature as We Know It

Etymologically derived from the words *natura* (‘the course of things’) and *nascere* (‘to be born’), the concept of ‘nature’ is a product of Latin translations of the Greek word *physis*. Usually ‘nature’ (and the ‘environment’) has connoted that which is given from birth or independent of human activities. Nature, then, is often presented as one half of a pair – nature/culture, the natural/the social – in opposition to the ‘artificial’ products of human labour. Highlighting such distinction, the ecosystem approach increasingly seems analytically restrictive and conceptually problematic, although early on it represented important advances. For one thing, it tends to relegate human perception and social discourse to the margin.

Attempting to redress the balance, in the context of wetlands research, the anthropologist Veronica Strang (2005) suggests, drawing upon phenomenological approaches emphasizing direct perception, that while human sensory and perceptual engagements with water are necessarily informed by particular ‘cultural landscapes and engagements with water’, it seems that human bodily experience of water exhibits many common characteristics:

> Common human physiological and cognitive processes provide sufficient experiential continuity to generate common undercurrents of meaning. These undercurrents persist over time and space – inter-generationally and inter-culturally (Strang, 2005, p. 115).

We would argue, along with Strang, that the experience of water and wetlands poses similar challenges and opportunities for humans irrespective of culture and context. Arguably, however, the global environmental crisis presents unprecedented challenges to human cognition and discourse. Some of these challenges relate to the limits of direct perception and
our inevitable reliance on virtual representations: as the environmental historian William Cronon (1996, p. 47) notes,

Some of the most dramatic environmental problems we appear to be facing ... exist mainly as simulated representations in complex computer models of natural systems. Our awareness of the ozone hole over the Antarctic, for instance, depends very much on the ability of machines to process large amounts of data to produce maps of atmospheric phenomena that we ourselves could never witness at first hand. No one has ever seen the ozone hole. However real the problem may be, our knowledge of it cannot help being virtual.

Another challenge to those concerned with the environment relates to the non-modern or ‘postmodern’ recognition that observers of the environmental crisis and the languages available to them are necessarily embedded in the world they observe. The critical interrogation by the humanities and the social sciences of central concepts in current environmental debates is essential; without it, there would be no way of knowing whether we are on the ‘right’ track. While it is easy, however, to dismiss the virtualism of climate discourse as just one more social construction, postmodern critique is sometimes paralyzing and beside the point.

The scale of the environmental crisis and its global connections demands new kinds of social institutions and communities, robust and flexible enough to generate the necessary trust and cooperation. The demarcation of the environment as a domain for human concerns and coordination implies, it seems, new kinds of socialities and citizenship. As the anthropologist Bruno Latour emphasizes, the global-warming controversy demands a new and hybrid kind of politics: ‘The sharp difference that seemed so important between those who represent things and those who represent people has simply vanished’ (2003, p. 33) with the imbrications of nature with the distinct sphere consisting of a specific sort of phenomenon variously called “society”, “social order”, “social practice”, “social dimension”, or “social structure” (Latour, 2005, p. 3). One innovative perspective in this vein is that of the political scientist Arun Agrawal (2005, p. 8) who proposes the framework of environmentality, combining the notions of environment and governmentality to develop an approach to studying environmental politics that takes seriously the conceptual building blocks of power/knowledges, institutions, and subjectivities. The global nature of many environmental problems not only poses difficulties for mitigation, it also presents particular methodological problems for environmental researchers. As a consequence,
in recent years, a growing emphasis has been placed on the mutuality of the centre and periphery, with humanities scholars and social scientists increasingly advocating multi-sited fieldwork. Thus, in her discussion of environmental change in Indonesia the anthropologist Anna L. Tsing focuses on a series of sites – among NGOs, peasants, politicians, scientists, etc. – exploring ‘the productive friction of global connections’ (2005, p. 3). As the geographer Doreen Massey (2005, p. 163) states 'There are no rules of space and place'.

**Mapping the Marsh**

A manifestation of the imbrications of nature with the distinct spheres of ‘society’, ‘social order’, ‘social practice’, ‘social dimension’, or ‘social structure’ (Latour, 2005, p. 3) is the way in which wetlands are accounted for through the art of measuring land by names, or Earth-writing (Gren, 1994). Names are the illustrations of explanations that ‘in essence travel stories, infinite chains of metonymies in which one wor(l)d slides into another’ (Olsson, 2007, p. 67). While we would argue, along with Strang, that the experience of water and wetlands poses similar challenges and opportunities for humans irrespective of culture and context, the landscapes shown on maps necessarily reflect the pragmatic motives and social bonds of the map makers, their ideologies, and strife: ‘landscapes naturalise ideologies and social realities because they are so tangible, so natural, so familiar …’ (Winchester *et al*., 2003, p. 67). Indeed as the geographer Dennis Cosgrove points out (2006, p. 51), referring to his colleague Kenneth Olwig (2002): ‘... the pictorial in landscape incorporates a more visceral and experiential reference'. As we argued above, it is not enough to know nature; comparative ethnography is important too, drawing upon:

The extension of networks of knowing nature – which is in principle a complexifying process – is informed by a cartographic imaginary that actually transforms and perhaps limits complexity (Ellis & Waterton, 2005, p. 675).

The coordination of map illustration or cartographical reasoning endows the map with the strength of logical reasoning, but a closer examination also reveals that the lines on the map are wobbly, the coordination may not be there, the line as a form merely exists as a multitude of forms, indicating a complex topology of existential possibilities (Huijbens, 2006, p. 82).
In order to study meaning ‘the task is self-evident; study the particular coordinate net in which the clerics simultaneously captured and shaped their universe of material and social relations’ (Olsson, 2007, p. 65). With the cartographic overview and setting at a distance, the aim is to achieve an ‘initial flattening out of connections ... before meaning is teased out from a grid-like configuration of connections’ (Ellis & Waterton, 2005, p. 677). In maps the perception that people have of wetlands is embodied but at the same time, this perception depends on charts and map making:

It is crucial to stress ... that just as the map (of which the sign is merely a special case) is our privileged means for finding the way, so the travel story is the most effective device for transporting our imaginations from the utopian No-where to the actual Now-here; whenever I am saying "of course," what I am really saying is that I am on course, that I am steered the way by the compass of the taken-for-granted (Olsson, 2007, p. 7).

The complexity of the mind that controls the emphases applied by humans to map making, in relation to wetlands, is illustrative thereof. Work on definitions and demarcation to facilitate map making relies on daily interaction of parties with diverse backgrounds, who view wetlands in terms of different standards and criteria (Huijbens & Palsson, 2009). In this simplest of interpretations, the topos graphically represented in the map is continually being circulated through different minds in different times; in every episteme ‘transporting our imaginations from the utopian No-where to the actual Now-here’ (Olsson, 2007, p. 7, see also Latour, 1999).

‘Sweet is the Swamp’

Mapping is usually the first step of any inventory that accompanies problem identification. The recognition of the importance of wetlands is reflected in an international convention, signed in Ramsar in Iran in 1971, entitled Convention on Wetlands of International Importance. The Ramsar Convention contains provisions on action and international cooperation that contribute to the protection and intelligent utilization of wetlands. Currently, 158 countries have signed the convention. The key aspect of the Ramsar agreement is the identification and inventorying of wetlands, so identifying 1500 wetland areas in the world, all considered important in an international context. Three of these are in Iceland: Mývatn District in
Northeast Iceland, Þjórsárver in the highland interior, and Grunnafjörður in the western part of the country. The Ramsar Convention illustrates a certain global view of the ecological value of wetlands, whose manifestations may be worth studying in a local context.

With the Ramsar inventorying rationale, international studies go as far as to approximate the annual value of wetlands, given their ecosystem services and natural capital. The price tag is US $12.790 trillion, no less than one-third of the presumed total value for the world (Constanza et al., 1997). Dubious price-tagging aside, a metaphor frequently used with respect to wetlands is that of ‘biological supermarkets’, on the grounds that they are characterized by biological variety (proportionately large numbers of organisms) and substantial biomass (Fraser & Keddy, 2005). The assertion is also often made that wetlands are ‘biological machines’ (White, 1996) or ‘kidneys of the environment’ (Fraser & Keddy, 2005), a reference to the important metabolism that acts within them, purifying waste from humans and other organisms. In demonstrating their importance, Mitch, a prominent wetland ecologist, constructed an experimental wetland with two man-made ponds in the shape of kidneys to monitor wetland purification processes (see Fink & Mitch, 2007). As indicative of the rationale of the Ramsar agreement, the area and the ponds were listed in April 2008.

The ecological valuing sketched above draws its imagery from early Romantic traditions. In poetic and cosmic contemplation of thinkers such as Dante, Milton and Ibsen, wetlands represented the forum of evil. For them, wetlands were an infernal domain where disease and nefarious acts were rampant. Dante said that wetlands encircled four of the innermost circles of Hell, where heretics and those who deliberately lie and cheat are tortured till the day of doom. Staged in the Fens of England, the novel Waterland by Graham Swift, perhaps, offers a modern version of Dante’s approach. At the same time, it provides a series of intriguing observations of landscape and water:

Realism; fatalism; phlegm. To live in the Fens is to receive strong doses of reality. The great, flat monotony of reality; the wide, empty space of reality. Melancholia and self-murder are not unknown in the Fens. Heavy drinking, madness and sudden acts of violence are not uncommon. How do you surmount reality, children? How do you acquire, in a flat country, the tonic of elevated feelings? (Swift, 1983, p. 13). “Not to mince matters, children, and to offer you, in passing, an impromptu theory, sexuality reveals itself more readily, more precociously, in a flat land, in a watery prostration, than in, say, a mountainous or forested landscape, where
nature's own phallic thrustings inhibit man's, or in the landscape of towns and cities where a thousand artificial erections (a brewery chimney, a tower block) detract from our animal urges.” (Swift, 1983, p. 137).

Wetlands have also been seen as holy territory, as symbols of life and renewal. The protagonist of this reaction, as it were, was the philosopher and environmentalist Henry David Thoreau, sometimes referred to as the protector and lover of wetlands, who emphasized that our ideas about wilderness are always inspired by Nature as reflected within ourselves: ‘It is in vain to dream of a wilderness distant from ourselves, there is none such. It is the bog in our brain and bowels, the primitive vigor of Nature in us that inspires that dream’ (Thoreau, 1856; quoted in Prince, 1997, p. 337). To Thoreau, it is absurd merely to make room for Nature exclusively in our minds, since our guts generate the dream of Nature and the Wilderness. Emily Dickinson makes a similar point in her poem ‘Sweet is the swamp with its secrets.’ Addressing a potential editor in 1862, she wrote: ‘You ask of my companions. Hills, sir, and the sundown, and a dog large as myself … They are better than beings because they know, but do not tell: and the noise in the pool at noon excels my piano’ (1959, p. 7).

Literary criticism has for long theorized the relation of place and text, of oikos and literary representation. The warp and weft of literature as it is written, read, distributed and translated retains the historically dense and often discordant experiences of language and places in all their complexities. While place alone, professor emeritus of literature William Howarth suggests, does not inform literary imagination, ‘one locale stands out because it has a long history of ambiguous and also evolving cultural status: the wetland, in its manifold guises of bog, fen, marsh, or swamp’ (1999, p. 513). In combining literary criticism and the ecological view of natural scientists, Howarth emphasizes the importance of knowing nature, challenging the popular view of literature as imagined territory without any natural limits; ‘Only those who know little of nature’, he argues, ‘think imagination can surpass it’ (1999, p. 510). ‘Ecocriticism’, he goes on, ‘seeks new ways to concur with nature, to see it as environs, or surroundings, in which human lives transpire. If we include in our readings the wetlands with all their tangled shimmer of meanings, we will begin to imagine territory that has natural limits, for such places tell us what we may hold close, and what we must let go’ (Howarth, 1999, p. 533).

Elsewhere (see Huijbens & Palsson, 2009) we have demonstrated how a particular genre of representation, i.e. the landscapes shown on maps, necessarily reflect the pragmatic motives and social bonds of the map...
makers, their ideologies, and strife. We argue that it is indeed not self-evident what constitutes wetland, as Cosgrove points out (2006, p. 51): ‘... the pictorial in landscape incorporates a more visceral and experiential reference’. Arguably, it is not enough to know nature, in Howarth’s sense; comparative ethnography is important too. In line with this, the notion of ‘ecological anthropology’ popular in the 1970s and the 1980s seems to have been replaced by the more open-ended label of ‘environmental anthropology’ emphasizing the unity of humans and ‘that which surrounds’ (the etymological root of environ). The historian Donald Worster rightly suggests that ‘we ... have two histories to write, that of our own country and that of “planet Earth”, adding ‘when that larger planetary history gets fully written, it will surely have at its core the evolving relationship between humans and the natural world’ (1988, p. 6).

In the Bog

For centuries utilization of Icelandic wetlands has been subject to changes. From the time of settlement, Icelanders living on a wet-weather island have had to cope with wetlands, avoiding them or tailoring them to their needs, extracting peat from them, ferric oxide and plants for food and fodder. Simultaneously they have given them meaning through art, literature and mythology.

A cultural attitude to marshes can be detected in the Icelandic Sagas. Marshes are there described as both oases and treacherous obstacles. Hrafnkel’s Saga offers the following narrative:

They now ride westwards out of the lava field and then arrive at another marsh named Uxamýri. It is grassy. The area is very wet, so that it is barely passable for those unfamiliar with it (Halldórsson et al., 1987, p. 1413).

Vatnsdælasaga tells about a struggle in the middle of marshland between a man named Thórólfur and a Norwegian:

The Norwegian ran after him down towards Vatnsdal river. Thórólfur reached a point where there were deep pits or bogs. Thórólfur then turned against the man, seized him and placed him under his arm saying: ‘You are now instigating a race that we will both take part in and he ran into the bog, where they both sank and neither one came up (Halldórsson et al., 1987, p. 1877).
The marsh, here referred to as a fen, is grassy but barely passable. Those familiar with it can use it, even to get rid of unwelcome strangers. The Sagas, one may note, and indeed much Scandinavian mythology and literature (Hastrup, p. 1985), similarly often contrast, on the one hand, the wild and uninhabitable domain of mysterious beings and, on the other hand, the domesticated world of the farm or the estate, óðal, symbolically demarcated and protected by a fence.

Prominent in the dealings of the early Icelandic settlers with the land is a dual use, so to speak, of wetlands. Some of the best hayfields were associated with wetlands or river floodplains subjected to cyclical inundations, especially those of the glacial rivers, e.g. Hvítá in Borgarfjörður. Moreover, accounts of the wetland’s nefarious potential echo some of the notions of wetlands via Dante, Milton and later Ibsen. In more recent accounts, the barely passable fens are often veiled in humor, but tinged with seriousness. In a tale of his travels in 1862, the Californian John Ross Browne describes his trip to Þingvellir in the company of Geir Zoega (Magnússon, 1976). At the outset Browne had difficulty understanding why his guide consistently avoided what appeared to be easily traversable flatlands and persisted in laboriously climbing hills and slopes. At one point he decided to demonstrate how folks in the western parts of North America travel and he sallied forth into the flatlands, but his steed refused to continue when it reached the marshland. Finally, John managed to coax the horse to move but as soon as they were in the marsh they began to sink. Zoega’s speedy reaction enabled him to rescue the horse from drowning, but Browne had in the meantime found safety on a small hummock nearby.

When they were back on dry land and Zoega was scraping the mud off the horse, John commented: ‘It was rather wet out there.’ Zoega stoically replied: ‘Yes, sir […] that is why I was planning to go around it’ (Magnússon, 1976, p. 87). It is safe to assume that the Californian was not familiar with the old Icelandic proverb which roughly translates, ‘Better to go around than end up in the bog’ (Ic. betri er krókur en kelda). After this adventure, he describes the marshland as follows:

It is a strange feeling to look over such a stretch of land where the hummocks almost equal the height of a man. It is as if the treacherous ground had swallowed a group of bellicose Vikings, making their way through the wilderness, leaving them still standing there, covered up to their necks, with their ruffled heads exposed and defenseless against the elements.
You can often see human expressions on the hummocks and on moonlit nights, it does not require much imagination to see in them the phantoms of slayers struggling to get out of the swampland. Indeed, the ignorant farmers have, with their lively imaginative skills, endowed these phantoms with life and enjoy telling tales about their pranks on dark, foul weather nights, when the apparitions have allegedly been seen thrashing about and kicking in the swamp. Hoarse shrieks can be heard through the wind squalls and solitary travellers take a roundabout route so that those uncanny spectres, seeking companionship, do not pull them into the bogs (Magnússon, 1976, p. 88).

Drawing on other literary accounts of wetlands, Iceland’s Bell by Iceland’s only Nobel prize laureate in literature Halldór Laxness contains a lengthy account of an escapade in ‘ugly bogs’, meant to take place in the 18th century. It reads as follows:

It was after nightfall that men rode off from Galtarholt and they were all quite drunk. But because of the ale they had imbibed, they lost their way as soon as they were outside the home field wall, when they found themselves in rotting marshland with deep pits, swamps, ponds and peat bogs. This landscape seemed to have no end and the travellers wallowed in this entrance to Hell for the better part of the night (Laxness, 1943, p. 18-19).

In these two more recent writings, referred to above, the marshland is clearly the abode of evil, ‘entrance to Hell’ or the home of ‘uncanny specters’. This description also applies to the Icelandic Sagas cited, where the marsh serves as a place of good riddance for strangers, but therein on the other hand lies also a hint that Icelanders have always utilized wetlands for cutting grass and for grazing purposes. How the benefits of wetlands could be reaped came to the fore towards the end of the 18th century. The marsh gradually ceases to serve as material for tales about the infernal domain of dark deeds and fades into the shadow of logical reasoning and modernism.

**Grand Engineering**

The marsh that for long had been a concrete obstacle to travel later turned into an impediment to the ideology of modernism where humans in the
company of God were to shape the world to their needs (Glacken, 1967, p. 680 & 689). This can be gleaned from the detailed descriptions in the travel books of Eggert and Bjarni (Ólafsson & Palsson, 1978), Sveinn Palsson (1983) and Lord Stanley (1979) and also from the district descriptions of the 18th and 19th centuries, prepared at the behest of the Icelandic Literary Society. Along with these travel accounts, the first ever detailed accounting of land in Iceland in the Book of Farmlands by Árni Magnússon and Páll Vidalín (1982 [1703]), heralded the dawn of the Age of Enlightenment in Iceland. The descriptions of wetlands in the above travel accounts resemble in many ways the excerpt taken here from the travel book of Ólafur Olavius from 1775-1777:

Kaupangur Parish is ... grassy, but land there has gravely deteriorated because of marshes and ponds, which can possibly be drained, in a similar way that road improvements could be implemented there by building bridges and digging ditches (Olavius, 1965, p. 18).

Illuminated by the progressivism of the Enlightenment era, wetlands underwent more radical changes at the hands of humans than previously known. By innovative creativity in Icelandic agriculture in the past century and with the equipment then introduced (e.g. excavators, tractors and ground-leveling equipment) wetlands in most areas were drained. The use of powerful heavy equipment made it possible to manage wetlands, drain them, plan and bring order in accordance with current requirements relating to economy and profitability. For the proponents of modernism and progressivism the marsh is regarded as destructive to land and shameful, but the solution consists in digging ditches, much like the solution to transportation problems consists in road construction.

Many projects in Iceland and elsewhere have either not lived up to modernist expectations or proven to be dubious investments. Amongst them are many attempts by the Icelandic state authorities to gain control of marshlands, including large irrigation projects in the southern regions of Skeiðar and Flói (Kjartansson, 1988; see figures 2.1 and 2.2). Here, a grand engineering scheme was launched in 1914 with the financial aid of the national authorities, for the purpose of facilitating flexible management of water on individual farms and for increasing overall productivity in agriculture. An Icelandic engineer was in charge of the project, drawing upon plans developed by the Danish engineer Carl Thalbitzer. The project demanded massive funding, but the results were disappointing. Ironically, when the project was ‘completed’ it turned out to be more or less obsolete, due to other innovations in agriculture.
Figure 2.1  The grand engineering scheme of Southwest Iceland

Source: National Archives of Iceland

Figure 2.2  From the Flói irrigation system

Photo: Gísli Palsson
The drainage schemes were later heavily criticized, by, among others, Laxness (see, especially, his article ‘The Warfare Against the Land’, 1971). Eventually, the ‘reclaiming’ of land gave way to a strong social movement favoring the reclaiming and protecting of wetlands along the lines of the Ramsar Convention. Many of the regions heavily drained in the early decades have seen the rebirth of wetlands with renewed vegetation and bird colonies. This is the result of both government initiatives and those of NGOs (as were the drainage schemes before). In some contexts, wetlands have turned out to provide new opportunities for local communities. Thus, one of the communities in the Flói region engineered last century, Stokkseyri, now offers canoeing for tourists in the coastal wetlands (see figure 2.3).

The Scenic and the Unscenic

Indeed, an appreciation of the scenic is important (see Benediktsson, 2007 & 2008). The visual experience of landscape is meaningful, even going so far as to state that the mere glancing at it as the body is moved through the landscape involves a sensuous experience (Larsen, 2001). One important issue to emerge from recent discussions of wetlands is the aesthetic notion of the unsenic landscape and the resultant devaluation that tends to inform environmental practice and politics. The philosopher Holmes
Rolston emphasizes that for many people wetlands are by definition ugly: ‘A “beautiful bog” or a “pleasant mire” are almost a contradiction in terms. Mountains are sublime; swamps are slimy’ (2000, p. 584). Swift’s Waterland presents a nice example of the unscenic in the context of wetlands:

For what is water, children, which seeks to make all things level, which has no taste or colour of its own, but a liquid form of Nothing? And what are the Fens, which so imitate in their levelness the natural dispositions of water, but a landscape which, of all landscapes, most approximates Nothing? (Swift, 1983, p. 10).

Whereas Rolston (2002) challenges the notion that the landscape of wetlands ‘most approximates Nothing’, and is ready to see scenic beauty almost everywhere, another philosopher, Yuriko Saito, remains skeptical. The picturesque emphasis on vision, Saito argues, clearly reduces some parts of nature to being ‘scenically challenged’ and, moreover, the unscenic deserves more attention and appreciation. But on the other hand, she suggests, it makes no sense to claim that ‘everything in nature is aesthetically appreciable’ (2000, p. 109). Thus, wetlands constitute part of a larger pattern in nature. The literary interpretations of wetlands counter modernism by pointing out that not all is gained by the mechanization of agriculture and the resulting drainage of a substantial portion of marshes and wetlands. Wetlands are not necessarily the manifestation of evil or obstacles to progress.

In modern Iceland, wetlands can be seen in a variety of roles created by writers. The Mire by the novelist Arnaldur Indriðason (2000) and a film by the same name render the North Mire in Reykjavík the scene of crimes and nefarious acts. The novelists Guðmundur Danielsson (1981) and Halldór Laxness (1971), on the other hand, both write about wetlands as something very different from and much more significant than muddy bogs requiring drainage. Water, including its currents and flow, is, as professor emeritus of literature Helga Kress (2000) points out, an important and familiar theme both in Icelandic and foreign literature.

The fickleness of the self-image was the constant interest of the novelist Ásta Sigurðardóttir. In a book published in 1961, she describes the areas where she grew up, i.e., in the Hnappadalur valley area and in the Mire area. She says: ‘The Mire area is not particularly beautiful, as we generally understand the meaning of the word’ (1961, p. 13). Sigurðardóttir on the other hand talks about the ‘beauty of the marshland’: ‘blessed peace pervades the hilly marshland and the spirit of God hovers above the swamps in
the form of the plover that sings glory, glory’ (1961, p. 13). She describes the fragrance of the plants and the lovely colours of the marshland. She walks about the marsh and depicts how ‘the pitch black lye water billows up from each footprint’. It presumably was a valley bog, near the childhood home of Sigurðardóttir, which she walked through. Some Icelandic writers have described wetlands as inspirers of emotions, kindlers of both self-image contemplation and understanding of nature, in a manner similar to that described in the words of Thoreau: ‘This inimitable charm of the marshland simply oozes through you, especially when you are barefoot’ (Sigurðardóttir, 1961, p. 14).

To Conclude

In the last years, the writings of natural scientists have been directed to the ecological context of drainage and protection. ‘Reforms’ of wetlands have, on the one hand, initiated controversial ecological changes and, on the other hand, they have occasionally turned out to be anachronisms, of little use or even at odds with other innovations in agriculture (see e.g. Robertson, 2000, pp. 463-464). Many natural scientists have pointed out that wetland areas are very important in terms of climate and its changes (see e.g. in an Icelandic context, Ólafsson, 1998; Óskarsson & Guðmundsson, 2005). Little attention has, on the other hand, been paid to the analysis of the perceptions, attitudes, and relations of those who are in close contact with wetlands and involved in discussions about them, their drainage, reclamation, management and research thereof. In their writings, natural scientists often refer to the usefulness of wetlands. Thus modernism appears, but laced with ecological valuation that draws on a more holistic understanding. The progressive ethos remains, aiming to gain the perfect understanding in order to utilise and harness resources for human benefit. In the international context, the ambiguous relation between place and its literary representation, the dream of nature, and its generation are echoed in the expanded ecological understanding presented by Mitch. Partly with reference to the catastrophes in New Orleans in 2005, he explains how local urban development by its neglect of the needs of the water and the drainage projects of the wetlands surrounding the city, had actually caused these catastrophes, which will recur (see Mitch & Gosselink, 2007, p. 353). Mitch contends that in our approach to wetlands we must ‘think like water’ and realize that it will always find its way.
For the philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1988) deserts and water are examples of smooth space while the land, subject to the control of humans, is constantly striated, distributed and divided. Borders and property boundaries can be drawn on land, even in the form of walls. This is more difficult at sea, and ownership boundaries in marine regions must be controlled from shore. Wetland falls, on the other hand, between land and sea;

The two spaces in fact exist only in mixture: smooth space is constantly being translated, transversed into a striated space; striated space is constantly being reversed, returned to a smooth space. (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988, p. 474).

From the unmolded mass of water of the marshland of the mind, ideas are shaped that are controlled by the discussion and technological competence of the day. These ideas are transformed into action and have now striated the land with ditches. Nowadays these ditches are occasionally filled up and in the course of time marshland is formed anew – we let the water decide sometimes. Thus, the wetland is transformed into a mass of water, which is never the same from one day to another, smooth under foot, the source of endless ideas – smooth space.

When the rhetoric of modernism was at its peak, in the 18th and 19th centuries, marshes and wetlands constituted obstacles to progress. This approach reached its climax in the grand engineering schemes developed in southern Iceland in the middle of the last century. Later on, a strong social movement advocated the reclaiming of wetlands. A somewhat romantic reaction to modernism created the ideological flexibility needed to see wetlands in another light. Holistic ecological valuation became the founding understanding of wetlands as an ecological system of global significance.

By now it seems patently clear to most people that the ‘natural’ climate of the globe has a lot to do with human activities. Not only have humans significantly contributed to global warming during the last decades, they have also had an important impact on climate for thousands of years, particularly through their use of fire. For some scholars, the notions of ‘naturecultures’ and ‘biosociality’ capture the fact that nature is increasingly being remade through technology, becoming more and more artificial. This is an issue often addressed by the social sciences and the humanities, including anthropology (Crate & Nuttall, 2009), through discussions of human perceptions and understandings of short-term and long-term
atmospheric fluctuations, weather and climate of which wetlands and the social attitudes towards them form an integral part.

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About the Authors

Edward H. Huijbens, geographer and scholar of tourism at the Icelandic Tourism Research Centre and the University of Akureyri. Edward is author of articles in several scholarly journals in both Iceland and internationally and co-editor of three books. He currently focuses on landscape experiences, space and places, tourism innovation and marketing strategies. Corresponding address: The Icelandic Tourism Research Centre, University of Akureyri, Norðurslóð, IS-600 Akureyri, Iceland, tel: +354 460 8931. E-mail: edward@unak.is

Gisli Palsson, professor of anthropology at the University of Iceland. He has written extensively on a variety of issues, including environmental discourse, human-animal relations, genomics, and biomedicine. He is the author, editor, or co-editor of a number of books. Corresponding address: Department of Social Sciences – Faculty of Social and Human Sciences, University of Iceland IS-101 Reykjavík, Iceland, tel: +354 525 4253. E-mail: gpals@hi.is

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The Marsh of Modernity


