



# Power lines and the Countryside: Is conflict inevitable?

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# The countryside as an idea

- As societies become more urbanised and industrialised, the *aesthetisation* of the countryside has increased (Murdoch and Lowe, 2003)
- *'Today, as never before, the countryside has become a place where those who live in towns and cities come to recharge their batteries, to find spiritual peace in a world which can seem overwhelmingly noisy and frenetic'* (Prince of Wales, 2013)
- The countryside is not (just) a real place, but a powerful idea filled with cultural and psychological significance, and protected by institutions of planning and conservation
- *'Real' England is therefore a rural 'green and pleasant land'* (Halfacree, 1996, 51).



# Research study 1

- Focus groups conducted in the **UK and Norway** with residents living near power line proposals
- Key findings:
  - Participants ‘essentialise’ the countryside when talking about power line proposals
  - The ‘mix’ of countryside and power lines elicit visceral negative emotional responses
  - Participants are strategic: distinguish between ‘their’ local countryside and the countryside more generally, in order to strengthen their objections

# Nature vs. Industry

- *‘A pylon is a pylon is a pylon, it’s still a scar on the landscape’ (Mid Wales 6).*
- *‘I mean people come here to get away from city life, town life and whatever. If there’s like, stuff like pylons, what they see around where they live, well they’re not really going to come here, **they come here they come to get away from that you know**, [to come to the] countryside and fresh air [Mid Wales 4]*
- *‘I’ve got a picture from Hardanger. There’s a red dot right there but that’s really a woman. And that’s when you start to realise which dimensions we are talking about .. And **this you put up in the Norwegian nature!**’ (Orskog-Sogndal 2)*

# Strategic distinctions

- *‘it's just pretty flat open countryside’*
- *‘Precisely yes, which is fine isn't it?’*
- *‘less um ... obtrusive in that sort of landscape than they potentially would **in our landscape**’ [Mid Wales 6]*
- *‘it's strange if you drive over the M62 from Manchester towards Leeds and you've got all this moorland at two thousand feet **boring landscape**, motorway runs through it, and you can't see a turbine anywhere’ [Mid Wales 6]*
- *‘They should never have put it up in ... it should never have been put in such **a totally untouched area**. Here are places with lots of building, with **lots of industry**’ [Ørskog-Sogndal 2]*



# Research study 2

- In-depth interviews with 25 residents of a rural town in South West England affected by power line proposals
- Concern for countryside impacts varied across the participants, according to their relationship with the place
  - For longstanding residents with strong attachment to the town, new pylons were already familiar features in the local area, and the countryside more generally
  - For incomers with strong place attachments, new pylons were objected to because of landscape & health impacts
  - For incomers with weak place attachments, the pylons were met either with indifference, or objected to on grounds of procedural and distributional justice



# Varieties of place attachment

- *Gary: 'I've grown up with power stations, my father worked in a power station as well and I've seen pylons and it's just part of the countryside, I don't care... it's not something that stands out and makes me think 'Eurgh, it's disgusting and ugly', it's just something that's there, and I don't see this new power line any differently'.*
- *Rachel: '... a lot of people aesthetically just don't want them. I mean Nailsea is so small compared to the amount of greenery we've got hitting down either side of our green bands... and do we really want that kind of technology, that industry going through our green areas? I certainly don't'.*

# Implications for stakeholder engagement

- Engage with people as denizens, not just citizens
- Do not assume that landscapes lacking official designation are not seen as unique by residents
- Recognise underlying psychological processes: place attachments transform the countryside into unique places that are special, worth defending from harm
- Explore ways to reduce the cultural conflict between industry and landscape, town and countryside
- *Can power lines be made more 'natural' and less 'industrial' (new materials, new designs, new colours)?*

# Thank you

- Batel, S. and Devine-Wright, P. (2015). The role of (de-)essentialisation within siting conflicts: An interdisciplinary approach. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 44, 149-159.
- Bailey, E., Devine-Wright, P. and Batel, S. (2016). Using a narrative approach to understand place attachments and responses to power line proposals: The importance of life-place trajectories. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 48, 200-211.
- Acknowledgement: This research was supported by the Research Council of Norway ('SusGrid' - Grant No. 207774)