

# Landscape: an indicator of well-being?

Érik Orsenna

Interview by Pierre-Marie Tricaud and Corinne Legenne

Érik Orsenna is a well-known writer who won the Goncourt Prize in 1988 with *L'Exposition coloniale* and who has been a member of the Académie française since 1998. However, he also has other strings to his bow. He always wanted a profession other than writing so he could be free, he explains, to give the book, a realm of total freedom, all the time it needs. For many years, he focused his attention on economics, both in teaching and research, before becoming an advisor to top politicians. He also turned his hand to landscape, writing a biography about Le Nôtre and was chairman of the Versailles National School of Landscape Architecture. His pen-name (a town from *Le Rivage des Syrtes* by Julien Gracq), is a tribute to an author whose work deals with horizons, borders and places.

He is also involved in horticulture and landscape inter-professional initiatives, chairing the Cercle Cité verte (Green City think tank), and taking part in planning the Assises Européennes du Paysage (European Landscape Conference, Strasbourg, 10 -12 October, 2011).

Les Cahiers – You are an adviser to the European Landscape Conference, the theme of which is “Landscape, a source of wealth

creation”. Do you believe we can quantify landscape as we do for wealth, in terms of monetary units?

Érik Orsenna – I am an economist by profession and I believe economics is becoming intelligent again. For a long time, economics was a human science, linked to history, geography, anthropology and sociology. What we see in the writings of all the great classical economists (Smith, Ricardo, right up to Marx) is a global vision of society. Then, we tried to turn economics into a science and reduced it to mathematics towards this end. This went hand in hand with the predominance of liberal thinking, which reduces economics to the market, a measurable thing.

But this did not work. We reached our limits. This was evidenced recently with the financial crisis. Hence the arrival of new measures of wealth, with the Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress (chaired by Joseph Stiglitz, Amartya Sen and Jean-Paul Fitoussi). It is not growth that is measured any more but development. We measure differently by adding new factors to wealth such as well-being, health and accomplishment.

Under these new mechanisms, landscape and plant life have a place. As Michel Péna aptly puts it<sup>1</sup>, some aspects of landscape are part of the market (an apartment with a nice view) but many are outside it, such as public property. How can we value the invisible long term? Sustainable development gives priority to the invisible and the long term. Landscape shows the link between man and nature in an enriching way and not as a predator. The idea is to broaden our measurements, even if it means using complex equations.

---

<sup>1</sup> Especially in his interview in this issue of *Les Cahiers de l'IAU*, Sept. 2001, p. 87.

The recent economic events have also put the spotlight on a very interesting trend, where plant life is central. I am writing a book on paper and forests. Since the earliest times, paper has been recycled (rags). Rather than a linear economy (we produce, we throw away), we create a circular economy. What we throw away is also a raw material. In the process, we are extending the product life cycle and reducing scarcity.

The answers to landscape questions should be put to use in a very different way. It is strange, but essentially the level of plant life in a city is a good indicator of the level of humanity in that city. Nature and Man are interlinked rather than opposed to one another.

### **Les Cahiers – Why was the “Grenelle” Environment Forum not able to address landscape?**

**Érik Orsenna** – The “Grenelle” was very useful at breaking down things: an illusion of managing the real world ever since Descartes – whereas landscape is defined by its global nature. How can we put our finger on what is global in nature? Landscape was at odds with this thinking for that reason.

### **Les Cahiers – Michel Péna, president of the French Landscape Federation, often says that landscape is not so straightforward any more. Do you believe this to be the case and, if so, what is driving these changes and who decides if they are acceptable or not? Is landscape thinking a prerequisite for beautiful landscapes?**

**Érik Orsenna** – Yes, a certain type of “big-picture” thinking is needed. In Africa, the world is not broken up like that. Why are there no gardens there? Because nature is everywhere – it is not nature on one side and

the town on the other. We are the kings of specialization, there are specialists everywhere.

And yet, we’d like to make landscapes in five years; whereas the landscapes we admire took five centuries to make. This admiration came after the landscapes were formed: thinking about the landscape was retrospective. Nobody decided to create the Tuscany landscape. What I am really interested in, aside from landscape, is our attitude to the world; which is no simple thing.

### **Les Cahiers – What can landscape tell us about major global environmental issues (deforestation, desertification, climate change, and so on)?**

**Érik Orsenna** – I am learning about the difference between a stand of trees and a forest. We need stands of trees, but they are not forests. Why bother growing a broad-leaved forest in northern Europe over 40 years when we can have a eucalyptus plantation in southern Europe in 5? There is an interesting paradox here: taking a decision means speeding up time – how should we make our choice by letting time do its work? Landscape thinking is one answer.

Another example of landscape’s global influence: we are destroying our horticultural producers and plant nurseries through taxation of stocks, call-to-tender regulations, competition distortion with neighbouring countries... Local authorities are not allowed to give priority to local produce. The landscape question is one that covers global problems such as homogenization, the loss of ties to the land, etc.

### **Les Cahiers – We, the landscape architects, can’t help but feel powerless...**

**Érik Orsenna** – Nonetheless, a lot of progress has been made over the last 20 to 30 years. Mayors are paying closer attention now. This revival started with architecture with landscape a little slow to follow. Every park is a landscape... France is slowly but surely catching up. We can't see it yet but the new gardens are still youngsters with their whole life ahead of them. You know, even landscape designers have trouble with time!

### Les Cahiers – **Can landscape improve our lives? And, if so, how?**

**Érik Orsenna** – Of course – it improves the standard of living, the quality of life and the reasons to live. There is a very simple reason: plants are an irreplaceable partner, just like living beings that cannot live without other living beings. Humans need life and need to communicate with life and other living beings.

Along with horticultural and landscape specialists, we are researching the effects of new living conditions on health. Allergy problems are ever-present and exacerbated by pollution. But to remove all allergies would mean getting rid of pollen and plants in the process. There are two things I find amazing in our civilisation: our inability to deal with time and risk.

### **Biographical references**

Orsenna Erik, *L'Avenir de l'eau : Petit précis de mondialisation*, II, Fayard, 2008.

Orsenna Erik, *Voyage aux pays du coton : Petit précis de mondialisation*, Le Livre de Poche, 2007.

Orsenna Erik, *Portrait d'un homme heureux : André Le Nôtre (1613-1700)*, Fayard, 2000.

Barrault Robert et Weber Jacques, *La vie, quelle entreprise ! Pour une révolution écologique de l'économie*, Éditions du Seuil, 2010.

Forum pour de nouveaux indicateurs de richesse (FAIR), « La richesse autrement », *Alternatives Économiques*, Poche, no. 48, March 2011.

Val'hor, the landscape specialists (horticulture and landscape joint-trade initiative):  
<http://www.valhor.com/>

European Landscape Conference:  
<http://www.assisespaysage.fr/assises-paysage-2011>