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Timothy G. Acott

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Wetland photography, encounters and values

Timothy G. Acott

School of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Greenwich, London, UK

ABSTRACT

Between 2016 and 2019 I embarked on a photo-essay of wetlands in English Lowlands as part of the UKRI funded project WetlandLIFE. This was a personal exploration of the sense of place of wetlands as experienced through photography. The aim was to create a collection of images around which the values of wetlands could be considered. Over 2000 photographs were taken and 32 images formed the final collection. Thirteen photographs and two photo-compilations are presented in this paper alongside reflections on the contribution of arts-based research and photography to encountering nature and creating conversations about human/nature relations. The photographs are thematically presented in six categories reflecting different aspects of my wetland experiences, these are: Authority; Memory; Work and Leisure; Creatures; Texture and Movement; Vistas (expansive and enclosed). The photographs illustrate ways society and nature are intertwined and provide a departure point for conversations about wetlands as socio-natural places.

KEYWORDS

Wetlands; photography; ecosystem services; values; relationality; interdisciplinary

Background

In recent years there has been increasing interest in arts-based research (Leavy, 2015; Rolling, 2013) and more work is being done on how arts and humanities approaches can be incorporated into ecosystem services research and environmental management more generally. As part of a national study Coates et al. (2014) concluded 'The AH (arts and humanities) contribution… is not restricted to the evaluation, recording and expression of values that already reside in environmental settings… AH approaches have the capacity to help shape new meanings and fresh values, not least for "yet-to-be valued" places…' (p. 63). Arts-led dialogues can offer a critical alternative to prevailing forms of instrumental and deliberative approaches (Edwards, Collins, & Goto, 2016). However, scientific knowledge is still a critical perspective underpinning policy development and decision-making.

Science-based research forms an important pillar on which wetland landscape management decisions are made. For instance, ecosystem services frame decision-making into the supporting, regulating, provisioning and cultural services that nature provides (Costanza et al., 2017). Such framings are quantified using ecological, economics and social science data to inform about the instrumental values of wetlands (Mitsch, Bernal, & Hernandez, 2015) and the multiple services they provide. In a review of wetland ecosystem services research Xu, Chen, Yang, Jiang,

CONTACT Timothy G. Acott at05@gre.ac.uk School of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Greenwich, London, UK

and Zhang (2020) show that from 1711 peer-reviewed articles 76.4% focus on biophysical methods and 14.3% on qualitative methods. Qualitative methods are generally associated with trying to add depth and context to our understanding of cultural services and reflect increasing interest in broadening the scope of deliberative decision-making (Ainsworth, Kenter, O'Connor, Daunt, & Young, 2019). There is increasing interest in using arts-based approaches for valuing nature and managing environments (Heras et al., 2021; Petrová et al., 2022). Arts-based research can help shape new meanings and values by exploring places as sites of relational encounters between humans and non-humans. Galafassi et al. (2018) argue that art can be used to 'trace the ways in which society and nature are intertwined' (p. 74). Saratsi, Acott, Allison, Edwards, and Freemantle (2019) describe how arts research can perform multiple roles as part of trans-disciplinary learning such as: promoting discussions; bridging disciplines; suggesting alternative ways of knowing and embracing complexity.

With reference to photography, photographs can create or consolidate a sense of place, challenging us to notice things otherwise overlooked or present the world in ways that run counter to dominant readings. In the words of Wells (2011) 'photographic vision thus entangles knowledge discourses, the technical and the aesthetic within both processes of production of images and those of viewing and interpretation' (p. 11). Photographs don't just communicate, as Sontag argues, '… picture taking is an event in itself, and one with ever more peremptory rights—to interfere with, to invade, or to ignore whatever is going on. Our very sense of situation is now articulated by the camera's interventions' (Sontag, 1977, p. 11). Photographs can draw attention to happenings in the world and invite explanatory reflections in the form of narratives. This narrative-driven approach to relationality expands opportunities away from seeing the world in purely instrumental terms. Photography can explore (however partially) places in ways that include but go beyond nature's instrumental use by people and can offer a way of revealing and drawing attention to human/nature relations. Photography has the potential to shape cultural imaginations and experiences of the world around us (Acott & Urquhart, 2015). This sets the context for this photo-essay which explores my use of photography to contribute to a cultural understanding of wetlands.

Approach

I started a photo journey to explore lowland wetland landscapes in England at the end of 2016. This was funded as part of the UKRI WetlandLIFE project (NE/N013379/1), an interdisciplinary exploration of wetlands and mosquitoes including economics, natural science, history, human geography and creative practices. Over the three years of WetlandLIFE I amassed a collection of over 2000 photographs taken in and close to 12 lowland wetlands in England (Figure 1). The wetlands were selected as part of the WetlandLIFE project and their locations reflected the different interests of the interdisciplinary team, an over-riding priority was to work in places where there may be a nuisance from mosquitoes (Hawkes et al., 2022). The photographs were taken in RAW format and processed in Adobe Lightroom (AL). RAW format gives creative control to the photographer with hundreds of processing options over elements such as exposure, contrast, highlights, colour balance, colour grading, texture, saturation, sharpness etc. Categorising the photographs into themes was an iterative process that continued throughout the time working on the photo-essay. The themes were created to reflect aspects of place that I felt the images represented. They influenced further photographs taken in the field and were iteratively modified as more locations were visited. The process was helped with members of the WetlandLIFE team being involved in photo-selection and organisation. Six final themes emerged from this exercise:

1. Authority
2. Memory
3. Work and leisure
4. Creatures
5. Texture and movement
6. Vistas: expansive and enclosed

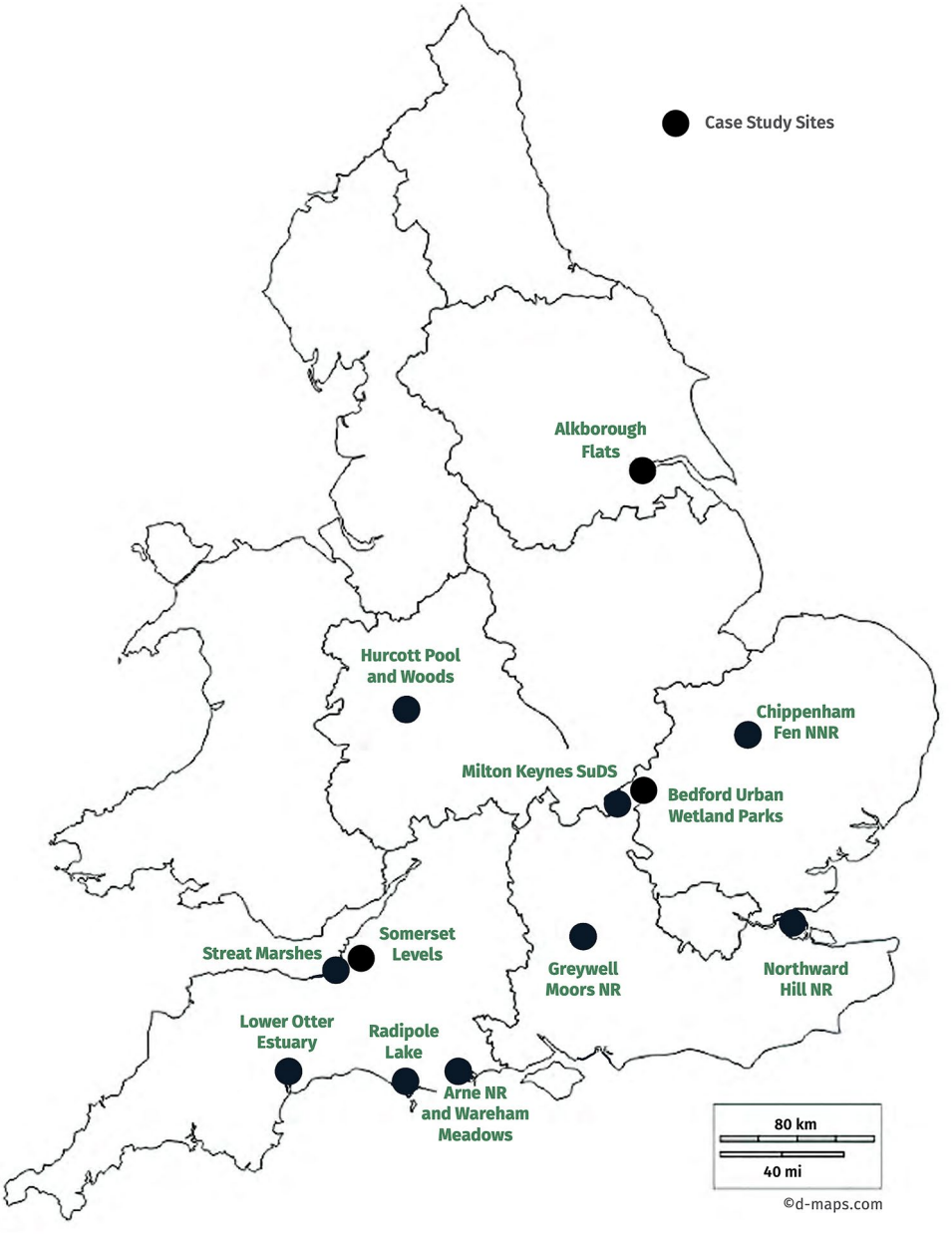

Figure 1. Location of WetlandLIFE study areas (modified with permission from Hawkes et al., 2022, p. 18).

The photographs

The following photographs have been selected to illustrate my encounters with wetlands. Thirteen images and text are taken from the WetlandLIFE photo-essay: 'Wetlands, Wonder and Place' (https://express.adobe.com/page/uhhjBGQc6V93z/). An additional two photo-compilations have been added (Figures 2 and 6) to illustrate a diversity of examples.

Authority

There are four sub-sections within the Authority theme: Engineering landscapes; Signs; Structures; Subverting.

Engineering landscapes

Brutal in its design and implementation, a stark, grey line arcing across the landscape, the seawall is a monument left by the engineer and builder that marks a divided landscape (Figure 2). On the seaward side organic mudflats, interspersed with fragments of salt marsh, a dynamic environment created by the diurnal rhythms of the tide. On the landward side, Cleve Marshes and Nagden Marshes, reclaimed wetlands are now low-grade agricultural farmland soon to be transformed into the largest Solar Farm in the UK. The landscape depicted in this photograph will become a cultural relic as new landscape decisions shape the future of this place.

Figure 2. A divided landscape: South Swale Nature Reserve, Kent.

Signs

Terms like marsh, bog and swamp conjures up images of liminal places, occupying edgelands between civilisation and untamed wildness. However, many wetlands are managed for visitor experiences. A wide range of signage is used to control people's behaviour and educate (Figure 3). Photo 'a' shows a sign warning of the danger of buried cables. Other danger signs include sudden drops, deep water and deep mud. Decisions to place such signs into the landscape draw attention to the inherent danger in wetlands and are used to ensure the health

Figure 3. Signs for instructions and information (various locations).

and welfare of visitors. Other signs more explicitly provided instructions in terms of access, either for limiting people's access and right of way (photos 'b' and 'd'). A further category of signs related to providing information for people. For instance, information about the ecology of the area (photo c). In this case, Lincolnshire Wildlife Trust informs visitors about the history, habitats and ecology of the area, such information can potentially deepen people's understanding about a site. However, use of signage needs to be balanced against the impact it has on the sense of place, perhaps making for more of a park-like experience. Other examples of information signage include health information, for instance telling visitors about ticks and Lyme disease, or simply pointing people towards the correct paths and rights of way.

Structures

On the edge of Shapwick Heath an interesting juxtaposition of elements became the focus of a photograph (Figure 4). These included a car park payment machine, a sign warning of crime in the area, a broad tarmac-covered path leading into the wetland with a gate restricting access to those with permission to take vehicles onto the site. Another barrier allowed cyclists access but discouraged motorcyclists. Two signs warned dogs are not allowed on the site while another provides information for people visiting the site. All the elements mentioned (warning of crime, car parking charge imposed, restriction of dogs, allowing cyclists, not allowing motorcyclists/cars) highlight decisions being made that shape sense of place and our relational landscape experiences.

A signboard with an accompanying benchmarked a location that land managers decided provided a good viewpoint (Figure 5). A camera icon on the sign was used to explicitly suggest this was a good place to take a photograph while the bench provide a spot to rest and enjoy the view. Decisions to build structures such as these reflect efforts designed to help visitors

Figure 4. Access and power: Shapwick Heath, Avalon Marshes, Somerset.

Figure 5. Viewpoint: Steart Marshes, Somerset.

get the most out of their visit, but they also influence the character of place and the relational encounters people have while in the landscape. There is a balance to be found between encounters prioritising feelings of wildness and providing facilities for people. Sometimes reserves will be zoned with people or nature having different priorities in different locations.

While bird hides take many forms, they are basically sturdy wooden sheds designed to let people observe bird life without causing disturbance. They tend to be functional with small wooden flaps open to the front enabling a post-box style view of the waters beyond. They provide refuge from bad weather and are places where people can sit. In WetlandLIFE bird hides were repurposed as spaces that could be used to uncover stories which exist in our wetlands through a 'Hide and Seek' initiative. Bird hides' also encourage an aesthetic response; the wooden structures illuminated through thin narrow windows create contrasts of light and dark intermingling with the texture and patterns of the construction itself (Figure 6).

Figure 6. Looking and reflecting: bird hide on the Avalon Marshes, Somerset.

Subverting

While wetlands are sites of management, with teams of wardens often working long hours tending and caring for reserves, ensuring family-friendly safe visiting experiences, they are also sites of subversion often being located many miles from population centres, with few visitors outside daylight hours. During my visits, I saw signs of parties being held, discarded condom wrappers and graffiti. Figure 7 indicates a range of activities being held outside the purview of authorities creating unplanned encounters that have a strong impact on the sense of place. In some ways, the presence of these subversive aspects gives the wetland a wilder feel, a place less managed and controlled. A place that feels less safe where the unexpected can happen.

A forlorn, wild place just to the lee of a seawall looking out over farmland reclaimed from wetlands (Figure 8). This is an open, wild, place with a hint of menace on a cold, dark winters day. I was walking for hours along the sea wall and only saw one person in my journey, a

Figure 7. Unplanned encounters (various locations).

Figure 8. Heron Meat: somewhere on the North Kent Marshes near St Mary's Bay.

cyclist who stopped and chatted remarking how lonely this place was. For me, the words 'Heron Meat' daubed over the wall of a small concrete shed adds to the liminal feel of the place. The decision to inscribe this lettering into the landscape has spilled out to shape my encounter

with place. This, in turn, is reflected in the moody, black and white photograph created to reflect that experience. This reclaimed farmland sense of place is in marked contrast to some of the more managed, family-friendly wetland experiences.

Memory

Situated on the far North Kent Coast at St Mary Marshes, just inland from the sea wall, this cluster of old abandoned buildings innocently emerges from the mist, their house-like structures belaying their true origins as storage magazines for explosives (Figure 9). Today, the site is a haunting collection of buildings located in a remote outpost of the marshes. The past speaks to the present and exerts a particular pull on the sense of place in this location. This is a wild, reclaimed wetland, not managed for the visitor experience. It is a world of drainage ditches and bird calls echoing on the strong winds whipping across the marshes.

Figure 9. An explosive history: North Kent Marshes, Hoo, Medway Kent.

Work and leisure

Leisure activities in wetlands include walking, dog walking, bird/wildlife watching, kayaking, cycling, shooting, boating, photography, relaxing, eating, education (e.g. pond dipping) among others. Some activities have a weak place attachment (they can be carried out in many different locations), such as dog walking, while others are more strongly tied to a locality, such as pond dipping, or wildlife watching. Thinking about the multiple ways that wetlands are used for leisure purposes is part of their instrumental values. Wetlands may be places of recreation but cycling across the flat reclaimed marshland with just the bird calls echoing out of the mist invites a deeper engagement fed by creative imagination (Figure 10).

Figure 10. Lone cyclist: somewhere on the North Kent Marshes.

Figure 11. Digging in the mud: South Oaze, North Kent Marshes, The Swale near Whitstable, Kent.

On this cold winter's day, wildlife played second fiddle to patterns of water and light on the mudflats just outside Whitstable. Rivulets of water etched a silver-blue web across the muddy terrain. But when a stray ray of sunlight caught the ground a golden radiance lit up a lone figure stooped digging in the mud (Figure 11). This place, the seaward side of the sea wall, is a dynamic, shifting terrain of mud and sand interspersed with patches of salt marsh. The

Figure 12. Tractors, pipes and wet places: Chippenham Fen, Cambridgeshire.

character of the place changes following the diurnal tidal rhythms. The aesthetic qualities of the landscape reflect the coming together of more-than-human elements of light, weather, tide and human activity.

Figure 12 is not a classic photograph of a wetland. Tractors and pipes have replaced birds and dragonflies. Yet, this does say something about the underlying reality of many of the wetlands I experienced as I travelled around lowland England. When inland or on the landward side of seawalls these are controlled environments, with land managers making decisions striking a balance between conservation and farming. However, decision-makers are not the only entities shaping, modifying and acting on the landscape. Water has agency which is controlled in diverse ways. Sometimes by humans using pipes and drainage schemes, other times by other creatures such as beavers creating mosaics of habitats and flooded pools.

Creatures

On the edge of Oare Marshes, the sluice gate is adorned with signs telling people of the danger of deep mud, deep water and to keep out. A crow alighted onto a post, and gazed around (Figure 13) making me feel that I, and all the paraphernalia of the sluice gate, were part of 'its' environment. As we modify and construct places we are shaping the environment for all creatures that live there, in the case of lowland wetlands in England with particular emphasis on providing suitable habitats for birds, mammals and insects. These are not natural places, they are co-constructed where humans and nature co-habit and landscape encapsulates all the relational associations between people and nature.

Figure 13. Whose environment? Nr Oare Marshes, Kent.

Texture and movement

A strong wind was whipping through Far Ings Nature Reserve bringing showers of rain. I dived into a deserted bird hide and was treated to the view of reeds and grasses blown and buffeted by the wind (Figure 14). All my attention was directed towards the continually swaying movement, as the feathery heads whipped back and forth creating a riot of pattern

Figure 14. White noise: Far Ings National Nature Reserve, North Lincolnshire.

and texture. The pits and reed beds at Far Ings are a legacy of the cement industry that operated between 1850 and 1959. As industry leaves and priorities change new relations emerge, in this case an aesthetic contemplation of movement and colour driven by vegetation coming back to the landscape combined with the wind passing through reeds and grasses.

Vistas: expansive and enclosed

A flat landscape of silver and grey, punctuated by the orange of the fading sun and the distant call of feeding waders (Figure 15). The mudflats are well-known feeding habitats for birds. Here, with a receding tide, pools and rivulets emerge in the dying light forming an organic contrast to the vertical groynes half submerged in the mud. A unique landscape, newly created each day as the sea retreats and a muddy, waterlogged place is exposed. In the distance, a lone person is just visible framed against the skyline and offshore wind turbines. Watching the light slowly fade and the mudflats disappear into the evening gloom, I was struck by the stillness, beauty and sense of peace that can be found in liminal places and how my encounter with the landscape builds on a foundation framed by multiple agencies of human and more-than-humans actors.

It is rare I visit a place and am lost for words. Yet on a relatively overcast day, I visited Hurcott Pool and the contrast from the grand open vistas of the Steart Marshes or the River Humber could not have been greater. This is the largest area of SSSI wet woodland in England. The trees are protruding like skeletal fingers groping up from a subterranean cavern (Figure 16). This is an alternate world, smothered in a green weed, blanketing the landscape in its slimy embrace. The variability of wetlands to transform from expansive vistas across vast acres of flat marshland into intimate, strange and compelling places illustrates the diverse encounters that such places can offer.

Figure 15. Pools of silver and grey: South Oaze, Near Seasalter, Kent.

Figure 16. An otherworldly place: Hurcott Pool. Worcestershire.

Reflections

Alongside other arts-based approaches in WetlandLIFE the photo-essay helped to contribute to a critical, questioning approach to knowledge among team members. As documented in the final report; '… the artists bought their creative practice to the project which resulted in specific outputs but also changed the dynamics of the team and promoted reflection on disciplinary understanding and how these are applied to valuing nature' (Hawkes et al., 2022, p. 45). The photo-essay provided an opportunity for the project team to discuss the sense of place in relation to different forms of disciplinary knowledge and ideas of epistemological equity.

The photographs raised questions about how humans share spaces in a more-than human world and helped explore wetlands as places in which human activity and nature are continually entangled in dynamic processes that stretch through time. In this photo-essay photography contributed to understanding human/nature relations in wetlands through:

- The physically constructed nature of wetlands: The use of engineering to modify drainage and control water flows is illustrated in the seawall (Figure 2), machinery (Figure 12) and the sluice gate (Figure 13).
- The exercise of power to shape people's knowledge and behaviour: Different signs are used throughout the wetlands visited (Figure 3), from warning people of danger to providing information. Figure 4 shows how power is exerted through controlling vehicle access to a wetland. Figure 7 depicts activities occurring on the edge of or outside permissive activities.
- How different types of human-made structures shape the wetland experience: Structures included the deliberate placing of boards and benches to encourage viewing and photography (Figure 5), bird hides and ruined buildings creating a sense of place (Figures 6 and 9), ticket machines and gates to control vehicle parking and access (Figure 4).

- Encountering vegetation through an aesthetic lens: Increasing the length of exposure can create abstract patterns depicting the beauty of colour, texture and movement (Figure 14).
- Challenging perspectives and asking whose environment is being considered: Figure 13, shows a crow alighting a sluice gate giving rise to a question about how humans occupy the environment of other creatures.
- Revealing the past in present and seeing landscape as a palimpsest: A sense of the past glimpsed in the ruined buildings constructed in the 19th century by the Thames Storage (Explosives) Company (Figure 9).
- Speculating that work and leisure pursuits can be embedded in dynamic processes of place reflecting relational nature/culture encounters that change through time: In Figure 11 the mudflat setting helped emphasise how places can be subject to rapid tidal changes. Figure 10 shows a lone cyclist experiencing the solitude of a misty day on the North Kent Marshes.
- Reflecting on how broad vistas and intimate locations give rise to different aesthetic feelings in a placed-based relationality. Contrasting Figures 8 and 14–16 show how different aesthetic values can be revealed when attention is directed towards different scale of observation.

In this paper, I have used a photographic approach to explore human/nature relations in wetlands from an aesthetic and documentary perspective. To revisit the words of Galafassi et al. (2018) art can be used to 'trace the ways in which society and nature are intertwined' (p. 74). Photography (and other art practices) has the potential to shape how places are imagined and understood and change relationships with the natural world. For instance, Simon Armitage (poet laureate) considers that; 'Poets can help fight climate breakdown by making us "spellbound, full of wonder and beguiled" by nature' (Guardian 2nd June 2024). On the other hand, Miles (2010) questions if art (in relation to climate change) has the capacity to contribute to a shift in consciousness. Tackling environmental issues requires transdisciplinary approaches that broaden our recognition of different forms of knowledge. Castree et al. (2014) suggest that the humanities are virtually ignored in the world of global environmental change science and there needs to be greater accounting for forms of knowledge that encompass, 'the moral, spiritual, aesthetic and affective' (p. 7). IPBES (2022) emphasises the importance of recognising multiple worldviews and knowledge systems in environmental management. I hope that this essay has provided a departure point for critical thinking about relations between people and nature and how photography can be used as part of an interdisciplinary project to create artworks around which reflective thinking and deliberation can occur.

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Data availability statement

The data (photographs) included in the essay appear as part of the publication.

Notes on contributor

Tim is a Professor in Human Geography exploring inter- and transdisciplinary approaches for understanding the sense of place, cultural values and environmental management. He has a particular interest in understanding arts-based approaches in relation to diverse values and land/seascapes. Since 2009 Tim has worked on and led research projects with a total award value in excess of £8M. Tim was Chair of the RGS Coastal and Marine Research Group from 2016 to 2019 and is a member of the Defra Advisory Group for 'Marine Natural Capital and Ecosystem Services Assessment' and Co-Chair and a founder member of the international Marine Social Science Network.

ORCID

Timothy G. Acott http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1246-0373

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