



**HAL**  
open science

## Spatially explicit landscape modelling: current practices and challenges

Cédric Gaucherel, Thomas Houet

► **To cite this version:**

Cédric Gaucherel, Thomas Houet. Spatially explicit landscape modelling: current practices and challenges. *Ecological Modelling*, 2009, 220 (24), pp.3477-3480. hal-01195819

**HAL Id: hal-01195819**

**<https://univ-tlse2.hal.science/hal-01195819>**

Submitted on 8 Sep 2015

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

## *Editorial*

### **Spatially explicit landscape modelling: current practices and challenges**

Gauchere C.<sup>1</sup>, Houet T.<sup>2</sup>

5

<sup>1</sup> INRA UMR AMAP - Bd de la Lironde TA A-51 / PS2, 34398 Montpellier cedex 5, France

email: [cedric.gauchere@cirad.fr](mailto:cedric.gauchere@cirad.fr) , Phone: +33 (0)4 67 61 56 08, Fax: +33 (0)4 67 61 56 68

10

<sup>2</sup> GEODE UMR 5602 CNRS - Université Toulouse 2, 5 allée Antonio Machado, 31058 Toulouse Cedex 9, France

email : [thomas.houet@univ-tlse2.fr](mailto:thomas.houet@univ-tlse2.fr) , Phone: +33 (0)5 61 50 36 28, Fax: +33 (0)4 67 61 42 75

15

### **Abstract**

In the past 30 years, the notion of landscape has emerged in ecology as a result of both theoretical strategies and practical aspects of land use. This has generated a variety of computerized models addressing both objectives and techniques. Scientists model landscapes for at least two reasons: to better understand the landscape dynamics themselves (called intrinsic needs) and to offer a realistic frame to support other ecological processes (extrinsic needs). This special issue concerns both needs and illustrates the way socioeconomic and/or ecological mechanisms of various landscapes have been understood through modelling approaches. It outlines the links between landscape and model concepts, focusing on one hand on several landscape types (agricultural, forested and aquatic) and on the other hand on several landscape model characteristics (explicit or neutral, dynamic or static, patchy or continuous and multi- or mono-scale). The patterns and processes of each landscape model presented in this issue, in particular, should be analysed in order to highlight the way they are contributing to the landscape ecology discipline. We finally argue that the discipline can now offer a theoretical dimension to landscape dynamics, aiming at understanding the possible mechanism unity underlying this complex object.

30

---

## **1. Context**

The concept of *landscape* has become increasingly widespread in ecology. Separated from, yet complementary to, the ecosystem, this notion encompasses elements of various natures and several scales of perception and analysis (Turner et al., 1991; Forman, 1995; Dungan et al., 2002). The concept emerged from a combination of land planning issues, theoretical approaches and technological progress. Lying between local strategies that focus on management of agricultural and forest areas and urban and suburban zones, and those for whole regions, landscape is often perceived as an intermediate level of organisation, prone to be managed (Shoute et al., 1994; Twery, 2004). In parallel, recent progress in computer science, data and information representation and algorithms, have enabled the development of modelling strategies for these objectives (Coquillard et al., 1997; Blasco et al., 1999). The central paradigm of landscape ecology is that the spatial structures of a landscape have an effect on the movements of individuals and the flow of matter it shelters (Forman, 1995; Burel et al., 2003). Certain properties of the landscape such as heterogeneity, connectivity or fragmentation strongly influence the exchange and flow of organisms, matter and energy between the different components (Ricklef et Miller 2000). Moreover, this branch of ecology insists on the importance of

45

scales and integration of processes, suggesting an holistic approach to landscape (Turner et al., 1993; Dungan et al., 2002). Other fields of investigation, sometimes less theoretical, have benefited from  
50 landscape analysis. Today, forest management is able to consider a forest landscape (sometimes restricted to a single stand) in order to study its evolution and assist in management (Twery, 2004). Physical geography and remote sensing studies are also a great source of inspiration when considering landscape models (Lambin et al., 2000).

Landscape studies are not concerned with energy or mass balances (e.g. element cycles, trophic  
55 networks), with specific ecological processes (e.g. tree growth, sedimentation of a water course) or the closure (i.e. no exchange outside the system) of ecosystems. Landscapes are gathering elements of very different natures (e.g. crop fields, rivers, roads, buildings...) that are continuously interacting at various scales (Burel et al., 2003). Landscape modelling may help to formulate, test and validate a hypothesis, often in spatial and temporal dimensions that are impossible to create and validate with *in*  
60 *situ* experiments. Other models (rarely the same as the preceding ones) can help to manage a system, to visualise it and make forecasts by implementing different scenarios. Several reviews of environmental models can be found in recent literature (Jorgensen et al., 2001; Müller et al., 2003), together with numerical simulations of landscape models where the notion of landscape is more present (Baker, 1989; Sklar et al., 1991; Mladenoff et al., 1999). Although these syntheses insist on specific features  
65 of current models such as spatial, temporal, and/or integrated descriptions, but they are not at all exhaustive in terms of landscape properties or model characteristics. We argue that they do not as yet emphasise any landscape properties or model characteristics in order to offer a coherent conceptual framework for landscape dynamics studies.

There are several ways of modelling a landscape: by interpolation, using cartography, with a *process-*  
70 *explicit* model or a *neutral* model. The first two types generally simulate spatial distribution of variables using statistical, multi-scale, geometrical and/or topological properties (through GIS) of their spatial patterns (Mackey, 2000; Kyriakidis, 2003). However, they rarely highlight landscape dynamics. Therefore these models are not known as « landscape models » and concern « spatial models on the scale of landscape », using landscape only as fixed support. Landscape models, in our  
75 sense, are mainly those highlighting the changes in land use: vegetation cover (forestry, agronomy, etc.), urbanisation (geography) or natural forms (geomorphology, soil studies, etc.). This temporal aspect, necessary in ecology and in the study of the landscape object, leads us to give details concerning the two last types of models. Process-explicit models reproduce a landscape by implementing one or several specific processes (Gaucherel et al., 2006b). They are complementary to  
80 neutral models which simulate landscapes with the patterns and statistical properties expected in the absence of studied processes (Gardner et al., 1991; With et al., 1997). Unlike explicit landscape models that would simulate dynamic functions and relations of landscape elements, these models do not try to reproduce the spatial patterns of any given real landscape. Neutral models deal more particularly with one of the characteristics of composition and configuration of real landscapes (With  
85 et al., 1997; Gaucherel et al., 2006a).

The authors for this issue were selected from a panel of authors that participated to the international symposium on "Spatial landscape modelling: from dynamic approaches to functional evaluations" which occurred in Toulouse (France), June 2008 ([http://w3.geode.univ-tlse2.fr/rtp-modelisation/eng\\_index.htm](http://w3.geode.univ-tlse2.fr/rtp-modelisation/eng_index.htm)). Its objective was to give an overview of current practices in the field of  
90 spatial landscape modelling, confronting developer and user approaches in order to point out future research challenges on spatial and temporal landscape modelling. This special issue aims at presenting a synthesis that characterizes landscape modelling approaches through the lens of four dimensions discussed below, summarizing main conclusions of this symposium. The resulting papers cover a wide range of theoretical and practical considerations, and together illustrate the diversity of existing spatial  
95 landscape models. Saltré et al (2009) present an original algorithm to reconstruct spatial and temporal species dispersion in Europe over thousands of years based on palaeo-environmental data. Such an approach would be useful for palaeo-ecologists and landscape ecologists to better understand how history matters (Gillson, 2009) either as geography (altitude, latitude...). Gomez-Gutierrez & al (2009) have respectively tested and developed models that also deal with DEM (Digital Elevation

100 Model) data. Conversely to Saltré et al (2009), they focus on fine scales and prediction of areas with  
environmental stakes. Indeed, the first paper aims to automatically detect area potentially concerned  
by gully erosion in Spain. Le Ber & al (2009) and Chaput-Bardy & al (2009) illustrate how models  
can contribute to explain how landscapes characteristics and/or dynamics influence gene flow and/or  
105 biodiversity. While dealing with very different landscapes (agricultural and aquatic), these papers  
illustrate that models could be efficient tools to evaluate how human activities / landscape  
configuration influence fluxes of matters and organisms. The last paper (Degenne et al, 2009)  
demonstrates that spatial landscape modelling, whatever the environmental issue, needs to refer to  
theoretical research to improve and facilitate development of such models. Finally, the papers in this  
110 special issue present an overview of the insights available to landscape ecologists, landscape modellers  
and all scientists working on modelling landscape dynamics.

## 2. Discussion

A rapid synthesis of modelled landscapes emerging from the review of the literature and on the models  
of this issue indicates the presence of dimensions (or polarisations) in relation to the design choice.  
The modelled landscapes have (a) a varying degree of landscape discontinuity (raster-vector); (b)  
115 various spatial and temporal dimensions (involving different scales); (c) operations dealing with  
diverse landscape elements; and (d) distinct degrees of specificity and finality.

- a. Firstly, we observe a dichotomy between those landscapes perceived as homogeneous patches and  
those with spatial gradients (continuous fields) which cannot be classified into a particular model  
type. If the component of a studied landscape is continuous, such as topographical elevation,  
120 latitudinal degree or bathymetric areas, physico-chemical equations can generally be used to  
remove segmentation bias and geometrical modifications not easy to avoid in landscapes. Rural  
landscapes are often discontinuous, but can also host continuous types of processes (pollens,  
pesticides, etc.) (Levin et al., 1993; Wu et al., 1997; Saltré et al, 2009). We have mentioned some  
of the works dealing with these discontinuous landscapes made up from uniform patches with  
125 distinct, well defined borders (Forman et al., 1981; Kotliar et al., 1990; Wu et al., 1994). As seen  
from the literature, especially with regard to neutral landscape models (Gaucherel et al., 2006a; Le  
Ber et al, 2009), the continuity or discontinuity of a landscape cannot be modelled in the same  
way.
- b. Undoubtedly the most interesting aspect of landscape models is to try to reproduce the dynamics  
they host. But which dynamics? Those of the first two dimensions [x, y, t], that concentrate on the  
130 evolutions in the structure of horizontal landscape. These are the prime dimensions in landscape  
ecology and remote sensing. Are we more interested in vertical dynamics [z, t], involving mainly  
digital terrain models (Saltré et al, 2009; Gomez-Gutierrez, 2009) and plant (or building) growth  
(Prusinkiewicz, 1999; Kang et al, 2008)? Hydrology, soil sciences and plant modelling all provide  
135 information for these dynamics, but other, more complex, approaches could be considered,  
involving simultaneously the dynamics of 2D landscape structures and growth in vegetation height  
or land erosion [x, y, z, t]. Very few attempts to develop functional landscape models in four  
dimensions exist.
- c. Beyond the question of landscape dimensions, there are also marked differences in landscape  
140 evolutions. We have mentioned Land-Use and Land-Cover Changes (LUCC) models which  
essentially take into account the attributes of landscape elements (Lambin et al., 2000; Mackey,  
2000): they modify the dominant type of element (the attribute of a patch, a group of pixels) called  
the landscape composition, but do not change the shape or the spatial arrangements of these  
elements called the landscape configuration. We qualified these latter operations as geometrical  
145 operations and noted that they remain relatively rare amongst landscape models (Le Ber et al,  
2009). Their development and calculation time are costly, but they are now increasingly being  
implemented in landscape studies (With et al., 1997; Gaucherel et al., 2006a). In particular,  
landscape models focusing on linear networks such as road networks or hydrographical networks  
are specifically addressing the question of landscape configuration (Chaput-Bardy et al, 2009).

150 d. Close examination of landscape models shows that objectives may vary. What are the objectives  
of these models? Do we want to check one or several hypotheses, or produce software or business  
packages? In this context, two model structures that have produced promising results for  
environmental issues, are in our opinion well adapted to landscape modelling: that of a domain-  
155 specific language (Fall et al., 2001; Degenne et al, 2009) and that of modelling platform. A  
domain-specific language uses a kernel of data, knowledge and methods surrounded by models  
specific to certain applications (less costly to design). This is situated mid-way between a  
multitude of small, object-specific models that are effective, but costly with, by definition, local  
results, and a universal, utopian model that could provide solutions to all objectives. This concept  
is not far away in one sense of other platforms such as SME (Costanza et al., 2004), CAPSIS (De  
160 Coligny et al., 2004) or L1/DYPAL (Gaucherel et al., 2006b), except that it also provides a  
language to improve modelling ease.

### 3. Conclusion

At present, there is need for landscape modelling to progress in many ecological disciplines. For  
example, different components must be integrated into landscape. Today, closer coupling between fine  
165 and large scale models, between biophysical and socio-economic factors is being implemented into  
landscape dynamics (Palang et al., 2000; Osinski et al., 2003). This coupling is all the more necessary  
today since the effects of man on the environment are becoming increasingly obvious. An integrative  
approach could be considered by coupling with other environmental models simulating atmospheric,  
underground and/or biological components of the landscape. Working in four dimensions and/or using  
170 domain-specific languages may be necessary in ecology (Degenne et al, 2009). These are promising  
strategies since they favour integrating ecological phenomena and provide a holistic view of  
ecosystems too. Landscape models that take into account their possible geometrical evolution, that are  
not limited to random change, and that adopt a patchy description in homogeneous landscape units,  
unlike a raster description, also seem to have a promising future. The small number of modelling  
175 approaches using only mechanistic landscape models, specifically describing how to change landscape  
components, leads us to further research along these lines using recent knowledge on ecological and  
socio-technical functioning of landscape and on fluxes. Landscape is a concept that can federate  
different environmental strategies.

### 4. Acknowledgments

180 This special issue and the symposium have been supported by the French Thematic Interdisciplinary  
Network on «Landscape and Environment» of the department Human and Social Sciences of CNRS  
(National Centre for Scientific Research), the Region Midi-Pyrénées, the University of Toulouse Le  
Mirail and the GEODE Laboratory (CNRS UMR 5602). We would like to thank all the 30 reviewers  
that have contributed to this result by their constructive comments.

### 5. References

- Baker, W.L., 1989. A review of models of landscape change. *Landscape ecology*, 2: 111 - 135.
- Blasco, F. and Weill, A., 1999. *Advances in Environmental and Ecological Modelling*. Elsevier, Paris, 219 pp.
- Burel, F. and Baudry, J., 2003. *Landscape ecology : concepts, methods, and applications*. Science Publishers,  
Enfield, N.H., 362 pp.
- 190 Chaput-Bardy, A., Fleurant, C., Lemaire, C. and Secondi, J., 2009, Modelling the effect of in-stream and  
overland dispersal on gene flow in river network, *Ecological Modelling*, this issue.
- Coquillard, P. and Hill, D.R.C., 1997. *Modélisation et simulation d'écosystèmes : des modèles déterministes aux  
simulations à évènements discrets*. Recherche en écologie. Masson, Paris.
- Costanza, R. and Voinov, A., 2004. *Landscape simulation modeling. A spatially explicit, dynamic approach*.  
195 Springer-Verlag, New York, Inc., 330 pp.
- De Coligny, F., Ancelin, P., Cornu, G., Courbaud, B., Dreyfus, P., Goreaud, F., Gourlet-Fleury, S., Meredieu, C.,  
Orazio, C. and Saint-André, L., 2004. *Capsis : Computer-Aided Projection for Strategies in Silviculture:  
Open architecture for a shared forest-modelling platform*, IUFRO Working Party S5.01-04. A.G., Wust-  
Sancy, Harrison, British Columbia, Canada, pp. 371-380.

- 200 Degenne, P., Lo Seen, D., Parigot D., Forax, R. and Tran, A., 2009, Design of a domain specific language for modelling processes in landscapes, *Ecological Modelling*, this issue
- Dungan, J.L., Perry, J.N., Dale, M.R.T., Legendre, P., Citron-Pousty, S., Fortin, M.J., Jakomulska, A., Miriti, M. and Rosenberg, M.S., 2002. A balanced view of scale in spatial statistical analysis. *Ecography*, 25: 626-640.
- 205 Fall, A. and Fall, J., 2001. A domain-specific language for models of landscape dynamics. *Ecological Modelling*, 141: 1-18.
- Forman, R.T.T., 1995. Some General-Principles of Landscape and Regional Ecology. *Landscape Ecology*, 10: 133-142.
- Forman, R.T.T. and Godron, M., 1981. Patches and structural components for a landscape ecology. *BioScience*, 31: 733-740.
- 210 Gardner, R.H. and O'Neill, R.V., 1991. Pattern, process and predictability: the use of neutral model for landscape analysis. In: M.G. Turner and R.H. Gardner (Editors), *Quantitative methods in landscape ecology. ecological studies*.
- Gaucherel, C., Fleury, D., Auclair, A. and Dreyfus, P., 2006a. Neutral models for patchy landscapes. *Ecological Modelling*, 197: 159-170.
- 215 Gaucherel, C., Giboire, N., Viaud, V., Houet, T., Baudry, J. and Burel, F., 2006b. A domain specific language for patchy landscape modelling: the brittany agricultural mosaic as a case study. *Ecological Modelling*, 194: 233-243.
- Gillson, L., 2009. Landscape in Time and Space. *Landscape Ecology*, 24:149-155
- 220 Gomez-Gutierrez, A., Schnabel, S. and Lavado Contador, F.J., 2009, Using and comparing two non parametric methods (CART and MARS) to model the potential distribution of gullies, *Ecological Modelling*, this issue.
- Jorgensen, S.E. and Bendoricchio, G., 2001. Fundamentals of ecological modelling. *Science B.V. Developments in environmental modelling*, n°21. Elsevier, 530 pp.
- 225 Kang M.Z., Cournède P.H., De Reffye P., Auclair D., Hu B.G.. 2008. *Mathematics and computers in simulation*, 78 (1) : 57-75.
- Kotliar, N.B. and Wiens, J.A., 1990. Multiple scales of patchiness and patch structure: a hierarchical framework for the study of heterogeneity. *Oikos*, 59: 523-560.
- Kyriakidis, P., 2003. Geostatistics for environmental scientists. *International Journal of Geographical Information Science*, 17: 198-200.
- 230 Lambin, E.F., Rounsevell, M.D.A. and Geist, H.J., 2000. Are agricultural land-use models able to predict changes in land-use intensity? *Agriculture Ecosystems & Environment*, 82: 321-331.
- Le Ber, F., Adamczyk, K., Lavigne, C., Mari, J.-F., Angevin, F., Monod, H. and Colbach N., 2009, Modelling neutral agricultural landscapes with tessellation methods – Application for gene flow simulation, *Ecological Modelling*, this issue
- 235 Levin, S.A., Powell, T.M. and Steele, J.H., 1993. *Patch dynamics*. Springer, Berlin, 307 pp.
- Mackey, B.G., 2000. GIS for ecology: an introduction. *International Journal of Geographical Information Science*, 14: 107-107.
- 240 Mérot, P., Hubert-Moy, L., Gascuel-Oudou, C., Clément, B., Durand, P., Baudry, J. and Thenail C., 2006. A method for improving the management of controversial wetland. *Environmental Management*, 37(2):258-270
- Mladenoff, D.J. and Baker, W.L., 1999. *Spatial modeling of forest landscape change. approaches and applications*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK, 352 pp.
- Müller, F. and Steinhardt, U., 2003. Landscape modelling and Landscape analysis. *Ecological modelling*, 168: 215 - 389.
- 245 Osinski, E., Kantelhardt, J. and Heissenhuber, A., 2003. Economic perspectives of using indicators. *Agriculture Ecosystems & Environment*, 98: 477-482.
- Palang, H., Alumae, H. and Mander, U., 2000. Holistic aspects in landscape development: a scenario approach. *Landscape and Urban Planning*, 50: 85-94.
- 250 Prusinkiewicz, P., Hanan, J., Mech. An L-System based plant modeling language. Technical report, University of Calgary, 1999.
- Saltré, F., Chuine, I., Brewer, S. and Gaucherel, C., 2009, A phenomenological model without dispersal kernel to model species migration, *Ecological Modelling*, this issue
- \*Shoute, J.F.T., Finlke, A.F., Veeneklaas, F.R. and Wolfert, H.P., 1994. Scenario studies for the rural environment. *Environment & Policy*. Kluwer Academic Publisher, 743 pp.
- 255

- Sklar, F.H. and Costanza, R., 1991. The development of dynamic spatial models for landscape ecology: A review and prognosis. In: M.G. Turner and R.H. Gardner (Editors), Quantitative methods in landscape ecology. Springer, New York, USA, pp. 239-288.
- Ricklefs, R.E. and Miller, G.L., 2000. Ecology. 4<sup>th</sup> edition. W.H. Freeman and Co., New York. 822 p.
- 260 Turner, M.G. and Gardner, R.H., 1991. Quantitative methods in landscape ecology. Springer Verlag, New York.
- Turner, M.G., Romme, W.H., Gardner, R.H., O'Neill, R.V. and Kratz, T.K., 1993. A Revised Concept of Landscape Equilibrium - Disturbance and Stability on Scaled Landscapes. Landscape Ecology, 8: 213-227.
- 265 Twery, M.J., 2004. Modelling in forest management. In: J. Wainwright and M. Mulligan (Editors), Environmental modelling - finding simplicity in complexity. Wiley, Chichester, UK, pp. 291-301.
- With, K.A. and King, A.W., 1997. The use and misuse of neutral landscape models in ecology. Oikos, 79: 219-229.
- Wu, J.G. and Levin, S.A., 1994. A Spatial Patch Dynamic Modeling Approach to Pattern and Process in an Annual Grassland. Ecological Monographs, 64: 447-464.
- 270 Wu, J.G. and Levin, S.A., 1997. A patch-based spatial modeling approach: conceptual framework and simulation scheme. Ecological Modelling, 101: 325-346.