So what is the state of the landscape in Switzerland? Do you consider the landscape where you live to be beautiful? Nine years ago, two WSL researchers, Felix Kienast and Marcel Hunziker, decided to set up, together with the Federal Office for the Environment (FOEN), an ambitious monitoring program to record not only physical changes in the landscape, but also how the public perceived it on the basis of around 30 indicators. “Landscape Monitoring Switzerland (LABES)” is today available as an exemplary monitoring program in Europe.

To record such physical indicators as forest area or freely accessible stretches of water, the researchers rely on data from WSL, Swisstopo, the Federal Statistical Office and agricultural sources. They combine these raw data and augment them with additional data from satellite images. This allows Felix to determine, for example, which areas are completely dark at night or how many rivers and streams have footpaths running along them.

To find out how the public perceive and value the landscape, the WSL researchers carry out representative surveys. Local residents are asked, for example, whether they consider the landscape of the municipality where they live to be varied and authentic, whether the elements in the landscape go well...
together and whether they like the landscape in general. Marcel explains: “It is not just the physical landscape that is changing, but also the way we value things. This is why it is important to record public perceptions as well. Only if we know more about both aspects will we find out whether changes in the landscape are positive or negative.” Marcel and Felix are therefore combining the natural and social science indicators to obtain estimates of how the inhabitants in different types of municipality and regions experience and evaluate the landscape. Felix summarizes the value of LABES thus: “FOEN can be proud of this instrument, which assesses both the physical and perceived landscape. It enables us to completely fulfill, for the first time, the monitoring requirements of the European Landscape Convention – an agreement that Switzerland ratified in 2013.”

**Development and public assessment of the landscape**

According to the indicator “Light Emissions”, which is based on satellite images, the last places where no light at night brightens the darkness disappeared in the Swiss Central Plateau in 1996 and in the Jura in 2008. Complete darkness in Switzerland today can only be found in 25 to 30 per cent of the Swiss Alpine region. Another development is that the size of settlement areas is increasing, particularly on the Central Plateau. Nevertheless the public, on average, rate the quality of the landscape in Switzerland very high. People generally think the landscape around where they live is beautiful and identify with it.

There are, however, regional differences. Rural municipalities are valued most positively. They are considered to be the most diverse and authentic. The Northern and Central Alps also receive good ratings. They tend to fascinate the public. LABES has also been able to draw interesting conclusions about the Federal Inventory of Landscapes and Natural Monuments of National Importance (BLN). The larger the proportion of BLN areas is in a municipality,
the higher the ranking of the landscape quality there. This applies in particular to the indicators “Particularity” and “Reference to the Past”, which were what were used in selecting the BLN areas. The survey suggests that people really notice the corresponding auras of such areas.

Landscapes in agglomerations score the worst. The researchers assume that the negative assessment has to do with the fast urban growth. Unlike in rural and so-called “central municipalities”, well over fifty per cent of the buildings in agglomerations were built later than 1960. This is probably why, for example, the indicator “Reference to the Past” – which is important for people to identify with a landscape – was valued less highly in agglomerations than in other municipalities. What is striking is that the suburban municipalities directly on the edge of cities are valued less highly than the peri-urban municipalities that are furthest out in a city’s surroundings. Even though the building structure is similar in both types of municipality, the peri-urban municipalities are normally less built up and have more green spaces. They often seem more rural because their structure is reminiscent of that of a typical village. As a result, the inhabitants can identify better with the surroundings where they live.

What is also noticeable is that people living in Southern Switzerland generally assess the landscape worse, even worse than the inhabitants of sub- and peri-urban municipalities on the Central Plateau do. A few physical indicators and the housing situation help to explain these low values: A landscape dominated by forest is comparably monotonous, with forest and residential areas bordering each other closely. Most inhabitants in this region live in sub- and peri-urban municipalities, which are concentrated in the valley floors together with the transport routes, thus putting agricultural areas under pressure. Moreover, most of the few agricultural plots are farmed intensively as is the case, for example, on the Magadino Plain. It is not until you reach the mountain villages, or go above the timberline or along the lake shores and river banks that you notice how attractive the landscape is, and why it has made Ticino a popular destination for tourists.

This landscape-monitoring program has shown that the quality of the landscape in Switzerland is further deteriorating, although in a few areas improvements have been made. The public tend, nevertheless, to be satisfied with their surroundings. Future surveys will show if and how long this will remain the case.