

From “Spatial Symbols” to an “Ecology of Meaning”: The Underlying Logic and Innovative Practice of Landscape Narrative for Urban Eco-Cultural Tourism Integration

--A Case Study of Dalian’s “Encountering Deer in the City, Meeting Spotted Seals by the Blue Sea” Project

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Abstract

Against the backdrop of the coordinated advancement of ecological civilization, the deep integration of culture and tourism, and urban biodiversity conservation, how urban ecological resources can be transformed from “natural capital” into cultural meanings that can be perceived, engaged with, and communicated has become an important issue in urban renewal, ecological education, and local cultural-tourism innovation. Taking Dalian’s “Encountering Deer in the City, Meeting Spotted Seals by the Blue Sea” project as a case, this paper examines the meaning-generation mechanism of urban ecological resources from the perspective of landscape narrative theory. The study argues that the core value of landscape narrative does not lie simply in “telling stories,” but in constructing dynamic connections among physical space, ecological knowledge, urban memory, and public action through spatial organization, media translation, behavioral participation, and emotional evocation. Focusing on two types of ecological resources, sika deer and spotted seals, the Dalian case develops, respectively, a “poetics of encounter” based on contingency, everydayness, and public co-creation, and a “detective epistemology” based on real cases, evidentiary reasoning, and ecological warning. Together, through behavioral, spatial, and emotional translation, the two approaches establish an “intermediate language” between professional science communication and public experience, promoting ecological education from “knowledge delivery” toward “collective storytelling.”

Keywords

Landscape narrative; meaning-generation mechanism; ecology of meaning; urban eco-cultural tourism; nature education; participatory design.

1. Introduction: The Cultural Transformation Dilemma of Urban “Ecological Capital” and a Narratological Response

At a time when ecological civilization construction and the deep integration of culture and tourism have become a national strategic consensus, the mountains, rivers, coastlines, plant and animal habitats, and other ecological resources possessed by cities are no longer merely “natural resources” in a geographical sense or “natural capital” in an economic sense; they also have the potential to be transformed into cultural capital, educational resources, and urban brand assets. The 14th Five-Year Plan for Culture and Tourism Development emphasizes promoting the integrated development of culture and tourism and enhancing the cultural content and experiential quality of tourism products; the establishment of the territorial spatial

planning system has likewise elevated the coordinated governance of ecological, living, and production spaces to a foundational task for high-quality urban development. Against this background, how ecological resources can be seen, understood, remembered, and protected through public participation has become a shared issue for urban culture-tourism integration and ecological education.

Dalian, as a northern coastal city, has a natural pattern in which mountains and sea depend on each other and land and sea interweave. In the State Council's approval of the Dalian Territorial Spatial Master Plan (2021–2035), Dalian is positioned as an important coastal central city, a modern marine city, and an international comprehensive transportation hub, with functions including that of an international coastal tourism destination. This positioning indicates that Dalian's urban image should derive not only from its port, coastline, and industrial memory, but also from its distinctive ecological landscapes and experiences of human-nature coexistence. According to public reports, Dalian has in recent years continuously conducted biodiversity resource surveys and monitoring, recording 2,224 species of higher plants and animals, including 29 nationally first-class protected animal species and 89 nationally second-class protected animal species. These data demonstrate the richness of Dalian's ecological resources, but the data themselves do not automatically translate into the public's sense of place and culture-tourism experience.

The problem is that many urban ecological resources are in a state of “meaning dormancy”: resources objectively exist but have not been fully narrativized; ecological value genuinely exists but has not been fully translated into lived experience. In Dalian, for example, the intersections between sika deer and urban space in areas such as Baiyun Mountain and Lianhua Mountain have made “encountering deer on a street corner” a distinctive experience in citizens' everyday lives; meanwhile, the overwintering, breeding, and protection practices associated with the Liaodong Bay spotted seal, a nationally protected wild animal, also constitute an important part of Dalian's marine ecology. In particular, a case publicly reported by the Supreme People's Procuratorate involving the illegal hunting, purchase, transportation, and sale of spotted seals involved 42 people and 206 spotted seals, carrying a strong ecological warning. How to transform these fragmented facts into urban stories that the public can understand and participate in constitutes the practical basis for the project.

Traditional ecological science popularization often relies on explanatory signs, display boards, brochures, and lectures, emphasizing the accurate transmission of knowledge; traditional culture-tourism development, by contrast, easily turns ecological resources into single attractions or check-in symbols, emphasizing visual consumption and visitor-flow concentration. Although the two appear to respond respectively to the needs of “education” and “tourism,” both may actually weaken the deeper relationship between people and ecology: the former has knowledge but lacks experience, while the latter has experience but lacks cognition. Landscape narrative theory is worth introducing precisely because it can build bridges among physical space, historical memory, emotional experience, and public action, enabling ecological resources to become not merely objects to be viewed, but urban stories that can be entered, traced, reasoned through, shared, and continuously written.

The “Encountering Deer in the City, Meeting Spotted Seals by the Blue Sea” project analyzed in this paper is an urban eco-cultural tourism integration practice developed from this problem awareness. Taking Dalian's characteristic local wildlife—sika deer and spotted seals—as narrative carriers, the project proposes an eco-cultural tourism integration approach combining “online digital interaction + offline immersive experience” and constructs a “1+2+N” strategy: two main lines, “Tracing Sika Deer” and “Exploring Spotted Seals,” extend into a WeChat mini-program, a UGC community, Citywalk routes, live-action murder-mystery games, cultural and creative products, and ecological cultural activities. The mid-term report shows that the team conducted field surveys and interviews at sites including the Baiyun Mountain

deer activity area, the Heishijiao coast, and Dalian Natural History Museum, and transformed public questions into content for subsequent design.

Based on this, this paper does not understand “landscape narrative” as merely placing a story shell over a scenic spot, nor does it simply regard the project as a culture-tourism planning proposal. Rather, it attempts to answer a deeper question: how can urban ecological resources be transformed through landscape narrative into “meaning assets” that can be perceived, engaged with, communicated, and continuously generated? Around this question, the paper first reconstructs the theoretical value of landscape narrative as a “meaning-generation mechanism”; second, it analyzes the different paradigms presented by the sika deer and spotted seal narrative lines; third, it discusses how the project uses an “intermediate language” to bridge the semantic rupture between professional science communication and public experience; finally, it summarizes implications for urban eco-cultural tourism integration, nature education communication, and participatory landscape design.

2. Beyond Encoding: Theoretical Reconstruction of Landscape Narrative as a “Meaning-Generation Mechanism”

Academic discussions of landscape narrative have long been associated with keywords such as “symbol,” “text,” “spatial sequence,” and “cultural expression.” Qiu Tianyi and Liu Songfu regard landscape as a discourse system with language-like characteristics, emphasizing that landscape can convey historical and cultural information to those situated within it through space, scenes, and symbols. Lu Shaoming further points out that landscape narrative includes not only story content but also narrative structure, the communication of meaning, and the construction of place identity; landscape elements, spatial organization, and cultural semantics must work together to create narrative effects that can be perceived and understood. These studies provide an important foundation for this paper: landscape is not a static background, but a medium capable of carrying, organizing, and triggering meaning.

However, if landscape narrative is understood only as “encoding stories into space,” it easily falls into a one-way communication model. Designers predetermine a theme and then convey meaning to the public through landscape elements such as sculpture, paving, signage, and routes; the public is assumed to be the receiver, needing only to follow the designed route to complete the decoding process. This model has a certain effectiveness in historical and cultural districts, commemorative landscapes, traditional village renewal, and similar contexts, but its limitations become evident in contemporary urban eco-cultural tourism settings. Urban ecological resources are mobile, contingent, and multi-actor: animals move, the public shares, events are reinterpreted, and digital platforms continuously change the ways space is perceived. Meaning is neither embedded in the landscape once and for all nor produced by designers alone; it is continuously generated through the public’s walking, observation, interaction, discussion, and recirculation.

Potteiger and Purinton propose in *Landscape Narratives* that landscape narrative can enable sites to tell stories through strategies such as naming, sequencing, revealing, gathering, and open endings. In *The Language of Landscape*, Spurr, from the perspective of “landscape language,” reminds us that landscape is not a silent object but an expressive system jointly constituted by natural processes, human construction, and human perception. The key insight of these theories is that the meaning of landscape is not fixed and stored in a particular symbol; rather, it is activated through specific perception and action. In other words, the value of landscape narrative lies not only in completing spatial encoding, but in creating a mechanism that can guide the public to actively discover, negotiate, and reproduce meaning.

From this perspective, landscape narrative contains at least three mechanisms. First is a “trigger mechanism.” A good narrative space does not rush to tell the public “what the story is,”

but uses “narrative fuses” such as footprints, clues, maps, tasks, sounds, and physical evidence to arouse curiosity and a desire to explore. Second is a “translation mechanism.” Ecology, conservation biology, laws and regulations, and spatial planning are often highly specialized, and the public may not be willing to read and understand them directly; landscape narrative needs to translate abstract knowledge into experiences structured around walking, observation, play, and interaction. Third is a “co-creation mechanism.” Urban ecological narratives should not consist only of official accounts, but should also accommodate citizen observations, tourist records, community discussions, and user-generated content on digital platforms, allowing individual experience to flow into public memory.

This theoretical turn resonates with research on nature education and study-tour landscapes. Chen Fanqi, in research on nature education in urban green spaces, emphasizes that landscape narrative can enhance the expression of nature education in urban green spaces through theme selection, story arrangement, spatiotemporal experience, and the integration of educational activities. Ai Yawei and Xiong Li, in their research on youth nature study programs, likewise propose design strategies for nature study from three dimensions—landscape narrative, spatial narrative, and scene narrative—focusing on five-sense experience, behavioral guidance, and reflective cognition. Together, these studies show that ecological education is not merely the presentation of knowledge, but needs to enter public experience through situated, embodied, and affective forms.

This paper defines landscape narrative as a “meaning-generation mechanism”: rather than simply decorating space with predetermined meaning, it organizes space, media, behavior, and emotion so that the public continuously produces meaning through participation. Compared with the traditional “encoding–communication–reception” model, this mechanism places greater emphasis on public agency, urban everydayness, and the openness of meaning. It does not exclude the organizing role of designers, but designers are no longer the sole authors; they function more like builders of rules, interfaces, and triggering conditions. The public is likewise no longer merely passive tourists, but clue discoverers, storytellers, data contributors, and co-practitioners of ecological ethics.

In the “Encountering Deer in the City, Meeting Spotted Seals by the Blue Sea” project, this mechanism is manifested particularly clearly. The project does not treat sika deer and spotted seals merely as mascot-style IP, but designs differentiated narratives according to the distinct characteristics of the two ecological resources: sika deer are characterized by everyday encounters, urban coexistence, and uncertain appearances, making probability maps, Citywalk, and UGC communities suitable for activating public exploration; spotted seals, by contrast, are closely associated with marine ecology, illegal poaching, legal protection, and historical trauma, making murder-mystery games, chains of evidence, role-playing, and closed-loop science communication more suitable for creating immersive warning education.

3. “Poetics of Encounter” and “Detective Epistemology”: An In-Depth Paradigmatic Analysis of the Two Narrative Lines

The most distinctive aspect of the project’s “1+2+N” strategy lies not merely in product forms such as online mini-programs, offline routes, or murder-mystery games, but in the different meaning-generation logics behind the two main lines. The sika deer line follows a “poetics of encounter”: grounded in uncertainty, urban everydayness, and warm coexistence, it transforms “accidentally seeing” into “actively searching” and “recording together.” The spotted seal line, by contrast, approaches a “detective epistemology”: grounded in real cases, evidentiary reasoning, and role immersion, it transforms ecological trauma into an immersive narrative that can be experienced, understood, and reflected upon. One is gentle while the other is

forceful; one is open while the other converges; one is everyday while the other is traumatic. Together, they constitute the project's composite narrative structure.

3.1. Sika Deer: The Narrative Aesthetics of Uncertainty and Participatory Mapping

The narrative appeal of the sika deer line first comes from "uncertainty." Sika deer in the city are neither viewing objects confined within traditional zoos nor performers that appear on schedule at tourist attractions; rather, they are nonhuman neighbors that emerge unexpectedly at the urban fringe, along mountain roads, and within citizens' everyday activity spaces. The locations, times, and distances of their appearances cannot be fully predicted. From the perspective of conventional tourism planning, this uncertainty appears to be a problem: tourists may fail to see the deer, routes cannot guarantee an experience, and managers find it difficult to arrange stable viewing content. From the perspective of landscape narrative, however, uncertainty can be transformed precisely into narrative tension.

The project does not attempt to eliminate uncertainty through enclosure, feeding, or fixed-point display, but instead turns it into the motivation for "tracking." The project application proposes using the "Our Neighbors" WeChat mini-program to integrate functions such as an animal probability map, a UGC community, and cloud adoption, transforming urban space into an explorable ecological narrative field. The significance of the "probability map" is not to tell users "where the deer are now," but to display a distribution of possibilities formed by historical observations, terrain conditions, and public records. Users do not capture animals by following coordinates; rather, they adjust their walking routes, dwell time, and observation methods within probability hotspots. In this way, the map is no longer merely a navigation tool, but becomes a narrative interface that triggers urban exploration.

The key to this design is to transform "seeing animals" into "understanding coexistence." If users treat sika deer only as photographic subjects, the ecological experience may be reduced to the consumption of animals as spectacles; when the mini-program and Citywalk routes embed deer activity, habitat conditions, safe distances, behavioral norms, and urban green-space management into task nodes, users' attention shifts from "Did I see the deer?" to "Why did the deer appear here?" and "How should I relate to it?" The mid-term report shows that the team recorded high-frequency locations around Lianhuashan Temple, the Baiyun Tunnel section, and outside the western wall of the Forest Zoo in the Baiyun Mountain area, and transformed questions raised in interviews into "coexistence observation" check-in points and science communication corner.

From the perspective of narrative structure, the "poetics of encounter" has three layers of meaning. First, it preserves contingency. The appearance of deer is not fully controllable, and what the public participates in is an open-ended exploration rather than a deterministic performance. Second, it emphasizes everydayness. Sika deer are not natural scenery removed from urban life, but neighbors whose lives intersect with everyday activities such as morning exercise, commuting, walking, and hiking. Third, it depends on co-creation. Every photograph, record, upload, and comment may become a clue through which subsequent users understand urban ecology. The project's story wall, check-in tasks, and UGC community are designed precisely to transform individual encounters into collective memory.

This mechanism is intrinsically related to de Certeau's idea of "spatial practice." Urban space is not defined only by planners and managers; it is also continuously rewritten by walkers' routes, pauses, narratives, and ways of use. In the sika deer line, citizens and visitors reinterpret familiar urban mountains and forests by searching for deer traces, recording observations, and sharing experiences; the same road is no longer merely a transportation path, but an interface of mutual perception between humans and animals; the same green space is no longer merely a landscape background, but a site of urban coexistence. Accordingly, the value of the sika deer

narrative lies not simply in adding a culture-tourism project, but in allowing urban residents to recognize anew the nonhuman lives that exist within their living spaces and to learn to coexist with them in a more restrained and respectful manner.

3.2. Spotted Seals: From Historical Trauma to the Narrative Elevation of “Detective Epistemology”

Unlike the warmth, openness, and everydayness of the sika deer line, the spotted seal line confronts heavier narrative material. Spotted seals are not urban neighbors that might appear on a street corner at any time; they are protected animals associated with marine ecosystems, overwintering and breeding grounds, illegal hunting, judicial protection, and public forgetting. Public reports from the Supreme People’s Procuratorate show that between 2016 and 2019, relevant offenders illegally hunted, purchased, transported, and sold 206 spotted seals; the case involved many people and a long chain of transactions, causing serious harm to the spotted seal population. How to transform such a real, grave case with legal consequences into an experience that the public is willing to enter, able to understand, and ultimately able to turn into conservation awareness is a question the spotted seal line must address.

The project selects the live-action murder-mystery game *The Spotted Seal Hunt* as its core medium. Its value lies not merely in borrowing a currently popular entertainment form, but in using “detective epistemology” to organize ecological knowledge, legal facts, and emotional impact into a narrative process that can be reasoned through. Murder-mystery games naturally contain roles, clues, conflicts, evidence, truths, and debriefing, and these structures can carry complex issues: players do not simply listen to the conclusion that “protecting spotted seals is important,” but gradually understand the seals’ ecological circumstances, the complexity of the poaching chain, the difficulties of law enforcement and rescue, and the ethical consequences of ecological destruction through role-playing and evidence collection.

The project’s mid-term report shows that the team conducted research at sites including the Heishijiao coast and Dalian Natural History Museum, noting that although there were conservation publicity signs along the coast, their content consisted mostly of policy provisions and lacked storytelling; many interviewees were also unclear about the difference between spotted seals and ordinary seals, which became an important motivation for creating *The Spotted Seal Hunt*. This research finding reveals the limitations of traditional science communication: facts may exist without necessarily entering public experience; the law may be serious without necessarily being transformed into emotional understanding. The murder-mystery game decomposes facts into role tasks, scene clues, and chains of evidence, making knowledge no longer an external infusion but information that players must actively mobilize in order to complete the reasoning process.

From the perspective of narrative mechanism, “detective epistemology” mainly contains three levels. First is role adoption. By playing fisheries law-enforcement officers, journalists, rescue personnel, or other relevant roles, players enter the action logics of different actors and thereby understand that ecological protection is not an abstract slogan, but difficult work carried out by many specific people in complex circumstances. Second is evidence organization. Physical evidence, logs, tip-off letters, on-site traces, and other clues translate biological knowledge, legal provisions, and case facts into information that can be found and compared, allowing players to learn actively while collecting evidence. Third is truth debriefing. The endpoint of a murder-mystery game should not be merely the gaming pleasure of “finding the culprit”; rather, the science communication segment should map game clues onto real conservation laws, actual cases, and the current state of spotted seal protection, completing a shift from emotional involvement to rational understanding.

This narrative transformation is particularly suited to serious ecological issues. If ecological education presents only warmth and beauty, it can easily obscure the conflicts, costs, and

responsibilities involved in ecological protection; if it presents only legal provisions and case outcomes, it can create distance. The spotted seal line transforms real ecological trauma into an immersive reasoning process, enabling the public to achieve deeper understanding through a continuous sequence of “discovery–suspicion–evidence collection–identification–debriefing.” It does not dilute the seriousness of the case, but seeks a narrative entry point that can be accepted by a broad public.

3.3. Coupling the Two Lines: A Complementary Structure of Warm Coexistence and Ecological Warning

On the surface, the “poetics of encounter” and “detective epistemology” differ markedly: the former is light, everyday, and open, while the latter is heavy, suspenseful, and convergent; the former emphasizes how coexistence might unfold in the future, while the latter emphasizes how the past should be reflected upon; the former relies on urban walking and user sharing, while the latter relies on plot structure and evidentiary reasoning. Yet it is precisely this difference that allows the project to avoid the flattening that can arise from a single ecological narrative.

The sika deer line makes urban ecology feel intimate. Through the name “Our Neighbors,” it transforms wild animals from distant natural objects into living subjects that share urban space with citizens. It evokes surprise, closeness, a desire to protect, and a sense of belonging, encouraging the public to participate gently in urban nature observation. The spotted seal line, by contrast, makes ecological protection serious. Through a real case and a reasoning structure, it makes the public realize that ecological destruction is not an abstract risk, but a real event that has occurred and produced severe consequences. It evokes shock, anger, reflection, and responsibility, helping the public understand the relationship among rule of law, ethics, and ecological protection.

When combined, the two lines form a relatively complete spectrum of urban ecological narrative: there is both an appealing imagination of “how humans and nature encounter one another” and a cautionary memory of “how human actions can harm nature”; there is both open-ended personal exploration and convergent public education. Wu Jian and Wang Boya’s research on narrative landscape renewal in traditional villages emphasizes the importance of the “story–scene–experience” model for revitalizing cultural space. Compared with traditional village cases, the distinctive feature of the Dalian project is that it deals with mobile urban ecological resources and cross-media scenarios of public participation.

At a deeper level, the coupling of the two lines allows the project to move beyond a simple combination of culture-tourism products. It does not mechanically splice together a “deer-viewing route” and a “spotted seal murder-mystery game,” but uses two different paradigms to answer the same question: “How can a city narrate the relationship between human and nonhuman life?” The sika deer line emphasizes the possibility of coexistence, while the spotted seal line emphasizes the boundaries of protection; the sika deer line brings the public into the everyday scene of urban ecology, while the spotted seal line brings the public back to ecological trauma that was once neglected. It is precisely between warmth and warning, openness and closure, everyday life and history that the project acquires greater narrative depth.

4. Reconstructing an “Intermediate Language”: Building a Narrative Mechanism for Semantic Rupture in the Dalian Context

One prominent problem in current urban eco-cultural tourism integration is the “semantic rupture” between professional science communication and popular narrative. Professional science communication pursues accuracy, systematicity, and objectivity, often using concepts such as population, habitat, migration, reproduction, protection level, and legal provisions;

public experience relies more heavily on plot, emotion, scene, interaction, and immediate feedback. The former provides facts, while the latter provides feelings; the former ensures the correctness of knowledge, while the latter determines whether the public is willing to enter the experience. Without a translation mechanism between the two, ecological science communication can easily become an information display that is “visible but not memorable,” while culture-tourism experience can become shallow consumption that is “fun but not educational.”

The value of the “Encountering Deer in the City, Meeting Spotted Seals by the Blue Sea” project lies precisely in its attempt to construct an “intermediate language” between professional science communication and public experience. This intermediate language does not reduce the accuracy of knowledge, nor does it turn ecological issues into entertainment. Instead, through the narrative organization of behavior, space, and emotion, it translates professional knowledge into an experiential structure that the public can enter. The public is not required first to understand complex knowledge and only then decide whether to participate; rather, people naturally encounter knowledge in the course of participation, return to reflection after action, and form memories through emotional fluctuation.

4.1. From “Abstract Data” to “Actionable Narrative”: Translating Knowledge into Behavior

Traditional ecological science communication often presents knowledge as static information, for example by explaining an animal’s habits, protection level, breeding cycle, or legal status. Such content is necessary and accurate for professionals, but for ordinary citizens and visitors it often lacks guidance for action. Even if the public knows that “spotted seals are protected animals” or that “a safe distance must be maintained from sika deer,” people may still not know how to observe, approach, avoid, or communicate about them in specific urban spaces.

The project first translates complex ecological knowledge into clear narrative motifs. Sika deer correspond to “encounter” and “coexistence,” while spotted seals correspond to “case” and “protection.” This step is crucial because it compresses a large amount of information into an emotional core that the public can easily understand and is willing to engage with. The project then further translates these motifs into behavioral tasks. In the sika deer line, the public learns by walking routes, viewing probability maps, recording deer traces, and sharing on story walls; in the spotted seal line, the public gains understanding through role-playing, clue collection, evidentiary reasoning, and end-of-game debriefing.

Taking the sika deer line as an example, the “probability map” translates the abstract range of animal activity into an actionable exploration interface. What the public sees on the map is not a fixed animal location but a spatial cue indicating where encounters might occur. In this way, knowledge of ecological distribution is translated into behavioral questions such as “Where can I go to observe?”, “How should I observe?”, and “Can I record and share what I see?” In the spotted seal line, the murder-mystery game translates species identification, conservation regulations, poaching chains, and rescue processes into a set of clues and role tasks. To complete the reasoning process, players must actively read and integrate information. Knowledge no longer appears as external preaching, but becomes a necessary condition for advancing the experience.

This translation from knowledge to behavior frees ecological education from the limitations of one-way information delivery. The public is not asked to memorize a set of concepts, but develops a contextualized understanding of concepts through tasks. For example, “safe distance” is not merely a number on a display board, but a behavioral boundary that must be observed when watching deer; “protection level” is not merely a legal provision, but an important basis for distinguishing the legal consequences of violations and ecological responsibility in the

spotted seal case. Once knowledge enters behavioral structures, it is more readily transformed into habits and attitudes.

4.2. From “Generalized Discourse” to “Local Anchors”: Translating Knowledge into Urban Space

Ecological protection discourse often appears abstract when it lacks local anchors. Expressions such as “protect biodiversity” and “harmonious coexistence between humans and nature” have universal significance, but do not necessarily evoke emotional resonance among local publics. The strategy of the Dalian project is not to treat sika deer and spotted seals as animal images detached from place, but to embed them in Dalian’s specific spaces and local memory.

The sika deer line unfolds around real locations such as Baiyun Mountain, the area around Lianhuashan Temple, Baiyun Tunnel, and the western side of the Forest Zoo. These places were not created specifically for the project; they already existed within citizens’ lives and the urban terrain. Through field surveys, route design, and check-in nodes, the project transforms these places into ecological narrative nodes, giving new meaning to roads and mountain forests familiar to citizens. For Dalian residents, “seeing sika deer” is not merely an act of nature observation, but also a way of re-understanding their city’s mountainous edges, green-space system, and human–animal relationships.

The spotted seal line incorporates the Heishijiao coast, Dalian Natural History Museum, and memories associated with the Changxing Island case into the narrative. The Heishijiao coast is not an ordinary seaside backdrop, but an entry point for understanding marine ecology; the natural history museum is not simply an exhibition space, but a connecting point among species knowledge, specimen memory, and public education; the Changxing Island poaching case is likewise not an isolated news event, but a warning episode in the history of Dalian’s marine ecological protection that needs to be retold. Through these local anchors, spotted seal protection is transformed from a distant marine issue into a public memory of something “that happened near this city and is connected to this city.”

In recent years, Dalian has continuously carried out work related to biodiversity protection, wetland conservation, supervision of protected natural areas, and public outreach. Public reports note that the city has advanced biodiversity conservation through survey and monitoring, ecological restoration, supervision of protected natural areas, publicity and education, and other measures. These practical foundations provide the urban context for the project. The project does not replace government conservation work or scientific monitoring, but supplements them at the levels of public communication and public participation with a narrative expression that is easier for citizens to understand. Precisely because the project is rooted in real places and real issues, its culture-tourism value is not merely “creative packaging,” but a re-expression of the achievements of urban ecological governance and the potential of ecological culture.

4.3. From “Rational Cognition” to “Deep Empathy”: Translating Knowledge into Emotional Experience

The goal of ecological education should not stop at “knowing,” but should move further toward “feeling” and “willingness to act.” Purely rational cognition is difficult to sustain long-term behavioral change, whereas emotional experience can help knowledge become memory and influence attitudes. The project designs different emotional pathways for sika deer and spotted seals, giving the two-line narrative greater psychological depth.

The sika deer line corresponds to an emotional pathway of “warmth–surprise.” As the public searches for traces, records observations, and shares photographs and stories along the route, they move from curiosity to discovery, from discovery to identification, and from identification to protection. In particular, the expression “Our Neighbors” weakens the subject-object

relationship between humans and animals, transforming deer from objects being viewed into living partners that share urban space. When users see other people's encounter stories on the story wall, individual experience enters community resonance, and urban ecology is no longer merely a resource spoken of by experts, but becomes a story of everyday life jointly told by citizens.

The spotted seal line corresponds to an emotional pathway of "suspense–shock–reflection." The murder-mystery game creates suspense through case settings, role conflicts, and evidentiary reasoning, drawing players actively into the plot. As the truth gradually unfolds, players come to realize that poaching is not simply the behavior of a single bad actor, but a complex problem jointly constituted by chains of interest, gaps in awareness, and regulatory difficulties. In the final debriefing, emotional impact is redirected toward legal understanding and ecological responsibility. Unlike the warmth of the sika deer line, the emotional tone of the spotted seal line is more austere: it shows the public the darker side of ecological protection and turns "protection" from a slogan into action with boundaries, costs, and the support of rule of law.

This emotional difference is not merely a stylistic embellishment, but an important way in which meaning is generated. Warmth makes the public willing to approach nature, while warning helps the public understand the boundaries of protection; surprise creates positive memory, while shock promotes ethical reflection. Together, the two pathways transform knowledge from external information into internal attitude. The value of eco-cultural tourism is thereby redefined: it is not merely about attracting visitors to a place, but about using experience to lead the public to reconsider its relationship with the city, nature, and nonhuman life.

Through behavioral translation, spatial translation, and emotional translation, the project's "intermediate language" forms a relatively complete narrative chain: ecological knowledge is translated into tasks and clues, urban locations into story nodes, and public emotions into memory and responsibility. Knowledge is no longer merely communicated, but acquired as users "walk," "observe," "reason," and "share"; the city is no longer merely the background in which stories take place, but becomes the site where meaning is generated; emotion is likewise no longer merely an accessory to culture-tourism consumption, but an important medium through which ecological ethics are internalized.

5. Conclusion: Constructing an "Ecology of Meaning" for Urban Ecological Narrative—Theoretical Resonance and Practical Prospects

Through an analysis of Dalian's "Encountering Deer in the City, Meeting Spotted Seals by the Blue Sea" project, this paper argues that the value of landscape narrative in urban eco-cultural tourism integration should not be confined to spatial symbolic expression or story packaging, but should be understood as a "meaning-generation mechanism." By triggering public exploration, translating professional knowledge, embedding narratives in local space, organizing emotional experience, and encouraging user co-creation, this mechanism transforms urban ecological resources from "natural capital" into "meaning assets" that can be perceived, remembered, communicated, and engaged with.

This paper retains and further strengthens three core judgments from the original analysis. First, the key to landscape narrative is not for designers to finish telling a city's story on its behalf, but to create conditions in which the public can enter and continue writing that story. The probability map, Citywalk, story wall, and UGC community in the sika deer line are precisely mechanisms that transform the uncertain appearance of animals into open-ended urban exploration. Second, eco-cultural tourism should not present only the beautiful side of nature, but should also present conflicts, trauma, and the boundaries of rule of law in ecological

protection. Through The Spotted Seal Hunt murder-mystery game, the spotted seal line translates a real case into evidentiary reasoning and role experience, making it possible to express serious issues in a form accessible to the public. Third, urban ecological narrative needs an “intermediate language.” The threefold translation of behavior, space, and emotion establishes a connection between professional science communication and public experience, thereby avoiding hollow science communication and superficial culture-tourism.

The project’s practical value is first reflected in the re-identification of urban ecological resources. Dalian does not lack ecological resources; what it lacks is a narrative mechanism for transforming those resources into public memory and cultural experience. Sika deer and spotted seals represent, respectively, the city’s mountain ecology and marine ecology. One is warm and everyday, the other grave and cautionary, and together they constitute an ecological-cultural picture of Dalian characterized by “mountain-sea coexistence.” Through its two-line narrative, the project gives structured expression to ecological facts that were originally scattered and also provides a new path for urban branding that differs from traditional coastal tourism narratives.

Second, the project’s educational value is reflected in the renewal of methods for communicating ecological knowledge. Compared with signboard-style science communication, mini-programs, Citywalk, and murder-mystery games are more consistent with the media habits of younger groups and urban visitors; compared with purely entertainment-oriented products, the project consistently revolves around real ecological resources, real spatial sites, and real conservation issues, maintaining the seriousness of ecological education. It suggests that ecological education need not occur only in classrooms or lectures, but can also happen through walking, games, reasoning, and sharing. The key is not whether the form is “new,” but whether it can carry accurate knowledge, real situations, and value guidance.

Third, the project has a certain degree of transferability. Different cities may all possess their own ecological resources and ecological stories. What can be transferred is not the two specific objects of sika deer or spotted seals, but the method of “identifying resource characteristics–extracting narrative motifs–designing participation mechanisms–forming an ecology of meaning.” Urban animals characterized by everyday encounters can adopt pathways of open observation, public recording, and community co-creation; ecological issues involving historical events or conservation controversies can adopt pathways based on chains of evidence, role experience, and debriefing education.

Of course, the project’s continued development still needs to confront several practical issues. UGC communities, probability maps, route updates, and content moderation all require long-term maintenance; narratives involving wild animals must also maintain ethical boundaries and avoid inducing people to chase, feed, or approach animals excessively; adaptations of real cases must maintain an appropriate balance between immersive experience and serious expression. These issues do not diminish the project’s value; rather, they indicate that eco-cultural tourism integration must maintain a balance among creative expression, scientific conservation, and public ethics.

Looking ahead, the “Encountering Deer in the City, Meeting Spotted Seals by the Blue Sea” project still has room for further development. Online, the project can continue to improve the mini-program’s science communication content, observation records, and community interaction mechanisms; offline, it can optimize Citywalk routes, ecological courses, and immersive experiences in conjunction with sites such as Baiyun Mountain, Heishijiao, and Dalian Natural History Museum; in communication, it can be combined with school study programs, community activities, museum education, and urban festivals to form a more stable network of public participation.

From this perspective, the significance of the project lies neither merely in completing the outcome transformation of a college student innovation and entrepreneurship project nor merely in proposing a set of culture-tourism products. More importantly, it offers a new way of understanding urban ecological resources: animals, coastlines, mountains and forests, cases, memories, and everyday life in the city are not isolated elements, but can be reconnected through landscape narrative to form an “ecology of meaning” jointly constituted by resources, space, media, users, and values.

The most far-reaching value of landscape narrative may not lie in creating a sufficiently moving story, but in enabling a city to continuously tell, listen, and co-create. For Dalian, what the “Encountering Deer in the City, Meeting Spotted Seals by the Blue Sea” project opens up is precisely such a possibility: allowing ecological resources between mountain and sea to become an active part of urban culture, allowing citizens and visitors to rediscover the city through walking, exploration, reasoning, and sharing, and allowing human and nonhuman life to continue dialogue, understanding, and coexistence within a shared “ecology of meaning.”

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