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En dan: Wat is natuur nog in dit land?

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land?

oop dank ik voor het maken

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van P.A. Bakker, Joop Bak-
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Summary

After all: what is nature in this country? Nature conservation in the Netherlands 1880-1990

Since the beginning of this century, Dutch nature conservationists have discussed the questions how nature has to be protected and what counts as important nature. As a result, the concept of nature and the related nature conservation practices have changed periodically. At the same time there was a certain consensus about these questions. In this book it is analysed how from about 1880 onwards the concept of nature has been constructed and transformed by the nature conservation movement in the Netherlands. Special attention is paid to the role of biologists and ecologists.

In the *first chapter* an overall scheme of analysis is presented, based on approaches from the field of 'Science and Technology Studies'. This means that this study covers organisational, scientific, ideological, practical and social aspects of the movement. In five empirical chapters, it presents the development of the Dutch nature conservation movement. Each of these chapters reconstructs part of the history of the nature conservation movement with different theoretical concepts from the field of Science and Technology Studies. In each chapter, the focus is on one or two important shifts in ideas, practices or social relations with respect to nature conservation.

The *second chapter* describes how the nature conservation movement arose at the end of the nineteenth century. In this period several groups of people gave new meanings to old ideas about the beauty and the vulnerability of nature, and developed ideas about the practical protection of 'wild nature'. One of these new practices was the founding of so-called *nature reserves* or *nature monuments*. In some respects this concept reflects continuity with the past, because the attitude towards nature within the Dutch nature reserves resembles older initiatives to show beautiful nature such as paintings and English landscape gardens. The focus is on complete landscapes, birds, remarkable trees and winding streams. With respect to the social basis of the ideas of nature we see continuity as well. Just as in earlier ages, upper class people, such as the nobility and the healthy business people gave meaning to nature and established new practices. Also the old idea to protect natural resources and to maintain the natural equilibrium was widespread among nature conservationists.

The nature conservation movement was linked to a variety of arguments and

social groups. Diverse groups such as animal protection groups, foresters, artists, nationalists, bicyclists and naturalists came together to protect certain areas or certain species. Although the arguments for protecting parts of nature differed at the beginning, eventually some of them became dominant. This process started in countries such as the US, the UK and Germany. The contents of the concept of nature conservation and the success were dependent on the composition and the strength of the conservation network or what is called here the conservation 'thought collective'. In Germany, the focus was on nationalist arguments and in the US on wilderness and natural resources. In both countries the nature conservation movement was successful, because of the involvement of the state. In the Netherlands the foundation of the nature conservation movement is comparable with the process in the other countries, but the outcome was slightly different. At first, animal protection groups, farmers and foresters played a main role, which resulted in a law for the protection of useful animals, especially birds.

After this first stage, amateur naturalists worrying about their field study areas started to play an important role. They founded special journals and organisations for nature study and conservation. Through these activities the conservation network became more substantial and structural. The next step in the rise of the nature conservation movement was the foundation of some organisations. The 'Vereniging tot Behoud van Natuurmonumenten in Nederland' (Society for Preservation of Nature in the Netherlands), founded in 1905, is the most important one. This organisation bought the first Dutch nature reserve: the lake Naardermeer, famous for its bird-life. In these organisations four types of groups played an important role: teachers, members of the nobility, merchants and biologists. After a period of detachment, biologists formed an inner circle of experts from 1905 onwards. They defined to a certain extent what had to be seen as 'wild and beautiful nature'. There was also an outer circle, consisting of the other groups. Both circles formed the nature conservation thought collective. The members of the inner (or esoteric) circle were dependent on the outer (or exoteric circle) for their recognition as experts and for money to buy reserves to save their objects of study. The exoteric circle derived status from the participation of biologists in the movement for nature conservation. In this structure of mutual dependencies the contents of 'wild and beautiful nature' was formulated in a restricted way: certain areas and certain species. This can be seen as a special 'thought style' in which some objects and features were seen as real nature. At the beginning of the century this kind of nature was protected in nature monuments owned by the 'Vereniging tot Behoud van Natuurmonumenten in Nederland'. Supporters donated or lent the necessary money. To be able to pay the interest, the organisation exploited the reserves as fishing, hunting and wood production areas. So in the beginning of the century, the old idea of vulnerable and beautiful nature was stabilised in a *thought style*, its *collective* (institutionalised in conservation organisations and managed by biologists and merchants), and a *practice* of (management of) nature monuments.

The *third chapter* shows how after a few decades nature conservationists changed

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Summary

the concept of nature. In the thirties and forties it appeared to be impossible to combine the different ideals of conservationists in the *management of nature reserves*. Some biologists and other non-interventionists wanted to conserve pristine nature in the reserves. This meant that nature had to be able to follow its own route to the moment at which the so-called 'climax-situation' had been reached, the end point of natural processes with respect to vegetation. Others preferred to intervene, to guarantee a varied nature or to ensure an economically healthy exploitation of the nature monuments. During two decades conservationists discussed how to manage the monuments. One central actor, the young biologist, Westhoff, played a major role in overcoming these contradictions and stabilising a new idea and a new practice of nature management. He introduced some new cognitive elements in the discussion and also had special relations with several opposite wings of the conservation movement.

Westhoff's main contributions to the debate were the introduction of the term *semi-nature* (or semi-natural landscape) and the focus on the plant community as the central issue for conservationists. He stressed that the need for human intervention is dependent on the type of plant community. For some plant communities human influence is not required but for many others it is necessary, especially for some biologically diverse grassland communities in areas with an extensive old-fashioned type of agriculture. He combined these ideas with the term *nature technique*, a technique to make nature more diverse. After Westhoff's intervention almost all interventionist and non-interventionist groups were satisfied. Westhoff transformed the question 'is intervention in nature monuments acceptable' into the questions 'which intervention is acceptable and when?' and 'who is the right person to answer this question?' It was Westhoff himself who got the credits and he became a central figure in the Dutch nature conservation movement. From 1945 onwards he was an 'obligatory passage point' for the management of natural and semi-natural landscapes. Besides the mechanism of stabilisation through a thought style and a thought collective, as mentioned above, here we see another mechanism to stabilise a concept of nature: a *central actor in a new established network*.

In the *fourth chapter* we concentrate on the *relation between the conservation movement and other interest groups in the rural areas*. After the twenties the relationship between conservationists and farmers changed profoundly due to large-scale reclamation projects. Farmers needed more land and supported these projects. The conservationists, however, feared that uncultivated areas would disappear completely. The conservation movement was forced to develop a conservation strategy to react to this new situation. Besides, it was facing the rapidly growing organisations of town and country planners and recreation organisations which were also interested in the rural areas. As a result of these two developments the conservationist movement generated a new 'cognitive practice'. In the first decades of the century the cognitive practice consisted of three components: an idea that there is a kind of nature worth protecting, the practice of buying nature monuments and an esoteric circle of nature experts with a group of financial supporters and nature

lovers. This is called here the *nature monuments practice*. In the thirties some conservationists proposed adding the protection of the 'landscape' to the aims of the conservation movement. After intense discussions it was decided to look for practices to protect the landscape. Meanwhile a new organisation was founded, the 'Contact Commissie voor Natuur- en Landschapsbescherming' (Committee for Preservation of Nature and Landscape), in 1932. In this committee we find classical conservationists (amateur nature lovers – teachers and merchants – and biologists) but also politicians and town and landscape planners. A new cognitive practice was founded, in which the idea of landscape protection played an important role. New practices were started, such as the making of landscape plans for reclamation projects, landscape care, landscape protection and physical planning. This did not mean that the older cognitive practice disappeared however; the new cognitive practice of *landscape planning and protection* was added to and partly integrated in the older cognitive practice.

In the sixties and seventies a comparable pattern appeared. Again the relation between agriculture and nature conservation became problematic, again new groups entered the movement and again the practices and the organisation structures changed. This time nature conservationists were confronted with the increasing intensification of in agriculture, especially the use of chemicals. Conservationists tried to destine thousands of acres of agricultural lands as landscape or nature reserves. As a result, the fights about the destination of the lands became more serious. Some of the new groups entering the conservation movement, trained in the newly established environmental movement or other social movements, such as the student movement, proposed to reject the area-centred (buying and physical planning) approach of the conservationists. They recommended paying attention to the whole (agricultural part of the) country and to work together with other groups such as farmers. To a certain extent these critics were successful. A new organisation was founded in 1972: the 'Stichting Natuur en Milieu' (Netherlands Society for Nature and Environment), formed out of the 'Contact Commissie voor Natuur- en Landschapsbescherming'. Furthermore, conservationists started to pay more attention to other societal groups, new agricultural methods, to the societal background of conservation problems and to democratic forms of organisation. A more *societal, democratic environment-oriented practice* was founded, partly within the existing organisation, partly in a new organisation specialised in the integration of nature conservation, agriculture and environmental protection. But again, the older cognitive practices ('nature monuments' and 'landscape planning and protection') did not disappear. With respect to the interaction between conservationists and other groups, an important mechanism to stabilise new concepts of nature appeared to be the establishment of *new practices* and new social bonds related to these practices.

The conservationists had much more agreeable relations with *foresters* than with farmers. In *chapter five* this is interpreted as a result of common interests or, in analytical terms, 'boundary objects'. These are broad categories, which are vague and

powerful enough to inspire foresters and nature conservers. Furthermore, both groups used the same system to characterise the nature of the pristine wood. During the sixties the concept of community but also the idea of a natural wood community measures, due to the need for a new definition. Foresters and nature s

In the seventies the idea of a natural wood concept of the so-called forest conservationists discussed the practice of the radical ecologists called for a new resulting debate the role of nature, more than in the forest ecosystem management, was formulated, including the introduction of lands, such as bisons and wood and leaving dead or dying trees they hoped to offer niches for conservationists appeared to be a management but did not accept these ideas was that a more extensive concept. After the debates, at least included some elements of the

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Chapter six focuses on an ecological and technological practice: the Abstract Method for Overcoming, developed by ecologists of the 1960s to the big water systems, and In this concept the quality

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Summary

powerful enough to inspire and bind different social groups. For instance, both foresters and nature conservationists were interested in the so-called natural forest. Furthermore, both groups used the ecological concepts of community and ecosystem to characterise the natural forest, and both were inspired by the archetype of the pristine wood. During the thirties the two groups found each other in the concept of community but disagreed about its precise practical implications. The ideas of a natural wood community were hardly ever transformed into practical measures, due to the need for wood and a rational, economical way of production. Foresters and nature societies changed their forestry practices slightly.

In the seventies the ideas of a pristine and natural wood came back in the concept of the so-called forest ecosystem. Again foresters, ecologists and nature conservationists discussed the possibility of and need for a new forestry practice. Some radical ecologists called for a radical type of pristine-wood management. In the resulting debate the role of man in the management of the woods was seen as a problem, more than in the forties and thirties. The radicals wanted to start a so-called ecosystem management, which means that all parts of the ecosystem had to be stimulated, including the introduction of species which were extinct in the Netherlands, such as bison and wolves. They proposed the banishment of imported trees and leaving dead or dying trees in the wood instead of removing them. Doing so they hoped to offer niches for small animals and mushrooms. Foresters and nature conservationists appeared to be sensitive to the new ideas of ecosystem forest management but did not accept its radical proposals. A stimulating factor for the new ideas was that a more extensive wood management could become more profitable. After the debates, at least three wood management practices existed, which all included some elements of the proposals of the radicals.

During the eighties the idea of pristine nature stimulated the discussion about the management of other areas. At the Ministry of Agriculture, Nature Management and Fisheries the concept of *nature development* was introduced to enable the idea of pristine nature to materialise. This concept turned out to be stimulating for many conservationists, but also for other societal groups, such as landscape architects and recreation organisations. Some industries were enthusiastic too because many nature development projects were situated along the rivers where gravel and clay were planned to be removed, which they can use. Just as the natural wood or the forest ecosystem the concept of nature development is a vague but inspiring concept which binds different groups as long as concrete practices are missing. The boundary objects, pristine nature, natural wood, community, ecosystem and nature development, stabilise concepts of nature to a certain extent.

Chapter six focuses on an example of the new nature policy, in which intervention and technological practices play an important role. It is called 'AMOEBBA', the Abstract Method for Overall Examination of the Biological Ambience, developed by ecologists of the Ministry of Traffic and Public Works. It was first applied to the big water systems, such as the Rhine, the North Sea and the Wadden Sea. In this concept the quality of an ecosystem is indicated by the number of individu-

als of a certain small number of animal and plant species. These species are put in a radar plot figure, the so-called Amoeba figure. This figure looks like a circle if the quality of the ecosystem is optimal, and is then meant to represent the sustainable situation of the ecosystem. If there are too many or too few animals or plants the figure looks more like a star. Then we have a disturbed situation which has to be changed, according to the ecological demands of the species involved. The method offers the opportunity to choose so-called ecotargets, which are somewhere between the pristine natural conditions and the actual situation. Because negotiations are possible about the precise targets, the method was acceptable for different parties such as the engineers of the ministry, conservation groups, ecologists working in the management context and practical water managers. This was enforced through the inclusion of economically important species, ecologically interesting species, and popular species such as the seal. In that sense the method was successful.

The Amoeba *figure* had even more impact. It was adopted by environmental institutes and is used by many ecologists, even outside the Netherlands. It fulfilled functions which exceeded the original ideas of its creators. The Amoeba developed as a 'macro-actor' for water management, nature management and environmental management. Thus it turned out to be an integrating and stabilising object. But it also structured reality, because nature is seen as a set of a limited number of animals and plants which can be manipulated easily. But even in this technocratic ecoconcept the hard core is the idea of undisturbed nature.

The *seventh chapter* presents some general conclusions. The *first conclusion* is that nature conservation has some continuities and changes. Continuous elements are the idea of a pristine nature and the nature monuments. Changes regard new areas and new ideas about nature. These changes are interconnected with alternative practices and new groups entering the conservation movement. The *second conclusion* concerns the pattern of changes in the movement. In many cases problems are reformulated by a relative outsider. Then groups and problems are reordered and the concept of nature is modified. The outsider becomes a central point and starts a new practice. Eventually the problem seems to be resolved and the new approach is stabilised in social structures, ideas and practices. The changes in the conservation movements can be related to external constraints, such as the governmental policy, the position and attitude of the counterpart, such as the farmers, and nature itself. For the changes and stabilisation of new approaches so-called 'movement intellectuals' play an important role. They introduce concepts from ecology and other scientific or practical fields, develop new concepts in the movement and export these new approaches to the outside world.

The *third conclusion* is that despite the interpretative flexibility of the concept of nature, not *all* interpretations are possible any more. The conservation movement has its own body of knowledge, ideas and practices which acts as a selection filter. During certain stages of the development of the movement, the animal protection movement, the landscape planners or supporters of an environment-friendly agri-

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Summary

culture were not seen as real nature conservationists. Part of this cognitive practice is the focus on certain areas, and certain natural objects, especially birds and vascular plants. The *fourth conclusion* is that the conservation movement has expanded its domain, both in a material and an ideological sense. Conservation movements kept extending their properties, regularly adding new types of terrains. In culture-historical respect we can view this process as a democratisation of wild nature. From the Middle Ages onwards a growing group has been inspired by wild nature, together with the increasing domination of man on nature.

The *fifth conclusion* is that biologists and ecologists played a major role in the conservation movement, ideologically and institutionally. Ecologists were, at least partly, responsible for the development of many central concepts, such as nature management, natural wood community, natural wood management, nature development and Amoeba. Due to the central position of ecologists, the nature conservation movement has become ecologised. Besides photographs and lyrical descriptions of nature, abstractions such as ecosystems and the Amoeba are used to represent nature.

A second theme of chapter seven is the question whether this study offers opportunities to contribute to the debates among nature conservationists. In fact in this study the author takes a agnostic position, a position of distance. The debates and developments are analysed from a position of an outsider. He discusses the question whether other analytical positions can be seen as more real insider positions and how far the agnostic position can be a total outsider position. He concludes that each analytical position has outsider and insider elements. The author proposes to explore the possibilities of combining a historical agnostic analysis with an explicit intervention strategy. Elements of this strategy are an analysis of the positions in the debate, a creative combination of several components of the debate and an analysis of the socio-cognitive dynamics of the debate.

An analysis of the positions in a debate can lead to a more or less powerful intervention, dependent on the dynamics of the debate. A creative combination of elements of the debate can create a new position, different from those of the actors as regards knowledge and practices. An analysis of the socio-cognitive dynamics of the debate can link social actors and cognitive elements from different parts of the network. Another possibility is to underline the need for outsiders and boundary objects. In recent discussions about nature development, for instance, it can be useful to analyse the different socio-cognitive positions of farmers, recreation organisations and different conservation groups, and the course of the debate. After an evaluation of the debate in terms of knowledge, strength of the positions and the relation between these elements, proposals can be made to ensure a democratically and ecologically adequate content of nature development.