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Stories of planned and unplanned change in 'het IJzerenbosch' | Lars van Peij



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disclaimer: the view presented in this thesis may not necessarily represent the view of the University or the supervisors

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Preface

For me, this thesis combines my passion for Limburg, my birthplace, and everything Wageningen has taught me. The theories I have learnt in Wageningen were interesting, but it becomes ever more real once you apply it in an area that means something to you personally. It was very nice to be able to interview someone while walking through the area. The interviewees

I would like to thank all the people I have interviewed or that have otherwise helped me or given me information. As their names are kept anonymous, I would just say thank you all! Furthermore I would like to sincerely thank Raoul for his never-ending enthusiasm about the case, and for all the interesting discussions we have had. I would also like to thank Kristof for his insights during the last stages of the process. Lastly I would like to thank everyone for their patience, the many hours of table tennis and the input you have given me during the process.

Lars van Peij, Wageningen

*Maar je hebt nog de oude kerk,
het kanon op de markt
Al is 'de Hens' al heel lang verdwenen.
Altijd blijf je mooi Susteren van mij
Mooi Susteren, dat zul je blijven.*

Mer doe höbs nog dien auw kirk,
't knon oppe maert,
Al is d'n Hens al hieël lang verdwene.
Altied blifse sjaon Zöstere van mich,
Sjoan Zöstere, det zöste blieve.

*But you still have the old church,
and the canon at the market place,
Although 'de Hens' is already long gone.
Always you will remain my beautiful Susteren
Beautiful Susteren, that's what you will remain.*

*Maar Susteren werd anders, dat houd je niet tegen,
Veranderingen kun je niet zomaar van de tafel afvegen,
Maar ook aan nieuwe dingen, je raakt er aan gewend.
Maar ik ben blij dat ik het nog heb gekend.*

Mer Zöstere woort anges, det hilse neet taege,
Verangeringe kèense neet zo van taofel aafvaege,
Mer ouch aan nÿj dènger, doe raaks draan gewènd.
Mer ich bèn blie det ich 't nog hób gekènd.

*But Susteren changed, you cannot stop that,
you cannot just wipe changes off the face of the table.
But even new things, you get used to them.
But I'm glad I did know it.*

Henk Steyvers, Zösters Leedje

Abstract

This thesis argues that within the current modernistic Dutch nature conservation policy, there are still valued nature areas that are not artificially 'made'. In a case study in 'het IJzerenbosch', a forest of 137ha that consists of 732 parcels, it explores how stories of a place and the stories about the community that is connected to that place, and the development of the relation between those two throughout history has led to the present situation. Three conclusions can be drawn for this case study. First, the place-identity of het IJzerenbosch and the social identity of the community of Susteren have been interwoven throughout history. Second, the perception of marginality has played an important role in its development. Third, when Natuurmonumenten, a large Dutch nature organisation started to buy parcels in the area, they met resistance. They did not see the informal forms of protection that were already in place. By recognising and acknowledging the evolution between place-identity and social-identity, this resistance can be avoided in similar cases.

Keywords: spatial planning, unplanned planning, nature conservation, Limburg, place-identity, image of nature

Summary

In the South of the Netherlands, in the Province of Limburg lies het IJzerbosch, a forest with 732 parcels. This forest provides an argument against the need for control and 'actively making nature' in Dutch nature conservation policy. It is not the result of policy, nor is it actively managed. This thesis aims to explore the stories of the place-identity of het IJzerbosch, and stories of the social identity of the community of Susteren that is connected to that forest. Moreover, it explores how this place-identity and the social identity have interacted throughout history, and how this relation has led to the physical status quo of het IJzerbosch. Every individual has its own perception of nature. In the literature about nature valuation, *natuurbeeld* (image of nature) is used. An image of nature is presented as something that is static, can be universally applied and is applied to a whole group. This thesis argues that a perspective of nature can be highly personal, can change throughout history, and is very specific for each area individually. Perspectives are shared through stories. Stories about an area are produced and reproduced continuously. They are negotiated in a social context. This has happened throughout history. History itself is also a story, which is produced and reproduced. Because stories play a central role in the negotiation of the individual perspectives on an area, 24 in-depth interviews were held to collect those stories about the area. Additional background stories were found in local books, historical documents and internet pages.

The first finding is about this community of Susteren and het IJzerbosch, how the interpretation of het IJzerbosch has changed throughout history. Up until the middle of the 20th century, once in a while someone would drag a tree out of the forest or maintain a parcel in the forest, but those were not accessible nor feasible parcels. To the community in those days, the forest was useless. Later, when the notion of nature and recreation had grown, the perception of the forest changed. People started to walk through the forest and enjoy its beauty instead.

Old stories were gradually replaced by new ones to enforce this new perspective. This example shows how the physical situation and the social interpretation of it are continuously connected and change throughout history.

The second finding is about the role that marginality has played in the area. Not only does the Province of Limburg hold a marginal position within the Netherlands due to its peculiar history, on a smaller scale Susteren holds a marginal place within Limburg as well. It lies directly adjacent to the German border. On the local scale, het IJzerbosch maintains a marginal position as well. It has been visually separated from the village of Susteren since the construction of the rail yard in the beginning of the 20th century. Additionally it has been hard to reach. The road through the forest was not connected up until the middle of the 20th century, and only in 2001 has it been paved. On top of the three levels of geographical marginality, het IJzerbosch was marginal in economic terms as well. It has never been feasible to use the land for agricultural use or for intensive wood production. In this setting of marginality, and in the social context of a very poor community in Susteren, stories of smuggling are portrayed in het IJzerbosch in the beginning of the 20th century.

The third finding is about the interventions of Natuurmonumenten. In 1979, Natuurmonumenten started buying parcels in the area to enforce their objective to take care of nature. What they did not see was that there were already informal ways of protection in place. The many individual parcels provided a deadlock situation in which little changed over time. On top of that, the community would not accept major changes in the area. For Natuurmonumenten, not having an understanding of this development led to unanticipated reactions.

An important lesson can be learnt from this case study. Understanding not only the physical situation but also the social context and how they have developed and interacted throughout history can avoid unanticipated situations.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Should nature be controlled?

There is a debate going on in the Netherlands on how nature policies should be effected. Should nature policies control nature? Should expert judgement be the ultimate judge on how nature should be protected?

Current Dutch nature policy can be typified as technocratic and modernistic. Sandra Rientjes claims that many of the basic ideas of modernity are still alive and well within Dutch nature conservation¹. Dutch nature conservation is convinced that a rational process can solve societal problems. With the state still playing a central role in nature conservation, there is great confidence in expert knowledge, policy-making and planning as a way towards effective nature conservation. But should nature be controlled? Should nature be locked away and fenced into nature parks?

The discussion is not only about controlling nature, it is also about 'making' new nature. In her book 'Nieuwe Natuur' (new nature) Tracy Metz describes an image of the Netherlands as a landscape that is constantly re-shaped². New nature is 'made'. It is designed at a desk, and then executed from scratch. This is not as surreal as it sounds. In 1990, the Ecological Main Structure (EMS) was introduced in the Netherlands. Now the basis of Dutch nature policy, it is a coherent network of existing and yet to be developed nature areas in the

Netherlands. It is effectively the embodiment of the modernistic aspect of Dutch nature policy. The EMS policy determines where to purchase land. This land is then shaped and planted. That is how nature is made in the Netherlands.

At the same time, there are areas in the Netherlands that are ecologically valuable without being purchased, shaped and managed. One of these areas is het IJzerenbosch in the South of Limburg. Het IJzerenbosch is a nature area that is valued, not only by ecologists, but also by farmers and inhabitants of the nearby village of Susteren.

Instead of a typical modernist *tabula rasa*³ approach, the origin of het IJzerenbosch is a case of cultural complexity. It is a forest of 137 ha that consist of 732 different parcels. Over the course of history, this situation has grown due to a chain of family inheritance over the course of many decades. With each inheritance, a parcel could be split in up to ten pieces for the inheritance of their children. From 1979, Natuurmonumenten, a large Dutch nature organisation, starts to purchase parcels in het IJzerenbosch.

Het IJzerenbosch is valued, although it has never been planned. Too what extent should nature be controlled and planned if you would want to protect that nature area? Is there a necessity for planning in the first place?

¹ Rientjes, 2002.

² Metz, 1998.

³ van Assche, 2010.



Figure 1. Het IJzerenbosch in aerial view.



Figure 2. het IJzerenbosch in aerial view with an overlay that shows the parcel borders.

⁴ translated from: Buijs, 2000.

⁵ Hoefs, 2005.

1.2 Problem clarification

First, some fundamental questions need to be answered. What is nature? How do people perceive nature? Nature is not a universal concept. How can an ambiguous concept such as 'nature' then be explained?

In the academic literature, the term 'natuurbeeld' (image of nature) is used to describe how people perceive nature⁴. Images of nature describe how someone perceives nature, what someone's attitude towards nature is. Based on qualitative research, Buijs then goes on to categorise five ideal types of images of nature: 'the wilderness image, the autonomy image, the inclusive image, the aesthetic image, and the functional image'. He says that knowing the types of images of nature can help professionals close the gap towards the wishes of civilians.

The use of images of nature as described by Buijs has various limitations. As he describes the five types of images of nature, this categorisation does not do justice to the variety and complexity of perspectives of nature. Images of nature are not static. Perceptions of nature change all the time. They are (re)produced and negotiated within a social context. And not only can they change within a social context, they can also change within an individual. Rob Hoefs has demonstrated that images of nature even depend on when you ask someone, and in what specific context⁵. Besides, an image of nature can be different for each area that is discussed, and for a specific social context.

That is why it is impossible and impractical to assume one group of stakeholders have one image of nature that is the same with each individual. Instead, every individual has his own image of nature, and even individual images of nature can change, depending on the context. The boundaries of the term 'nature' are not a given⁶. These boundaries shift in relation to the definition of nature and in relation to the purpose of the person talking about nature.

But to properly give an answer, we must dig deeper. There are deeper motives, concepts and processes that we need to understand in order to fully grasp what is really going on in planning processes. How are they created? How do different concepts relate to each other? When we have answers to these questions, we can have a deeper understanding of what is really going on in planning practices.

The problem statement is then stated as follows:

'To what extent should nature be controlled to ensure protection for a nature area?'

1.3 Scientific objective & research questions

The main objective of this research can be typified as follows:

'How did the history of het IJzerenbosch lead to the present situation, and what does that imply for this situation.'

This will be done by searching for coherence between existing concepts and insights in the perspective of spatial planning.

1.4 Reading guide

The above concludes Chapter 1, in which the issue has been introduced and a research objective and questions have been established to facilitate the process of finding answers. Chapter 2 explains how the research conducted has been designed and operationalised. Chapter 3 will explain the theoretical framework within which you should position this thesis. It also introduces theoretical concepts to provide a solid foundation for the empirical findings. Chapter 4 first introduces a set of stories and then makes an analysis of the role of these narratives and how they have collectively shaped the status quo in het IJzerenbosch. During this analysis, new material is included that did not fit into the first part. Chapter 5 discusses what happened when Natuurmonumenten designated het IJzerenbosch as a nature area and started to buy parcels in the area. Chapter 6 discusses the general conclusions and the implications of this thesis for planning practices, and gives recommendations for further research and practical recommendations for the case study.

⁶ Descola and Pálsson, 1996.

2. General theoretical framework

To be able to give an answer to 'how the history of het IJzerenbosch led to the present situation, and what that implies for this situation', we must first establish a theoretical framework. This general theoretical framework can be best described as the lens through which we see the world around us, and subsequently how we intend to describe it. Before the term 'history' and the 'present situation' are further explained, an elaboration is given on how identity is attributed to a place.

The identity of a place

A place is more than just a location. Although the coordinate [51.055855, 5.876913] gives the location of het IJzerenbosch, it does not describe what het IJzerenbosch means to somebody. A place is about the meaning that people allocate to that location. That meaning is what turns a space, which is the abstract coordinate, into a place, which also includes less tangible aspects such as meanings and memories.

Meaning and memories can be very individual. But the experience of place is 'relational rather than primarily subjective'⁷. These experiences are shared. The identity of a place is about what others tell us about the place. It is a process of receiving, selectively reconstructing, and then re-communicating a story that constitutes the identity of a place

such as het IJzerenbosch. The identity of a place is negotiated in a social context through stories.

What is a story? The term 'story' itself is subject to interpretation. It can have various meanings, varying from an anecdote to something that is invented rather than true. 'Stories integrate knowledge of what happened with an understanding of why it happened and a sense of what it means to an individual and a larger community'. A story defines the identity of the individual that produces it, and his place within a community. Stories organise knowledge around our need to act and our moral concerns.

The idea that the meaning and subsequently the identity that is attributed to a place is relational rather than subjective has an important implication. There are many possible identities for any given place, but it is possible to discern shared or dominant ones. Amundsen introduces the concept of a narrative, which is 'a coherent story with high and potent argumentative and symbolic value'⁸. A narrative explains and links different components of a place-identity. When several separate stories share common attributes, they form a narrative. Narratives can also implicitly or explicitly include a norm on what action is allowed. Narratives are linked to identities. 'It is the structure of the narrative in which we place ourselves - or that others place us in - that conditions the options open to us in identifying who we are'. As the boundary between a narrative and a story is difficult to establish, this thesis acknowledges the notion of a narrative but

⁷ Hague and Jenkins, 2005.

⁸ Amundsen, 2001 in Hague and Jenkins, 2005.

throughout the thesis the concept of a narratives is not extensively used.

A third, more abstract concept often used in literature is a discourse. A discourse is 'a set of ideas and actions concerning a part of reality that make that part of reality accessible for human thought'⁹. Discourses can enforce themselves by highlighting certain aspects of reality and neglecting others¹⁰. Although the concept of a discourse is important when considering relations and differences between groups, it, too, is not used extensively. Discourses are linked to specific narratives or stories. They include 'representations of how things are and have been, as well imaginary representations of how things might or could or should be'¹¹.

For place-identity, the following definition is used: 'Place-identities are formed through milieux of feelings, meanings, experiences, memories and actions that, while ultimately personal, are substantially filtered through social structures and fostered through socialisation.'

Amundsen has defined four components that contribute to the place-identity of a particular place:

1. Spatial qualities that distinguish them from others
2. Characteristics or qualities of the inhabitants that distinguishes them from inhabitants of other places (values, customs or physical appearance)
3. Social conditions and social relations between the inhabitants

⁹ van Assche, 2004, p30.

¹⁰ Hajer, 2005.

¹¹ Cronon, 1992; Fairclough, 2003 in Sumares and Fidélis, 2011.

¹² van Assche, 2004.

4. Culture and/or history, seen as a unifying element that again connects the inhabitants to tradition and again distinguishes them from 'the others'

Identity is about 'us' and 'them'. It is about what makes this place unique. Uniqueness is a relative attribute. An area can only be unique compared to another area or other areas in general. What makes het IJzerenbosch unique is based on characteristics it has that other forests from the area do not possess.

A perspective on history

On aspect of the first part of the research question, 'how the history of het IJzerenbosch led to the present situation', is the concept of history. There is no such thing as '*the* history of het IJzerenbosch'. History is always constructed from a certain perspective¹². It is constantly and actively constructed, by people that tell stories about that history. These stories are then negotiated in a social context. In this sense, history is a social construction. People share interpretations of place, history and the social environment. The meaning of a historical place is constructed in a social environment.

There is not such a thing as an objective history. Winston Churchill once demonstrated this as he once said, 'history is written by the victor'. There are, however, people in our society that we call 'historians', who describe the scientific history of a community. Within our society, we are accustomed to ascribe a degree of objectivity to people who we call historians. This is an ascription of objectivity, not

objectivity in itself. These historians are similarly influenced by the social context they are in. The story would be totally different if a Chinese historian wrote a book on the history of Europe. The stories of historians are themselves influenced by stories from their own discipline about what proper research is and how it should be done, stories that contribute to the self-description (autobiography) of their discipline. As Sandercock puts it, 'the writing of histories is not simply a matter of holding a mirror up to the past and reporting on what is reflected back. It is always a representation, a textual reconstruction of the past rather than a direct reflection of it.¹³' That is why it is important to look at the stories that construct this history.

Planning and storytelling

The second aspect of the research question is the present situation. Present situation in this case means the planning situation of het IJzerenbosch. Planning is neither a static nor a homogenous discourse, nor is it undifferentiated or unambiguous¹⁴. For this thesis, I consider planning as the interaction with both the physical and the social environment. It is about the physical situation, but it is also about the interpretation of that physical situation and the actions that follow out of that interpretation.

'There are still too few practitioners or academics who are conscious of or creative about the use of story¹⁵'. Throgmorton proposes the idea of planning as a form of storytelling, which runs against the grain of conventional planning practice. Conventional planning practice tries to control the future by using technical expertise. According to Throgmorton, conventional planners want to believe that they can be 'neutral, objective and rational, and that their texts have a single meaning'¹⁶.

In the text 'beware of the fallout: Umberto Eco and the making of the model reader', the author claims that the interpretation of that text, as well as other texts, is not fixed. Instead it is contestable and negotiated between the author and the many readers. Every individual reader has a different history of previous interpretations of other texts, and as a result a different interpretation of this specific text. Or, as Rorty puts it, 'reading texts is a matter of reading them in the light of other texts, people, obsessions, bits of information, or what have you, and then seeing what happens'¹⁷.

Story-telling has a constitutive aspect¹⁸. This means that when someone writes or talks, effectively he shapes community, character and culture. The choices of which actors play a role in the story, how it is portrayed and which events are left out of the story shape how

¹³ Sandercock, 2003.

¹⁴ van Assche, 2010.

¹⁵ Sandercock, 2003.

¹⁶ Throgmorton, 2003.

¹⁷ Rorty in Sandercock, 2003.

¹⁸ Sandercock, 2003.

those characters are expected to act and relate to each other. These stories define who 'we' are and what we are allowed to do. Stories do not only describe reality; in fact they construct reality. With those stories, people construct that reality, and the actions that follow from it.

It can also be said that planning is about place-making. It is about attributing meaning to a place. Van Assche proposes planning as 'one of the important tools to work towards place-identity'¹⁹. Planning is about producing, reproducing or adapting the identity of a place. This can be achieved by interfering with 'the activities, feeling, meanings and fabrics that combine into place-identity'. Van Assche does give a reminder that planning, by nature, can not guarantee results.

Planning has many faces. The unity of planning is questionable, sometimes absent²⁰. The few definitions of planning mentioned in this theoretical framework do not do justice to the wide range of definitions of planning that are available²¹. As mentioned before, this thesis defines planning as the interaction with both the physical and the social environment. Conventional planning, characterised as modernistic and technocratic in the introduction, puts most of its focus on the physical aspect. An argument could be made for a more balanced perspective. It is just as important that the physical project is accepted within a community. This is determined in the social environment, where stories are produced, reproduced and adapted.

Many examples fit within this broad definition of planning. This was a deliberate choice. Some definitions of planning assume a form of a top-down organisation that is responsible for organising the planning process²². This definition describes a broader interpretation of the concept of planning. Planning in this sense is any interaction with the physical environment, or the social environment that builds around this interaction. If a single individual would plant a tree, this would be planning. But if he would talk about planting a tree, it is included in this definition of planning as well.

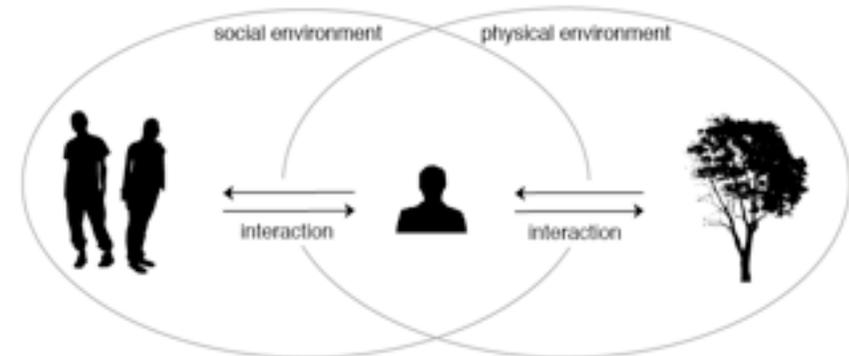


Figure 3. A model of how planning is about both the social environment and the physical environment.

¹⁹ van Assche, 2010.

²⁰ van Assche, 2010.

²¹ Allmendinger, 2009 provides further reading on this subject.

²² Allmendinger, 2009.

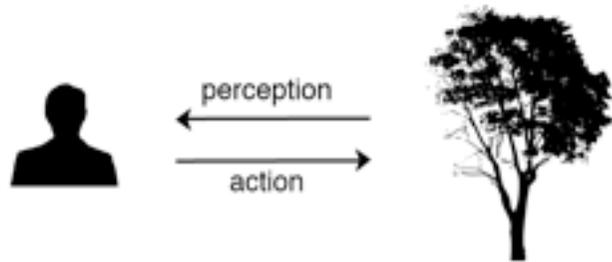


Figure 4. A simple model of how an individual perceives the physical reality.

Objectivity and the social construction of knowledge

What happened to the objective truth? Since the so-called ‘Science Wars’, in which the opposition between natural and social sciences became evidently clear, social scientists have struggled to find a new paradigm²³. The classic ‘realism’ perspective on science presumes there is a direct connection between ‘reality’ and what we seem to know. Realism also presumes there is one universal truth, that can be approached through science.

Antirealism is the postmodern answer to realism. Antirealists argue there is no such thing as a universal reality. Every single piece of knowledge has to first pass the senses, the brains, language and culture. Kant famously said that ‘Das Ding an sich ist ein Unbekante’²⁴ (a thing on itself is unknown), by which he meant that a thing on itself can never be know without interpretation interfering; or as van Assche puts it: ‘interpretation is everywhere’²⁵. Everything we know bears the

²³ Flyvbjerg, 2001.

²⁴ Kant, 1781.

²⁵ Van Assche, 2004, p18.

²⁶ Foucault, 1968.

²⁷ Latour, 1999.

mark of the human mind. This thesis adheres to a socialconstructivist approach, in the line of Foucault²⁶, which tells us that knowledge is constructed in social interaction.

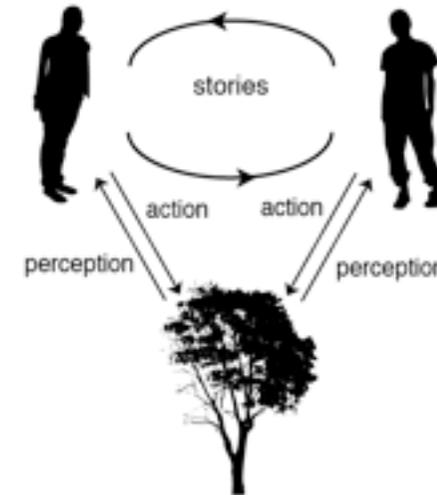


Figure 5. A conceptual model of how an individual perception is negotiated within a social context.

Social constructivism proposes new definitions for knowledge and truth that forms a new paradigm, based on inter-subjectivity instead of the classical objectivity. In line with this thought, I do not claim to be objective in my thesis, but rather recognise my inter-subjectivity as a scientist. As Latour mentions, ‘there is no such thing as objectivity’²⁷.

To shift focus from truth to meaning and persuasiveness is to shift focus from technical accuracy to a combination of accuracy and normative evaluation²⁸.

To give an answer to the research question, it is important to research stories. In those stories, the identity of a place and a community, and the history of the interaction between those two identities are created. As stories determine the perception of the physical environment, the negotiation within the community, and ultimately the actions that follow from the resulting perception, they form the foundation of this thesis.

²⁸ Throgmorton, 2003.

3. Research design

3.1 Research method

In the first chapter, the topic has been introduced and the research question has been defined. The general theoretical framework as described in chapter 2, has provided the theoretical foundation in which this thesis can be placed, or the 'frame' to view the rest of the thesis in. Additionally, the theoretical framework has provided a solid foundation for the use of stories in the methodology.

This research is carried out in an area called 'het IJzerenbosch', in the South of the Netherlands. I start directly in that specific area because it demonstrates a unique situation. In het IJzerenbosch we see Natuurmonumenten, a large nature organisation enacting its general policy in an area where they do not own every single parcel. In fact, the area is divided in 732 parcels, of which 333 (45%) belong to the organisation. Most of the other parcels are privately owned by individuals, just a few by organisations. This situation is the starting point of the thesis, because it is quite unique in the Netherlands that a nature organisation does not own all the parcels in its area. The complexity of the situation has two implications for the design of the research. First of all, the research was conducted as a case-study. Secondly, as it was not clear from the start what exactly I could come across in the area, the theory has been continuously adapted to the practical situation throughout the thesis process.

3.2 Data Collection

As shown in the theoretical framework, stories construct history, place-identity and social identity. What I did in this particular case, is collect stories about het IJzerenbosch. I did not beforehand determine which stories would be most suitable. Instead, I let the interviewees lead the

conversation towards the stories they loved to tell, or the stories that they eagerly wanted to tell. And all those stories conveyed parts of reality, and enlightened other parts of reality, for the sake of their own argument. What I then did was to find common threads; pinpoints that I could use as a guide when navigating through the material. These were parts of stories that were told by more than one person. Some stories were interesting because they provided a counterpart to other stories, or a rival perspective when there was a general consensus among other people. I will use written history in the form of historical documents, maps and data in my research to use it to gain insight in the overall situation.

Interviews

Stories play a central role in the production and negotiation of the perception of a nature area. To be able to collect these stories, in-depth interviews were conducted. Interviews are the most important and the most time-consuming part of the thesis. Although a list of questions prepared beforehand should have assured that I would not forget to mention a certain topic (see Appendix for the format), the interview as a whole was to be carried out as 'spontaneous' as possible. With spontaneous I mean to establish a friendly conversation with the person. This approach has several advantages. The person tends to be more relaxed during the conversation, and probably will take a more active role in bringing up conversation topics that the interviewee himself deems important. Moreover, topics will be chosen by the interviewee instead of the interviewer. This avoids the projection of the thoughts and concepts of the interviewer onto the interviewee. For example, using the term 'Ecological Main Structure' might change the focus of the conversation and the way it is framed, so that other topics that the interviewee finds more pressing could be pushed to the background. The interviews were (as far as possible) mostly carried out during a walk through the area itself. The reason for

this is twofold. One is that the interviewee would feel more comfortable and less defensive in a relaxed and familiar setting. Second reason for interviewing people in the forest instead of indoors is a practical reason. When taking a walk through the forest it is possible to point at the very things you are discussing, making the discussion more tangible for both the interviewer and the interviewee. If this was not a possibility, then the favourable location would be the house or the workplace of the interviewee.

In total I have interviewed 24 people, mostly interviews of 1 to 3 hours. Initially, the people I selected for interviews were representatives of official institutions. Later I had gained information from Natuurmonumenten on the tenants of Natuurmonumenten, which gave me interesting interviews in the field. Later on in the process, I interviewed people that were actively involved in one way or the other, mostly in informal institutions. These were harder to reach, but once you are 'within the network' it becomes easier to reach people that are in some way involved with the area, as word starts to spread among the community. On one particular occasion, I got called myself by someone that had heard of the research and had taken an interest in the topic.

The interviewees will remain anonymous. Among the interviewees are farmers, tenants from Natuurmonumenten, area coordinators and steward of Natuurmonumenten, local residents, people recreating in the forest (chosen randomly), (amateur) historians, policy advisor on Landscape from the Municipality of Echt-Susteren, and someone from the board of the Wildbeheereenheid Susteren - Graetheide (wildlife management unit).

Special care was taken to not miss a thing; the interviews were first recorded and at a later stage written down on paper. The interviews

were mostly carried out in the native language of the interviewees, in the local dialect of Limburg. The official requirements of this thesis prescribed the use of English, and so the interviews had to be translated. I ensure that the translation is as accurate as possible, although there is a risk that some of its meaning might be lost in translation. Words have a certain meaning within a language, and this meaning can never fully be transferred to another language. Where necessary I will provide the original as well.

Documents

For this thesis both official and unofficial documents have been used that somehow connect to the thesis. These mainly consist of historical maps of the area and its surroundings, and historical stories, legends or registrations of parcels. The municipality has provided data on parcels in the area, and allowed me to work with that data. A large part of the data is collected by talking to a lot of people and asking them if they have or know any valuable documents. Documents or books on the subject were mostly hard to find, partly because it is a local topic and partly because it is a very specific topic.

Role of the researcher

This thesis is based on inter-subjectivity instead of the classical objectivity. In my role as a researcher I am myself constantly engaging in interpretation. In line with this thought, I do not claim to be objective in my thesis, but rather recognise my inter-subjectivity as a scientist. I know my position within the group of interviewees, and intend to enforce (but not misuse) this relationship to get more information from the interviewees. To be specific, most of the times one of the first questions of the interviewees was where I come from, and quickly afterwards they do a 'family-check', to see if they know anyone that I know or am related to. Living close to the case study and

knowing the local culture is a prerequisite for getting detailed and unbiased information on the topic.

Communication Accommodation Theory

To explain why I choose to do spontaneous interviews, and prefer to focus on my inter-subjectivity, I will shortly mention Communication Accommodation Theory²⁹. Accommodation is a constant movement toward or away from others by changing communicative behaviour. There are two types of strategies: convergence and divergence. Convergence is a strategy to become more similar to another person by changing communicative behaviour. Divergence is the other way around; when using divergence you accentuate the differences between yourself and the other.

So why do people take effort to accommodate to others? We accommodate because we have an inherent desire for approval. We adjust our communication in such a way that it is more similar to the other person, because there's a positive relationship between similarity and attraction. Strangely though, research shows that people tend to chose a divergent strategy more often than a convergent strategy. This can be explained using Social Identity Theory. We are not isolated individuals; we live in an interconnected world. We each have several social identities that we might want to enforce in a certain situation. This means that a person has to chose between his social identity and his desire for approval.

In practice this means that 'similarity breeds liking'. That is why, during the interview, I actively position myself as someone from the

neighbourhood. That is why the interviews are done in the local dialect, if possible. The more spontaneous and relaxed setting is a way to not trigger another identity of a person. If I would for example keep the meeting in an office, with rigid questions, the interviewee might choose to be more divergent in the communication, and the results can be different. Or, as Forester puts it, 'respect can stymie dialogue and mutual learning'³⁰.

3.3 Validity, reliability and ethical considerations

The researcher has an obligation to respect the rights, needs, values and desires of the informants.³¹ Ethical considerations have taken a prominent place within the thesis research (and afterwards). All interviewees were kept informed on the intentions of the interview and the research. They were all assured that the research conducted is private research, not conducted in commission by any company. No interview data will be used in any other way than for the purpose of this thesis, and all interview data used in this thesis is rendered anonymously.

I will not treat the collected data as objective information, but rather as perspectives, within the larger context of social constructivism which will be explained in the theoretical framework.

When I describe the history of Susteren and Limburg, I do not intend to be thorough nor complete; I only aim to illustrate the many stories of history and their effect on the present situation.

²⁹ Griffin, 2009.

³⁰ Forester, 2000, in Sandercock, 2003.

³¹ Creswell, 2009.

4. A historical perspective on 'het IJzerenbosch'

The theoretical framework has provided a solid foundation for the use of stories. Stories play an important role in the perception of a place such as het IJzerenbosch. They are the negotiation of the place-identity of het IJzerenbosch. This chapter is about stories of the history of het IJzerenbosch. These stories are being presented as part of one or more of the four elements typically present in a place identity, frequently combined in some fashion. At the end of the chapter it is discussed how these stories have had an influence on het IJzerenbosch in its present situation.

4.1 Spatial qualities

These are the spatial qualities that distinguish the place from other places. One of the spatial qualities is the location. 'Het IJzerenbosch' is a forest in the smallest piece of land of the Netherlands, called 'the green waist'. Situated in the middle of Limburg (the south most Dutch province), it lies directly adjacent to the German border, and only 4,7 kilometres from the Belgian border. The relatively small forest (137 hectares) is split up into 732 parcels. These parcels, with an average size of 0,2 hectares, each have their unique, individual 'planning' strategies. And so, each parcel has its unique tree species and characteristics.

Geologically speaking, Het IJzerenbosch is unique. Literally meaning 'iron forest', it has a soil that is rich in iron. This is visible in the stream called 'De Rode Beek' (the red stream), because the oxidisation of iron in water makes it appear red. The area once was a meander of the river Meuse. On the German side of the border, near *Schalbruch*, you can still see some higher patches, that were pushed



Figure 6. Het IJzerenbosch is located in the Province of Limburg in the south of the Netherlands.

up by the Meuse. The Meuse has deposited fluvial clay in the area, but additionally löss from the South of Limburg, sand and sandy loam from the North and East and peat soils meet in the forest³². This leads to a situation in which a small forest has three plant geographical districts, each with its own characteristics. This diversity is enhanced by the small creeks that flow through the area towards the Meuse. Beside the iron ore, strong concentrations of peat chalk can be found in het IJzerenbosch.

During the interviews, one thing was evident; almost everyone I have talked to valued the forest, each in their own way. While one valued it for specific ecological value, others would value the forest for its diversity or its openness. One farmer, as an exception, had no opinion about the forest. 'It is a forest. And it's there, yes. But that's it; it's there'. This was not a typical response; most opinions on the forest were different. Often when I would walk through the forest with one of my interviewees, other people taking a walk through the forest would make remarks as 'beautiful forest, isn't it?'. One lady, 92 years old, said she had walked through the forest every day since her husband had died. 'It's a beautiful forest, het IJzerenbosch, every corner it gives you something new to watch'.

4.2 Culture and/or history

Being the second element typically present in a place-identity, culture and history is seen as a unifying element that connects the inhabitants to tradition and distinguishes them from 'the other'. While the forest is valued in many ways, the question remains why it is there in the first place. Why is the forest as it is today? Which factors contributed to the

development of het IJzerenbosch? For that we have to go back to its earliest appearance, in 1260. There we find a statement of aldermen³³ that describes a set of rules that apply to the forests of Susteren, even before Susteren has been given its city rights. Most probably, het IJzerenbosch is a remainder of those forests. The statement carefully describes all the rights of the foresters in those days. To give some examples, it explains in detail what a forester can do with acorns, branches that fall down by the wind, a beehive found in the leafage, a beehive found in the trunk of a tree, et cetera. Apparently the use of the forest for the community was important enough to write down rules on its usage.

From more recent time, a legend tells of the forest. 'Der Ritt durch den Eisenwald'³⁴ (the ride through het IJzerenbosch) tells of King Swentibold, who with Amelberga, the abbess of Susteren at his side, promises the villagers of Born the 'Graatbos' as a gift to the villagers for all eternity. As decided by an ancient custom, the size of this gift would be determined by a rider. Everything the rider would ride around from the feast to the sunset would become common use afterwards. When Reginar, the rider, wants to ride, Benedicta tells him to 'stay away from the Isenbruch (Iron Swamp), the damned Eisenwald (Iron forest), where the demons and dead live and many have not returned!'. Just before the rider reaches Susteren, he is stuck in the swamp when he meets the demon witch of the Eisenwald. Although he makes it in the end, both horse and rider die the next morning. Interestingly, a similar version of this legend is known, by the name of 'Het Bescheidt van de Graethei', from the 16th century. Both stories originate from one, older tradition.

³² Hajenius et al., 2004 and bodemkaart rijksgeologische dienst, property of Evert Zits.

³³ van den Bergh, 1983.

³⁴ Cals, 1989.

Still, some people in Limburg at that time did not want to be part of the Netherlands. In 1830, all of Limburg except Maastricht and Mook, which had Dutch garrisons, joined the Belgian Revolution. Hasselt became the temporary capital. One year later, in 1831, the 'London Treaty' described the definite border between the Netherlands and the new Belgian state. The eastern part of Limburg should return to the Netherlands, but also join the 'German Confederation', that strived for a German unity on a liberal basis, as compensation for the German loss of Western Luxemburg. Also, Belgium would gain the right of a connection through Dutch Limburg to Germany, later referred to as the 'iron Rhine'. While initially king Willem I resisted the Belgian separation, he accepted the treaty in 1839. Limburg has been split into a Belgian and a Dutch Province ever since the treaty. In 1838, a protest movement was formed against the separation, and against Eastern Limburg joining the Netherlands, but it failed.

In 1848 the 'March revolutions' broke out within the German Confederation. The Limburgian representatives in the newly formed 'Frankfurter Parliament' tried to join this German unitary state, but ultimately the revolution failed and the 'German Confederation' was re-established. The confederation collapsed in 1866, because of a rivalry between Pruisen and Austria, and with it ended the unique position of Limburg. Formally, the Province used the title 'Duchy' until 1906, although it has functioned as a regular Province since ever since 1866. The only remnant of this time is the custom of referring to the Queen's Commissioner of Limburg with the title 'governor'.

After the First World War, in which the Netherlands had held on to its neutrality, a movement gave rise in Belgium that claimed that the Netherlands should be punished for their disposition towards Germany

during the war. They strived for the annexation of both Limburg and Zeeuws-Vlaanderen. This plan also failed. This has been the last territorial claim for the Province of Limburg. Collectively, these historical events and influences not only shaped the physical boundaries of the Province of Limburg, but are still noticeable in the present culture of Limburg. Not only German and Belgium, but also French influences can still be traced in the culture and language of the Province of Limburg³⁵. In 2008, exactly 170 years after the separation of the two provinces by the London Treaty, the 'Limburgcharter' was formally signed by both Provinces of Limburg, as a starting point for an interprovincial cooperation that does justice to their collective history.

A border situation

On one side of Het IJzerbosch the German border is situated. The border has had its influence on the development of the forest. But it has not always been as it is today, although the designation of the border has remained roughly the same after the London Treaty of 1839. Directly adjacent to the place where the Netherlands is at its smallest lies a German Province called the 'Selfkant', named after the river 'Safel'. Being the westernmost Province of Germany, it has a peculiar position. While its border with the rest of Germany is only 6 kilometres, it borders the Netherlands for 27 kilometres. It is virtually an enclave within Dutch territory. Roughly a quarter of its population has a Dutch nationality.

After the Second World War, Dutch propositions were made for annexation of German territory, to compensate for the war damage. In 1945, the Netherlands requested a financial compensation of 25 billion guilders, but the conference of Jalta had already determined that war compensation could only be paid in kind. A commission was installed

³⁵ The disposition of Limburg towards Belgium or Germany as opposed to the Netherlands is still traceable, for example in (Storken, 2009).

to investigate 'the issue of territorial expansion of the Netherlands'. Although three scenarios had been calculated, none of them were accepted. In 1946, 4980m² was confiscated as a Dutch annexation, only half of the area that the commission had proposed to claim. But the claims were rejected by the allies, who defended it by saying West Germany needed a stable recovery and an annexation would only worsen the situation. Although the Netherlands made a new proposition of 1840m² in 1947, only 69m² was designated for annexation in 1949 at the German Conference in London. The same day at noon, Dutch troops occupied the area.

In 1960, the Bundesrepublik Deutschland negotiated terms for the 'Wiedergutmachung'. They agreed to pay 280 million German Mark for the return of - amongst other small areas - the Selfkant. In 1963, German authorities had once again gained control over the area. But since the annexation, many people from Limburg went to live in the Selfkant due to the higher housing prices in Limburg. In 2008, a quarter of its population had a Dutch nationality³⁶. A particular story of the Wiedergutmachung is the N274, a road that connects Roermond with Heerlen, directly crossing the now German territory. Constructed during the Dutch occupation, the road remained Dutch even after 1963. Having no junctions with German roads, no passport was needed to use it. Only in 2002 the road was returned to Germany, and in 2004 it was connected to other roads.

Het IJzerbosch lies directly adjacent to the border with the Selfkant, and even crosses it for a small part. Although the borders are now open, many interviewees remember the role of the border patrol for their daily work. I spoke to a farmer that lived on the German side of

the border, but still had parcels on the Dutch side, almost next to his German parcels. He remembered that around 1970, he got a toy tractor from his mother. Trying to cross the border to go back to his home he walked into the border patrol. They made him go to the headquarters at Tüddern to report the toy he got. 'You can hardly imagine how the situation was at that time. If I went to my parcel and forgot my passport, they made protocol of it. Unimaginable.' He goes on to tell that at some point they put border poles on the border, of which he had the key to go to his parcels. But the poles were always immediately destroyed. 'And if I had to go across the border with cattle to let them graze, I had to mark them all and keep an administration of them. It was madness.' This situation maintained until about 1995, he recalled.

Het IJzerbosch has never truly been economically feasible. It has always been a wet area. This made it more difficult to turn it into agricultural land, which is probably why it is a nature area today. Because of the high water table, the forest could not be used for planting pines either. Pines were extensively used in mining, because they give away noise before they break. Het IJzerbosch, although very close to the railway yard, has not been used for the production of pines, while other forests did, e.g. Montfort and Limbrichterbos. One interviewee said that most parcel owners in het IJzerbosch planted Canadian poplars during the middle of the 20th century. The story was that Canadian poplars were fast-growing trees, and so would be easy money for the parcel owners. Unfortunately, it turned out to become 'the mistake of that time', as most trees rotted from the inside due to the high water table. All in all, the forest has never been economically feasible.

³⁶ selfkant.de, 2011.



Figure 8. These two aerial photographs are both taken from 500m in the air. On the left a piece of het IJzerenbosch, on the right a piece of het Munningsbosch, near Montfort. Het Munningsbosch has been used for intensive timber production.

Het IJzerenbosch and Susteren; a long history

On the other side of het IJzerenbosch lies the village of Susteren. Susteren is a fairly small village, with only 7.419 inhabitants³⁷. But as early as 1276 it had gained city rights from Reinoud I of Gelre. Despite its size, Susteren has played an important role in history. In the 7th century it had a monastery on the domain of Suestra, that belonged to Pepijn van Herstal. In 714 Pepijn gave the monastery to Willibrord, an Anglosaksian missionary Saint. Willibrord was on a mission to Christianise the Netherlands. The monastery initially served as a refuge, later on it also aimed at training new missionaries. In the 9th century the abbey was destroyed by Vikings, but was soon rebuilt. Amelberga, who had become the first abbess, was declared patron

saint of this abbey after her death. The church as of today still is named the Amelberga church. Two daughters of Zwentibold von Lotharingen followed, Benedicta and Cecilia, followed. They are both buried in the church and honoured as saints³⁸.

Susteren has been developed in several stages. First, there is the village itself, that has gained city rights in 1276. From there on, *de Heide, de Heij* or *Heijerhauser*³⁹ has been colonised. First there were some scattered farmhouses along the road to the village of Echt, later on two parallel roads gave access to housing, which were gradually built there. From the 'Heide', the forest is more easily accessible. This was enforced at the dawn of the 20th century, when mining was introduced in both the Belgian and the Dutch side of Limburg. Susteren played a vital role, it had a large train yard to control the trains going north and south through the bottleneck. The population quickly rose. To compensate for the workers from the mines and the rail yard, *Mariaveld* was quickly built, a new neighbourhood with its own church. The railway split Susteren in two; the old village on the one side and the 'Heide' on the other side of the track. Only two crossings are in place; a tunnel and a normal railway crossing. From the village of Susteren there is no visual connection to the forest, nor can you see the 'Heide'.

Susteren has long functioned as a religious centre. For centuries, people with dental problems made the pilgrimage to Susteren for the holy Apollonia. Every seven years the Heiligdomsvaart (relic

³⁷ echt-susteren.nl, 2011.

³⁸ Venner, 2000, p.92-99.

³⁹ Tranchot, 1804.

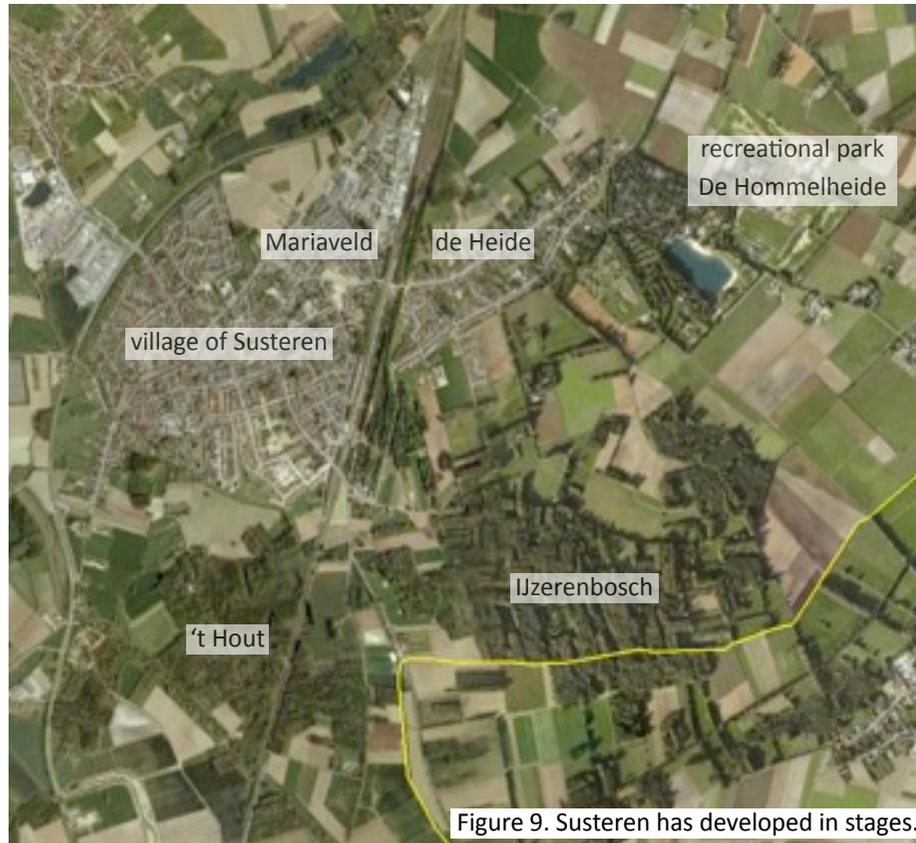


Figure 9. Susteren has developed in stages.

procession) is organised to celebrate the holy relics, a spectacle that attracted 35.000 visitors in 2007⁴⁰. In the same year, the Amelberga church has been declared a basilica minor⁴¹ by the pope, thereby officially acknowledging its importance.

⁴⁰ heiligdomsvaart.nl, 2011.

⁴¹ Volkskrant, 2007 .

⁴² Habets, 1869.

⁴³ This story is largely derived from Zits, 2003 and Zits, 2009; I would gladly recommend to read the full story there. Also, these stories still live in Susteren, many interviewees know someone who had smuggled in those days.

Before 1801, Susteren was the capital of the ‘Landdekenaat Susteren’. The landdekenaat most probably originated somewhere during the 9th century, and comprised of most of the parished of Middle and South of modern-day Limburg⁴². Shortly after the diocese of Roermond had been established in 1559, the landdekenaat had lost parishes to the newcomer. Ultimately, in 1801, the landdekenaat Susteren had officially been ended by the concordat of Napoleon Bonaparte and Pope Pius VII.

4.3 Social conditions

The third characteristic element of place-identity is about social conditions and social relations between the inhabitants. An important story to include on the history of both Susteren and of het IJzerenbosch is a story that started during the First World War⁴³. The Germans had a major scarcity of food and other supplies during that war. As the Netherlands had maintained their neutrality during the war, their living standard was better than on the German side of the border. Large sums of money were offered for food and goods for the Germans. And Susteren was the perfect border village for executing these smuggling practices, and het IJzerenbosch, stretching alongside two kilometres of German border and even occasionally crossing it, proved to be an ideal spot for illegal smuggling. On top of that came the state the region of Susteren was in at that time. Most of its inhabitants lived in poverty. Moreover, most of them had lost their jobs, because they had previously worked in the agriculture, construction industry or stone factories in Germany. Initially a small

scaled practice, smuggling was locally referred to as 'de päöl euver gaon' (going over the poles, referring to the border poles in the forest), or as 'nao Nónk Wullum gaon', going to uncle Wilhelm, referring to the German emperor at that time.

But the smuggling practices got bigger. While the first contact was with neighbouring villages of Isenbruch, Schalbruch and Millen, later on they made contact directly to the cities, which needed the food and goods more than the countryside. As it got bigger, and smuggling became professional, 'clans' were formed to lead the smuggling operation, mostly consisting of ten to fifteen 'carriers'. Although most of the money went to the suppliers of the contraband, these carriers did the hard work for them. They wore forty to fifty kilos of contraband in their 'pungel', or pouch, which they had to carry roughly 1 kilometre through forest pathways in the at that time very wet IJzerenbosch. Many ditches and streams, which were filled with water made it difficult to pass through during the cover of night.



Figure 10. A smuggling clan during the First World War.

Initially the border patrol on both sides did not intervene. But when the smuggling increased, the government stationed military personnel with fire arms in the area. On the German side of the border a strip of five hundred metre was declared forbidden area. Knowing the ditches and forest paths of het IJzerenbosch, the local smugglers had an advantage at first, but the soldiers also got better at navigating the terrain. The operation got bigger. The smugglers sent out scouts ahead of them, they deployed guards to patrol the area and spies were positioned in the village, even children watched the whereabouts of the soldiers.

Occasionally, a smuggler could get caught. Knowing his way in the forest could prove vital when his life was on the line, being chased by an armed soldier. The smuggler could then search for one of the many streams, and hold still with his neck up in the water and hope for the best. But it did not always end like that. Through the course of years, eight smugglers were killed, most of them while trying to run away. In an act of revenge, the smugglers killed one soldier as well. And all of this happened in het IJzerenbosch. Today, several crosses, scattered through the forest, remind of us these stories.



Figure 11. Several crosses are still scattered through the forest.

The smuggling practices had profoundly changed Susteren. In a time when the average wage of a working man would be 10 to 12 guilders per week, a smuggler would earn 45 guilder for an operation. With the intensity and constant fear inherent in those nightly operations, smugglers found their relieve in drinking. Soon, the number of cafés increased up to about forty, in a village of just 2400 inhabitants. The different clans, their rivalry and the drinking collectively led to a display that was similar to a 'Wild West-scene'. The smugglers' nest of Susteren had gained a reputation; it was better to avoid it. For the pastor of Susteren of that time, Louis Tijssen, those were hard times. Many of his 'flock' had turned to the bottle, or criminality. He was a 'Pater familias', and deeply worried about the fate of his 'stray sheep'. In his life story, written down by father Jac. Schreurs⁴⁴, it said that many smugglers sought and found refuge in the rectory of pastor Tijssen.

In November 1918, Susteren was the scene of an unanticipated event⁴⁵. The First World War had ended, the Allies and Germany had signed the truce on November 11th. Suddenly, Susteren was 'invaded' by German soldiers. Without any announcement, about 100.000 soldiers marched through the streets of the village between the 11th and 23rd of November. On a higher level, the exodus of German soldiers had been approved and planned, and the bottleneck of Susteren was the fastest route from Belgium back to Germany. For the inhabitants of Susteren, it was an unexpected sight to see.

⁴⁴ Schreurs, 1957.

⁴⁵ Zits, 1984.

⁴⁶ stationsweb.nl, 2008.

After the First World War, smuggling continued. Germany still suffered from food shortages. But gradually alternatives came in place, other (more respectable) ways to make a living. The economic situation improved, due to the rapid development of the mines in Limburg. The 'sjmókkelpungel' (smuggling pouch) was replaced by the 'koelpungel' (mining pouch). Meanwhile, the German money 'earned' with smuggling practices was partly spent in buying parcels or building houses. Those who had saved their money were less fortunate. The defeated Germany had to pay war recovery payments, and inflation struck in the 1920's. With the German Mark at one billionth of its original value, the smugglers that had saved their money had lost practically everything.

The Smuggling period was gone, and mining took its place. The mining in South Limburg has had a profound impact on Susteren, both the physical place as the social identity. A large rail yard was constructed at the beginning of the 20th century. This terrain played a vital part in the transport of coals out of the mines in the South of Limburg, to distribution places throughout the Netherlands. When the mines were closed, the rail yard was partly in use for the repair of freight trains. It wasn't until about 2000 that the old freight trains that were stalled there were removed⁴⁶.

The mines and the rail yard had a visible impact on the physical appearance of Susteren, it had divided the village in two. The railway now physically separated the old village of Susteren from the 'Heide'. For the sand needed for the rail yard, an area near the yard was

dredged. The excavation site left a big hole that quickly filled with water. Soon it was known as a place to swim. It didn't stop there; it now houses a complete vacation park, known as 'Landgoed Hommelheide'.

These physical changes had an impact on the social identity of Susteren. The employees that were drawn for the train yard came from 'up north', above the rivers. Pastor Tijssen was worried about the many railway personnel, 'of which some were not catholic, or even without faith'⁴⁷. The Catholics formed a strong community, and it should stay that way.' The church of Amelberga would not be large enough to house all these newcomers, and Tijssen would also like to lower the threshold for the workers, giving them an alternative to walking all the way from Mariaveld to the Amelberga after a hard day's work. In 1917, a new church was built within the new Mariaveld.

In those days, at the dawn of the 20th century, conditions were different. There were no schools, no homes for the elder, no hospitals or doctors. That is why Evertz, mayor of Susteren at that time, asked the 'Filles de la Charité' to visit his village. This Company of Daughters of Charity was founded by Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac in 1633, and its main mission is to help the poor. And Susteren had many poor people when three nuns arrived in 1902. They immediately started tending the poor, the sick and the elderly. They founded a nursery school and a girls' school and gave sewing lessons to young girls⁴⁸.

⁴⁷ Zits, 2010.

⁴⁸ Comité 'Vincentius à Paulo', 2002.

⁴⁹ susteren.nu, 2010.

⁵⁰ Koumans, 2011a.

Now, in 2011, there are eight nuns in Susteren, and although their ages range from 70 to 86, they are still eager to fulfil their mission. But the time has come to leave in Susteren. Now, after a hundred years, they leave for Panningen, Den Bosch and Rosmalen. But the sisters have rooted in Susteren. They will miss the contacts, the community and the nature around Susteren⁴⁹. And they also have been an important part of the community of Susteren themselves, always caring for others.

Another peculiar story yet again demonstrates the intense connection between the people of Susteren and their village⁵⁰. It is depicted in November 1944, when the Allies are forced to stop their front line just out of Susteren. The neighbouring village of Nieuwstadt had already been liberated. At that time, the German invaders forced the village of Susteren to evacuate. They commanded the 'Grüne Polizei', the Nazi order party, to pass all houses with their sheepdogs and round up all villagers for evacuation. And so they came by the Hennissen family, living in the 'Hoeve Ijzeren bos', on the edge of het Ijzerenbosch. The family delayed the soldiers by eating slowly, and when the soldiers had left they got the horse and went straight for the forest. It turned out that Pierre Hennissen had secretly built a bunker in the forest in the last two months. The bunker was dug in, made of eighteen henhouses and well camouflaged. He had also provided provisions which were dug in around the bunker and then carefully mapped.

There were two reasons why Pierre had built the bunker. First, he did not want to leave the 'Hoeve'. Secondly, there were German families involved that had fled. If they had to evacuate to Posterholt, their

future would be uncertain. The two months in the winter were intense, but not cold. Everyone had his own job within this ‘small community’, from butcher to barber. At some point they were discovered, but luckily the German soldier could be bribed. After a long winter, the Allies approached and the Germans had to pull back. During the heavy fights, the Germans left behind an 88mm PAK (Panzer Abwehr Kannone) 43/41 anti-tank canon in Susteren, which is still visible today⁵¹. Pierre had succeeded in keeping his family safe in Susteren. The Hennissen family was the first that saw Susteren after the liberation. ‘A lot was broken and in the streets and the houses were several dead bodies.’, Mathilde Hennissen recalled. It took a while before the other villagers had returned. Her father Pierre had said ‘I’m not leaving this place unless they carry me away.’ And he did keep his word, until he died in 1979. Although I have asked many people, only one interviewee had heard about the story. No one knew the location of the forest bunker.

4.4 Customs

The fourth element that is typically present in place-identity is characteristics or qualities of the inhabitants that distinguish them from inhabitants of other places. Susteren knows many traditions. Carnival is a strong tradition in Susteren, as in most places in Limburg. Every village has its own traditions, its own name for the village and villagers during the carnival period, and their own songs. And Susteren has strong traditions. For example, on the website [limburgzingt.nl](http:// limburgzingt.nl), about three hundred songs have been enlisted that are typical for Susteren during the carnival. And many of these songs recapitulate specific parts of the history of Susteren, parts that belong to the place-identity of Susteren. They are typically (but not always) about Suestra,

⁵¹ oorlogsmuseum.nl, 2011.

⁵² Ebersson, 2002.

‘king Swentibold’ or traits specifically allocated to Susteren. During the carnival period, Susteren is referred to as ‘het Graasboerriek’, and its villagers are ‘Graasboere’ and ‘Graasboerinne’. This originates from a time when the people outside the city were poor, and were referred to as ‘Graasboere’, or ‘grass farmers’. When you lived in the city, you were a ‘Graasbörger’, which means a ‘grass civilian’, as opposed to the grass farmers⁵².



Figure 12. This image shows words in the local dialect in the dictionary of Susteren, including the meaning of the word ‘graasboer and its use in tradition.

Many villages in Limburg have their own traditions during the carnival festival. In Susteren the tradition is to dress a straw doll as a ‘graasboer’. The designated prince carnival must take care of the graasboer, because the many ‘hermeniekes’, responsible for the music, will try to take it away. When the prince resignates he has to give back the graasboer to the hermeniekes. On carnival’s Tuesday the graasboer is shot ‘back to ‘t Hout’. ‘t Hout’ used to refer to both the present forest of ‘t Hout and het IJzerenbosch. They are now separated by the railway. He must remain in ‘t Hout until the next November 11th.

Susteren is proud of its roots. The stories of its history are repeated in its culture, almost exclusively in the local dialect. One example is the song 'Blauw is oos blood', by Piet and Evert Zits. It is about our 'historical' roots. It narrates of 'our father Zwentibold' and 'our mother the Graasboerin', thereby taking aspects of Susteren's cultural roots, and repeating them each year at carnival. The local dialect has also been documented in the dictionary 'Zösterse kal', which contains short of ten thousand words and a many old sayings in the local dialect⁵³.

4.5 Het IJzerenbosch and Susteren; two connected histories

In this chapter, I have introduced many stories. Some are individual stories, stories that interviewees have shared with me. For example, one person told me he used to run through the many paths of the forest with his brother when he was younger, finding new paths every time. Others are narratives, stories that are shared and adapted within the community as a whole. There is a thin line between stories and narratives, they strongly relate to each other. One example is the story of the bunker in het IJzerenbosch during the last two months of the Second World War, which for a long time has been an individual story. It was only when someone of the 'Op Vleugels der Vrijheid' (on the wings of freedom) Foundation was looking for stories on a plane that had crashed in Susteren, that Mathilde had shared her story about the bunker. Up to that point the story had only been known within a small circle⁵⁴. Now the story seems to have transcended into a narrative. The story enforces ideals of resistance, bravery and the identity of the people of Susteren. These ideals are shared by a larger group that identifies with the story and can use it to enforce their own identity.

⁵³ Schulpen et al., 2000.

⁵⁴ Koumans, 2011b.

When stories travel through a community, they are not left intact. They can be adapted, enforced, neglected or weakened. Every time they are passed from one individual to another, the story changes. The story can even change depending on the social context or the general setting. When individual stories become community stories, the general storyline or idea can stay intact, but the details can vary. By these processes, a story can change over time. An example is the story of smuggling in het IJzerenbosch during the First World War. In those days the village of Susteren was very poor, to such an extreme that the mayor asked the 'Daughters of Charity' to aid his village, which they did. At the time, there were no basic facilities and a lot of people lived in poverty. Nowadays, the stories of smuggling are largely romanticised. The heroic deeds are still reproduced, but the bitter necessity in which these smuggling practices existed slowly vanishes to the background. The historical stories are adapted to fit in the present context. In a similar fashion, the stories of history continuously change, and are adapted to fit the present day demands.

This chapter has described several stories. These stories have played a role in the social construction of the identity of het IJzerenbosch and the identity of the community of Susteren. They describe what it means to them to be in the community of Susteren or to have a connection with het IJzerenbosch.

These stories have also shaped the perspective on het IJzerenbosch and the perspective on the community of Susteren. While this perspective is individual, there can be common aspects within the perspectives of individuals within a community.

As these stories can change an individual's perspective, they can shape a person's stance or attitude towards a place as het IJzerenbosch. After one particular interview with an old man, he told me that he had never viewed the forest as a beautiful nature area. It used to be a useless forest, one that you could not use for timber production or agricultural products because it was too wet. Older narratives of the uselessness of the forest, that have gradually been replaced within the community by a notion of appreciation for the beautiful nature there, had not yet impacted the stories of the old man. There could be a variety of reasons why he never adopted the arising narrative, perhaps because it was never mentioned or he did not go there that often (which was true in this particular case). But the old story he clung on to did impact his actions and attitude towards the forest. It could be the case that he changed his perception of het IJzerenbosch after the interview, and included this new insight in his own stories.

The physical situation of het IJzerenbosch at a certain point in time, and the perspective of the community on the forest at that time, are always in context to each other. The perspective of an individual is the interpretation of their own personal experiences with the physical situation. This interpretation with the physical situation is then negotiated within the community through a story. Within that community, this story gets neglected, adapted or enforced. If it is enforced, it can become a narrative. Influenced by both stories and narratives, the perspective of an individual can change over time. This socially constructed knowledge on the physical situation of het IJzerenbosch can lead to action. It can lead to an intervention in the forest.

The physical situation can change over time. The perception of the physical situation can change over time. This perception, on its own turn, can effectively determine the actions that occur in the forest. The legend of 'Der Ritt durch den Eisenwald' is an example. It shows us how the community of that time is warned through this story of the 'Eisenwald'. The demon witch is introduced as a metaphor for the at that time impenetrable IJzerenbosch. The physical situation of het IJzerenbosch in those days, have led to the social construction of a story that is used to warn people for the dangers of the swamp. Het IJzerenbosch as it is today is probably one of the last remainders of the vast swamps of those days. It is imaginable that the perception of het IJzerenbosch through this story has had an effect on the lack of intervention (action) in the forest in those days, due to a fear for the swamp. These ancient stories have continuously been reproduced throughout time, as is evident from the fact that another version of this story exists.

In the beginning of the 19th century, het IJzerenbosch has been reclaimed⁵⁵. This might have changed the perception of het IJzerenbosch as an unreachable, impenetrable swamp. If it did, it might soon have returned to its identity as unreachable. In the beginning of the 20th century, the railway was built and separated the village of Susteren from het IJzerenbosch, so on a local scale the forest took a marginal place as well. Not only physically, but also in the perception of the community. There were two dead-end roads into the forest, which were both very inaccessible. After the Second World War, the road was gradually extended into the forest using the rubble from the houses that was left after the war. Halfway through the 20th century, both paths were connected. It was as late as 2001 that the path through the forest has been paved.

⁵⁵ Renes, 1988.

The map on the right is a detail of the cadastre map from het IJzerenbosch. It shows detailed information about the parcels that were already there at that time. It also shows names that were used to describe a piece of the forest, so-called toponyms. Some names designated the characteristics of the place, such as 'de Sumb', meaning the swamp. Interestingly, there are also names that connect a family name to a group of parcels. The red lines indicate which parcels have been divided and whether the two separate parcels were of equal size. The cadastre maps of almost the whole of the Netherlands had been formally recognised in 1832. Limburg was in a unique political state at the time as a result of the Belgian Revolution. Only at the end of it could the cadastre maps of Limburg be formally acknowledged. This happened in the period of 1840-1842. The maps, however, had already been drawn.

The map shows the impact of the social construction of parcel borders on the physical situation. At some point, the forest was perceived to be feasible for reclamation. As this interpretation, based on the social context of that time, gradually replaced the older narratives of the impenetrability of the forest, a call for action was made. The new narrative of the reclaimed IJzerenbosch was put into action, effectively constructing the physical situation.

The interpretation of het IJzerenbosch has changed through time. In the middle of the 20th century, every owner of a parcel in the forest would maintain his own parcel. Once in a while, a tree would be cut down and dragged over the pathway using horses. If someone did not have a horse or the proper tools, it could always be arranged by a neighbour or a friend. The many individual parcels had their own boundaries, which were maintained in different ways; while one parcel had a ditch alongside it, another had a fence or just stones at the



Figure 13. This is a detail of the cadastre map of Susteren, Section C, Page 2.

corners of the parcel to mark its border with the neighbours' parcel. But the forest was still quite inaccessible, let alone feasible for use. Fed through stories of the lack of success in feasibly using the forest, het IJzerenbosch had got a reputation within the community as a useless piece of land. Its place-identity at that time was connected to the perception of the community as a useless piece of land.

After the Second World War, the Land Consolidation project of the Netherlands gradually turned wastelands into agricultural land. The landscape changed, and so had the perception of these wastelands. The disappearance of wastelands and fragmented nature areas had led to an opposite reaction for the appreciation and preservation of the few areas that had escaped the consolidation. These were typically areas on the margin, such as het IJzerenbosch. At the same time prosperity increased in the Netherlands and in Susteren. It was no longer necessary to drag wood out of the forest for individual use. Gradually, awareness increased of another value for the forest; the possibility to walk through the forest and enjoy its beauty. As this perception gradually took hold of the community, the appreciation of het IJzerenbosch changed as well. In the mean time, the swimming pool next to the forest developed into a recreational centre, which started to advocate the beauty of the forest on its promotional communication. This is an example of how the perception of the forest can change throughout history, without the need for the actual physical situation to change.

This new narrative of the beauty of het IJzerenbosch started to spread. To enforce this new perspective, new stories were produced. In 1977, 'Susteren Natuurgetrouw' was published, in which the author pleads for a consciousness of the beauty and uniqueness of het IJzerenbosch.

⁵⁶ Schulpen, 1977, p. 2.

He also tells us that 'its natural beauty has as of yet been largely unnoticed⁵⁶'. This small book is the signal for a major shift in perception of the forest. Het IJzerenbosch had been perceived to be useless for a few hundred years, arguably more. Suddenly, in less than a decade, this perception had changed. The place-identity of het IJzerenbosch changed as well.

Although this new perspective did not directly penetrate the whole community, because in a stable village with low dynamics change occurs less fast, it did have an effect on the physical situation. Benches were put in the forest by the local community, and ultimately, in 2001 the path through the forest had been paved. As the two paths were connected since the middle of the 20th century, the forest was more accessible as well. Another development was that the social context had expanded beyond the local community. Soil scientists from Wageningen visited the area to make a map. People from outside the local community began to interfere with het IJzerenbosch.

At this point, some people still owned a parcel in het IJzerenbosch. But up to the 1960s, the use of the parcels for a small supply of wood had rapidly declined. After that, only a minority still actively used the parcel, or maintained it. The parcel borders, which had historically been kept open by a frequent passing of someone wanting to drag a tree out of the forest, were now declining.

In this chapter, several stories have been introduced that collectively portray het IJzerenbosch within a context of marginality. Het IJzerenbosch is marginal in many ways. First there is the marginal position of the Province of Limburg within the Netherlands, due to its particular history. Limburg has longer been occupied by Germany and

France than any other Province, and has since the decision of Willem I to separate the two Provinces of Limburg repeatedly fought the decision. Nowadays, the predisposition of Limburg towards Germany or Belgium is declining, but still noticeable.

On a smaller scale, Susteren and het IJzerenbosch on their own turn hold a marginal position within the Province of Limburg. The forest lies directly adjacent to the border with Germany. While from 1949 to 1963 the neighbouring Selfkant area had temporarily been Dutch territory, the effect of the border still has been noticeable. Even more so during the First World War, when smuggling was a common occupation in Susteren. Smuggling only occurs in the most marginal of places, which apparently suits het IJzerenbosch. The smuggling is not a story on its own. In itself, it has a context. The smuggling only took place because there were no alternatives at hand. Most of the people from Susteren had lost their jobs in Germany after the First World War.

Taking a look on the local level, a third geographical form of marginality can be distinguished. Het IJzerenbosch historically has been the most difficult place to reach. It was only reclaimed in the beginning of the 19th century⁵⁷. Later on, in the beginning of the 20th century, the railway was built and separated the village of Susteren from het IJzerenbosch, so on a local scale the forest took a marginal place as well. There were two roads into the forest, which were both very inaccessible. After the Second World War, the road was gradually extended into the forest by using the rubble from the houses. Halfway through the 20th century, both paths were connected. It was as late as 2001 that the path through the forest has been paved.

The marginality is a social construction. It is about a perception that is interpreted as a form of marginality. Limburg is perceived to be marginal within the Netherlands. Its peculiar history has shaped its identity within the other provinces as a marginal province. Neither is the border with Germany a physical characteristic. A border pole is in place, but the idea of a border is the result of a social negotiation; the border is a social construction. On the local level, the marginality is also negotiated within the community.

It could be argued that the marginality of this area has had a significant impact on its development as a nature area. The area has never been accessible enough to intensively harvest resources. It has only been reclaimed at the beginning of the 19th century and as late as 2001 the road through the forest has been paved. It has never been feasible enough for harvesting timber. During the land consolidation, these parcels were not interesting enough to cultivate. In the time that Susteren played a central role with its rail yard for the mining industry in the South of Limburg, there was a large demand of pine trees for the mining industry. Pine trees give a snap just before they break, giving the miners a little time to escape before the tunnel collapses. While het IJzerenbosch had a strategic location for the transport of pine trees, positioned so close to the rail yard, it has never been used for intensive pine tree production because it was too wet. Collectively, these stories of marginality have kept the forest in its present shape, despite all external influences or changes in society. The perception of het IJzerenbosch as a marginal area has long been active in the community.

During the First World War, the marginality of the forest suddenly plays an important role. When the smuggling began, it began in a specific

⁵⁷ Renes, 1988.

place. For their illegal activities, the smugglers chose a difficult to reach, dark, unused forest that connects to Germany along a strip of two kilometres. The forest is largely fragmented, both by the many parcels and the streams, which along with the high water table makes it the perfect place to hide when something goes wrong. Only because het IJzerbosch was perceived as marginal in many ways, the scene of smuggling has been depicted in het IJzerbosch, and not in other places.

When looking back at the concept of place-identity as described in the theoretical framework, aspects of the concept are visible and recognisable in het IJzerbosch. Stories play a vital part in the perception of a place-identity. Stories are produced and reproduced, and negotiated in a social context. Stories continuously change. These stories build the place-identity of het IJzerbosch; these stories determine what this place is perceived to be, and what value it has to the community. One aspect of the place-identity concept is not only determining what this place is, but also what it is not. What does het IJzerbosch have as opposed to other areas? These characteristics make it unique, and important within a community. And these characteristics are continuously negotiated through stories.

Merely using images of nature for how people perceive nature in this area would not address the complexity of the situation. How people perceive nature is not static, it is in fact a constant negotiation within a community. And not only does every individual have a very specific and unique perception of nature; not every one will refer to it as 'nature' in the first place. The stories and narratives shape the perception of an area, and whether it is perceived to be 'nature' at all.

Perceiving an area is not merely passive. Through stories, this interpretation can influence others, and can ultimately shape the way

other interact with the physical or social environment. Perception can lead to action. Someone will most probably only interact with the place in a way that he finds acceptable within his own perception, and within a larger social context. His actions could change the physical appearance of the place, which in turn might affect the perception of the place to others.

This change of perception of het IJzerbosch has had an impact on its use and appreciation, and ultimately on its physical appearance. The physical situation is continuously negotiated in a social setting, and so the place-identity of het IJzerbosch and the social identity of Susteren as a community are strongly intertwined. This interwovenness of het IJzerbosch and the community of Susteren has ultimately led to the situation at hand.

Stories that describe het IJzerbosch are continuously produced and reproduced throughout history. The social context of that time then determines how the story is framed and passed on to a new generation. Throughout history, the social identity of the village Susteren and het IJzerbosch have been strongly intertwined. One example is the appearance of family names in an older map of the forest. That particular place must have meant something for that family, initially for the usage of wood. Other examples of the interwovenness are the stories within that community about het IJzerbosch. The family Hennissen that had endured the winter in a self-made bunker during the last two months of World War II probably still knows the location of the bunker. If still present, the bunker would be a physical reminder of this story of a man that would not want to leave his village.

Other stories are repeated each year within the community. Every year after carnaval, 'de Graasboer' is shot back to the forest. This is another

connection between stories of the social identity of Susteren and the place identity of het IJzerenbosch. The 'stories' of the history of Susteren are continuously reproduced by a small amount of (amateur) historians, that put in a lot of effort in describing its history.

In the present situation, the many individual parcels have led to a situation in which there is no common objective. It is this history that has shaped the present physical appearance of the forest. Today, the many parcels are still visible in the structure of the forest. Borders of these parcels can still be distinguished in most parts of the forest. During the interviews I noticed that several people valued this diversity. 'I love it that at every corner you see something new'. Also, the bunker is probably still visible in the forest, and the many crosses remind us of a past in which lots of good were smuggled to Germany.

The forest is appreciated within the community of Susteren, and is deeply intertwined with it. The interaction between the physical place of het IJzerenbosch and the interpretation of that place within the community has throughout history led to a specific physical situation. The perception of het IJzerenbosch has changed through time. There has been a change within the community of Susteren in the perception and appreciation of the forest from a 'marginal use' perspective towards an appreciation of its natural beauty, without any major physical changes in the forest. In turn, however, these changes in perception have led to the paving of the road in 2001. In the current situation, it is hard to individually interfere with the forest without the consent of the community due to the large number of parcels. The many parcels provide a form of protection against a unifying policy. This 'deadlock situation', together with a community that will not easily allow major changes, provides a stable situation for het IJzerenbosch to remain unchanged.

5. The interventions of Natuurmonumenten

Natuurmonumenten is a Dutch national nature association founded in 1905 by amongst others Jac P. Thijssen and Eli Heimans. Their initial ambition was to save the Naardermeer in the West of the Netherlands from becoming a landfill. Their strategy at that time has been to buy the land, and so they did in 1906. As Natuurmonumenten mentions on their website, those ambitions are still valid. Nature is still under pressure and 'Natuurmonumenten must secure land by buying the land'⁵⁸. At the time of writing, Natuurmonumenten has over 750 thousand members with a common purpose: 'to take care of the nature in the Netherlands'. That is why they acquire land and manage nature areas. And so they have done in het IJzerenbosch. They have strategically bought parcels in the area, to protect het IJzerenbosch from disappearing.

In 1979, Natuurmonumenten started buying parcels in and around het IJzerenbosch. They contacted the municipality, to inform them that they wanted to buy parcels in the area. The municipality then provided the data of people that owned a parcel in the area, and soon the purchases began. Natuurmonumenten made the first calls and the first deals were made. The first few years the correspondence and the transactions went perfect. Folders were systematically kept in order, containing all correspondence with the owners. And then it slowed down. Not all owners could be traced. It turned out that some had already deceased a long time ago. And not all of the children or even grandchildren had passed on their information to 'het Kadaster', the main Dutch registration body for parcel ownership. It proved to be a

⁵⁸ natuurmonumenten.nl, 2011.

⁵⁹ Annual Report Natuurmonumenten 2010.



Figure 14. Natuurmonumenten owns 45% of the 732 parcels.

hard task for Natuurmonumenten to find out who actually owns the 732 parcels of het IJzerenbosch.

One of the people I have interviewed was responsible for the purchases in het IJzerenbosch. He told me it was a lot of work. On some occasions a parcel could be split in ten different parcels, sometimes formal, sometimes informal. Only a part of this information was registered at 'het Kadaster'. It was a lot of work to get all the information, and all that work just made a minor addition to the total area for Natuurmonumenten. The average parcel size in het IJzerenbosch is 1,6 hectares, which is small compared to the 102.951 hectares NM owns in total in the Netherlands⁵⁹. And beside all the effort put in obtaining information of the sellers, the notary had to be

paid by Natuurmonumenten. Quite an investment for a marginal area. To cut down the costs, they tried to combine several transactions on a single day. In one particular occasion an event was organised by Natuurmonumenten on which owners could sell their parcel, with a notary already there. On another occasion, a parcel had ten different owners, all belonging to the same family. 'I was invited to their family day, which was the only day in the year on which all ten owners of that parcel were together. Each of them signed their contract.'

Even if they could be contacted, it didn't mean they wanted to sell right away. There were a lot of reasons why people didn't want to sell their parcel, one of which being the price. As a nature organisation, it is impossible to give a good price for the land you buy. Selling your parcel as agricultural land would yield more income. That is not something Natuurmonumenten can compete against. But the parcels in het IJzerbosch are too wet to be sold as agricultural land, and they are also too small to be feasible for agricultural use. Nor can they be sold as parcels used for wood production. The forest floor is too wet for a production value forest, and it is not feasible to harvest trees on a small scale nowadays.

So what is it that drives people in the area to not selling their plot? If it is not its economic value, what other value can be important to the owners? It cannot be the direct recreational value of their plot, because people don't use their own parcel anymore. The parcels are fairly untouched. The interviews provided yet another value, one which is less prominent. A farmer I have interviewed talked about his land, and how one small parcel in the middle did not belong to him. Everything else was neatly arranged and maintained, but that one small piece of land was overgrown. It belonged to two sisters, which he contacted once in a while to ask if they would be interested in selling the parcel. Although they were both above 80 years old, they always

replied in the same fashion: we will not sell it. It had belonged to the family, and they intended to keep it, even though they were not able to manage it by themselves. Just the thought of owning it was far more valuable than the sum of money they could get by selling their beloved parcel.

When Natuurmonumenten made its first appearance in het IJzerbosch, the first thing they did was to immediately cut down all the Canadian poplars in a large parcel on the edge of the forest. As these were planted there for production, little was left when they were cut down. When I talked to farmers in and around het IJzerbosch, there was a general consensus on that topic. 'They came here, cut down the trees and then they took the profit', thereby questioning the 'nature conservation' ambitions of Natuurmonumenten. 'They don't care about nature.' According to the farmers, there was already nature in place, and Natuurmonumenten had destroyed it. From that point onwards, Natuurmonumenten had lost the trust of most of the farmers in the region. And after that clear felling, little or no communication or activity could be noticed by the farmers. They didn't hear anything from Natuurmonumenten, and seldom saw them in the area.

From the perspective of Natuurmonumenten, the poplars needed to be cut down immediately, because it says so in their policy. They have to enact that policy. And in that policy it said that Canadian poplars are alien to Dutch forests, and therefore are not allowed in it. The poplars had to be cut down to make way for other species, that are allowed by their policy.

And as for the communication, Natuurmonumenten only has two field-coordinators employed in the whole area of South-Limburg. Together they are responsible for a large area. And het IJzerbosch is a

relatively unimportant area, in which Natuurmonumenten does not put much focus or resources. As one coordinator told me, 'this is actually the first time in three years that she visited the area'. She was used to only visit an area when there were complaints, due to the limited time they have in the field.

The employees do not have the time in the field as they had before. Nowadays they have to 'sit behind a desk at least half of the day, filling in all kinds of forms, such as FSC certification'. She told me that she had to update the administration for the FSC certification, although she knew that in the end het IJzerenbosch was not suitable for FSC certification in the first place. The FSC requirements can not be applied in the forest because it is fragmented. FSC requires the management plots to be solely owned by a single party with full management capabilities. Policies like FSC keep the area coordinators from Natuurmonumenten from spending more of their time in the field.

These area coordinators are the people who are actually in the field, that at least have the opportunity to visit the area and interact with the local people. Since two years, the two provinces of Noord-Brabant and Limburg are combined in one administrative region. Both the communication team and the region staff function at this level⁶⁰. And then, at a lower level, the management units take care of a specific area. The actual policy that affects the present and future situation of het IJzerenbosch is made by people that, according to an interview, do not know the specifics of het IJzerenbosch. But they do influence the general policies that Natuurmonumenten produces, and the management that results from those policies. At some point this general policy will have an impact on the management of het IJzerenbosch.

⁶⁰ van Tiggelen, 2009

There's another reason why Natuurmonumenten did not proactively manage the forest. As can be seen on the map in the lower left, Natuurmonumenten only owns about forty-five per cent of the parcels (by number of parcels; by area they own more than sixty per cent). But there is not even a single large plot in the forest of which they have sole ownership, there is always a small parcel within the perimeter. This makes it hard for Natuurmonumenten to enact their policies in het IJzerenbosch. They cannot cut down trees on the scale they are used to in other nature areas they own. Cutting down trees is only feasible if your tree plot is large enough, easily accessible, and roughly universal in tree length and species. Plots in het IJzerenbosch are typically small, mostly hard or virtually impossible to reach, and very diverse in tree length and species. In some occasions the management team of Natuurmonumenten has tried to make a deal with other plot owners that lie within a perimeter of their own. 'If we can convince them to let us cut down their trees and give them the profit, it is a win-win situation', one interviewee said. But most of the time all they received was a negative response.

A final example of this deadlock situation relates to another policy Natuurmonumenten wants to enact in the forest. They have a zero tolerance-policy on some invasive species. This is a general policy that Natuurmonumenten wants to enact in all of their nature areas in the Netherlands. One example is the prunus (*Prunus serotina*, in Dutch commonly known as 'the forest plague'), that is known for rapidly spreading. On their own parcels, Natuurmonumenten organises events to remove all prunus from their plots. However, if an individual owner of a neighbouring parcel does not remove prunus from his parcel, the prunus trees on his plot germinate and within a year the plot of

Natuurmonumenten is once again filled with Prunus. Plants do not stop once they have reached the parcel's border.

How Natuurmonumenten has intervened in het IJzerbosch

Natuurmonumenten came into the area in 1979 to protect het IJzerbosch from disappearing. But would het IJzerbosch have disappeared without the interventions of Natuurmonumenten? As demonstrated in the previous chapter, het IJzerbosch already has informal ways of protection in place. A history of fragmentation of het IJzerbosch has led to a deadlock situation in which no one has prevalence over others and the situation will remain roughly the same. On top of that there is a community that has played an important role by producing and reproducing stories about this place throughout history.

The stories about the meaning of het IJzerbosch and what you can or cannot do in the area are the result of a long evolution of the relationship between the place-identity of het IJzerbosch on the one hand, and the social identity of the community of Susteren on the other. The resulting perspectives are partly based on stories of historical use of the area. Traces of this usage are still visible in het IJzerbosch, in the borders of the parcels, the crosses of smugglers who had died in the forest, the bunker and in general the diversity of the area due to its fragmentation. For people that are connected to het IJzerbosch, their perspective depends on stories. In those stories, the historical use and the appreciation of the forest to the community plays an important role.

On the other hand, a largely centralised organisation such as Natuurmonumenten considers the area for its nature value. The reports that will be conducted to consider the future of het IJzerbosch do consider the soil topography and the structure of the

forest but not the history and the connection to the village of Susteren. In its communication to the members, Natuurmonumenten uses specific images of nature and advocates buying the parcels to protect nature from external influences. In het IJzerbosch, two protection mechanisms were already in place. One is the fragmentation of the forest. The many parcels and the many parcel owners effectively impede a unified management or the purchase of parcels. A second protection mechanism is a general opposition to change in the area. The stable community and the strong connection of the community of Susteren with het IJzerbosch have led to a hesitance towards change. Natuurmonumenten did not understand these informal methods of protection, due to the blind spot created in their organisation; they are only focused on ecological, aesthetic and recreational values. This blind spot is a natural consequence of their own policies.

With this insight, we can review the situation. Although some communities may embrace this generic policy, a place like this with less dynamics, more stability and a marginal context, it is less likely. In this place, the historical stories play a role, there are many old connections between that place and the community that are still visible today. Generic policy, that is thought of in a totally different context and place, makes it hard for Natuurmonumenten to truly observe what is going on here and what would be the most fit strategy to protect it. This blind spot did result in unanticipated change for Natuurmonumenten. They did not expect the reaction of the farmers when they cut down the Canadian poplars, nor did they expect the resistance when they wanted to buy parcels, or the negative response of parcel owners on the question whether they wanted to cooperate to remove prunus from the forest floor.

6. Conclusions and recommendations

In this thesis, we have been looking at the unravelling of history in het IJzerbosch, and how that has led to the present situation. The history of IJzerbosch is not isolated concept; it is connected to the community of Susteren. Throughout history, the social identity of the village Susteren and the place-identity of het IJzerbosch have continuously influenced each other.

What defines het IJzerbosch and what defines the community of Susteren are not two unrelated developments. We have seen that the place-identity of het IJzerbosch is continuously negotiated within the community. Through stories, parts of reality are enforced, while others are neglected. These stories are then shared within the community, and determine how people perceive the forest.

This relation between the forest and the community has collectively shaped the present situation. There are now 732 parcels, of which some borders are still intact. The many parcels have led to a situation in which change is not so easy because of this fragmentation. Secondly, there is a connection between the forest and the community. Change that is perceived within the community as unwanted is kept out. The community does not see the need for change. These two factors have contributed to the nature area it is today. A nature area that is valued, but was never designed to be as it is today, nor has it been formally controlled or managed.

In 1979, Natuurmonumenten starts buying parcels in het IJzerbosch. Their aim is to take care of this nature area. By their own institutional complexity, they did not recognise that there are already informal ways of protection in place. Although Natuurmonumenten came into the

area with good intentions, their actions were not appreciated in the community. The institutional complexity of Natuurmonumenten makes it hard for Natuurmonumenten to recognise this relationship between the community and het IJzerbosch.

6.1 General conclusions

This takes us to the three main conclusions of this thesis.

1. Concepts of place-identity, social identity (community) and nature are intertwined, and continuously produced, reproduced and negotiated within the community of Susteren.

In the theoretical framework, the foundation of this thesis has been established. From a social constructivist perspective, nothing is purely objective. Everything we perceive has to pass the senses, and thus bears the mark of the human mind. As interpretation is everywhere, every individual person has its own perception of a physical reality. This individual perception is then negotiated within a social context, through storytelling.

Stories play a central role in the negotiation of the meaning, identity and value allocated to het IJzerbosch. Its place-identity is defined in this social context. But what defines het IJzerbosch and what defines the community of Susteren are not two separate developments. Throughout history, they have had an effect on each other. One example demonstrates how the place-identity of het IJzerbosch is continuously reproduced within the social context of the community of Susteren. Up to the middle of the 20th century, the forest has been very wet. This has made it useless in the perception of the community

of Susteren in those days. When the land consolidation took place after the Second World War and many wastelands disappeared, at the same time a consciousness arose for the protection and appreciation for the nature areas that were left afterwards. And het IJzerbosch with its marginal position was among these areas.

At the same time the prosperity rose. As people from Susteren got wealthier, there was no longer a need to occasionally drag a tree from the forest. In a time when nature and recreation got more attention, the community gradually realised that het IJzerbosch was also a beautiful place to take a walk. Within the social context of the community, the place-identity of het IJzerbosch had been reproduced, and so had the interpretation of nature within the community and within the society as a whole. While this was merely a change in the perception of het IJzerbosch within the community, ultimately it had its physical implications as well. The recreation park 'de Hommelheide' expanded, and so did the number of people walking or biking through the forest. In 2001, the path was paved to accommodate the perception of het IJzerbosch by the community and the expectations they have of the physical appearance of the forest through this perception.

2. Marginality has played an important role in the historical development of het IJzerbosch. Many specific characteristics of the forest that make it unique are kept intact because of its marginality.

Limburg itself holds a marginal position within the Netherlands, as it has longer been influenced by France, Germany and Belgium than other provinces, and has itself only joined the Netherlands in 1839. Limburg could not join the Belgian resistance because there were Dutch troops stationed in Mook and Maastricht, which is why Limburg ended up becoming a Dutch Province instead of a Belgian Province.

Additionally, Limburg has been a part of the German Confederation while being a Dutch Province, until the confederation collapsed.

On a smaller scale, Susteren is a marginal place within Limburg. Susteren and het IJzerbosch are positioned close to the border with Germany, and this border has played an important role in the history of het IJzerbosch. Stories of smuggling are portrayed in this forest that is located on the border.

On a smaller scale still, on the local level, het IJzerbosch has taken a marginal position within Susteren as well. Being the last remainder of a vast swamp, the forest has historically been impenetrable and hard to reach. Only up to halfway the 20th century did a road pass through the forest, and as late as 2001 has this road been paved. Additionally, het IJzerbosch was visually separated from the village of Susteren by the rail yard throughout the 20th century.

Apart from a geographical marginality on three levels, het IJzerbosch has been economically marginal. Because the forest was very wet, it was never feasible for agricultural use nor for intensive timber production.

Because it was never feasible to turn (parts of) the forest into agricultural land or production forest for the mines, the forest is still intact as of today. The marginality of the forest, in various ways, has protected the forest throughout history from external influences. All these forms of marginality are a social construction. It is about the perception of marginality within the community.

3. The institutional complexity of Natuurmonumenten, their concepts of nature and their central policy, has made it hard for them to recognise and acknowledge the history, informal institutions, values and stories that have shaped het IJzerbosch as it is of today.

At the end of the 20th century, many people take a walk through the forest. But still there are people that remember the history of het IJzerbosch, and visit the many paths they used to know from their childhood. The strong connection between the forest and the community has had implications on its organisation. Many individuals own a parcel in the forest. This has led to a deadlock situation which is more or less stable. Additionally, the community, which has been related to the forest throughout time, does not see a necessity for change in 'their' forest. Combined, they form an informal way of protection from change.

From 1979, Natuurmonumenten has determined to buy parcels in het IJzerbosch to enforce their objective of taking care of nature. Along the way, they have met resistance. First of all they still do not own all parcels in the area, they are stuck at 45%. Additionally they meet resistance when they try to manage the forest. When they want to remove prunus, they can not effectively do that because there are still privately owned parcels. The same goes for tree harvesting. When Natuurmonumenten wants to feasibly harvest trees in the forest, they have to make arrangements with small parcel owners within their plot. Most of the time these individual owners do not want to cooperate.

Natuurmonumenten is an organisation that is driven by conservation of nature by the purchase of land. They intended to protect het IJzerbosch from external influences. What Natuurmonumenten did

not see, was that there were already two informal ways of protection in place. One is the fragmentation of the forest, the second is the community that is reluctant to change. Through this blind spot created by their own institutional policies they are unaware of the informal ways of protection that were already in place through the interweaving of that place and the community of Susteren through history. Some events can be ignored perhaps, or can be dealt with easily by making small adaptations. This is how most organisations act, due to their inclination towards self-referentiality⁶¹. With their good intentions of effecting their policy, Natuurmonumenten has effectively marginalised the local stories about the place-identity of het IJzerbosch. Their institutional structure has led to unanticipated reactions in het IJzerbosch.

6.2 Implications for (the organisation of) spatial planning

This thesis has demonstrated the history of het IJzerbosch and its community. From 1979 onwards, Natuurmonumenten has designated the area for nature development to enforce its objective of buying land to take care of nature. The appearance of Natuurmonumenten in the area has led to the current deadlock situation in which large scale management is not an option. Should Natuurmonumenten have bought up land in the first place? There were already two informal ways of protection in place; the fragmentation of the forest and its relation with the community. But Natuurmonumenten did not see these characteristics. If Natuurmonumenten did know of this protection, buying the land would perhaps not be necessary to enforce their objective to take care of nature; the community already took care of het IJzerbosch.

⁶¹ van Woerkum et al., 2011.

Additionally, when Natuurmonumenten already owned some parcels in het IJzerbosch, they came to meet some resistance. Some people would not participate in selling their parcels, or even help to effectively remove prunus or harvest trees. From the perspective of the history of the relation between the community of Susteren and the place-identity of het IJzerbosch, these actions could be explained. But Natuurmonumenten had never invested time in gaining insight in the community and its historical relation with the forest.

We can take some lessons from this case study. First, context is everything. It is important to understand the context of the resistance. It is not simply a case of one image of nature against another; it is far more detailed than that. Different people have different perspectives, but apart from the individual perspectives there are also community perspectives. And both of these perspectives can be found by collecting stories in a community. Let them talk, let them tell the stories that matters to them the most. Stories are an essential but underrated part of getting to know the perspectives of people in the area, and what they value.

An institution like Natuurmonumenten can learn from these lessons. They could review their centralised policy and allow more room in their policy for (in)formal local initiatives. They can use stories to investigate what is important to the community. From those stories, Natuurmonumenten could reframe their communication towards the community. If they can find a common goal, such as maintaining nature in the area, they can help each other instead of obstruct one another. Stories can be used in planning for transcending a my-needs-versus-your-needs situation. Gathering stories can provide an opportunity to surpass the situation and find a common purpose. As Sumares and Fidélis state, ‘the arrangements designed for the

conservation of certain elements need to make sense within local narratives, and vice-versa. In other words, they need to remain within history and meaningfulness⁶².

One important lesson for spatial planning is the role that marginality has played throughout the development of het IJzerbosch. Its marginality ensured that all spatial developments took place elsewhere, such as the land consolidation and intensive wood production. Effectively, the marginality protected het IJzerbosch from changes. But the marginality is not just a perception of a physical situation, it is the relation between the physical situation and the perception of it as it has developed throughout history. The forest has for a long time been a useless, impenetrable swamp. The perception of its uselessness has been negotiated throughout the community at the time. Nowadays, there is a new perception: the forest is important for recreation and nature preservation. The perceived unimportance of the area has disappeared within the stories, other story elements have replaced it to enforce a new perspective.

How can we deal with marginality within the organisation of spatial planning? First of all it is of importance to recognise and acknowledge the role of marginality in an area. While the stories of marginality of het IJzerbosch are quite unique, there could be other areas as well, each with their own stories of marginality and its influence on the development of that specific area.

The question of marginality leads us to another question. The marginality has effectively led to an absence of active intervention, which has ensured the preservation of het IJzerbosch. In a land as the Netherlands, where everything is intensively planned, this creates

⁶² Sumares and Fidélis, 2010.

quite an interesting question. Is active intervention necessary? While this has been effective (and probably necessary) in many - if not most - areas in the Netherlands, this case study of het IJzerbosch has demonstrated that it is possible that a nature area can benefit from the absence of active intervention. This is partly because the perception of the community and of society as a whole changes over time. Policies that determine active intervention mostly have a fixed objective. For example, the land consolidation was put in place to maximise agricultural benefits and the pine tree production aimed at maximising pine tree production for the mines of South Limburg. It was never meant to create a beautiful nature area in the process.

Nor has it ever been the objective of the community of Susteren to create a beautiful nature area in het IJzerbosch. While planned change is the norm, in het IJzerbosch it has long been a story of unplanned change. The deadlock situation as it is today was never planned to be that way, but is instead the result of the continuous relation between the community of Susteren and the physical situation in het IJzerbosch. It is the accumulation of many events and stories that has led to the present situation. And in this situation where unplanned change was the norm, suddenly Natuurmonumenten buys up parcels in the area and tries to enforce planned change upon the community. As a result the deadlock situation is still in place, albeit with a new player that owns 45% of the parcels. And now, Natuurmonumenten plans to execute planned change in the area.

The situation in het IJzerbosch as it is now, is not the result of a planned policy or strategy. It is in fact the result of unplanned change.

⁶³ van Woerkum et al., 2011.

⁶⁴ Nolon and Salkin, 2006 in van Assche, 2010.

⁶⁵ van Assche, 2010.

As van Woerkum demonstrated, 'planning is about change, but not all change is planned'⁶³. It has been able to develop because it could not be used for other purposes. In the mean time the perspective has changed towards a need for conservation of the area. Without intervention, the situation might change, the parcel borders would not remain intact. The question of how to plan the future can only be asked when an insight is given into the evolution of the place-identity and the community. Doing nothing is not the same as keeping things as they are⁶⁴.

The production, reproduction and adaptation of identity has played a central role in this thesis. With the insight in how identity construction works, it is possible to apply branding. The strategy with the best chance to preserve the desirable character in cultural landscapes is not a direct preservation strategy, but rather an approach that attempts to create or strengthen a place-identity, a place brand. Van Assche states that "the most stable planning strategy for cultural landscapes is careful management of place-identity⁶⁵". A strong place-identity or place brand can form a counterweight to future threats.

6.3 Recommendations for further research

Although this thesis has shed a light on certain aspects, more research is needed. Resulting from this thesis the following questions have been posed for further research:

- Which role has marginality, social identity, place-identity and history played in the historical development of other areas, and how are they related?

- Which of the concepts of marginality, social identity, place-identity or history can be controlled in a planning situation?
- To what extent are individual stories separated from community stories?
- Has the objective of planned planning in this area been effective on the long term as the perspective of its community has changed?

6.4 Practical recommendations

There are other ways of managing, maintaining and developing het IJzerbosch. This thesis has provided insights in the complex situation of het IJzerbosch. These insights then be used to improve the situation at hand. For this specific area, Natuurmonumenten can implement a strategy where they incorporate the community in their policy development cycle. A difficulty here is the fact that all their policy is centrally produced, and applies to all their nature areas. Producing a specific policy for het IJzerbosch does not fit into their structural organisation. To be able to avoid this problem, Natuurmonumenten can choose to give freedom of policy to het IJzerbosch, and then try to fill in the practicalities with the local community.

Another issue that they must work out with the community is the communication of their own reasoning. At the moment, Natuurmonumenten tries to enforce a nature area without invasive species, with large tree plots, with an open canopy and with facilities in place for endangered species. The community has different expectations of het IJzerbosch, based on the long history of the intertwinement of the village and the forest. In that particular

situation, Natuurmonumenten can not reach their goals due to informal small-scale resistance. As one of the conclusions has demonstrated, that resistance comes from the lack of communication from Natuurmonumenten towards the community about what they were planning to do in the area. And more importantly, why they were planning to do those things. Open communication towards the community could have at least softened this deadlock situation.

Natuurmonumenten should allocate more time towards the area coordinators for communication with individual parcel owners, or collective in a 'future of het IJzerbosch' event, in which Natuurmonumenten then can tell their reasons for wanting to buy all parcels and enacting certain policies, and the community can respond to find common solutions. Another thing Natuurmonumenten could do in het IJzerbosch is to maintain the physical reminders of the history of the forest and the community. Natuurmonumenten could promise to maintain the parcel borders, crosses, benches and the bunker. Perhaps on their turn, the community is willing to help with the management. If the community would help instead of resist the goals of Natuurmonumenten - or common goals derived from them together with the community - a lot can be done to maintain the identity of het IJzerbosch for the community as well as help Natuurmonumenten reach their objectives.

Natuurmonumenten at this point says they don't have the time, the means or the money. But one could also say that money spent at buying parcels in the area, might just as well have been spent on ways of protection that are less expensive, which are also more aware of the connection already in place between the community and that place. No one in the area had the intention to cut down those trees, because they are not economically feasible. The forest would presumably have been protected by the community. Families could fall apart, or the

village might change. But that is less likely to happen in a place as Susteren, with a marginal context and low dynamics.

Another way to deal with this situation is to establish a foundation. On one hand we have many individual parcels that prevent certain management interventions in the forest, such as large scale tree harvesting or the entire eradication of invasive species. On the other hand the many parcels seem to have a specific value to the individual owners which transcends economic gain or other values. This mere 'ownership' value plays an important role in the area, and has been strengthened throughout history. It is one of the reasons Natuurmonumenten is still stuck at forty-five per cent ownership of the total area of het IJzerenbosch.

So the many individual parcel owners do not want to sell their parcel and without those parcels Natuurmonumenten does not seem able to effectively execute management in the area. At a first glance, these two objectives might not seem compatible. Establishing a foundation provides an answer. An independent foundation could take care of the proper execution of common management objectives, while preserving the ownership for the individual parcel owners. The foundation could transcend both Natuurmonumenten and the parcel owners, and ensure a collective management approach. Within this approach, the cultural history could have a special focus by maintaining the parcel borders and the physical reminders of its rich history.

6.5 Evaluation of the research design

I have followed an approach that puts stories at the heart of the research. This approach has had several implications for the design of the research. To be able to find these stories, I have chosen long in-depth interviews with people that are somehow related to het

IJzerenbosch. To carry out these interviews, I have chosen to not claim to be objective, but instead acknowledge my inter-subjectivity. I was born in the area and this has proven to be an advantage when in search of underlying assumptions during an interview. Integrating in the community has worked as well; at some point I was approached by someone who wanted an interview with me. Word had spread through the community.

The overall research design has been open from the start. Because it has been so open, it has been easier to gain additional data, add more and more interviews and explore more historical data. It does take a lot of time to keep track of all this data and link it all together. Additionally, it took a lot of time to take all this data and put it back in perspective of the research questions. During the research there were continuous adjustments.

Ultimately, my own interpretation of the stories I have collected, and the (un)conscious prioritising of those stories have shaped this thesis, which is a story in itself. Rather than deny it, I aim to underline my inter-subjective role in the gathering of data and ultimately forming the storyline of this thesis.

Storytelling can be a powerful agent as a catalyst for change. It can shape the imagination of alternatives. The new interpretation of the value of the forest has shaped the imagination of alternatives throughout the community at the time when the book 'Susteren Natuurgetrouw' came out. Stories can inspire others to act. After talking to someone about the value of het IJzerenbosch, he was baffled but had to agree. It also shows that stories are crucial in peeling back layers of preconceptions and assumptions about in this case the perception of het IJzerenbosch.

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