

THE CASE OF DUTCH MANAGEMENT AGREEMENTS AS A TOOL TO ENHANCE THE PEOPLE'S  
ROLE IN WETLAND MANAGEMENT

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The preamble to the Ramsar Convention states that the conservation of wetlands and their flora and fauna can be ensured by combining far-sighted national policies with coordinated international action. The Netherlands government assigned Ramsar wetland status to eight areas, and is contemplating the assignment of sixty-two more areas. Taken on its own, this assigning may be anything from an internationally coordinated effective national policy, to a mere exercise in bureaucracy.

However, The Netherlands government has by now eight years of experience with a national policy that might deal effectively with processes of a smaller scale and of a more endogenous character that put increasing pressure on wetlands. This policy of Management agreements (beheersovereenkomsten) is used by the national government to induce local farmers to take the interest of flora and fauna into account in the management of their lands. On a voluntary basis farmers can enter into a binding agreement with the national government to refrain from certain practices which might be profitable for agriculture in the short run, but will be detrimental for the fundamental ecological functions of, for instance, wetlands. In compensation for abstaining from agricultural practices that are used elsewhere, these farmers are paid a yearly compensation. The agreement specifies the kind of agricultural management that is attuned to specified fundamental ecological functions, for example forage areas for waterfowl.

In this paper it is argued that this kind of management agreement is an excellent tool to counter or redirect the processes that are central to the conference on the people's role in wetland management. It stimulates the involvement of the local population in the management of their surroundings, it makes use of local knowledge, it is cheaper for the government than the creation of nature reserves and thus can be extended to larger areas. It also offers a means to improve the income from wetlands for the local population. In this light the paper analyses the tendency to redirect management agreement policy towards standard contracts, as this limits the usefulness of the policy instrument to take local requirements into account.