

The brewery goes

HEINEKEN and the province of South Holland are working with Alterra Wageningen UR on making the brewery in Zoeterwoude sustainable. The surrounding landscape is benefitting too.

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It was an unusual order for the HEINEKEN brewery last summer: instead of barley malt or hops, the brewery took delivery of a load of flower seeds specially selected in order to attract bees and other insects. The results can already be admired by visitors and passers-by on the park-like premises near Zoeterwoude.

Where there used to be a neat but rather dull lawn, there is now 6000 square metres of meadow full of wild flowers. Sowing the nectar-rich flowers is part of the Green Circles Agreement, a public-private collaboration between HEINEKEN, the province of South Holland and Alterra Wageningen UR. The shared objective of the partners is that the brewery and the wider community around it should support each other by working together on making both the company and the landscape more sustainable, says Paul Opdam, professor of Landscape and Spatial Planning, who works at Alterra. HEINEKEN wants a sustainable profile, says Opdam. 'The company is aiming for climate-neutral beer production, starting at the biggest brewery in Europe here in Zoeterwoude.'

TRANSPORT BY WATER

For some time already, ingredients and beer have not been transported by road but by water, explains Jan Kempers, sustainable development manager for HEINEKEN. Meanwhile, four wind turbines due to be installed soon are going to generate 43 percent of the brewery's electricity. But the idea of Green Circles goes further than that: the vision is that the entire region can make a contribution to sustainability and recycling of materials, becoming greener, more beautiful and eco-

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nomically stronger in the process.

The first steps are already visible. 'On the brewery premises a trial is going on to purify waste water by breeding algae,' says project leader Eveliene Steingröver of Alterra.

As part of the Green Circles initiative, the institute is also developing a ditch containing purifying swamp vegetation, helophytes, into which a local dairy farmer can dump the water used to clean the milk tanks so it can be purified naturally. Steingröver: 'The farmer then gets less water in his manure and saves on transport costs too. We are going to study how this ditch copes with the pollution and which animals and plants benefit from this. It is a way of promoting biodiversity.'

NICER ENVIRONMENT

According to Opdam, this exemplifies the core principle of Green Circles: how do you make use of nature in order to create a sustainable economic system in which you make responsible use of water and resources, if possible improving the environment at the same time. 'Why use purification technology if nature can do the work?' The same goes for a second important principle for the Green Circles partners: the use of biogas to generate energy from locally sourced manure and biomass such as wood from pruning or verge grass. 'That would be another big step towards a climate-neutral heating system at the brewery,' says Kempers. This stage has not yet been reached, says Steingröver. 'Before you can use mown verge grass you have to apply for an exemption under the waste substances law, because it could be polluted. That takes time and money.'

According to Kempers from HEINEKEN, reducing these kinds of obstacles is one of the aims of the collaboration. He mentioned the role of the province as a

crucial one. 'Traditionally a government tends to look mainly at licenses and compliance with existing rules and regulations. In Green Circles we talk much more at policy level: what should a future framework of laws and enforcement look like in order to bring about a viable sustainable economy?' The answer to this does not come readymade. But just the fact that it is being discussed 'in a good atmosphere' makes Kempers happy, in his own words. The implementation of the project is in part an assignment from the ministry of Economic Affairs. One focus of attention in the discussions, says Steingröver, is how to involve landowners and farmers in the project. 'There are all sorts of ways for farmers to get rid of their manure, for instance. It is up to us to show them the advantages and offer a workable business model.' Kempers agrees: you can't have ecological sustainability without economic sustainability, he stresses. The broad collaboration makes Green Circles 'unique', thinks Paul Opdam of Alterra. The way knowledge, political influence, economic interests and financial capacity are joining forces in the interests of greening a company and the environment around it has not happened before on this scale within a region.

MEADOW FLOWERS

And this is visible to the casual passer-by, thanks to the Green Circles project Biodiversity at the Brewery, in which the 35 hectares of green space at HEINEKEN is being made bee-friendly. 'Neat lawns and boring meadows will change into meadows full of flowers with bramble and hawthorn thickets – an Eldorado for bees and butterflies,' says the website. 'The biodiversity of wild bees, butterflies, birds, dragonflies and fish is expected to increase dramatically. Pollinators such as bees and butterflies will become so abundant that the brewery will become a source of nature for the area.' The question remains what HEINEKEN stands to gain from sowing wild flowers. Kempers willingly explains: 'It strengthens our image as sustainable and it generates a lot of goodwill. Our staff enjoy it, and people passing by see that the greening of our company leads to a nicer landscape. And last but not least: who wants to live in a world without flowers?' ■

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'The brewery is going to be a source of nature'