

**AN ACTION PLAN FOR RESTORING BIODIVERSITY**

# Farmers and ecologists unite to save nature

**Something has to change in nature conservation in the Netherlands, agree 18 stakeholder organizations. Imposing rules and regulations doesn't always work. To halt the decline in biodiversity, they are going to find out for themselves what works and what doesn't.**

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Ecologists used to be inclined to point an accusing finger at farmers when biodiversity came under threat, says David Kleijn, professor of Plant Ecology and Nature Conservation at Wageningen. They would then indignantly demand measures from the government in The Hague. This tended to work against them: people dug their heels in and farmers and nature conservationists lined up in opposition to each other. Now, Kleijn hopes that the Delta Plan for Biodiversity Recovery, the broad lines of which were presented to the relevant organizations at the end of 2018, charts a new course. Named after a major programme in the long Dutch tradition of consensus-based water management, the plan's aim is to boost biodiversity on agricultural land, in public outdoor spaces and in nature areas. 'The Delta Plan for Biodiversity Recovery does not aim at imposing rules,' he says. 'The main aim is to inspire collaboration between regional nature conservationists, farmers and other nature managers.'

Kleijn himself used to be part of the antagonism between nature conservation and the agricultural sector. From 1999 he made a name for himself with his critical evaluations of the 'agricultural nature management' approach. In spite of the roughly 50 million euros that farmers received annually for adapting their farming methods to benefit field birds, for example, the results were negligible. A lot of money and bureaucracy delivered little or no additional biodiversity, concluded Kleijn. Not least because the money went everywhere, even to places where there was no chance of success. Attempting field bird management on land with such low water levels that no black-tailed godwit is going to brood there, for example. 'For most farmers, these were rules imposed from above,' says Kleijn. 'If they just

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obeyed them, they would get paid. But people had lost sight of what those rules were for and what good it all did. Whereas it is commitment you need the most: you have to work at it. Here I manage the grassland as a habitat for field birds, so what I do in the next field matters too. You don't get far with rules alone.'

'And anyway, it is not just farmers who are held responsible for biodiversity measures, but also nature managers, road verge managers, retail chains and the water board.'

### DISAPPEARING INSECTS

The idea of changing course came from the Netherlands Ecological Research Network NERN. Kleijn was not involved in this at first, he says. 'The straw that broke the camel's back was research by Hans de Kroon and fellow researchers from Nijmegen. In October 2017 they concluded that just across the border in Germany, three quarters of all insects had disappeared over a period of 30 years, including very common species, and even in nature reserves. So the loss of biodiversity could well be a lot more extensive than we thought.'

This was the moment to bring stakeholders in nature together, thought several experts including Louise Vet, director of the ecology institute NIOO and professor by



special appointment at Wageningen. 'And let's keep the government and politicians out of it for the time being,' says Kleijn. 'Otherwise you get polarization: it comes from the left, so right-wingers oppose it. Let's first see whether we can build up trust.'

At the end of 2017, this initiative bore fruit in the Driebergen Declaration, signed by parties such as the nature conservation organization Natuurmonumenten, the Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF) and the Butterfly Foundation, as well as what Kleijn calls some 'unusual suspects': farmers' organization LTO Nederland, Agrifirm and the Rabobank. On that occasion, 18 organizations pledged to work towards a 'richer Netherlands'. At the end of 2018, the people appointed to manage the process under the leadership of Louise Vet, among them Kleijn, presented the broad lines of the Delta Plan for Biodiversity Recovery.

## BOTTOM-UP

This new approach calls for a new mindset,' according to Kleijn. 'More bottom-up. It's important that land users do not see landscape restoration as a burden imposed on them from above. They should be properly recompensed for the nature-friendly management decisions they make.' That is crucial, according to Ben Haarman of farmers' organization LTO Nederland: 'The recovery of biodiversity affects us all. We want to do more to address it and to offer solutions,' says Haarman. 'We initiators emphasize that you need a good business model to start with. Biodiversity comes with a price tag. That needs to be prominently visible in our food supply chain.'

Land users who participate in a biodiversity project will be paid for the progress on biodiversity achieved by their region, the Delta Plan promises. Everybody's contribution will be documented using key performance indica-

tors (KPIs) for biodiversity. This is a system developed by the WWF, the Rabobank and FrieslandCampina dairy company – currently only for dairy farms – for measuring the degree to which the right conditions for biodiversity recovery have been created. In a trial in the province of Drenthe, farms that scored highly had the interest on their loans from the Rabobank lowered by 0.5 per cent per year, as well as getting a higher price for their milk and a bonus from the province.

'As a society, we must start covering the costs that we have hitherto always passed on to the environment and biodiversity,' says Kleijn. 'Farmers are in a tight spot, but so are road authorities. We have let a system grow up in which costs are extremely low. Now that the countryside is getting scarily quiet and bare, we can't expect land users to foot the bill on their own. For just a few cents more per litre of milk, all dairy farmers can switch to nature-inclusive farming,' says Kleijn.

The initiators of the Delta Plan also hope for funding from Dutch and European funds for agricultural nature management and a more sustainable countryside. And there are plans to establish a biodiversity fund, banks can charge lower interest rates on loans to collaborating farms and other businesses, water boards can help by rewarding farmers for cleaner water, and there might be scope for fiscal instruments for incentivizing nature-friendly measures.

## 2.5 MILLION EUROS

Exactly what form this will take remains to be seen. Work is currently going on to formulate a more detailed version of the Delta Plan, which is due to come out this summer. Minister Carola Schouten of Agriculture, Nature and Food has allocated 2.5 million euros to the work of making the plan more hands-on and building



an organization. She has also promised to support research projects. Within the Delta Plan, Kleijn leads the working group on monitoring. Ideas for this are still on the drawing board, but it is likely that a number of groups of species will be used to determine whether biodiversity really does benefit from implemented plans. 'You have to keep your finger on the pulse, of course, but it also works as a bit of a stick,' says Kleijn. 'Are we achieving something or do we need to up our game? Naturally, the financiers want to see results.'

There are certainly still big gaps in our knowledge that need filling. 'We know a lot about what field birds like, for instance, but we still know very little about some other groups of species.'

In order to garner more knowledge, Kleijn has set up a recovery project for wild bees in the Geul valley in South

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Limburg. The insects are starving because flowering plants along verges and the banks of ditches are disappearing or being mown. Kleijn brought together an alliance of 10 parties, from the water supply company and municipalities to an agricultural collective, who are prepared to change their management strategies for the sake of the bees. That entails 'an awful lot of talking', the professor grumbles, but this approach is also very much in the spirit of the new Delta Plan: collaborate to save nature.

'It would be lovely if we could set up a living lab in every province, so as to learn what works and what doesn't together with stakeholders.' Kleijn hopes the focus on bees in South Limburg will inspire other regions. 'If we make the landscape in South Limburg more attractive to bees, it will lead to a better habitat for butterflies, birds and reptiles as well. And once we have got that going, perhaps we can roll out more nature-friendly management and do something for other species such as the hazel dormouse.'

### MOWING VERGES

We haven't got that far yet. From the inventories made by Kleijn's students, it appears that there are five times as many species of bee living on the barren grasslands in the nature reserves along the Geul river as there are in the arable fields and road verges. 'So there is a lot of room for improvement, for example by not mowing the verges on both sides of the road at the same time, so there are always some flowers for bees. But things that may seem like small adjustments to make are not so simple at all in reality.'

One reason for this can be that verge management in municipalities is already planned in multiannual contracts, and must not cost too much. And the machines for mowing and transporting the cuttings cannot negotiate narrow or sunken lanes. There the verges are flail-mown, as a result of which the wild flowers give way to stinging nettles. 'It takes commitment from all 10 parties to come up with new solutions. That is time-consuming, but the nice thing is that we talk through the practicalities with the people involved. I think this is the only way we can achieve anything for nature.' ■

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