

Nature Conservation in the Netherlands

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Introduction

Nature has a special place in the Netherlands. Large or small, nature areas are a treasure trove of species and ecosystems. Home to plants and animals, they are also excellent retreats for people wanting some peace and space and quiet. Our nature areas draw millions of visitors, mostly walkers and cyclists, each year.

But nature offers us more. Forests, for example, supply us with timber for our homes and clean the air that we breathe. Nature is crucial for the survival of plants, animals and people alike and that is why the Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality sets great store by the protection and development of nature. In this pamphlet, we describe how the Ministry sets about achieving this aim.

Numerous activities are undertaken to protect Dutch nature. One very important instrument is the designation of protected nature areas. There are different types of designations. Areas of outstanding natural value from a European perspective are designated Natura 2000 areas. Areas which have a special value primarily for the Netherlands itself are designated as nature reserves. In order to ensure that all these different areas function as a whole, they have been incorporated and linked up in a national ecological network. Finally, the Dutch Government has also designated National Landscapes. These are regional

landscapes with outstanding natural, landscape and recreational values.

Nature conservation policy in the Netherlands distinguishes between the protection of areas, or habitats, and the protection of species (plants and animals). Areas are protected under the 1998 Nature Conservation Act or municipal zoning plans. Zoning plans lay down the use or function of a particular area and thus which activities are permitted there. Species are protected under the Flora and Fauna Act, but there are also specific species protection plans for endangered and Red List species.

In this pamphlet, we explain how each type of conservation instrument helps to preserve nature.

1. Natura 2000

Natura 2000 is the largest nature conservation initiative in Europe. When completed, it will be a coherent, pan-European network of nature areas. All of the Member States of the European Union are helping to realise the network, which is aimed at conserving and restoring biodiversity in the EU. Natura 2000 areas are designated on the basis of the Birds and Habitats Directives. The Dutch part of the Natura 2000 network comprises about 330,000 hectares (on land) and 770,000 hectares (of water, including Wadden Sea, IJsselmeer and Delta).

The Dutch Natura 2000 areas are vital links in the international flyways of many species of migratory birds. Spoonbills, geese and waders all depend heavily on Dutch nature areas to feed, rest and breed. For these and a number of other plant and animal species, the responsibility of protecting them from international extinction lies to an important extent on the Netherlands' shoulders. Another species for which the Netherlands has special responsibility is a subspecies of root vole that occurs only in the Netherlands, in particular in damp to wet vegetations in peat bogs and clayey soil areas. The deterioration of the subspecies in these habitats is alarming. Natura 2000 areas have been designated in the provinces of Friesland (Groote Wielen) and Noord-Holland (Ijperveld) as part of the effort to save this animal from extinction.

The Wadden Sea and the North Sea dunes also have a high natural value

internationally. The Netherlands has fairly large tracts of these types of nature, which are more or less in unspoilt condition. They have also been designated Natura 2000 areas.

Wetlands and the plant and animal species that are associated with them, are protected by the Ramsar Treaty. This is one of the oldest treaties regarding nature. Since 1980, the Netherlands has submitted 44 areas to the list of wetlands of international importance. All Dutch wetlands submitted to the Ramsar agency are also designated as Natura 2000 areas.

How this helps to preserve nature

The concrete objective of the European Union is to stop the decline in biodiversity by 2010. The realisation of Natura 2000 will be important in fulfilling this aim. In the Netherlands, Natura 2000 areas are formally designated by the Minister of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality. The nature values in these areas are then protected by the legislation that applies to these areas as well as a balanced package of management measures. Management measures are practical measures to protect, restore and develop specific nature types and habitats. In this way, our natural heritage is preserved for future generations.



Situation on 1 July 2005

- Blue square: Birds Directive area
- Yellow square: Habitat Directive area
- Green square: both

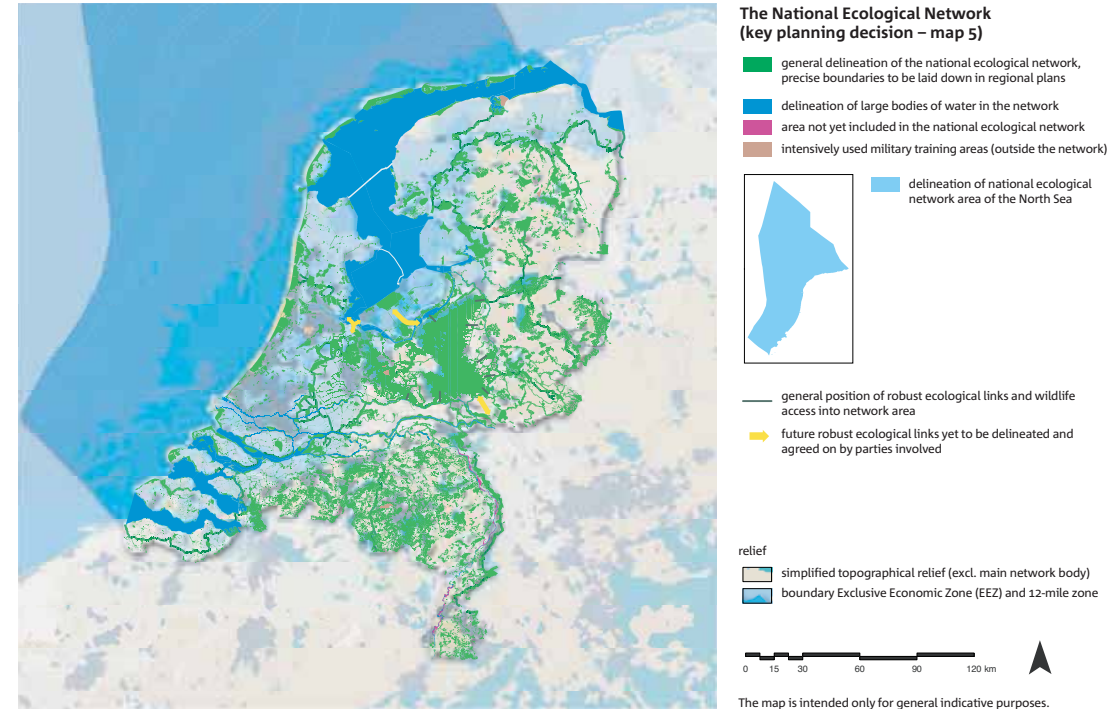
Natura 2000 in the Netherlands

2. The National Ecological Network

In the past, considerable tracts of nature have been sacrificed to the building of new housing estates and infrastructure. In 1990, the minister for Nature introduced the national ecological network as a way of stopping this trend. The concept envisions larger nature areas that are connected in a coherent network spanning the entire country. Many of the Dutch Natura 2000 areas are also part of the national ecological network. The Government's target is to realise all 728,500 hectares of the network by 2018. This is about 20% of the total land area of the Netherlands. In addition to this area, the network will also comprise over six million hectares of waterscape (lakes, rivers, estuaries and the Dutch parts of the North Sea and Wadden Sea).

In order to adequately preserve nature, it is not enough simply to establish protected nature areas. In order for populations to stay healthy and vital, their habitats need to have a viable size. Animals also need to be able to move freely between different (summer and winter) habitats. This is the added value of a national ecological network. It gives species the freedom to disperse when circumstances in one nature area deteriorate, temporarily or structurally (e.g. climate change). The links between nature areas also enhance the exchange of genetic material between different animal populations. This is beneficial for the overall health and robustness of the species.

The national ecological network is made up of longstanding nature areas such as Veluwe and Biesbosch as well as new nature areas. Special attention is given to creating variety in the types of nature in the network (dunes, heathland, marsh, woodland). The nature areas are connected by so-called robust nature links and wildlife corridors. Fauna overpasses or tunnels are constructed to allow animals to cross hard barriers such as roads, railroads and canals. The national ecological network is realised in cooperation with provincial and municipal authorities, nature conservation organisations, civil society organisations, farmers and private parties.



How this helps to preserve nature

The objective of the national ecological network is to preserve, restore and develop important ecosystems in the Netherlands. Nature areas are enlarged and linked up, so that species can move from one habitat to another. In the future, it should be possible for red deer to travel from Oostvaardersplassen via the Veluwe to Germany. The national ecological network not only links up land areas, it also creates a coherent waterscape, connecting the different types of water and wetland on a national and international scale. This is important for the survival of water-dependent species, such as the bittern. Finally, many nature areas in the national ecological network

provide excellent opportunities for nature-oriented recreation. After all, the rich natural diversity provided by the national ecological network is there for us to protect and enjoy.

3. National Parks

The Netherlands has twenty national parks. A national park is a single area comprising at least 1000 hectares. Parks are chosen for their exceptional natural value for the Netherlands. One of the exceptional values of Dwingelerveld National Park, for example, is the size and ecological quality of its wet heathland, which set it apart from others in the Netherlands. Oosterschelde National Park is an impressive tidal area that attracts large numbers of birds of different species who come here to rest and forage. The park also has a rich underwater diversity. All in all, it is a highly dynamic landscape which may well be unique in Europe. With outstanding natural values such as these, it comes as little surprise that nearly all the national parks are integrated in the Natura 2000 and/or national ecological networks.

Our national parks give visitors plenty of opportunity to relax and enjoy peace and quiet, space and natural beauty. There are extensive networks of walking and cycling trails, as well as other recreational facilities like observation huts and information panels. Most parks also have a wheelchair trail. Every national park has at least one visitor information centre, which aims to inform, teach and amuse both young and old. Here, visitors can learn more about nature conservation in practice, the importance of conserving nature and the impact of man on nature. A visitor centre is also a starting point for nature walks and guided excursions.

In many national parks, studies are conducted into park management and design. For example, what is the impact of outdoor recreation on nature, what are the effects of management measures?

In deciding on strategy and policy, the national parks work closely together in the platform Samenwerkingsverband Nationale Parken. The Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality retains responsibility for the functioning of the Dutch system of national parks as a whole.



Learning about the Great Outdoors is fun

How this helps to preserve nature

The national parks represent the best in nature, outdoor recreation facilities and activities in the Netherlands. The combination of natural beauty with recreation and education is a success: many parks get more than one million visitors per year. National parks bridge the gap between nature as an abstract concept and nature as a phenomenon that can be savoured and experienced. The result may be greater appreciation for nature and more support for nature policy.

4. The National Landscapes

The Netherlands has many landscapes with a high cultural-historical, natural and landscape value. A high-quality landscape is an attractive setting for living, working and recreating. In order to protect valuable areas, the Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality, in cooperation with the Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning and Environment, has designated twenty unique or characteristic regions as National Landscape; about 800,000 hectares in all. About three-quarters of this area is countryside. The purpose of this designation is to enable greater care and attention to be given to the preservation, management and strengthening of the landscape and its natural, cultural-historical and recreational values.

National Landscapes do not have the same degree of protection as National Parks. Living and working are important activities in the National Landscapes, and there must continue to be scope for spatial development in the future. The designation of National Landscape is intended to protect the most important landscape qualities. New homes, for example, may only be built for local people. The government also contributes financially to the management of the landscape and to projects that strengthen the specific character of the landscape. Spatial developments in the National Landscapes are closely supervised, to ensure a good balance between ecology, economy, liveability and beauty.

How this helps to preserve nature

The total area of the National Landscapes is roughly the same as the national ecological network. The National Landscapes also contain nature areas, that are linked up by characteristic landscape features such as hedgerows, lanes and streams. This network has a high natural value and perfectly complements the national ecological network. Many plant and animal species, such as meadow birds, depend strongly on man-made landscapes, and that has also been a consideration in designating landscapes.



Heuvelland National Landscape in the province of Limburg

5. Species Protection

Despite the many different types of protected area in the Netherlands, it is still difficult for some plants and animals to survive or maintain a viable population. The Flora and Fauna Act does not provide sufficient protection for these threatened species. Additional measures, such as species protection plans and Red Lists, provide more active protection.

A species protection plan describes concrete actions to improve the habitat and living conditions of a species. Its objective is the recovery and sustainable management of the species or genus in the Netherlands. Species protection plans run for five years and are carried out by the provincial authorities.

Currently, 15 species protection plans are in effect in the Netherlands. Sometimes, they apply to animals that are also protected by other legislation, such as a subspecies of the root vole which is protected under the Natura 2000 framework.

A new species protection approach is currently under development. This approach will have its focus on the habitats of species and groups of species rather than on individuals. On top of this, measures that are to be taken for groups of species can be integrated and made more effective through cooperation with different organisations and integration with other activities and measures in the rural area.

A Red List is a list of species that have become extinct or that are threatened

with extinction in the Netherlands. This assessment is based on frequency of sightings (rare) and/or evidence of a downward trend. There are different degrees of threatened: extinct in the Netherlands, seriously threatened, threatened, vulnerable, sensitive. The lists are updated periodically by the Minister of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality. Red Lists do not have a legal status and species on the list are not automatically protected. In order for a species to be protected, it must be included in the Flora and Fauna Act. There are Red Lists for mammals, birds, reptiles, bees and dragonflies.

How this helps to preserve nature

Concrete measures for the protection of species help ensure the survival of threatened plant and animal species in the Netherlands. One of the goals of nature policy for 2020 is to create favourable conditions for the sustainable conservation of all species and populations that occurred naturally in the Netherlands in 1982. The Red Lists play an important role in drawing attention to positive or negative developments. If the Red List indicates that a species is deteriorating, additional measures can be taken to increase the degree of protection for that species. Species-specific protection thus contributes to biodiversity in the Netherlands.

6. Legislation on Nature

The main laws for nature conservation in the Netherlands are the 1998 Nature Conservation Act and the Flora and Fauna Act. Both can be regarded as the Netherlands' interpretation of the European Birds and Habitats Directives. The 1998 Nature Conservation Act lays down requirements for the preservation of nature areas, while the Flora and Fauna Act focuses specifically on the protection of plant and animal species.

The Nature Conservation Act of 1998

Nature areas in the Netherlands are protected under the Nature Conservation Act of 1998. The Act also lays down the designation of nature areas of outstanding national or international importance as nature reserves and Natura 2000 areas, respectively. The Act also lays down which activities are allowed in protected nature areas and under which conditions. For example, a permit must be obtained for activities that may have a detrimental effect on natural values, such as a campground or construction activities in or near a reserve. The Act also lays down a duty of care for everyone in or dealing with nature areas. Actions which might cause damage should not be undertaken. For example, smoking is not allowed in an area where a fire alert has been called out due to drought.

Flora and Fauna Act

The Flora and Fauna Act lays down protection regimes for certain plant and animal species regardless of whether they occur in nature reserves or not. About

500 species are protected under this Act. In general, the Act prescribes a hands-off policy for these protected animals and plants: it is prohibited to pick or dig up protected plants or to kill, catch or disturb protected animals. The aim of the Flora and Fauna Act is to preserve these plant and animal species which still occur in the wild. All animals and plants are considered to have an intrinsic value, for which people have a responsibility of care. Actions that might reasonably be assumed to cause damage to species or their immediate environment, are essentially prohibited. This also means keeping a dog on a lead outdoors if the owner cannot guarantee that it will not hunt down or injure animals.

Other laws

Next to the 1998 Nature Conservation Act and the Flora and Fauna Act, our natural heritage is also protected by the Estates Act of 1928 and the Forest Act. The purpose of the Estates Act is to prevent country estates from being divided up, thus diminishing their natural beauty. The Forest Act protects woods and other areas with a lot of trees. Its aim is to conserve or even expand our woodlands for the benefit and enjoyment of future generations.

Finally, nature protection can also be realised through spatial planning laws. Municipal zoning plans, for example, must take account of designated nature reserves. The management of the National Landscapes is laid down in the

And finally...

Natura 2000, the national ecological network, the national parks, the National Landscapes, species protection and nature legislation are all important in preserving, restoring and strengthening the nature values in our country. It depends, however, which instrument is best in a particular situation. In one situation, it might be best to protect the area as a whole, while elsewhere it might be more effective to strictly protect specific plant and animal species.

A sustainable conservation of valuable nature areas and landscapes is only achieved when government incorporates nature and landscape in its other policies, for example on rural development, spatial planning and the environment. Clean water and good environmental conditions, for example, are essential for the conservation or restoration of nature. Farmers can also contribute to nature development by participating in agri-environment schemes. All these different nature-oriented measures provide a sound foundation for the protection and further development of nature in the Netherlands.

It is necessary to lay down rules in order to protect nature, but this does not mean that people should be banned from nature areas. On the contrary, the public has access to Dutch nature areas wherever possible. Because nature is for people, too. It is where we find peace and quiet, a sense of space and natural beauty.

For more information

For more information about nature conservation and nature laws in the Netherlands, go to www.minlnv.nl, the website of the Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality. For more information about the Dutch National Parks, go to www.nationaalpark.nl.

This is a publication of the

Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality
P.O. Box 20401
2500 EK The Hague, the Netherlands

Text: Department of Nature
Photography: Kina (except cover photograph by Ronald van Wijk)
Production: Ministry Publications Office
Translation: Ministry Translation Office
Design: Trossen Loso Rotterdam
Printed by: Zwaan Printmedia

October 2005

More information:
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