

Farming with field

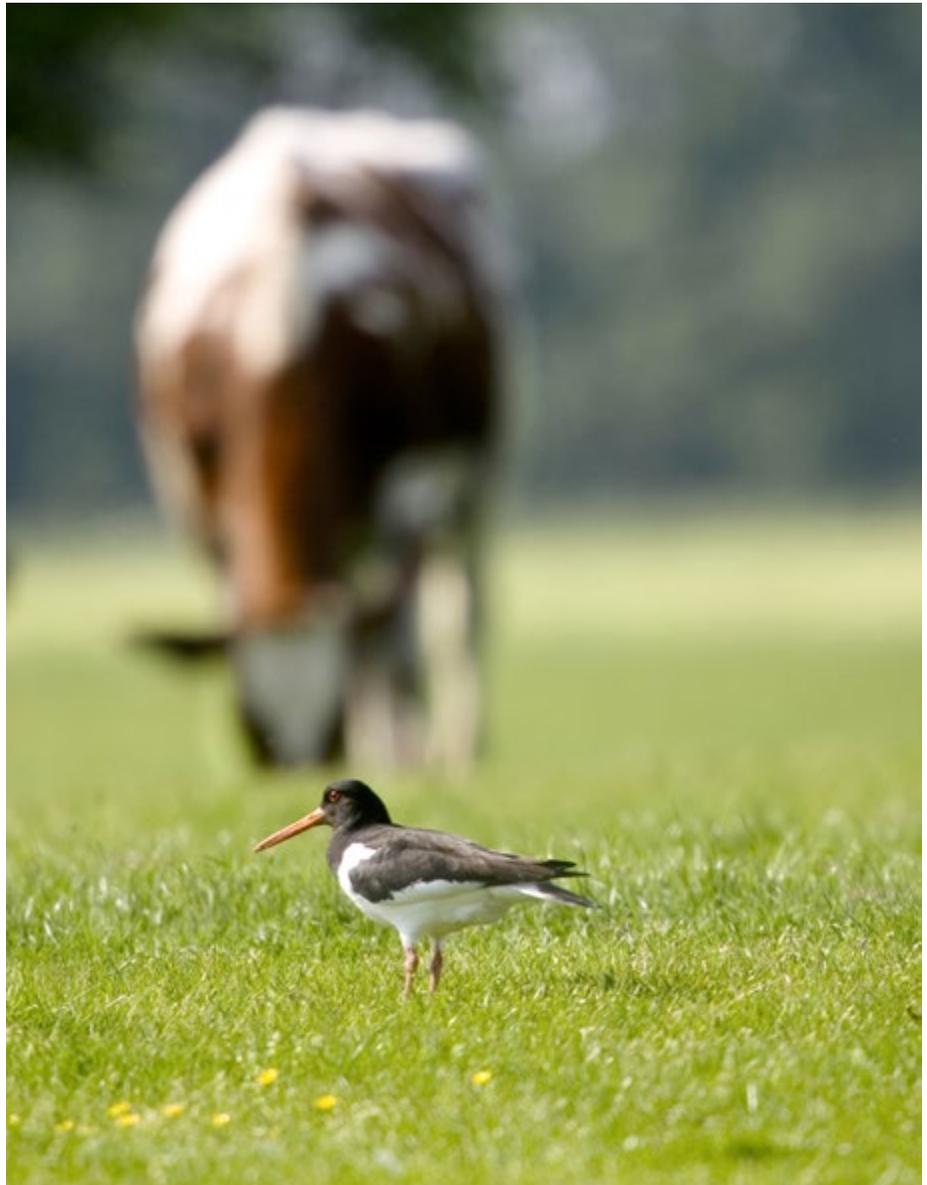
The editors of a new Dutch book about agrarian nature management in the Netherlands don't mince their words: hardly any of the goals set since 1975 have been achieved. But that does not mean you have to throw out the baby with the bathwater. The book also points to hopeful signs of growing public commitment.

TEXT RIK NIJLAND PHOTO THEO TANGELDER

Agrarian nature management has come in for a barrage of criticism in recent years. Although for 40 years now large sums of money – 60 million per year at the last count – have been channelled to farmers to be spent on saving nature, there is little sign of the desired positive impact on nature on farmland. Field bird populations declined rapidly in this period, rural biodiversity decreased and the landscape became less varied. Both its friends and its enemies deplored the system's unwieldy regulations and bureaucratic merry-go-round, which swallowed up over 40 percent of the funding before a single skylark could benefit from it.

SOBERING PICTURE

The authors of the new book *Agrarisch Natuurbeheer in Nederland* paint a sobering picture of the impact of nature-oriented farm management. Yet it has not been doom and gloom all the way: there are now meadows where black-tailed godwit chicks thrive, field verges full of flowers and farmers who do cherish the Montagu's harriers that breed in their grain fields. More than 40 researchers, including 20 from Wageningen University & Research, describe in the lavishly illustrated book how this policy developed in the context of a fast-changing agricultural sector. They also offer a broad overview of the ecological aspects of agrarian nature management: what works and what doesn't, for field and



birds

meadow birds for instance. And they discuss what should be done about all the geese in the Netherlands – quiet zones for overwintering birds and a big reduction in the number of geese breeding here – and appeal for more attention to ditches and their banks, where the authors feel much can be gained in terms of flora and fauna. The book also pays attention to economic and social aspects of the topic: What motivates farmers to embrace the nature on their land? Money of course, but also their self-image and the appreciation of their peers.

STANDARD REFERENCE WORK

The book rounds off the period of eight years during which Geert de Snoo held the endowed chair in Agricultural Nature and Landscape Management at Wageningen. When he left in 2012, the idea came up of collating all the findings and knowledge in the field of agrarian nature management in a standard reference work, explains Dick Melman of Wageningen Environmental Research (formerly Alterra). Melman was in the core team that compiled the material, led by De Snoo, now professor of Conservation Biology in Leiden. Their objective was to provide a basis for courses for university students on both theoretical and applied degree programmes as well as to offer inspiration for policymakers, water boards, nature organizations and the farmers' collectives which took over agrarian nature management as of 1 January.

NEW SYSTEM

Agrarisch natuurbeheer in Nederland has come out at an interesting moment. Trials started six months ago of an adjusted set of regulations which should give new impetus to the movement. In order to cut overhead costs the government – the provincial authorities these days – will no longer make contracts with more than 7000 individual farmers but

with 39 farmers' collectives. Control has changed hands too. Farmers used to get to participate in a system thought up by the government. It was not their problem if it was not effective. This top-down approach caused a lot of irritation. In the new system the collectives get to draw up their own plans, on the assumption that this will generate more commitment among the farmers. If the plans make ecological sense, the collectives will get funding to implement them. The authors expect this to lead to more tailor-made approaches but they also express a fear that central control within the collectives will become a new source of irritation among the farmers.

KEY REGIONS

The new system also responds to a wish long cherished by nature conservationists. The money, for field birds for example, will be spent in key areas where the chances of recovery are strong. Formerly it also went to farms in areas where there were hardly any ruffs, godwits or redshanks left. But even with this new system in place, it is touch and go now for a bird like the black-tailed godwit, as calculations in the book show. Currently there are more than 35,000 pairs brooding in the Netherlands, but that number is going down by 5 to 7 percent per year in spite of all the efforts being made to prevent this. Only in the unlikely event of farmers being able to create an optimal biotope for this bird in the new key areas will 20,000 pairs survive.

PUBLIC COMMITMENT

These kinds of conservation measures require funding. The gap between nature-oriented farm management and conventional farming is growing, which means the level of compensation per hectare needs to go up to motivate farmers. This will mean less nature even if the budget remains the same – which is not guaranteed under future cabinets.



PHOTO HOLLANDESE HOOGTE

The authors of the book imply that their hopes are fixed on increased levels of public commitment to this cause. From consumers, for example, who are willing to pay a higher price for milk if they know that by doing so they are saving godwit chicks from the combine harvesters. And from recreational and catering businesses which help fund a natural countryside, or water companies which contribute to clean ditches. Whether this willingness really exists will be a decisive factor in whether the vision of Fred Wouters, director of the Dutch society for the protection of birds *Vogelbescherming*, becomes a reality: 'The knowledge in this book can contribute to ecologically sustainable agriculture with which farmers earn a decent living while using sophisticated agrarian nature management to make sure that we have skylarks singing again.' ■



**Agrarisch Natuurbeheer
in Nederland**

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