

# Nature at heart?

**Dutch nature conservation policy has been turned upside down. Former secretary of state Henk Bleker was the personification of this change for a while, after he announced a two-thirds cut in the budget for nature management. He met with little public opposition – and according to some, that is because of a decline in public support for nature and policy related to it. And the blame for that is laid at the feet of nature conservationists themselves, who are accused of undermining their support base by not communicating adequately with the public and only talking about guidelines and species. Five responses to this accusation: have nature conservationists undermined their own public support?**

TEXT ARNO VAN 'T HOOG PHOTOGRAPHY HARMEN DE JONG



Nature conservation: heath restoration near Amersfoort.



### MATTHIJS SCHOUTEN

adviser and philosopher at Staatsbosbeheer (the State Forest Service) and professor of Restoration Ecology at Wageningen University, part of Wageningen UR:

'If people are not acknowledged, they will be slower to accept it'



I don't believe there is less support for nature. It is as important as ever, as various studies show, and that goes for young people too. But when it comes to the distance from the public, I do agree with the allegation. Many nature conservationists are just like medical professionals – they are more preoccupied with their profession than with communicating about what it involves. Whereas what you want from a surgeon is that he is very expert but can also explain what he is doing clearly. Often there are no problems if the local community is involved in a project from the word go. If people are ignored beforehand, especially, they will be slower to accept it. In the past, we at Staatsbosbeheer have not addressed that need properly.

'But it is not right that ecologists should get all the blame for this. The way we have been going about nature conservation in the last 20 years is a consequence of international treaties such as Natura 2000, and the wish to restore badly damaged natural features and areas. People wanted to do that as efficiently as possible and that makes targeting clearly stated habitats and species not a bad idea. A noble aim, in fact.

'We have legislation and treaties which are supposed to shape our nature management. That obligation remains. But we are going to place more emphasis on participation and citizen involvement. For Staatsbosbeheer staff, that means they will have to do more than just manage nature areas. They will have to enter into dialogue with the local community.' >

## RAOUL BEUNEN

assistant professor in the Land Use Planning chair group at Wageningen University; at the end of 2012 he published work on the social dynamics underlying the criticism of nature policy

‘The implementation of European treaties has had a negative impact on the image’



**T**oo simple a link gets suggested between what ecologists do, nature policy and public support. There are many more developments that play a role here. Public support is a tricky concept and the sense that support is dwindling has to do with the image that is generated: critics get heard more in times of political and social change, whereas not everyone is so critical, by a long way.

The implementation of European treaties such as the Bird and Habitat Directives has had a negative impact on Dutch nature policy. Initially, that was because of legal battles related to plans for roads and business estates. According to the critics, it was all very tricky, problematic and slow. And at some point more and more people started thinking and acting that way. Then government bodies started living down to their reputation by asking for more research and advice, fearful as they were of further legal proceedings. And then procedures really did move slowly; it is partly a self-fulfilling prophecy. ‘At the same time, the image people have that everything ground to a halt is not true. Just look at the facts: 70 to 80 percent of the construction projects went right ahead. Because of the focus on legal matters, the possibility of a concerted search for local solutions is now longer in the picture. The public criticism has made renewed discussion possible on the nature policy. Nature policymakers had created a little world of their own in which criticism was seen as a failure to understand. Now a lot more people are getting the chance to contribute their views.’

## HARRIE VAN DER HAGEN

ecologist with co-responsibility for nature development at dune water company Dunea; doing a PhD on dune vegetation with the Nature Management chair group at Wageningen University

‘You can get people on board by showing them what is growing’

**I**f you ask me, public support for nature has not diminished at all. At Dunea we have witnessed discussions about projects where we remove dune vegetation in order to get loose sand back. Some of the public say: nice that we can see the bare tops of the dune again. And others say: this is my area; I don’t want this intervention at all.

‘I know from experience that people can relate more to ponds, swamps and forest than to dune grasslands with rare, but tiny, plants. Those grasslands – grey dunes – take 20 to 40 years to develop, but people don’t find them as awe-inspiring as a tree of the same age.

‘Yet on field trips I notice that you can get people on board by showing them what is growing – although there are always some opponents who stick stoically to their guns. There is more to telling stories about this sort of project than just putting across the facts. We have done too little of this in the past. ‘The Netherlands has the largest continuous stretch of dunes in Europe. In terms of grey dunes, we have a special responsibility to conserve that surface area and extend it. There is no way we can just ignore that. But that doesn’t mean we have to go for top scores everywhere. We take into account the area, the water supply, leisure facilities and cultural history. We always look for a compromise, without losing sight of the great importance of nature.’





### ARJEN BUIJS

senior researcher at Wageningen University and Alterra Wageningen UR; at the end of 2012 he published a report on support for nature called *Draagvlak in de energieke samenleving*

‘Emotions are a sign of involvement’

**I**n principle I agree with the suggestion that the support base for nature has diminished. It may be a bit of a generalization because there is a very big group of people who still stand behind the nature policy. It is a good thing Bleker didn’t stay in office too long, because his policy did a lot of damage, but his term in office did put the cat among the pigeons. That opened up the discussion about nature conservation and how people experience nature. Now more points of view can get a look-in, not just the traditional view that is based on ecological knowledge and the promotion of biodiversity, but pays too little attention to the way nature is experienced by local communities.

‘There was too much of a tendency in nature conservation circles to counter criticism and the feelings expressed by local people with ecological arguments. As a consequence, there was not enough differentiation in the discussion: it seemed as though a higher value was always placed on nature than on the local people’s experience. Ecologists and nature conservationists have therefore gradually made themselves vulnerable to criticism from the public and the business world. State secretary Bleker made eager use of that.

‘I think nature organizations should have realized better that not all natural features are of equal ecological significance. For example, felling exotic American oaks in an area does not constitute a big ecological gain, while it does have a massive impact on the experience of hikers. So in that case, make a conscious choice to leave the trees alone. Let us not forget that nature is not just a collective good, but also a local common good. So you should always weigh up the interests of society as a whole against the interests of the local community.

‘Emotions are too often seen as a negative thing in public discussions about nature. But they are a sign of involvement. Many ecologists have forgotten that they themselves once chose their profession on the basis of emotional commitment.’

### JAAP DIRKMAAT

chair of nature conservation organizations Stichting Das & Boom and The Association of Dutch cultivated landscapes

‘I don’t see much use in a support base’



**M**y main thought is: there we go again. A strange *idée fixe* has taken hold of people: defending nature in court because the Netherlands doesn’t stick to international

treaties is seen as bad for the support base. So we mustn’t do it. The Netherlands often takes the lead in drawing up and signing international treaties. But when the time came to translate European nature conservation treaties into laws, that was a bridge too far: that would bring the Netherlands to a standstill, people claimed.

‘The Rutte cabinet [the previous Dutch government until last summer] saw an opportunity to slash the nature budget. But Bleker’s standpoints were definitely not a reflection of public opinion. Yet many nature conservationists were so shocked that they started declaring in panic-stricken tones that the Dutch public had become alienated from nature. ‘People tend to forget that nature conservation is not a hobby, like cultural or sporting activities. Nature is the basis for human life and the only resource for our economy. The cuts that are coming now will speed up the extinction of species in the Netherlands because nature management will stop. Without mowing and digging over the soil, you will lose the orchid and the adder.

‘I don’t see much use in a support base. Some people don’t like new roads, but those roads will come anyway. Some people may have a preference for pink roads with a flowery pattern on them, but those roads are not going to be made. So is the Netherlands going to start worrying about the support base for asphalt? Decisions about the creation of infrastructure and the kind of asphalt to use are taken by specialists, by and large. So why, in the case of nature conservation – the very ground of our being – should we be required to listen to everyone’s individual wishes?’ ■