



Is the Netherlands simply too small for big game?

Every winter when some of the wild cattle, horses and red deer in the Oostvaardersplassen nature reserve starve to death, a heated debate blows up again in the Netherlands: should the policy of letting nature run its course be abandoned? Hunting is another controversial topic. So is the Netherlands really just too small for large game?

TEXTST RIK NIJLAND PHOTOGRAPHY GUY ACKERMANS ILLUSTRATION IEN VAN LAANEN

The Netherlands is too big not to have any large mammals at all', says Ron Ydenberg, endowed professor of Fauna Management at Wageningen University, part of Wageningen UR. 'The answer to all the dilemmas is surely not just to ban these animals? No right-minded Dutch person would want to have that on their conscience. Precisely because this country is so densely populated, it really needs its nature; having animals around us is necessary for our wellbeing.' Ydenberg is director of the Centre for Wildlife Ecology at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, Canada.

Geert Groot Bruinderink takes an equally firm stance. 'Do away with them? Oh no! From the ecological point of view we still lack a couple of species of large mammals, actually', asserts the ecologist, who works for the Mammal Society and Alterra, part of Wageningen UR. 'In the riverine nature areas, for example, we do not have any eland, and in the higher forested areas we lack the European bison. Just because there is a debate about management issues is no reason to stop the whole project. Sure, there is discussion, and we take each other to court. Well that's fine, there is life in the issue and discussion helps get things clear-

er, although I would prefer it if this one were less emotional and less driven by the political nonsense of the day. But, whether we like it or not, this discussion gives us frontrunner status in the world. People in other countries are watching with interest to see how we resolve these issues.' Wouter Helmer, director of ARK Nature Development and honorary associate professor at Van Hall Larenstein University of Applied Sciences, part of Wageningen UR, finds all the discussions about the management of large mammals fascinating too. 'It is clear that we are really alienated from our green roots. Nature is no longer some- >

thing we feel part of but has become a kind of décor, a leisure landscape for recreation or water storage. And this alienation brings with it a new kind of attitude to animals: we start to see them more and more as people. This ‘animal-friendliness’ gives us a different take on hunting or on the policy in the Oostvaardersplassen than we used to have. This is a temporary outlook, I expect, and will change into a more realistic one: where there is birth, there is death; it is as simple as that.

Helmer does not subscribe to the view that the Netherlands is too small. ‘That is contradicted by the facts: urbanization is actually leaving more space for large mammals, even now that the cabinet has shelved the ecological main structure. Throughout Europe the countryside is emptying, in the Netherlands as elsewhere. That creates new opportunities, even for species such as lynxes and wolves. In the Netherlands you can



RON YDENBERG,
endowed professor of
Fauna Management at
Wageningen University

‘Because this country is so densely populated, it really needs nature’

see that red deer and especially wild boar are going their own way. Boar are reaching the centre of Nijmegen, whereas officially they are only allowed to inhabit the Veluwe and the Meinweg. Elsewhere they are supposed to be shot to keep the population at zero. If you ask me, it is in everyone’s interests to abandon this policy. If a farmer near Nijmegen suffers damage to his land from rooting boar, he cannot get any compensation because officially the animal is not found in the area.’

Albert Schimmelpenninck – who, as estate manager with the Twickel foundation, manages 6,500 hectares of nature and farmland – does want to keep to the zero population. ‘I think it’s a beautiful sight, a red deer or a wild boar. But if I look at the consequences for the Veluwe, with its grids and the limits on other interests such as traffic safety and agriculture – we’ve got land up there, near Dieren, too – it seems to be very difficult to arrive at a good policy. If our big neighbour, the nature organization Natuurmonumenten, doesn’t make sure that the red deer and boar populations stay within limits, we’ll end up with situations like those in the Oostvaardersplassen. Or visitors will start feeding the animals. Surely we don’t want that? Anyway, the large game populations are putting our forests under pressure. In fact young saplings just don’t stand a chance any more. When I see how it goes there, I don’t have much faith left in the chances of our making good arrangements in areas where farming interests are much bigger, or where there is more traffic’, says the estate manager.

Deep in their hearts, many private land-owners love seeing the occasional stag on their land, says Schimmelpenninck. ‘One or two stags or boar are not a problem, but what the Federation of Private Landowners and farmer organizations are afraid of is



GEERT GROOT-BRUIINDERINK,
ecologist with the Mammal Society
and Alterra, part of Wageningen UR

‘From the ecological point of view we still lack a couple of species of large mammal’

that we won’t be able to control the populations. Our system in the Netherlands is that the government has to issue culling licences, to which anyone can raise objections. This has placed heavy limitations on hunting, which has become a pawn in a political game. So a zero population policy has become the only option. The extreme protection of game in the Netherlands is shooting itself in the foot. There are big areas with limited populations of red deer and wild boar. This is possible if you can manage them adequately.’

Canadian Ron Ydenberg proposes a kind of polder model of collaboration, based on the way the Dutch managed the development of reclaimed land in the 20th century. ‘We need to tackle and solve the problems on the basis of scientific research and in consultation with all the stakeholders. And the Dutch have to relearn how to deal with large animals. Just as in the suburbs of Vancouver, residents had to learn to keep



their garbage cans under lock and key to prevent bear problems. Sometimes small adjustments are enough. I have understood that collisions with game in the Netherlands occur at certain specific locations, so putting up a couple of fences there would probably suffice.'

At the moment, Ydenberg thinks that



WOUTER HELMER,
director of ARK Nature Development
and honorary associate professor at
Van Hall Larenstein University of
Applied Sciences, part of
Wageningen UR

'Urbanization is leaving space for large mammals'

hunting is a necessary measure for keeping numbers of large mammals under control. 'But in principle the aim should be the restoration of complete ecosystems, including top predators which cream off populations. Yellowstone is a good example of that. Until the reintroduction of the wolf in the mid-1990s, the park was totally overgrazed. Since then, the wapiti population has shrunk by 40 percent, and various other animals have made a comeback, such as the beaver. This is because there are young trees to gnaw on again.' So is that an option for the Netherlands? 'Perhaps; we should research it. Lynx are not big enough to tackle an ox or a red deer, but wolves may be.' Wouter Helmer cannot wait for the first wolf to reach the Netherlands from Germany. He thinks that the newcomer will be a huge success. 'In Yellowstone, the number of tourists shot up by thousands per year when the wolf came back. Make no mistake about it, large wild mammals do damage, but the excursions they prompt also generate profits into the millions through tourism and catering. The establishment of Konik horses and wild cattle in the Millingerwaard nature area led to a spectacular rise in visitor numbers, from a couple of hundred to 200,000 per year', says Helmer. 'We all like to see cows in the meadows, but that is less and less compatible with efficient agricultural business management. What could be lovelier than to see their place being taken by large, wild mammals?'

Groot Bruinderink is not so keen on the idea of wolves and lynxes controlling populations of roe deer, boar and red deer. 'I think hunting is the most realistic option. There is some talk of rounding them up and gassing, slaughtering or electrocuting them, but I am not in favour of that.'

The ecologist from Alterra and the Mammal Society observes that there is a lot of resist-



ALBERT SCHIMMELPENNINCK,
estate manager with the Twickel
foundation

'The extreme protection of game in the Netherlands is shooting itself in the foot'

ance to letting go of the zero population policy. Does fear of collisions on the roads play a role in this? 'I have approached the Dutch road safety organization to suggest research on collisions with wild animals, but they assured me it was not an issue. No, the resistance is mainly from the agricultural sector. At the moment there is no scope even for an experiment, to see for example what happens if these animals come into a new area, how much damage is really done, how many collisions there are, etcetera. The farmers feel threatened, not just because of the potential damage (boar eat anything) but also because of limitations for farm management and because they fear the spreading of animal diseases such as swine fever and foot and mouth disease. To be honest I don't think farming interests can always be allowed to prevail, but then someone must take responsibility for ensuring that other parties are very well aware of the fact that farmers' livelihoods are at stake.' ■