

LIESBETH BAKKER:

# ‘Nature is perfectly capable of taking care of itself’

**Dutch nature policy is too focussed on maintaining the status quo, says professor of Rewilding Ecology Liesbeth Bakker. ‘There has to be room for change. That could be very beneficial in many areas.’**

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‘I think it’s a great plan to plant climate forests,’ says Liesbeth Bakker, who was appointed Special Professor of Rewilding Ecology at Wageningen in February. ‘But the way we do it says a lot about how we treat nature. We decide which tree species we think suitable for the location and we go ahead and plant them. That makes me think: Keep off it, let it go, leave it to nature. It might take a little longer before you’ve got the forest you want, but you will get all kinds of interesting intermediate phases, with habitats that many species like to make use of. This is a golden opportunity to make the Netherlands a little bit more natural.’

Bakker’s new chair, the first in Europe (and probably in the world) that focusses on rewilding, is funded by the Netherlands Institute of Ecology and Rewilding Europe,

an organization that targets large-scale nature development in Europe.

*The word ‘rewilding’ usually conjures up images of wild cattle and horses in nature areas.*

‘That is often what it is in practice, but its meaning is far broader. Rewilding aims at making room for natural processes, including abiotic ones, such as flooding, water level changes or drift sand. Then there is also the biotic side that you are referring to, “trophic rewilding”, which brings back important missing links in the food web. Sometimes that means predators, but in the Netherlands it often means large grazers. Since indigenous wild cattle and horses are extinct, this role is taken by Scottish Highland cattle, Galloway cattle, Heck cattle, aurochs,





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Konik horses and nowadays the European bison too.

‘The term rewilding came over from the US about 20 years ago, but we’ve been at it for 40 years in the Netherlands. Including in the Veluwezoom National Park in the early 1980s. But there was also Plan Ooievaar, a project that combined clay extraction with nature development in the water meadows of the major Dutch rivers. At locations such as the Blauwe Kamer nature reserve near Wageningen, the summer dyke was breached and Koniks and Galloways were introduced to restore the riverine landscape and its dynamics.’

*With the aim of bringing back pristine nature?*

‘What we set in motion will definitely not be pristine nature. The fact is that the starting point in the delta is a landscape featuring dykes and dams, so it is dominated by humans. Nature should be given free rein wherever possible, rewilders believe, but of course we can never recreate an unspoiled wilderness in Europe anymore. The point is a change of attitude.

‘Dutch nature policy has historically been dominated by the idea that humans are essential as managers if biodiversity is to be maintained. But of course, that biodiversity was there long before human beings put their stamp on it. And even now, nature can still take care of itself very well. What is lacking is the space to do so.’

*Have we got that space in the overcrowded Dutch delta?*

‘The larger an area and the less that has been done to it by humans, the more promising the starting point. A small area often doesn’t have enough heterogeneity to accommodate much biodiversity, but even in the Netherlands opportunities arise to give natural processes a chance to varying degrees. On former agricultural land, for example. But it’s also a matter of changing our attitude.’ >

## 'Heather plants really don't disappear if the heath gets overgrown'

### *Can you give an example?*

'At the moment, the Markermeer lake is actually just a bathtub surrounded by dykes. Fishers complain that the fish stocks have collapsed. Our research on and around the Markermeer clearly shows how incredibly important shallows and wet zones along the shore are for birds and for breeding and young fish. Bringing back natural land-water transition zones such as marshy banks and inundated grasslands is crucial to how well the lake functions. I see that as rewilding too. How to put that into practice and what conditions apply will be one of the main topics of my research.'

*Isn't nature management a job for people too, in practice? Heathland has to be kept clear, pools have to be deepened for amphibians? Isn't it better if we maintain nature ourselves?*

'What is better? Of course, we can maintain fantastic vegetation and keep animals happy, but those species had a place in the landscape before we started uprooting trees or deepening pools. Heather plants really don't disappear if the heath gets overgrown: heather seeds stay viable for more than 100 years. In an area that we leave to nature, they will reappear at some point, maybe when an open space is formed. Even if it's not on the same scale as a large heath.'

### *So no more purple moorland?*

'I love the sight of it too, but nature management is too focussed on maintaining the status quo: moorland on the left, woods on the right, and it must never change. That's not how nature works; nature is dynamic. There has to be room for change. In times of climate change especially, nature should be given the chance to adapt. Our management is all about trying to stop change. 'If deer graze on newly planted trees or wild boar make a mess, we say there are too many deer or boar and we must shoot them to protect the forest. And at the same time, we uproot trees on the heath to prevent it from getting overgrown. A lot of animal species like a half-open landscape with a mix of copses and open land. That is a rarity in our static nature.'

'In the Onlanden, a water storage area of 2500 hectares with large grazers in Groningen province, there is a half-open landscape like that on some higher ground. There are now 20 pairs of whinchats brooding there. They are a rare bird that hardly ever finds a suitable habitat in the Netherlands. Through rewilding you get more variety, which benefits species like that.'

### *And does biodiversity as a whole benefit?*

'Everyone sees the spectacular results, such as the return of iconic species like the sea eagle and the fish eagle, but it is hard to give a simple answer. There are also places where large grazers have wreaked havoc with the habitat of a rare plant. 'An important motive for me is: create more clarity. Most of the literature about rewilding consists of opinion papers, and there are very few solid studies that delve into the results: what happens if I do this or that? And the Dutch contribution to the literature is negligible, even though we are pioneers of rewilding. There is a lot of data on monitoring and from grazing experiments. Nature managers and scientists need to join forces to make better use of those data. Then we can show, at home and abroad, what we have achieved in the Netherlands.'

### **LIESBETH BAKKER**

Liesbeth Bakker (47) studied Biology at Groningen University and got her PhD in 2003 in Wageningen on the impact of cattle, rabbits and field mice on vegetation. She is currently working as lead researcher in the Aquatic Ecology department at the Netherlands Institute for Ecology (NIOO-KNAW). She leads a joint research project by several universities on the developing food web on and around the new artificial islands called the Marker Wadden. Bakker was appointed Special Professor of Rewilding Ecology at Wageningen in February. This chair is funded by the NIOO and Rewilding Europe, an organization that targets large-scale nature development in Europe.



*Is there still a place for classic Wageningen-style nature management?*

‘Grazing research has been done in Wageningen for a long time, and the results of that are very applicable in rewilding. And there is a lot of experience with the ecology of large herbivores on the African savannas. In that sense, this is very compatible with Wageningen. But that doesn’t rule out other forms of nature management. The biodiversity problem is big enough for us all to have a role.

‘In these times of surplus nitrogen, nature managers who work themselves into the ground to save threatened species are the superheroes of the day. And I’m not suggesting putting a herd of Scottish Highland cattle in grassland that is a little floral gem amidst farmland, but there are plenty of areas of the Netherlands that are not little gems, and a lot can be done there.

‘I see rewilding as a different approach to making our degraded landscape more beautiful. We shall need to totally rethink both our water management and our agriculture in the future, and that means rethinking our

## ‘Rewilding is an action plan for making the landscape wilder and more natural’

land use too. There are great opportunities there for more nature inclusivity.’

*Is there public support for that? The Oostvaardersplassen have been controversial for years. Last winter, activists threw bales of hay over the fence to feed starving large grazers.*

‘To me, the Oostvaardersplassen are not the best example of rewilding. The large grazers there are not managed, so their numbers have got out of hand and the amount of food available is a limiting factor. A different approach is taken elsewhere in the Netherlands, in which people limit the number of animals through herd

management. The reason for that is that the ecosystem is incomplete. Apart from a handful of wolves, there are no predators here who affect the behaviour of the large grazers and regulate their numbers. So as long as there’s a lack of predators, it’s an option for humans to do the regulating. ‘Rewilding is an action plan for making the landscape wilder and more natural. The question should always be: what steps can I take, given the physical and social context? If there is no popular support for letting the large grazers starve before our eyes, that’s where the line is drawn now.’ ■

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