

Making a romantic dream come true

A YEAR IN THE WILD

To strengthen their bond with nature, Forest and Nature Conservation lecturer Koen Arts and his wife Gina slept outdoors in a tepee for a year. He describes their experiment in his book *Wild Jaar* (Wild Year).



Text Roelof Kleis

Koen Arts grew up in the Brabant countryside and knew from an early age that he wanted to do 'something to do with forests and nature' when he grew up. As it turned out, he studied Forest and Nature Conservation at Wageningen, and he's been working here since 2015. But as his career progressed, his bond with nature gradually weakened. Realizing this let him to a radical remedy: a 'wild year'. Sleeping outdoors for a year and spending at least half his time outdoors too.

Wasn't your wild year primarily an attempt to go back to being that little boy who wanted to be a forester?

'Yes, I think it was. It was based on a strong romantic longing for an experience of nature, there's no denying that. And that longing gets stronger for me if I'm indoors a lot. I spend 95 per cent of my working hours at my laptop. A lot of our students are fired with enthusiasm for nature conservation and long to do something good for the world. That's how I started out too. And by now I was main-

ly just talking about nature. That was a major motivation for the experiment.'

Your definition of wildness is the uncontrollable. Was your wild year really so wild?

'In many ways it was. By sleeping out of doors you shift your boundaries. Take the cold: being cold colours your experience of nature. As soon as you're cold you can't enjoy yourself anymore. You're preoccupied with your body. If you spend a lot of time out of doors it confronts you with the limitations of your own body. The first thing you need is warmth. And that means fire.'

Did you rediscover fire?

'Yes. When we think of nature we think of biodiversity, trees and forests. But fire is part of nature too. Fire is essential. If you live outdoors, you're busy with fires a lot of the time. Collecting wood, splitting it and making your own firelighters. Fire structures your evenings. What's more, fire changes a dark cold place into a home and provides a psychological boost. It warms you up and makes you

feel safe, and you can't stop looking at it. If you have a fire you don't need Netflix.'

But surely you don't have to go into the woods to experience that wildness?

'No, you can do it in your own back garden. You'll hear an owl there at night too, oystercatchers will fly by or frogs will cross your path. That is the hopeful message of this experiment. You can do it anywhere, even in the city, by sleeping on your balcony, for instance, or opening the windows wide. Another aim of the experiment was to find wildness in

'BY NOW I WAS MAINLY JUST TALKING ABOUT NATURE'



'Comfort ends up leading to routine, laziness and dullness.' Photo Otto Kalkhoven

a country that doesn't have any wilderness. How do you go about looking for that? Which buttons do you have to press? That is exactly why we camped not just in the wild on the Veluwe plateau but also in our back garden and various interesting, hybrid places where nature and culture come together.'

So you don't really need a wilderness for a wild year. What do you need?

'You need to want to push your bound-

aries. You need to approach the nature around you in a slightly different way. In the Netherlands we know exactly where the nature is. We put fences around it and put up signs with all kinds of rules that apply there. That is the kind of nature where we take a walk on a Sunday. The experience of nature you get there is very much in a strait-jacket. To get a different experience, you need to find access to nature in a different way. At dusk, for example, or at night.'

New course

Students will soon be able to take a course on 'going wild' with Koen Arts. He is currently setting up a course called Anthropology of Basic Nature Skills, combining theory and practice. 'The idea is to go into the woods with students and use the experience as the basis for reflecting on the anthropological significance of fire, sleeping outdoors, and other nature-related skills. I want to link this up with transformative learning. I think that's going to become much more important in the next 10 years. That cross-fertilization between environment and learning worked very well for us. Being outside made me more creative and more productive. It would be interesting to do research on that. Are students more productive if they study outside as well? Do they get a better command of the material?'

In your book you propose abandoning the strict distinction between culture and nature. What do you mean by that?

'That distinction runs through the entire history of nature conservation. Nature versus culture sounds harmless enough but it isn't. It's a very bloody distinction, actually. The first national parks in America in the 18th century were established at the expense of the indigenous communities. Thousands of people were evicted from the parks because the idea was that nature had to be empty. We've still got that dualism.'

