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Environmental Values

Theodoor Marini Lam, Timothy; Arts, K.A.J.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/09632719241289505>

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Imagining rural landscapes: Making sense of a contemporary landscape identity complex in the Netherlands

Timothy Theodoor Marini Lam

Forest and Nature Conservation Policy Group, Wageningen University,
Wageningen, The Netherlands

Koen Arts 

Forest and Nature Conservation Policy Group, Wageningen University,
Wageningen, The Netherlands

Abstract

Periods of accelerated societal change in European history have disrupted gradual alteration in the landscape, creating breaks with the past. This has led to, what we refer to as, the contemporary landscape identity complex in the Netherlands. Composed of dissonant narratives surrounding the landscape that play out on the societal level, the contemporary landscape identity complex may create tensions that can obstruct conservation efforts. In this article, we map out this complex. Three narrative clusters, distilled from literature and supplemented by interviews, aid in understanding the tension regarding the future of the Dutch contemporary rural landscape, namely: 'the utilitarian narrative', 'the romantic narrative', and 'the eco-scientific narrative'. The contemporary landscape identity complex is fed by these narratives, specifically through how rural landscapes are *imagined* and *discussed*, as opposed to how they are *lived* and *acted* upon. The way such narratives play out in practice is further investigated through a case study on the 'Bommelerwaard', an area in the south-central of the Netherlands. From our results, we propose a pathway to reconcile the contemporary landscape identity complex towards a landscape conservation ethic that allows for a co-existence of a diversity of images and ideas about (semi-) natural landscapes.

Keywords

Landscape narratives, landscape identity, rural landscape, conservation ethics

Corresponding author:

Koen Arts, Forest and Nature Conservation Policy Group, Wageningen University & Research Ringgold Standard Institution, Gaia building (101) Droevendaalsesteeg 3, Wageningen 6700 HB, The Netherlands.
Email: koen.arts@wur.nl

Introduction

Over the past few years, discussions on nature conservation in the Netherlands have hardened. While nature is deteriorating rapidly and immediate action needs to be taken to prevent further loss (De Graeff et al., 2022; Ecologische Autoriteit, 2023), interventions aimed at doing so increasingly incite debate and protest. A narrative dissonance and friction connected to the landscape has come to the surface. It is the central point that we further discuss in this article, one which we refer to as the contemporary landscape identity complex, in which entrenched narratives on the contemporary landscape contribute to a complexity that sometimes obstructs conservation efforts. While many factors come into play that spark this polemy, most of which are practical, we argue that a more fundamental phenomenon underlies this wedge.

Over the course of European history, rapid changes have occurred in society and the landscape (Antrop, 2005; Kullberg et al., 2019). These changes quickly accumulate and eventually outrun the changes in related personal and collective identities, preventing a steady adaptation and connection to altered landscapes, and creating breaks with the past (Antrop, 2005). Such breaks can have a strong effect on people, since the landscape decreasingly functions as a static, familiar reference point to return to and to borrow from (Tilley, 2006). This eventually can make one linger for a past landscape (Antrop, 2005; Fritzsche, 2004). As a result, people may find themselves engaging with an ‘ingrained’ historical connection between them and a landscape that hardly or no longer exists (Moore and Whelan, 2009).

To soothe the desire for that increasingly disappearing past, nostalgic landscapes tend to be preserved mentally. They are reconstructed in the mind and are consequently often expressed or referenced in genres of imagination (Taylor, 2007). These expressions include poetry, paintings, photos, stories, cuisine, architecture and the like. Especially romantic reconstructions seem to be part of the national mythos of many European nations, and by proxy their national identities (Kullberg et al., 2019). Paradoxically, the landscape situated in reality has tended to become an antithesis of that romantic landscape that seems so popular in the mind. As Kolen and Lemaire (1999: 433) explain: ‘[that] popular romantic imagining of the landscape causes a certain blindness to that which really occurs in the landscape and our environment [...] time and again the societal debate is held with mental images [that are] ill-fitting with the landscape in reality’.

Such mental images present a narrative of one’s relationship with the landscape. These narratives structure the way a person puts those images into practice (Beach, 2021; Crouch, 2010). However, when such individual narratives on the natural world do not resonate with other dominant narratives, frictions may arise in debates on landscape and nature conservation. For example, if one appreciates nature through a narrative of recreational use, but another detests recreation through a narrative of ‘we must lower pressure factors on nature’, disagreement on a fundamental level occurs. We refer to this narrative dissonance as the ‘contemporary landscape identity complex’, which we apply to the Netherlands, where changes in the rural landscapes are occurring at a rapid pace (Geuze, 2018). More specifically, we focus on the Bommelerwaard, an isolated region with a mostly rural nature.

In this article, we focus on the following three objectives: through a literature review, interviews and a case study approach we examine recurring narrative clusters that shape

the contemporary landscape identity complex in the Bommelerwaard (objective 1). We further exemplify how these dominant clusters, and their interactions, affect the landscape through practice (objective 2), and explore whether there are alternative ways of conceptualising familiar landscapes that do not result in a contemporary landscape identity complex (objective 3).

Theoretical background

'Landscape' is a fickle and highly interpretive term that can mean a multiplicity of things. Stobbelaar and Pedroli (2011) sequence one of its interpretations along cultural, personal and existential dimensions. That interpretation is linked to identity, memory and meaning. Thus, the landscape is understood as a special place to people, as being inter-linked with peoples' biographies and their identities; not simply being a space, but a place. For the purpose of this article, we will view the landscape through that lens, so that we can understand how individuals personally engage with it, and how that translates to practice. A landscape identity then is a dominant representation of this relationship between the self and a particular landscape form.

Our second objective focuses on practice. This can be understood in many ways: physical actions in the landscape, the shaping of cultural norms, the depicting of and advocating for specific forms of landscape, influencing policies and legislation and much more. Investigating how all of these numerous forms of practice flow from internalised narratives is relevant in understanding the dissonance between them, and necessary in preventing friction with conservation efforts. In this research, we have mainly focused on the practices informed by the narratives and agency of the interviewed individuals, which are consequently placed in a larger cultural context. For an example of how narratives inform action, we refer to Beach (2021) who describes how narrative structure shapes expectations, supports detections and mitigation of threats towards those expectations, and entertains alternative scenarios, or Crouch (2010: 13) who deemed representations of landscapes as relational to action and reflection 'in a broader process of making space'.

Slipping into romanticised landscape narratives

Augé stated that 'never before have individual histories been so explicitly affected by the collective history, but never before, either, have the reference points for collective identification been so unstable' (1995: 37). The emaciation of the past in the landscape, as a result of increasingly accelerating change, decreases the chronological points of reference that people can sense within it (Antrop, 2005). According to Tilley (2006), a failure to find stability in the landscape results in disconnection between people and place. It effectively makes one a tourist in one's own landscape, which becomes valued more as a foreign country to visit, or a backdrop, as opposed to a part of the self or a place where one belongs. As a result, one may slip into a romanticised narrative of the past (Hannerz, 1992; Schama, 1995), along which the landscape is storied through books, diaries, paintings, and other genres of imagination, connecting past and present, strengthening one's memory. These narratives, argues Tilley (2006), become entrenched through that constant representation of an increasingly fictional landscape.

Such romanticised landscapes come to form a ‘pictorial book of our memory’ (Van Toorn, 1998: 58). They remind one that a past beyond oneself exists and that others have come before. It allows one to sense and read the arduousness, endeavour, and toil of one’s ancestors ‘disguised as nature’ (p. 291). Drenthen (2013) presents ideas within that sphere as well; a relationship with the landscape grounded in the past would provide one with an ‘ethos’ on how to appropriately dwell in it, promoting a sense of stewardship. Chawla and Hart (1995), however, argue that the development of such an ethos was – already in 1995 – only still possible in a traditional rural setting.

In light of the aforementioned rapidly accumulating change, such lingering romantic narratives may become spoiled by reality. After all: ‘a human resists when a landscape from their memory is affected too quickly’ (Van Toorn, 1998: 74). In an act of rebellion against this change, one becomes trapped in ingrained romanticised representations of the landscape, while the disconnection with reality grows, and the imagined and preferred landscapes become increasingly rare, eroding the ethos and pushing escapism further (Kolen and Lemaire, 1999; Kullberg et al., 2019; Tilley, 2006).

A shift to eco-scientific narratives

At the dawn of 20th-century nature conservation, narratives of harmonious, whole, and romantic landscapes were popular (Denslagen, 2009). In the arts too, such landscapes have been featured over several centuries and in many different artistic traditions, most notably in the romantic period. Even today, as Crommentuijn et al. (2007) explain, such (semi-)natural landscapes with a historic character are still valued most in broad society. However, Denslagen (2009) continues that this ideal has been driven out within academic and professional circles by the modern functionality of biologists and ecologists, marginalising aesthetic history- and nostalgia-based narratives on nature. As Denslagen (2009: 81) recalls: ‘few, even among the most ardent conservationists, will admit feeling such [romantic] emotions’. In the world of modern conservation, ‘the idyllic feeling for nature that prevailed in the period after the First World War has been seen as ‘unnatural’ and even decadent since the 1970s (Denslagen, 2009: 81). Instead, biodiversity has taken centre stage as a core concept in conservation since the second half of the 20th century (Ducarme and Couvet, 2020: 4) and has perhaps come to shape a new idyll hinging on ecology. According to Denslagen (2009: 81), that shift is signified by the ‘professionalisation and increasing “scientisation” of government policy’.

Thus, seemingly in contrast with nostalgia-based romantic narratives on the landscape, a more modern narrative cluster joins the fray; eco-scientific narratives which biologists, ecologists, naturalists and others often seem to adopt. Technical by nature and arguably disillusioned, because these are oftentimes people who experience the decline of nature most directly. As a result, romantic conceptions of the landscape are replaced with the restoration of natural values over aesthetic, cultural, or historical values (Denslagen, 2009; Ducarme and Couvet, 2020). For some, this newer idyll and its corresponding practices are a source of joy. However, for others, the resulting landscape is one with which they are unable to find a connection (Gobster and Hull, 2000).

Tension among narrative perspectives

Conservation paradigms have shifted towards a more technical, scientific perspective in both academic and governance circles (Ducarme and Couvet, 2020; Jepson et al., 2018), while broader society has not necessarily done so. The discourse in these circles is no longer about how nature looks or is experienced, but mostly on how it functions; paired with increasing responsibilities and obligations to report on the state of nature and prevent further decline, resulting from e.g., the European Bird and Habitat directives, Water Framework Directive, or the proposed Regulation on Nature Restoration (European Parliament and Council, 1992, 2000, 2009, 2022).

As a result of this mismatch between narratives, different groups of people have come to identify with different landscapes, which they consequently aim to preserve, restore, or create. When one of these approaches becomes more hegemonic, as eco-scientific narratives have over the last few decades, it may exclude other groups from the resulting changes in the landscape. As a consequence, developing a 'sense of place' (Hunziker et al., 2007) may be challenging, particularly in areas that are developed or promoted solely along eco-scientific narratives. Simply put: 'new restoration narratives cannot make up for the loss of the feeling of belonging, because they do not flow from a genuine connection to the landscape' (Drenthen, 2009: 298).

Engaging with the above-mentioned literature on this topic we find numerous examples of, on the one hand, romantic narratives thriving among those who ground their perspective in the past, with the risk of becoming entrenched in a delusion of fictional landscapes that are increasingly altered, and on the other hand, eco-scientific narratives that disenchant the landscape and disconnect from historical continuity and context. These two-dimensional opposite views result in a tug of war over the future shaping of the landscape.

Methods

We adopted an interpretivist qualitative approach to get to grips with a constructed web of language, differences in time periods, and differences in cultural values (Silverman, 2000) and employed a discourse-based narrative approach for our data collection (Overcash, 2003). This means that we do not focus on commonly shared truths and general laws, but rather – through reading and listening – gather narrative expressions on the landscape. After all, narratives in their many forms are widely used to convey ideas about the landscape. They hint at affinities that align with dominant clusters (e.g., romantic or eco-scientific narrative clusters) that influence actions. These clusters structure and order the contemporary landscape identity complex.

A foundational basis of literature was established from search queries such as 'landscape art', 'landscape identity', 'landscape change', 'nature and nostalgia', 'resistance to change', and 'landscape narratives'. These queries were entered in Google Scholar, Jstor, and the WUR online library. Reference lists from initial articles provided more articles on similar topics. Furthermore, the physical university library at Wageningen University was consulted. This resulted in a broad spectrum of literature, the most relevant of which are introduced in the theoretical section of this article. This literature review

has provided historical context and insight into ways through which authors describe the landscape, indicating specific narratives we attribute to the complex. A history-oriented perspective allows us to understand which narratives and values have been hegemonic and how their dominance has shifted. Concurrently, this foundational basis of literature contains narratives on the landscape. It is a supplemental form of data.

Contemporary and local narratives that nuance and add to the historical context were identified through interviews and interactions with genres of imagination. Seventeen semi-structured interviews of around 40–70 minutes were conducted with purposively selected experts of different ages; people who elaborately engage with the landscape in various ways. A list of these interviewees and their professions is presented in the results section (Table 2). It should be noted that participants were not purposively selected to reflect dominant narratives in their discipline, (e.g., an ecologist so that we have someone with an eco-scientific perspective). The criterion was that they should intentionally and strongly engage with the landscape in their private life or profession. These ‘expert’ participants fleshed out narrative lines already deduced from the literature, but also demonstrated alignment with new narratives. Some participant selection occurred through snowballing from primarily selected interviewees, and interviews were conducted up until data saturation (Calder, 1977; Palinkas et al., 2015).

The interviews were split into two parts and followed a generalised format along a pre-composed interview guide, with room for digressions on salient topics introduced by our participants. Prior to the day of the interview, participants were asked to name several examples of – in their opinion – memorable genres of imagination that represent the Dutch landscape in some form or another. Participants were specifically not given examples. Their nominated works were asked to be narrowed down to a single one they felt most strongly about. Based on these choices, our participants established a canon of 17 works that encompass different representations, conceptualisations, and time-periods of the Dutch rural landscape (Appendix I). At the start of the interview, participants were invited to provide some initial commentary on a set of 8 works out of the total canon of 17 works. To that end, we created 17 unique sets of 7 randomised works. A mathematical tool was used to ensure that all works were included the same amount of times. Interviewees were given one such set of 7, including their own nominee as an 8th work. Only 8 out of 17 works were discussed in order to not overwhelm participants with an overabundance of representations. Participants were asked to interpret each of the works – one by one – in order to gain in-depth insight into what they observed, whether they had an affinity with it, what stories it told them, what it made them think of, and how they felt about the work. Finally, they were asked to pick a favourite out of the 8 works and explain why this was their choice. This exercise was followed by interview questions on early life experiences of the landscape, positive and negative associations with it, experiences of change, visions on and purposes of and for the landscape, and tensions in the way the rural landscape is currently being used.

To analyse the data, the interpretations and interviews were recorded and transcribed through verbatim transcription software. The text was subsequently coded in ATLAS.ti (v9). A combination of inductive (data-driven) and deductive (theory-driven) coding was employed, commencing with an initial set of codes that was drawn from the literature. In order to establish this set from the body of literature, recurring articulations were isolated

through reading, categorising, comparing, and analysing these texts. The literature itself was not coded. Instead, the matter discussed in the foundational basis of literature, as well as the articulations with which the authors discuss landscape, indicated preliminary codes. Table 1 shows an example of how these articulations were grouped into clusters and operationalised into codes. These initial clusters and codes provided a starting point to draw interview questions from. Upon completion of the interviews, these codes were supplemented by additional emerging codes.

Table 1. Preliminary narrative clusters, corresponding articulations and codes.

Cluster	Articulation	Codes
Romantic narratives	○ 17th- to 19th-century paintings are typically Dutch ○ Representations inspire nostalgia, or melancholy ○ ‘Missing’ certain landscapes of the past ○ Landscape is supposed to look such and such ○ (Cultural) history adds value	Nostalgia, idyllic, history, and pastoral
Eco-scientific narratives	○ Depicted landscapes are out of touch with reality ○ Urgency for nature restoration does not allow for aesthetic priorities or experiential values ○ Value is determined by state of nature	Biodiversity, goals, urgency, wildness, and species

Table 2. Interviewees and affinity with narratives.

Interviewee no.	Profession	Age	Locality	Dominant narrative
1	Rewilding specialist	47	Non-local	Strong eco-scientific
2	Nature storyteller	50	Non-local	Hybrid romantic/eco-scientific
3	Ecologist	49	Non-local	Strong eco-scientific
4	Landscape architect	23	Local	Moderate romantic
5	Archaeologist	58	Non-local	Moderate eco-scientific
6	Park ranger	42	Local	Moderate eco-scientific
7	Archival historian	91	Local	Strong romantic
8	Heritage expert	55	Non-local	Strong romantic
9	Politician	27	Local	Strong romantic
10	Layperson	23	Local	Moderate romantic
11	Farmer	62	Local	Moderate utilitarian
12	Art historian	31	Local	Strong romantic
13	Hunter	62	Local	Hybrid romantic/utilitarian
14	Historian	77	Local	Strong romantic
15	Conservator	27	Local	Hybrid romantic/eco-scientific
16	Policymaker	59	Local	Hybrid romantic/eco-scientific
17	Farmer	33	Local	Strong utilitarian

The case study region: The Bommelerwaard (NI)

In order to be able to apply our notion of a contemporary landscape identity complex to perceptions of reality, a case study approach was added as a second layer of the research; a clearly demarcated landscape that the participants as well as the researchers are familiar with. This area, the Bommelerwaard (Figure 1), is situated in the southernmost tip of the province of Gelderland, wedged between two large rivers. Uncoincidentally, the historical identity of this sort-of-island is marked by both living with and battling against that water (Gemeente Zaltbommel, 2011). In the past, the morphology of the river dictated where people would settle; higher dryer parts were for living, and lower fertile parts

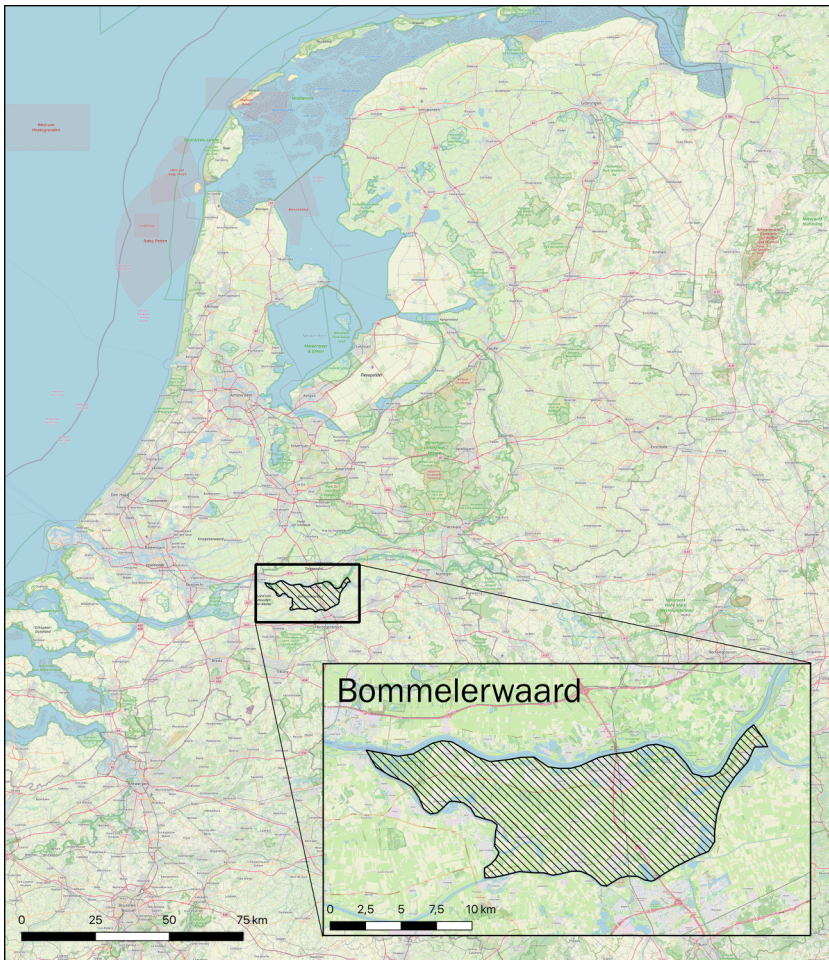


Figure 1. Map of The Netherlands (inset) and the Bommelerwaard (central coordinates: 51.779309, 5.220401) (Map created on 02-02-2024 using the free and open source QGIS).

were for agriculture (Verkuil, 2022). It resulted in a collective landscape identity closely intertwined with water and agriculture; rural landscapes within the dikes and wilder landscapes beyond on the floodplains. The Bommelerwaard has a size of about 150 km² and hosts about 55,000 inhabitants. The region contains a UNESCO-heritage 19th century defensive border as well as several protected Natura-2000 areas. Culturally, the landscape is characterised by high-trunk fruit orchards, dikes, mills, hedgerows, and knotted willows (Gemeente Maasdriel and Gemeente Zaltbommel, 2003). Notable developments in the last few decades are the expansion of several villages and cities in the area, the intensification of orchard and greenhouse agriculture, the consolidation of agricultural land, and the loss of landscape elements such as hedgerows, lanes, and small utility woodlands. Pressures on its current layout are found in the hardening of boundaries between nature and developed areas, decreasing the coherence and expanse of the natural landscape. Additionally, there are worries about the containment and disruption of the floodplains, threatening their historical makeup (Gemeente Zaltbommel, 2011).

Results

Context from case study region

Since a large part ($n=12$) of the participants were from the same region – the Bommelerwaard – we wanted to check what narratives these 12 participants would present on this familiar landscape. The regional ‘identity’ of this area was perceived by participants as a mostly rural landscape filled with old (poplar-lined) lanes, higher ridges, basin grounds, land consolidation patterns, an abundance of storks, and most notably the presence of the river and floodplains. Quite a number of participants recalled the floods of 1995 as a dramatic event that added to the regional identity and shaped the relationship they had with the landscape. Additionally, participants experienced the Bommelerwaard as winding, natural, dynamic, varying and diverse, traditional, small-scale, and open. The area was demarcated similarly by all participants as an island-of-sorts between the rivers *Maas* and *Waal*; distinguished by hard boundaries. However, one participant also mentioned it in the larger context of the riverlands stretching further east and west.

These locals seemed to have a strong sense of what is and what is not fitting within the regional context; a distinction between what blends into the landscape and what stands out negatively. Regardless, the landscape has been changing. Local historian Verkuil (2022) noted that the historical poverty of the area played a large role in finally pushing for land consolidation and the rearrangement of a landscape that – halfway into the 20th century – still mirrored the original geomorphic structure of the river’s dominant presence. As a result, the ancient influences of the river have become increasingly harder to recognise in the layout of the landscape within the dikes.

Nevertheless, the region as a whole is experienced as authentic or intact by our participants: ‘a piece of old-time Netherlands’. Most of them expressed the wish to keep it that way. A unified sense of threat through further intensification, urbanisation, and industrialisation came forth. As one farmer expressed ‘[the landscape] will do as it is now’, meaning that further transformation beyond its current state was deemed excessive.

Disconnection with this familiar landscape was not experienced by our local participants. Instead, a shared sense of a collective 'we' identification comes forth: 'to us, this [landscape] is normal, you tend to think the rest of the Netherlands is also like that, but that is not the case' or 'culturally we are not high on the ladder, we are more towny, we are an island after all, we are on our own' or 'people see it as a piece of no-man's land between [the provinces of] Brabant and Gelderland'.

Correspondingly with this collective identity, some reservations that existed towards the 'other' were put forth. For example, one farmer expressed resistance towards the replacement of his dairy cows by Scottish highland cows – belonging to a different organisation – on the floodplains, stating that 'there might be a political agenda for that, to make it more attractive to people from outside', another participant expressed how 'the government is not aware of what needs to be preserved and where the industry needs to be limited'. Yet, another participant indicated that 'we discuss how people from the city move here. A lot of houses are being bought and built, but that puts pressure on our small-scaledness', and a fourth mentioned how 'there is this field of tension between our traditional landscape and the sudden arrival of these large distribution centres'. For our local participants, a shared ideal existed through the pastoral idyll when discussing this familiar region as a whole, being driven mostly by romantic narratives. Nonetheless, they presented a nuanced view of agricultural use, naming its downsides but also explaining an understanding of current dominant practices. Furthermore, they regarded previous local conservation measures in a positive light, such as in the completion of the recent *Ruimte voor de Rivier* project (Ministerie van Volkshuisvesting, Ruimtelijke Ordening, en Milieubeheer & Ministerie van Verkeer en Waterstaat, 1997), but also argue for the need for economic development. Locally, while opinions may differ, a contemporary landscape identity complex does not seem to exist. However, when zooming out onto the rest of the Netherlands, and shifting our interviews to a more general level that did not address the immediate local landscape, more strongly diverging perspectives and narratives emerged.

Invoking a breach of continuity

At the start of their interviews, our 17 participants did not convey complex and clashing ideas on the landscape; contrary to what some of the literature discussed in this article would suggest (Denslagen, 2009; Drenthen, 2013; Gobster & Hull, 2000). Though opening questions regarding contemporary times and the landscape revealed a shared sentiment of uncertain times and various ways of perceiving nature and landscape, this wide understanding of what is and what is not landscape did not signify tension. When asked to identify threats to the landscape, participants introduced diverging priorities, ranging from biodiversity decline to urban and industrial encroachment, agricultural intensification, degraded distinctiveness, excess leisure, excess planning and order, or the loss of (interest for) rural nature paired with increased attention for wilder and urban nature. However, most participants also nuanced these statements, indicating that such is the course of history and that it enabled them to live their current lifestyle. Consequentially, many threats were perceived as normal to a degree, and the changing landscape was seen as a given.

Positive associations with the landscape started to show more narrative variety. Most related to perceptions of ‘real’ nature; a place where ‘you can empty your head’, ‘pristine’, ‘rare’, ‘valuable’, ‘good’, ‘natural’, ‘authentic’, or simply ‘real’. An isolation from culture and society was a common denominator. However, to the two farmers we interviewed, such isolated nature was deemed no more ‘real’ than other forms, and both rural nature and gardens were perceived as valuable parts of the landscape. These participants, uncoincidentally, identified with – and felt rooted in – the contemporary rural landscape. Those feelings of rootedness were less apparent among participants who externalised nature from culture or compared the rural landscape with more sublime landscapes, most notably among younger participants, those who were less place-bound, or those not visiting ‘common’ landscapes with specific intent but choosing to visit more salient landscapes as a form of recreation.

Regardless of its shape or form, all participants expressed difficulties in connecting to a landscape that had changed too much or too quickly, that was void of species and variety, or that was ‘overly functional’. The purposeful demarcation of different patches of land, each with its own function, was generally perceived as negative; regardless of one’s preferences for the landscape. Almost all participants indicated that, in essence, the landscape they prefer is varied and dynamic, a mosaic of different elements, a mixture of nature and culture. When pressed further, participants expressed resistance towards rapid change. As one interviewee explained: ‘things that don’t fit the [contemporary] narrative are altered to match it, now it all starts to look alike’. Regional distinctiveness and past traces of traditional landscape use disappear, not gradually but suddenly. Another mentioned: ‘change occurs so fast that time barely plays a role anymore’.

Most of these negative associations with landscape change alluded to rural landscapes and rural nature. As one participant, an ecologist, put it: ‘it will never be authentic nature anymore [...] like a golf course [...] every square meter is used to the extreme’ and ‘there no longer is that vast expanse of the past’. While it is indeed so that Dutch rural landscapes have changed drastically under the intensification of agriculture (Van den Bergh, 2004; Wilmlink, 2019) this was not a one-sided negative sentiment expressed on change in the rural landscape.

Indicators of a complex

The Netherlands is known for arranging and rearranging the physical space that it is made up of (Doevendans et al. (2007)). From reclaiming the sea and overgrazing the heath, to containing rivers and rearranging agricultural plots of land, it has been on the forefront of creating changed landscapes. Even today, while a battle for space is waged over different interests for the landscape (CBS, 2001; Keulartz, 2023), new landscapes are designed and (re-)created by the victorious party; whether for nature or economical use (Doevendans et al., 2007). Industrial concentration zones, agricultural intensification, an increased need for new housing, but also the necessity for the restoration of the natural ecosystem all need their designated square meters.

Especially this last example of the restoration of nature has been gaining traction in the Netherlands over the past decade. The state of nature in the Netherlands is not good (Ecologische Autoriteit, 2023), and many (inter)national policies, agreements, and legislation are putting pressure on restoring nature and the landscape from an ecological

perspective. The Oostvaardersplassen (Lorimer & Driessen, 2013), Rijn-Maasmonding, and Gelderse Poort (ARK Rewilding, 2023) in the Netherlands are all examples of rewilding and ecological landscape restoration demanding large amounts of (scarcely available) space. Most notably emergent in the Netherlands is the case of rewilding, aiming to increase biodiversity while decreasing the impact made by human interventions, subsequently changing the landscape (Lorimer et al., 2015).

Our participants noticed these changes and, in line with the narratives they have affinities with, positioned themselves differently towards them. For example, participants that lean towards agriculture-oriented narratives (in our research solely those that work with or on the land in some form or another) saw agricultural-favouring change in the landscape as an enhancement, but ecology-favouring change as a possible threat. While they too regretted biodiversity decline to an extent, they indicated that an intensified rural landscape tamed nature and allowed room for development. Conservation-oriented change was seen as a source of displacement when directed at claiming space for nature. Furthermore, the priority of such interventions over their form of land use was not always understood. The intensified rural landscape, according to these participants, harbours plenty of common species and cattle. They identify with these, as opposed to endangered species. As one informant put it: '[in the rural landscape] I see nature every day as well'.

Oppositely, participants that lean towards ecology-oriented narratives (in this research mostly but not solely those in the natural sciences) gave examples of nature restoration, rewilding, and intensified protection regimes for Natura 2000-areas as a good development, sometimes even lamenting how the government was not nearly doing enough. These participants usually identified agricultural intensification as a threat. Two of them also stressed the urgency of conservation efforts directed at biodiversity and ecology, as opposed to recovering or preserving historical landscapes referred to by them as 'museum nature'. Often, only 15 minutes into our interviews, this stage of diverging narratives was reached and fingers were pointed at the 'other'. The dissonance between narratives, that we have named the contemporary landscape identity complex, started to crystallise. As expected, participants who engaged with different narratives on the landscape, actively contested narratives proposed by other participants. Parallels can be drawn to the romantic and eco-scientific narrative articulations present in the literature, but new elements, such as the agricultural-oriented narrative above, emerged as well.

While discussing the canon of 17 selected works, affinity with these narratives became very clear. Participants' interpretations and preferences resonated with specific traditions and aesthetics in artistic representations of the landscape. Like the artists of these works, our participants imagined their own idyll. Specific patterns in their interactions with these artworks and their narrative choices formed into narrative clusters.

Contemporary landscape identities

In this section, we provide an oversight of the narrative clusters that make up the contemporary landscape identity complex. Drawn up from the narratives present in the literature discussed in this article, further fleshed out by the interviews, we categorised three main

recurrences: 'the utilitarian landscape', 'the romantic landscape', and 'the eco-scientific landscape'.

The first narrative cluster was found solely in our interviews, and expressed in only one corresponding work of art (Appendix I, 14). It is that of the utilitarian landscape. Here, the ideal is an organised landscape, bountiful and utilised to the very last detail. The underpinning notion of the preference for this landscape is that of utility. It is inexhaustible, dominated by human progress and rationality. Land that is unused, or empty, is seen as wasteful. The three participants aligning with this cluster expressed a sense of pride and accomplishment, commenting along lines such as: 'I think it is a marvellous accomplishment that we are able to utilise every square centimeter' or 'we can improve the landscape, make it better'. Interestingly, one of these three felt the need to justify this narrative by mentioning that it is all part of an effort to make the land more functional 'so that people will never be hungry again', referring back to the post-World War II period that he had experienced. Two of the three participants, both farmers, displayed a strong sense of place and identified strongly with the contemporary rural landscape. Our three participants experienced developments that encroach on the agrarian lands, whether these result from conservation, urbanisation, or industrialisation, as threats. Other threats can be found in an increase of regulatory or legislative restrictions reducing agency in the landscape. Nature conservation in these useful rural landscapes is not urgent in these narratives, because they are not perceived as degrading. Conservation of useful hectares for agriculture, in light of other claims on the physical space, was seen as more pressing. Instead, what others may identify as threats to biodiversity and the landscape were seen as improvements by two of the three participants leaning into this narrative.

The second narrative cluster was that of 'the romantic landscape'. The underpinning notions are nostalgia and preservation or recovery of the past. Corresponding narratives were largely present in the literature, and were expressed by twelve out of seventeen participants. Suitably, there seems to be an over-representation of romantic depictions of the landscape within the canon of 17 works composed by our participants. The narratives in this cluster have close ties with those romantic depictions of the landscape. The idyll here for rural lands is mostly pastoral; small-scale extensive agriculture, mixed with patches of nature and patches of extensive inhabitancy, variance in the landscape and an (aesthetically oriented) abundance of flora and fauna. However, a preference for more sublime landscapes is also very dominant. The rural landscape is a place of leisure and enjoyment, as well as a landscape that is worked by people; with visible traces of the past. Participants described this landscape as 'typically Dutch'. One participant put it as follows: 'if you get to know these areas, learn old stories and imagine how things were, it gives one feeling of nostalgia'. The landscape is often described through memory and aesthetics, as opposed to current practice or biology. It is a reminiscence and imagination, rather than an experience. Though present in contemporary times, these landscapes are becoming increasingly uncommon in places where they are not intentionally protected, and are under threat of urban and industrial encroachment, as well as agricultural intensification.

Our third narrative cluster resonates with the eco-scientific perspective introduced in the literature and did not have strong ties to the works of art. The key underpinning notion is the restoration of - and room for - natural processes. Seven out of seventeen

participants expressed articulations leaning towards this cluster. The idyll here is a form of wildness, a separation from culture, and a rescue from degradation. It is a return to, or a preservation of, what our participants conceive as 'authentic' nature; robust, wild, and separate from society. As one participant put it: 'that is real nature, the way it is supposed to be'. Participants described contemporary expressions of this landscape as very fragmented, decreasing, or 'under construction'. One of the participants, an ecologist, expressed a nostalgic feeling towards these landscapes: 'there is a nostalgia; a feeling of 'things used to be better'. But, on a professional level, we would rather stay away from that'. Participants engaging in this narrative found themselves confronted with the reality of the landscape in the Netherlands, often disenchanted with the state of nature. Those that provided commentary on rural nature did not consider many contemporary rural landscapes a part of nature: 'most parts of the Netherlands are not very natural, so when I see an area that is more pristine it makes me happy'. A unison is found through a shared regret about the current state of many areas. The desired landscape is mostly under threat of abiotic factors such as climate change, nitrogen deposition, drought, and salinisation, but also any human activities that 'tame' or put pressure on the landscape, such as agricultural use or excess leisure. As one participant expressed: 'I hold nothing against farmers, but over time the agricultural use has become so intensive that it has resulted in a biodiversity crisis in rural areas'. An oversight of participants and their affinity with these narratives is shown in Table 2.

Narratives in practice

The three narrative clusters we categorised make up the main body of the contemporary landscape identity complex. Their presence and interaction are bound to have implications on the landscape, so participants were asked how they personally engage with the landscape as well; how their perspective translates to practice.

Participants engaging in mostly romantic narratives supported 'traditional' nature conservation. Meaning that they applauded or donated to efforts that preserve the 'traditional' landscapes they identify with or typical species that tend to garner attention, but also landscapes that were present and remain unchanged for as long as they remember. Since these landscapes are not commonplace, outdoorsy participants would visit them; to go hiking, biking, bird-watching and such. Little attention or care was spent on local common rural landscapes.

Our three participants who gravitate towards utilitarian narratives were able to directly change the landscapes they operate on. Perhaps unexpectedly, they too supported local small-scale conservation measures, such as delayed mowing or protecting meadow-bird nests. However, conservation was only deemed functional for 'normal' species and was not supposed to be too demanding or intrusive on regular practices. As one of the participants mentioned 'those common animals are not that fragile, but we help them out a bit. Compared to protected species, we don't need to go fencing them off'. At the same time, though driven by economic incentives, they also indicated to be removing hedgerows, mowing more often, ploughing deeper, and using larger machinery compared to their parents who ran the same farm and lived in the same landscape. Furthermore, resistance to more generalised national conservation measures came to the fore, specifically

technical measures that change the way these participants affect the land by hunting or farming (such as restrictions on the hunt of specific species or reduction in the amount of nitrogen emitted by cattle). With looming national and international legislative pressure, as well as an urgency required by the declining state of the physical environment, the local area has entered the agenda-setting stage for new landscape-changing conservation policies and subsequent measures in the near future. Though the interviewing stage of this research was too early for these interventions to have entered the conversation at the time, we can assume that much is to be said on this topic.

Support for conservation measures among participants expressing eco-scientific narratives took a different shape. These participants applauded ecological and hydrological restoration measures, rewilding efforts, and were also the only cluster in which participants explicitly mentioned increased government intervention in a positive light. The urgency behind biodiversity decline and related issues called for more pressing conservation measures, a more rapid change in certain areas, and a change of destination for landscapes ‘headed the wrong way’. Attention to aesthetics, tradition, or historical use was low on the priority list.

Table 3 gives an extensive overview of the three clusters we categorised, and the way change is perceived. It also provides insight into how our participants are influenced to act. These

Table 3. Relationship between narratives and practices.

Cluster	Perception of change	Action through practice
<i>Utilitarian narratives</i>	Change resulting from industrialisation and urbanisation are bad. Change from agricultural use is good in its current form (but it should not go overboard)	Conservation efforts aimed at local small-scale interventions for common species; removal of small-scale landscape elements; agricultural intensification; soil disturbance; deliberate removal of specimens from ecosystems; resistance towards generalised interventions that are deemed intrusive; green voluntary work
<i>Romantic narratives</i>	Change is bad if it makes the landscape lose historical perspective, familiarity, and nostalgia. Change is rarely good, except when it is in the form of (aesthetic) restoration or improvement of an undesirable area.	Conservation efforts aimed at aesthetical preservation or restoration; (intrusive) recreation; consumption of aesthetic depictions of landscape; visiting landscapes that are not common; externalising landscapes; green voluntary work
<i>Eco-scientific narratives</i>	Change is bad if it is a deterioration of the physical environment. Change is good when conditions are improved.	Conservation efforts aimed at ecological restoration (with disregard for historical context or aesthetics; support for generalised conservation measures and policies; agenda-setting; green voluntary work; (non-intrusive) recreation

narratives and the underpinning notions behind them result in different priorities, interests, and preferences. Based on our results, the contemporary landscape identity complex takes shape as a triangle of utilitarian, romantic and eco-scientific narratives, with clashing intersections.

Discussion

In a time where conservation debates are reemerging in the Netherlands, it is a good moment to recalibrate findings that were developed in a different time and place. Based on our results, we can connect to large parts of the theory introduced earlier in the section 'Theoretical background', and consolidate our proposal of a contemporary landscape identity complex, in which a pluralism of dissonant narratives underpins our relationship with the landscape, aligned along three fundamentally different clusters that can actively contest each other and steer different practices.

The prevalence of history

Regardless of one's alignment, history appears prevalent as a central factor in the framing of the landscape. Haartsen et al. (2000: 2) explained how identities base themselves on the perception of an area: 'as the future is not yet known, these perceptions always lean on the past'. The tendrils of historical landscapes have thus worked their way into contemporary narratives. Uncoincidentally, almost all of our participants described the typical Dutch landscape as it is romantically depicted in past artistic traditions.

This landscape is a longer existing form of communicating images. It is a visual language that people understand more easily (Van Toorn, 1998). Perhaps newer landscapes and newer forms of representation such as cinema and photography do not lend themselves yet to identification; simply because they are more commonplace and have not been around as long. The photographs people are confronted with can be seen anywhere, anytime. The movies and shows people watch usually contain landscape as a setting instead of a topic, and as one of our participants, an art conservator, stressed: 'landscape paintings have become a bit of a cliché genre'. Landscapes are not a very salient topic in contemporary art compared to the past. In that fashion, there is perhaps a skewed distribution of artistic landscape narratives over time. Many such narratives that people are confronted with base themselves in history. Fewer stories are told of the normal and the now.

Antrop (2005) explains that people change the landscape to adapt it to societal demand. Our participants demonstrated nuancing such changes. Change in itself is thus not deemed an issue. Landscapes are dynamic after all, and the traditional rural landscapes embraced by many are a product of cultural change as well. However, all participants indicated negative associations with landscapes that had changed quickly, suddenly, or too purposively, giving ground to Antrop's notion of 'breaks with the past'. In our study, however, while history was deemed important, not all participants resonated with a romantic landscape narrative. Where Antrop (2005) points his arrows solely at a romantic past, and Haartsen et al. (2000) do not specify *which* past these narratives engage with, we found that romantic narratives engage in a cultural aesthetic-based landscape history, while eco-scientific narratives draw on natural history, and utilitarian narratives focus more on the present and see history as a frame to behold

contemporary feats. In light of these different interactions with history, the contemporary landscape identity complex not only represents a narrative struggle, but also a temporal one; capturing society between older and newly constructed perspectives. Participants evoked a sense of transitioning hegemony from older romantic narratives to newer eco-scientific narratives.

Narratives and practice

The coexistence of three dominant narrative clusters means that society is dispersed among affinities with different types of landscape. These narratives by themselves affect the landscape, and the contemporary landscape identity complex we place around them has effects at large as well. These range from effects on the relationship between the individual and the landscape, the state of nature in the landscape, physical action in the landscape, the shaping of cultural norms, the gaze of conservation, governing bodies' ability to make clear choices on the future of the landscape, and the support for certain conservation measures.

To start off with the utilitarian narrative, we see how differences in underlying ideologies cause friction. The narratives these people engage in suffer under conservation interventions that break loose from the landscape's purpose, history, and locality, but most of all those that prioritise ecological goals over their preferred form of land use. They are confronted with a reduced sense of agency in a landscape that is felt to be 'theirs'. In expressions of negative landscape associations and change, fingers were pointed at the 'other'. That sentiment is paradoxical. Utilitarian narratives change the landscape through their practices so that it is decreasingly a source of identification for romantic or eco-scientific narratives, and increasingly incites demand for restoration interventions. Such interventions, along with eco-scientific narratives, press for a landscape that the utilitarian narrative does not identify with. As Denslagen (2009: 83) said, university-trained professionals have replaced hobbyists in recent decades: 'Ecologists have claimed a monopoly on notions concerning the appreciation of nature'. That sentiment is felt by participants aligning with utilitarian narratives. While they indicated an interest in local small-scale conservation measures, they aimed at a rural cultural landscape that leaves room for their practices and a more practice-based conservation on their own lands.

Continuing with 'the romantic landscape', participants demonstrated that for them identification and rootedness in the landscape suffers most from interventions that break loose from history and locality. More drastic landscape changes usually occur through provincial, national, or European ecological narratives that determine how it is re-shaped, and what goals should be met. These changes are felt to be abrupt and purposeful, breaking loose from gradual adaptation. The landscape as pictured in romantic narratives and as reconstructed in the mind by these participants becomes further removed from the landscape in reality as change keeps pace. The Dutch rural landscape contains increasingly less of the idyll that people have conceived.

Our local participants – who deemed their landscape relatively authentic – identified most dominantly with this romantic landscape when discussing the Bommelerwaard. Notions of detachment from this local area did not come forward in the interviews. However, a sense of powerlessness was felt: 'I see what has changed and I am left

only with memories of what was behind it'. Participants adopting this romantic narrative may consequentially come to shift their focus to more 'special' or ideal landscapes, disenchanting contemporary common aspects of the landscape, as was seen among participants' focus on salient landscapes.

Participants expressing eco-scientific narratives ascribed identity to landscapes through functional and nature-centred narratives. They felt an affinity towards the experiences of a salient, often wild landscape, as opposed to the identification with familiar landscapes that romantic or utilitarian narratives engage in. Ecology – rather than cultural history, memory, or practice – speaks strongest. Romantic landscapes were appreciated less and considered a 'façade' by several participants adhering to these narratives. Even lower on the ladder were (plain or intensified) rural lands; rarely commented on in a positive light, lest as an area for developmental opportunity.

The coexistence of these three narrative clusters is not peaceful. Kolen and Lemaire (1999: 19) see a clash between imagination and reality: 'a sort of maniacal destruction is paired with an almost as a maniacal urge to preserve'. The Netherlands is currently caught in the middle of those urges: a recent push for conservation has resulted in a heated debate in which the Dutch government aims to repurpose rural landscapes in order to protect more vulnerable strictly protected Natura 2000-areas and solidify a nationwide nature network. With a looming threat of dispossession and conservation goals that do not resonate with utilitarian narratives, earlier relative support for conservation among – mainly but not exclusively – farmers has turned into rebellion over the past two years (Holligan, 2022). We see how shifting hegemonic relations within the contemporary landscape identity complex are an inherent part of its complexity, and that largely has to do with who decides which landscapes stay, which change, and which go. Because of society's division along these different narratives, swift action and choices necessary for conservation purposes tend to be stalled because adequate support needs to be garnered first.

The singular eco-scientific hegemony in conservation practice, academic works and governmental policies thus loses conservation support of the utilitarian cluster, though not per se from the romantic cluster. However, constituents of a romantic cluster experience a severing of the cultural and natural realm through more extreme conservation interventions that do not take history or aesthetics into account. Paired with additional fast-paced changes in agriculture, development, and economic activity the contemporary landscape contains hardening borders where small areas have their own designated purpose, affinity, and identity. The continuity with the past and context of the landscape as a whole – two of Stobbelaar and Pedroli's (2011) aspects that allow for rootedness – are eroding.

We thus find that the contemporary landscape identity complex affects people and nature in four ways: (1) the way people are able to root themselves in a changing landscape is challenged; (2) the romantic way people imagine and discuss landscapes situated in the mind cause a disenchantment of contemporary landscapes situated in reality and marginalise non romantically salient landscapes; (3) the hegemonic eco-scientific narrative too focuses on (ecologically) salient landscapes, reduces a sense of agency, and challenges identification for the utilitarian cluster; and (4) the contemporary landscape identity complex inhibits the attaining of urgently needed biodiversity goals through failing conservation support. The persistence of these issues, as well as their effect on nature, require that they must be addressed. Quoting Schama (1995: 15): 'inherited

landscape myths and memories share two common characteristics: their surprising endurance through the centuries and their power to shape institutions that we still live with'.

Towards a new conservation ethic

Our case study of the Bommelerwaard contained constituents pertaining to all three landscape narratives. However, the contemporary landscape identity complex seemed somewhat less problematic in this area. On a philosophical level, tensions came forward between different clusters among locals. However, when applied to a concrete landscape matters seemed much less dramatic. The difference between the practicalities of this landscape and its inhabitants, compared to the philosophical imagining of the landscape, can inspire a new conservation ethic that might mitigate the issues resulting from the contemporary landscape identity complex.

As we see in Table 2, there is room for nuance, complexity, and overlap between the dominant narratives. Extracted from context, the three dominant clusters are archetypes, stereotypical of their own affinities. Within the person and locality, the individual leans towards these archetypes but is also able to nuance and surpass them. We see this in the Bommelerwaard. Wilderness was not craved as an ideal among our local participants, likely because it was in part already present due to the predominance of relatively dynamic nature on the floodplains. These floodplains also feed the pastoral idyll that many romantic narratives engage in. Nevertheless, our local participants, while engaging in such romantic narratives of the region, were less entrenched in cultural, and more in natural history. The cultural history of a large part of the landscape has literally been buried by layers of river deposit through many past floods and dike breaches. That natural presence forms a stronger source of connection than the histories buried in the mud. The processes that have shaped the landscape are more legible than the actions of the people who inhabited it. Natural and cultural diversity go together here. Possibly because of the relative shallowness of the roots in this area resulting from its natural history, locals know foremost their own histories and the oral histories of their predecessors. This seemed sufficient as a base for identification with 'their' landscape.

As implied by our participants, landscapes can thus contain plural ideas and remain whole as a unit. Furthermore, conservation can be successfully practised without a singular hegemonic eco-scientific narrative. Contingent policies may want to change strategy to prevent hindrances from the contemporary landscape identity complex. With our newfound understanding of how this contemporary landscape identity complex is shaped and how it translates to practice, we can aim to de-escalate this situation into a more constructive approach. Based on the observations, findings, feelings, and expertise of the participants, a hybrid of romantic cultural landscapes, contemporary rural landscapes, and eco-scientific wild landscapes is possible while remaining coherent and fitting of the larger historical context of an area, which are key values necessary for identification (Stobbelaar and Pedroli, 2011).

Antrop (2005) too stressed the importance of coherence and the ability to tell the (hi) story of the landscape. As one participant put it: 'these stories [...] colour the landscape and give it meaning in that way'. Embracing a pluralism of narratives in a single landscape is another way of providing this story, as seen in the Bommelerwaard. Instead of a battle for the landscape, excluding other narratives through hegemony, coexisting story-lines unify differing clusters. Such storied narratives connect us to the land and assist in

the building of its identity (Drenthen, 2012; Van der Valk, 2013). Since the landscape is largely the work of the mind, built up of memory (Schama, 1995), we need such new stories to imagine the rural landscape in a more constructive fashion. Traces of nonhuman beings and processes take part in that too. They place human history in a larger perspective (Drenthen, 2009), as seen in the influence of the river in the Bommelerwaard. Tilley (2006; 14) too found that ‘fostering a sense of landscape and place requires its deliberate re-representation’. In one of our interviews, an art conservator indicated how such contemporary stories are not being represented often. Storying a landscape with a pluralism of narratives through different genres of imagination can improve conservation support.

Furthermore, the role of agency in shaping the landscape is an important aspect in creating a sense of identification and stewardship over the landscape that can be experienced as one’s own. This can be done by providing more space for cooperative conservation efforts that are implemented gradually and do not impose sudden change. Agency is being worked on through participative governmental processes, the right to protest, societal influence, and access to the debate. However, these roads are far-removed from the landscape and practice. Instead, the agency can also take place on a physical level, for example through taking part in conservation measures in a familiar landscape that one identifies with.

Limitations and further research

While this study has provided us with insights into how the contemporary landscape identity complex works, supplemental information and studies into other regions can be helpful in further understanding the differences between the local effect and the broader discussion on a nationwide level. A focus on one region and a relatively small sample size bear the risk that narratives which are not locally present are not considered in the interplay we studied. The sample size and focus on one region also prevents us from cross-referencing the effects of the local landscape on its people. Finally, the dimension of power dynamics in who chooses what happens with certain parts of the landscape and how they benefit from it, while highly relevant, was beyond the scope of this research. It could play a strong part in shaping why one gravitates towards a dominant cluster, as well as how these clusters interact. We expect that power dynamics have at least partially resulted in the degree of how ingrained a person becomes in their cluster. This is hinted at by how a reduced sense of agency in the landscape (and thus a feeling of powerlessness) sparks antagonism.

Conclusion

The narrative clusters that our participants introduced and displayed during the research were varied. Multiple conceptualisations and preferences exist within one person. Nonetheless, clear clusters of dominance arose. Three resulting coexisting contemporary recurrences in narratives regarding the Dutch rural landscape bring an array of complexity, thus far referred to as the contemporary landscape identity complex. These clusters were grouped into utilitarian, romantic, and eco-scientific coalitions (objective 1). While much more attention could be dedicated to why these narratives came into existence, we have instead deliberated on their occurrence, interactions, and repercussions.

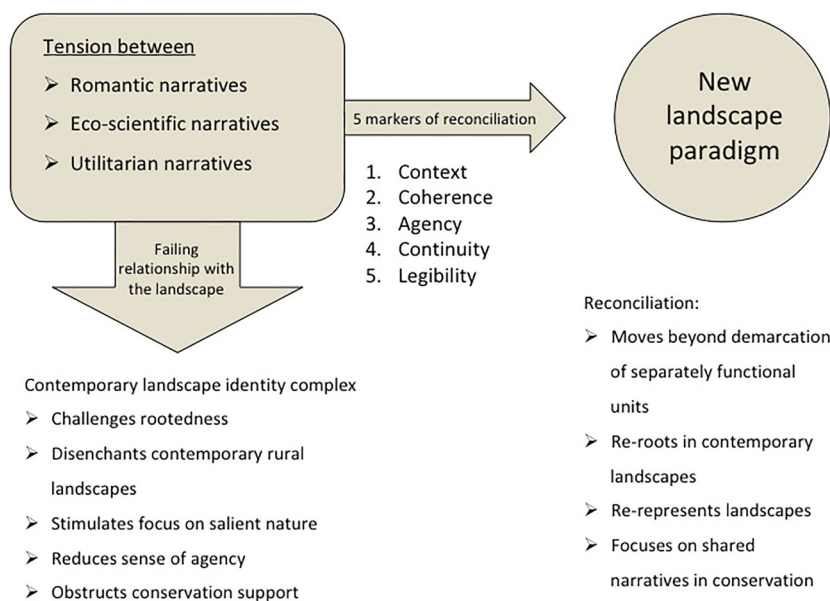


Figure 2. Graphic representation of the contemporary landscape identity complex and ingredients necessary for a narrative of reconciliation.

Figure 2 illustrates an abstracted oversight of the contemporary landscape identity complex, flowing from both literature and interviews. The dominance of and tension between singular narratives affect the landscape in practice through the severing of the cultural realm from the natural, the shifting of our gaze to solely salient nature, and disenchantment of contemporary landscapes; all drawbacks of the imbalanced power relation between current narratives. Furthermore, the hegemony of one singular narrative cluster can reduce agency, hinder rootedness, and obstruct conservation support (objective 2). If conservation policies wish to keep in touch with the human realm, such shortcomings should be kept in mind.

Otherwise, a failing relationship with the landscape at large negatively contributes to biodiversity loss, landscape fragmentation, and declining support for conservation efforts that engage solely in eco-scientific narratives (objective 2). Because of that, there is a need for a new conservation ethic with a narrative of reconciliation; harbouring plurality in the landscape, contextual and coherent transitions, practice-based agency, and nurturing the continuity and legibility of the landscape. In short, a narrative of reconciliation is based on context, coherence, agency, continuity, and legibility of the landscape, aiming for increased conservation support and a fitting and constructive contemporary identity. Finally, this landscape should be storied as such and part of that responsibility lies in the arts (objective 3).

The Bommelerwaard as a case study has proven a good example of that. The region, a hybrid amalgam of nature and culture, yet as a whole with inherent legibility and continuity with the past, displayed far less issues in contesting narratives than established in

earlier literature and displayed when other areas were discussed. Nevertheless, the Dutch landscape at large is not such a soft-bordered unit of a landscape. Imaginations of the landscape play a large role in that, since the contemporary landscape identity complex plays out predominantly in the way landscapes are imagined, occurring when participants were invited to contemplate the landscape and its alteration.

Drawing boundaries in that process, not only mental but also physical, to protect one's personal ideal, results in animosity and irreconcilable conceptions of landscape use. A conservation approach that transcends those boundaries and aims at transition, ambiguity and a diverse collective may be far more effective in safeguarding positive interactions when landscapes are changed for the benefit of nature.

Acknowledgements

We have enjoyed the privilege to meet with, and talk to, a wonderful collection of people from all sorts of disciplines and professions. Distinguished gratitude goes out to them for their willingness to be interviewed. Their insights and cooperation have been vital to this work. Special mention goes out to the late G. Verkuil. His life work of collected documents, oral histories, and many newspaper articles on the Bommelerwaard served as inspiration and the richest of sources for our investigation.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

Koen Arts  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6436-6499>

Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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Author biographies

Timothy Theodoor Marini Lam is a policy advisor at the Dutch Ministry of Agriculture. His area of research is the interstice between nature, culture and society.

Koen Arts is a lecturer in social dimensions of human-nature relationships.