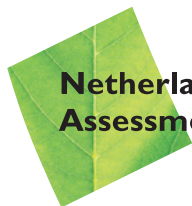


Nature balance 2007

Summary

Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency



**Netherlands Environmental
Assessment Agency**

Colophon

Nature Balance 2007, summary

© Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency (MNP), Bilthoven, September 2007

Original title: Natuurbalans 2007

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The complete publication, in Dutch, can be downloaded from the website www.mnp.nl, or a copy may be requested from reports@mnp.nl, citing the MNP publication number.

Parts of this publication may be cited in publications, providing the source is cited, in the form: Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency: the title of the publication and the date.

The Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency (Het Milieu- en Natuurplanbureau: MNP) provides the Dutch government with independent evaluations and studies on the quality of the physical residential environment and its influence on people, plants and animals. In this, the MNP constitutes the bridge between science and policymaking.

MNP-publication number 500402007

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Foreword

The Nature Balance is a report published annually by the Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency to overview trends in the pursuance of quality in nature and the landscape.

Just as in previous years, the Nature Balance came out in September in time for the opening of the Dutch parliament and bringing down the budget. This is an ideal moment in which to launch the transformation of cabinet ambitions for the environment, nature and the landscape into policymaking. Presentation at this time also paves the way for the ensuing parliamentary debate. By bringing out the Environmental Balance at the same time as the Nature Balance, MNP can strengthen its support of the cabinet and parliament in policy-making for the environment, nature and landscape in the Netherlands.

Alterra, part of the Wageningen University and Research Centre (WUR) and the Agricultural Economics Research Institute (LEI), have made important contributions to the analyses, which are largely supported by data made available through other organizations. A special word of thanks goes to Statistics Netherlands (CBS) and private nature data management organizations.

The basic data used for the 2007 Nature Balance were taken from the Environmental and nature compendium (www.milieuennatuurcompendium.nl), a co-production (in Dutch only) of MNP, CBS and the WUR.

Finally, please let me take this opportunity to thank everyone who has contributed to this publication.

Director of the Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency



Prof. Ir. N.D. van Egmond

SUMMARY

The landscapes and nature conservation areas of national and international importance in the Netherlands are becoming fragmented. This is not yet being prevented through the application of policy.

The value of National Landscapes with 'openness' as their core quality is being weakened by scattered built developments. The National Landscapes policy is being implemented in a vacuum. As a result, the National Landscapes are not yet being protected in line with the original policy objectives. Moreover, as the division of tasks between the provincial councils and central government has not yet fully crystallised, core landscape qualities such as openness are being further eroded. The new Spatial Planning Act which, comes into force on 1 January 2008, will in principle enable implementation of protection policies in line with their original objectives.

With the creation of the National Ecological Network (NEN), the total area of nature reserves and protected wildlife habitats is expanding. Nevertheless, the nature conservation areas remain so fragmented that the Netherlands will be unable to meet its international obligations on biodiversity conservation – even when the NEN has been completed. This would be possible, though, if the NEN was constructed differently, with more large contiguous areas. Such an alternative approach would require changing some of the planned sites within the NEN. Achieving this will require robust government steering.

The Dutch public say they attach great importance to the availability of green areas within easy reach of home and are also prepared to mobilise and to pay for them. Moreover, they think that recreation businesses, property developers and others should take greater responsibility for nature conservation.



Landscape

Green areas are being lost; unease about landscape quality

The area of Dutch countryside subject to little or no visual intrusion from buildings and infrastructure is dwindling. The province with the smallest remaining area of open green space is Zuid-Holland, where it exists mainly in small pockets (see Figure 1).

Civil society organisations and individual citizens are worried about increasing ‘clutter’ in the landscape. Civil society organisations argue that we should make the Netherlands more attractive. People and civil society organisations have very different views on what amounts to ‘clutter’, but often point to large developments such as business estates, housing developments and greenhouse complexes.

The demand for new homes, commercial and industrial estates and infrastructure will remain high in the near future as the population size, economic activity and mobility continue to rise. In addition, the growing trend towards smaller household sizes is continuing. All these developments will in future lead to further loss of open countryside.

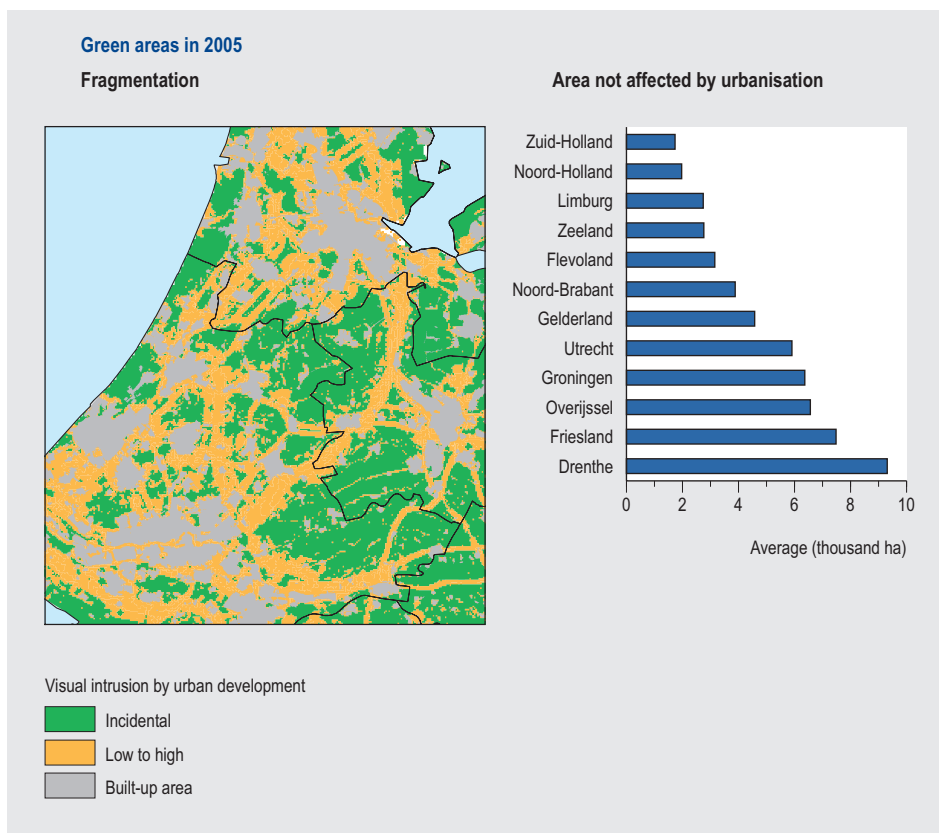


Figure 1 The average size of open green areas is smallest in the province of Zuid-Holland. Here the landscape is highly fragmented, degrading its core quality of ‘openness’.

Landscape quality is under pressure not only from encroaching buildings, fragmentation and clutter, but also from poor maintenance. Green landscape elements such as wooden banks, hedgerows and tree rows are under threat because they are poorly maintained or not maintained at all. In time, this will endanger regional landscape character.

Landscape protection via spatial planning a long way off

Since the adoption of the National Spatial Strategy, Dutch landscape policies have had two central objectives:

- secure the Government’s ambitions for the twenty National Landscapes;
- secure a basic level of landscape quality in the areas outside the National Landscapes.

The implementation of the policy for the National Landscapes is progressing according to the timetable agreed by central government and the provincial councils, but for a number of reasons it may still be a long time before the landscape is conserved and developed in line with these policy objectives. What are the reasons for this?

First of all, the National Spatial Strategy contains only very general definitions of the core qualities of the National Landscapes, and even the further elaborations by the provincial councils are not described in very concrete terms. This makes it difficult for local authorities to translate these core qualities into specific local plan policies and designations.

Second, the boundaries defined by the provinces offer the National Landscapes only limited protection against house building. Although a number of major regional housing sites have been kept outside the National Landscapes, this has led to situations in which more housing can be built in the region as a whole, and in the National Landscape itself,



Openness is one of the few concrete core qualities (Photo: Hans Farjon)

than before the designation of the National Landscape. This is because house building within the National Landscapes is permitted in order to meet the needs of local population growth, even though this had already been catered for in the regional housing sites. In these cases, therefore, the designated areas are not protected against building. In fact, more new homes can be built in the National Landscapes than before their designation. Third, revision of local land use plans has in the past proved to be a time-consuming process that can take ten years or more.

It will also take a long time before the basic landscape quality outside the National Landscapes is realised. Initial indications suggest that small local authorities lack the expertise, enthusiasm and financial resources to get initiatives off the ground.

Legislation in a vacuum

Given the vacuum between the National Spatial Strategy and translation of the policies and guidance it contains into local plans, the courts now review cases directly against the provisions of the National Spatial Strategy. In a number of cases the courts have ruled that plans to build in National Landscapes were in conflict with the National Spatial Strategy, either because building is only permitted to meet the needs of the local population, or because large commercial and industrial estates are prohibited, or because the plans are at variance with the designated core quality.

New Spatial Planning Act can protect landscapes; central and provincial government must take the initiative

The introduction of the new Spatial Planning Act in 2008 will give central and provincial government the tools they need to achieve the goals of landscape policy. They will be able to attach conditions to plans to build in the National Landscapes, such as compensatory measures and limits to the scale of housing and commercial sites, via provincial by-laws or national orders in council (general administrative orders). The initiative for this lies strictly with central and provincial government. If they fail to make use of these provisions in the new act, local authorities will not have to take them into account when preparing local plans. Protection and development of the landscape can be considerably speeded up under the new Spatial Planning Act. There is already a backlog of plans for sites in the National Landscapes, most of them drawn up years ago, before the National Landscapes existed. Central government and the provincial councils can use the new planning act to bring these plans more into line with the core landscape qualities.

Nature

Biodiversity objectives will not be fully achieved

The European Union, and by extension the Netherlands too, aims to halt the decline in biodiversity by 2010. Despite a few positive trends, the loss of biodiversity has not yet been brought to a standstill. Butterflies and meadow birds are declining in numbers and the number of species of breeding birds and butterflies classified as endangered or vulnerable on the Red List has risen over the last ten years (see Figure 2).

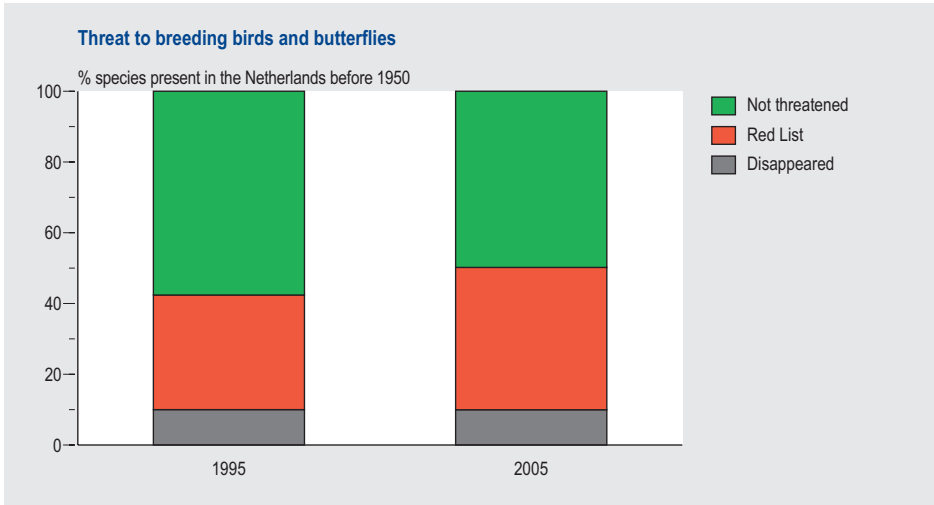


Figure 2 The number of endangered and vulnerable species on the Red List (breeding birds and butterflies) has risen over the last ten years. (Source: Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality)

It is unlikely that the loss of biodiversity will be stopped by 2010 because environmental conditions, water quality and land use conditions will have to be put right first. Although much has been achieved on this front over the last twenty to thirty years, particularly regarding environmental conditions, further efforts will be needed to remove the main constraints. For example, levels of nitrogen deposition are still too high, many nature conservation areas suffer from water table drawdown and ecosystems and habitats remain fragmented. Current policies have been unable to resolve these problems. Nevertheless, there are prospects for meeting biodiversity targets, although later than 2010. The key to this lies in the creation of large contiguous ecosystems.

Coordinated development of large conservation areas

As the National Ecological Network (NEN) is developed, the total area of nature reserves and protected wildlife habitats is expanding. But even when the NEN has been completed, nature in the Netherlands will largely be broken up into small areas. The spatial connectivity between these areas will still be insufficient to guarantee a sustainable future for species and habitats. This also applies to the species and habitats for which the Netherlands has obligations under EU agreements (see Figure 3).

Natura 2000 areas alone make up 45% of the NEN (excluding the major water bodies) and provide an insufficient area for all the protected Natura 2000 species and habitats. Important benefits for nature could be obtained if greater effort was made to use the NEN policy to create an interconnected network of large contiguous ecosystems. Large areas are needed to provide the space for natural processes to operate, to offset the effects of extreme weather caused by climate change, and to provide the space for species

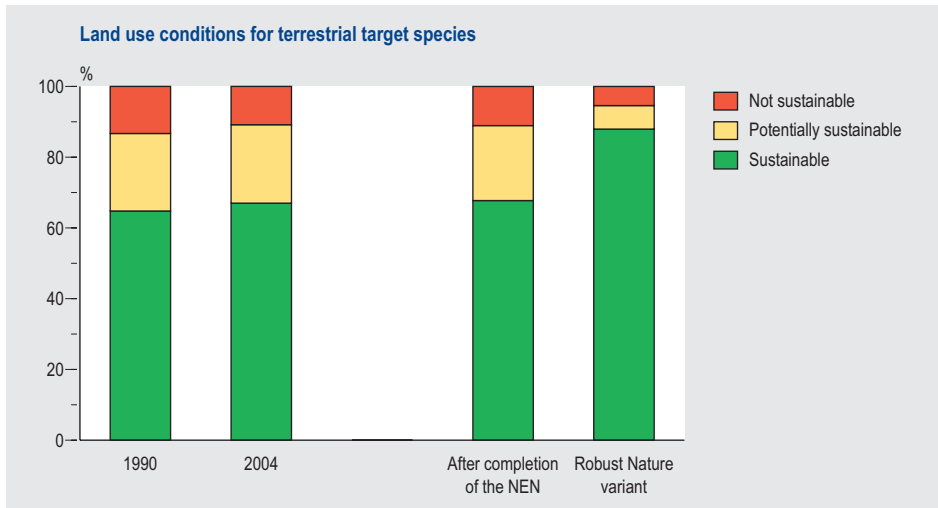


Figure 3 More internationally important species can survive if large conservation areas are assembled around Natura 2000 areas.

that can only survive in large areas, such as the Sea Eagle. Moreover, it is both easier and cheaper to secure the right environmental and water quality conditions in larger areas.

The Environmental Assessment Agency has developed a variant of the NEN built around a core formed by the Natura 2000 areas. This is the ‘Robust Nature’ variant in which almost all Natura 2000 species as well as nationally important species can be sustainably supported (see Figure 3). Species which are not guaranteed a sustainable future, even under the Robust Nature variant, are mainly the species that require such a large area of habitat that they are also dependent on areas outside the Netherlands.

The creation of large areas of contiguous ecosystems is not possible within the current boundaries of the NEN. A decision to create large conservation areas therefore implies adjustment of the NEN boundaries.

To achieve the objectives of national and international nature conservation policies the environmental and water quality constraints will also have to be resolved. This could be achieved by designating zones adjacent to the Natura 2000 areas where agricultural activities and urban development would be adapted to meet the requirements of the Natura 2000 areas. This would often involve hydrological restoration or raising water levels, which is difficult to combine with conventional agricultural practices. Financial compensation and long-term security would be required so that farmers could adapt their management practices. Nature also benefits from continuity.

To bring about the necessary conditions in nature conservation areas, it will often be necessary to enter into agreements with the neighbouring countries, for example on river and stream catchments.



Various species, such as Montague's Harrier, need large areas of habitat for their long-term survival. (Photo: Martijn de Jonge)

Nature for people

Insufficient recreational green space

There is too little green space for walking and cycling, especially in the Randstad. At least 40,000 ha of woodland is needed to meet the demand, whereas the policy objective for 2013 is 16,000 ha. Owing to rising demand due to population growth, the ageing of the population and changes in recreational behaviour, a further 12,000 ha of recreational green space will be needed between now and 2020.

Not only should there be enough green space, but it must also be accessible. Greater use is made of the countryside for recreation if it more accessible to cyclists and walkers from the city. The amount of recreational green space in urban neighbourhoods is also inadequate. The target norm of 75 m² per dwelling is not being met in more than half of the 31 biggest towns and cities. Moreover, the amount of green space per dwelling is declining in five of the eighteen towns and cities where provision is already below the target norm (see Figure 4).

The Dutch value nature

The Dutch population consider policies to protect existing habitats to be important or very important. There is also support for nature education and habitat creation/restoration. A majority of the population thinks that not only the government but also recreation businesses, developers and individual citizens should take responsibility for conserving and developing nature. More than 40% of people are prepared to pay

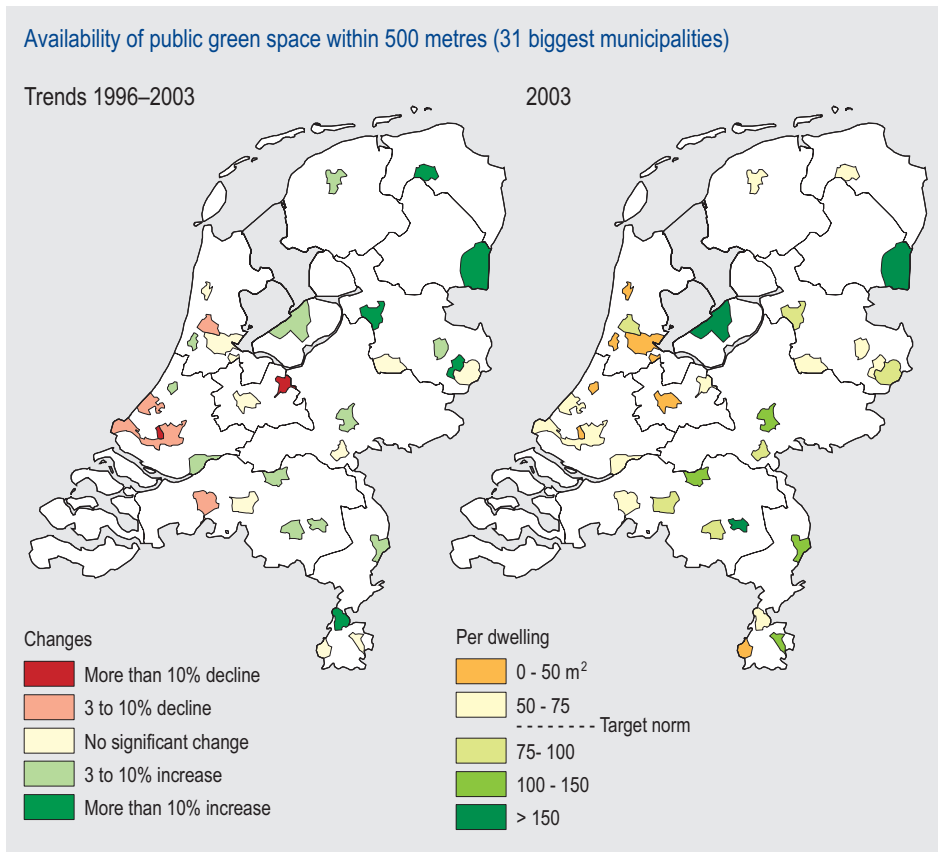


Figure 4 The amount of green space per dwelling (within 500 metres) in more than half of the 31 biggest municipalities is below the target norm of 75 m². The situation improved between 1996 and 2003, particularly outside the Randstad, but in many Randstad municipalities the amount of green space has remained constant or even declined. (Source: Statistics Netherlands)

higher taxes for this. The level of public support for nature conservation is also high. About three-quarters of those over sixteen support nature conservation, about half are occasional visitors to natural environments and about 15% are nature conservation volunteers. However, people want very different things from nature. Older people and ethnic Dutch residents are the most frequent visitors to natural countryside areas. Young people are the least frequent visitors.

Environmental education works; funding under pressure

Environmental education is one of the methods used by central government to influence people's attitudes and behaviour regarding nature. Instruction in primary schools and provision of public information and education in National Parks is effective. Pupils that have received more environmental education at primary school have a more positive attitude to nature in later life. National Parks with a visitor centre reach more people via information provision and education than parks without a visitor centre.

The environmental education centres are important for nature study in primary schools because they put together teaching packages and organise excursions. It is not clear for how long they will be able to continue providing this service because the funding of these centres is vulnerable to local authority cutbacks.

Observations from nature and landscape conservation practice

House building can finance local authority plans

For this Nature Balance three areas (Arkemheen-Eemland, the IJssel delta and the Veluwe) were studied and observations made on actual practice. In two cases, the IJssel delta and Arkemheen-Eemland, there are plans for large housing developments. In both cases, important motives for the building projects are not only the fear of a shortage of homes and business estates in future, but also the desire to finance a range of other plans from the receipts from housing developments.

Integrated approach adds value

Both in the IJssel delta and the Veluwe the parties involved are enthusiastic about the integrated approach to spatial planning. In the IJssel delta the parties have avoided a compartmentalised planning process which would have resulted in uncoordinated spatial development. The integrated planning of land uses and functions has resulted in a coherent plan in which the separate elements strengthen each other (the whole is more than the sum of the parts). Spatial constraints and the construction of major infrastructure (the Hanzelijn rail connection and a motorway) have proved to be important incentives for adopting an integrated approach. The 'Space for the Rivers' national spatial planning key decision prohibits building in the IJssel delta. Natura 2000 restricts the possibilities for extensions to recreational complexes in the Veluwe region.

In the third case study, Arkemheen-Eemland, the spatial plans were not integrated and the parties involved have found that separate decision-making processes lead to conflicting planning objectives (house building, National Landscape, NEN, disposal of dredged material). Although an integrated approach can deliver added value, this may be at the cost of sectoral objectives because compromises have to be struck. An example is the loss of important meadow bird habitat in the IJssel delta.

Crucial role for provincial councils

The three case studies highlight the crucial role of the provincial tier of government. On one hand, the provincial councils have to weigh up often conflicting planning objectives and land use proposals. On the other hand, they have proved capable of initiating area-based planning processes and taking on a coordinating role.