

SUMMARY

During the last few decades urban expansion in the Netherlands has led to a reduction in the quality of Dutch landscapes. Historic features continue to disappear. The government's new National Spatial Strategy identifies twenty National Landscapes where the implementation of landscape and heritage policies will be concentrated. This approach appears to be a promising one, on the condition that a clear assessment framework is developed. This is all the more relevant because the government has also decided on a limited regime of planning protection for the National Landscapes. The provincial councils, which will be responsible for pursuing the policy and have a central coordinating role, now face the challenge of developing a vision for implementing national landscape policies and ensuring that they are translated into regional and local plans. Calls for clear objectives and firm direction from government have also been made with respect to other areas of nature and landscape policy, particularly for the development of green recreational areas near the cities.

Following a swift start during the 1980s the development of the Randstad Green Structure (the green recreational areas within the Randstad conurbation in the west of the country) has stagnated in recent years. The main reasons are the lack of a clearly defined planning regime and, partly as a consequence of this, the rapidly rising land values. In parts of the Randstad new housing developments are expanding at a rapid rate, outpacing the creation of green recreational areas. The recreational areas that have been realised are already intensively used by urban residents.

The picture of ecosystem quality in the Netherlands is a varied one, with large differences between ecosystem types and between species. Bat populations, for example, are doing well, whereas many butterfly species are in a precarious situation. The National Ecological Network of protected areas is gradually taking shape, but connections between the various areas are still insufficiently developed. The target dates for achieving environmental and water quality objectives in protected areas have been pushed back and progress has been slow, particularly in tackling the problems associated with lowered ground water tables.

The Netherlands has made much progress with designating protected areas under European legislation. However, these areas too are under threat from acidification, nitrogen deposition and lowered ground water tables. Much has been achieved in the 25 years following the introduction of the EU Birds Directive, but there are exceptions, especially the poor state of the meadow bird populations. For meadow birds and geese, opportunities to implement area-based initiatives in combination with landscape policies remain unexploited. Initiatives like these could combine the resources of a range of committed individuals and organizations.

The various players active in the field of landscape and nature conservation are highly committed. Besides the nature conservation organizations, property developers, farmers and the European Union have an important part to play. National government could make greater use of these developments by setting clear goals and giving these organizations greater scope for putting them into practice.

Landscape and land use

Further decline in landscape quality and loss of historic features

During the last century major changes in the landscape were due mainly to the modernization of agricultural techniques and practices. Nowadays this role has been largely taken over by the construction of new housing areas and business parks. This new development has led to a further deterioration of landscape quality, an example being the loss of historic patterns and cultural features in the landscape.

Landscape policy delivers variable results

Dutch landscape policy contains two tracks. The first track is a restrictive policy for the conservation of landscape quality; the second is geared to development. An example of the conservation strategy is the national policy that has been pursued for more than forty years to prevent the cities in the Randstad from growing together. This policy has been successful in preserving open landscapes in various areas, such as the Gagelpolder near Utrecht and the Bloemendalerpolder near Amsterdam.

The development-oriented policy track features prominently in the policy document 'Nature for People, People for Nature', published in 2000 by the then Ministry of Agriculture, Nature Management and Fisheries. This policy seeks to raise the quality of Dutch landscapes. Many of the actions being pursued under this development-oriented policy are still in the planning stage. They include landscape development plans as well as plans for conserving and restoring valuable features and characteristics in a development and design-oriented way.

Initiatives in National Landscapes are promising but risky

The national landscape policy contained in the National Spatial Strategy and Agenda for a Living Countryside policy documents is focused on twenty National Landscapes. The government defines a number of core qualities found in these National Landscapes. Core qualities such as 'openness', 'landforms' and 'field patterns, parcelization and watercourses' require a policy geared primarily to conservation and the incorporation of such features into existing and future land uses. The strategy for other core qualities will require a stronger element of restoration, renewal and management.

The government has delegated much of the responsibility for filling in the detail of these policies to the provincial councils. Time will tell whether the development-oriented policies will be successful in preserving and enhancing the core qualities of the National Landscapes, and whether the provincial councils have been able to put the policy into effect as required. Their role includes the application of policy tools provided for by the revised Spatial Planning Act, which is currently before Parliament, to ensure that these core qualities are afforded protection in local land use plans.

Implementation of the Randstad Green Structure faltering

Central government has been working on the creation of the Randstad Green Structure for more than twenty years. The green recreational areas already in place attract

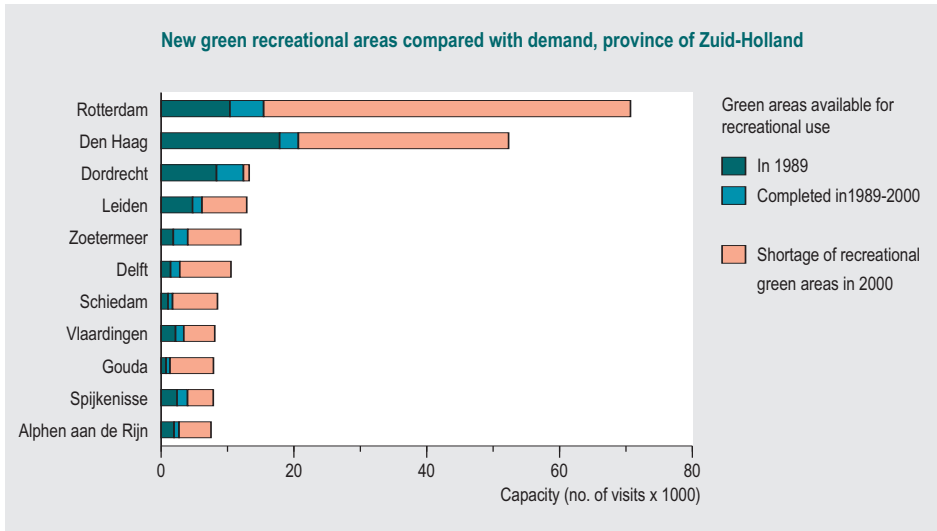


Figure 1 The towns and cities in the province of Zuid-Holland still face an acute shortage of green recreational areas.

many visitors, but progress with developing new areas has faltered in recent years. The main reasons for this are the lack of a clearly defined planning regime and, partly as a consequence of this, the rapidly rising land values.

The government intends to transfer responsibility for green open space around the cities to the provincial councils. However, the role to be played by the provinces and the statutory powers and instruments to be put at their disposal have not yet been clearly defined. Property developers have taken advantage of this transitional period to acquire considerable land holdings in strategic areas of the buffer zones around the cities. In parts of the Randstad new housing developments are expanding at a rapid rate, outstripping the creation of green recreational and nature areas. This can be seen near Zoetermeer, for example, where the planned Bentwoud recreational area has failed to materialize.

Green projects in the Randstad need firm direction

Currently a plethora of organizations and groups are involved in green projects in the Randstad and a multitude of plans are produced for each project. Despite considerable consultation and discussion, the roles and intentions of the various parties involved remain unclear. In future, firm direction, better coordination and effective cooperation, particularly with property developers, will be needed to speed up the development and realization of green projects near the cities. The major impediments to this are amending land use designations in local plans, acquiring land and financing public-private projects. The provincial councils are clearly in the best position to coordinate and direct this process, given that they have access to the necessary funds via the Rural Areas Investment Budget. The challenge now facing the provinces is to

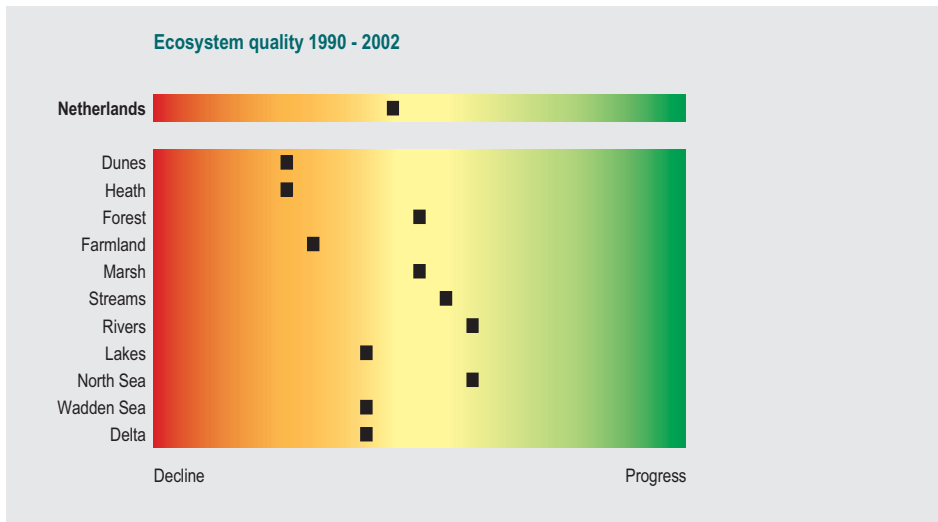


Figure 2 A variable trend in ecosystem quality in the Netherlands since 1990 (Source: Statistics Netherlands and NGOs collaborating in the Ecological Monitoring Network, with additional data from the National Institute for Inland Water Management and Waste Water Treatment and the National Institute for Coastal and Marine Management).

develop a vision for the landscape policy that provides a basis for landscape conservation in some areas and the realization of green space in combination with urban development in other areas.

Nature in the Netherlands

Trends vary according to ecosystem type and species

The area of forest and woodland has expanded; the areas of other ecosystem types continue to decline. The picture of ecosystem quality in the Netherlands is also a varied one. The condition of streams and rivers in particular is improving. This is due not only to improved water quality, but also in places to the emerging benefits of habitat development projects.

The trends in the state of other ecosystem types are less positive. The impacts of acidification and nitrogen deposition on heaths and dunes can still be seen in the dominance of grasses and the growth of shrubs. Some species that cannot survive in habitats subject to eutrophication, such as the Tawny Pipit, are on the verge of disappearing from the Netherlands. Many farmland species, including various meadow birds, are in difficulty.

Clear differences can also be seen between species groups. Bats, for example, show a positive trend. Butterfly populations, however, face a much more uncertain future: two thirds of the species in the Netherlands declined between 1990 and 2000.

Development of the National Ecological Network continues, but on a riskier course

The Nature Policy Plan introduced the concept of the National Ecological Network (NEN) in 1990. The goal is to realize an interconnected network of good quality nature reserves and conservation areas by 2018.

The present government has made some alterations to the way the NEN is assembled and managed. The most obvious change is the shift towards less public acquisition of land, coupled with greater scope for wildlife and landscape management by private landowners and farmers. So far, however, management by private landowners has had very limited success and the growth in the area of land under on-farm conservation schemes is tailing off. Central government has abandoned responsibility for establishing the wildlife corridors. It has also dropped its commitment to acquire the small pieces of land needed to joint together existing nature conservation areas to form larger areas. However, a limited budget will be retained for resolving issues that stand in the way of achieving an integrated management of large areas.

Spatial connectivity of ecosystems remains the goal, but results slow to materialize

Lowland forest and fenland ecosystems will remain highly fragmented even after the NEN has been established. The spatial connectivity of forest and woodland ecosystems in the higher areas of the country, which was already relatively good in 1990, has further improved.

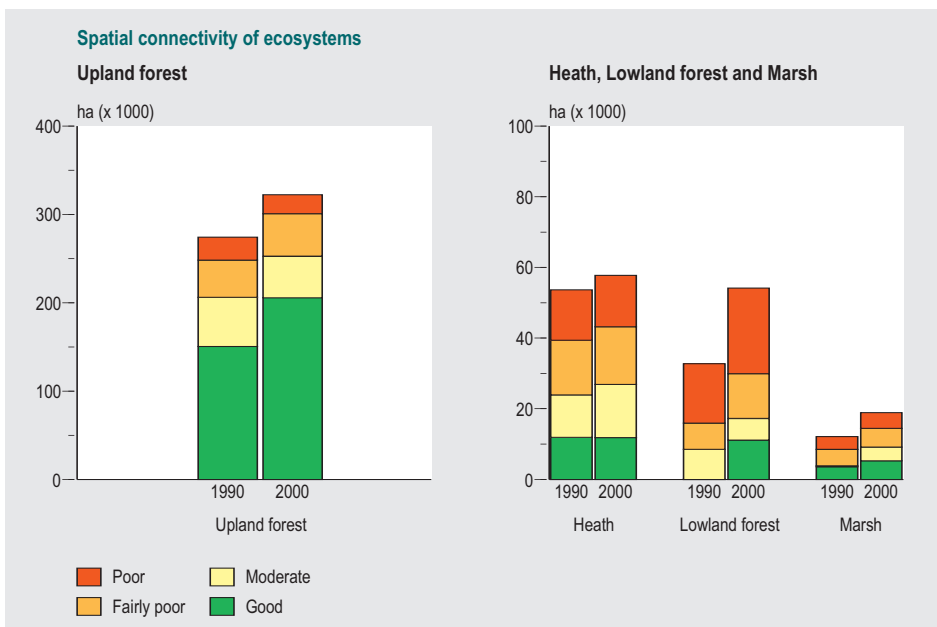


Figure 3 The spatial connectivity of forests and woodland ecosystems in the higher parts of the Netherlands, which was already relatively good in 1990, has further improved. Lowland forest and marsh ecosystems, however, remain highly fragmented.

The policy document 'Nature for People, People for Nature' proposes establishing robust corridors to link the large nature conservation areas together, but so far progress has been slow. The provincial councils were uncertain about the levels of government grants available for the corridors, but the Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality and the provinces have since come to an agreement, allowing implementation to proceed.

Further environmental improvements in the National Ecological Network required

In recent years environmental conditions in some parts of the National Ecological Network have improved, water quality being a case in point. Nevertheless, environmental quality in many areas still needs to be improved to bring the quality of nature reserves and conservation areas up to the levels intended by policy. In recent environmental policy documents, though, the target date for achieving the quality objectives in parts of the NEN has been put back. The policy document 'Nature for People, People for Nature' (2000) states that in 2018–2020 environmental quality should have reached a level at which it forms no obstacle to establishing the ecological objectives within the NEN. In the recently published 'Agenda for a Living Countryside' the date when environmental and water quality in the protected areas under the Habitats and Birds Directives must be up to standard is set at 2015, but the government's final date for the other areas of the NEN is 2027. These last two dates reflect those in the EU Water Framework Directive.

Zoning: benefits for nature and lower costs through clustering

Dutch environmental policy contains provisions for establishing environmental zones around nature reserves to combat local environmental problems, especially those caused by ammonia emissions. Restrictions are imposed on ammonia emissions and/or the expansion of livestock farms within a certain distance of the protected nature conservation area. The benefits of zoning are greatest for small, vulnerable areas of high nature conservation value that are subject to high levels of nitrogen deposition. An area of highly fragmented and vulnerable habitat requires a relatively large area of buffer zone, and this is reflected in the costs. Clustering these areas together to form larger units, for example by redrawing the local boundaries of the NEN, would considerably reduce costs. Zoning around large nature conservation areas is especially beneficial for vulnerable or valuable habitats on the edges of these areas.

Restoring ground water tables at an impasse

The Agenda for a Living Countryside policy document makes solving the problem of lowered ground water tables a priority, particularly within the National Ecological Network. The government indicates that it expects the provincial and municipal councils and the water boards to take vigorous action to combat the lowering of ground water tables where this causes ecological damage. It is not clear, however, what measures the government plans to take to break the impasse that for years has frustrated attempts to restore lowered ground water tables. About 25% of the area of

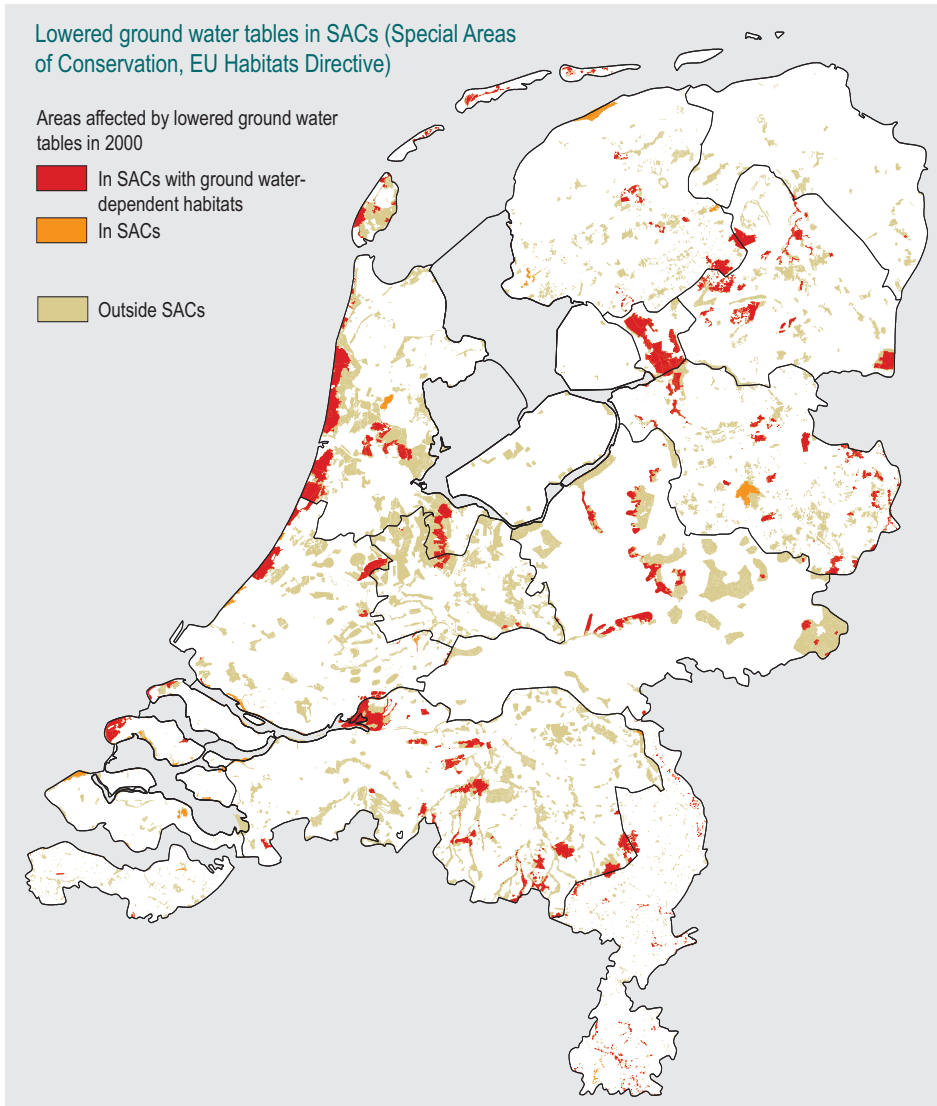


Figure 4 About 25% of the area of habitats affected by lowered ground water tables lies within Special Areas of Conservation (EU Habitats Directive).

affected habitat identified by the provincial councils in 2000 lies within Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) designated under the EU Habitats Directive. For these areas the Water Framework Directive states that the conditions required to support these habitats must be met by 2015 at the latest.

Natura 2000 areas protect Dutch species and habitats

In recent years the Dutch government has been successful in proposing and designating areas for protection under the EU Habitats and Birds Directives. These areas will become part of the European ecological network of conservation areas, Natura 2000.

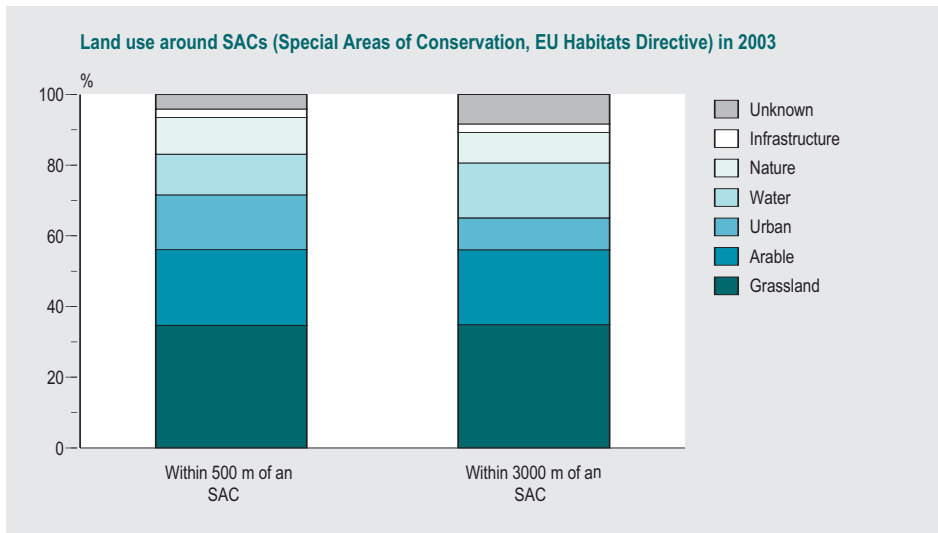


Figure 5 Land use in areas surrounding Special Areas of Conservation (EU Habitats Directive) is mostly agricultural or urban.

Although the Netherlands is a small country, it possesses a relatively high diversity of ecosystem and habitat types, which is reflected in the list of proposed Special Areas of Conservation submitted to the European Commission. These include 51 natural habitat types, almost a quarter of all those on the European list. The Netherlands contains important areas of salt meadow, coastal dunes, dry sand heath on inland dunes, natural eutrophic lakes and raised bogs.

Now the Dutch sites are on the European map, attention has shifted to the quality of these areas. An important consequence of the Habitats and Birds Directives is the demands they make regarding the impacts of surrounding activities on the quality of the protected natural habitats (external impacts). This places restrictions on activities outside Natura 2000 areas that influence the species and natural habitats these areas were designated to protect. About 15% of the land within 500 metres of the Special Areas of Conservation (Habitats Directive) in the Netherlands is urban land and 55% is agricultural land.

Twenty-five years of the Birds Directive: the foundation has been laid

This year the Birds Directive is 25 years old. Taking stock, we see that across Europe as a whole the designation of Special Protection Areas has proved difficult. At the moment only Belgium, Denmark and the Netherlands have more or less completed the designation of these areas. The majority of the habitats of the Dutch populations of listed species are protected under the Birds Directive. Whether this will ensure the sustainable conservation of these species will depend in part on the control over external influences on the protected areas.

Within the Special Conservation Areas, 40% of the breeding bird species have increased in numbers. But this positive trend has been accompanied by some negative developments. At least 17 species are now less numerous in the Netherlands than they were when the Birds Directive first came into effect. Ten species of breeding birds have shown a decline or further decline in numbers during the last ten years, including Avocet, Great Reed Warbler, Short-eared Owl and Hen Harrier.

In the EU many wetland species have shown an increasing or stable trend. It has recently become clear that farmland birds in particular have sharply declined in numbers throughout Europe. In the Netherlands this applies especially to meadow birds.

Meadow birds in decline despite thirty years of policy measures

Policies to protect meadow birds have not been very effective. Most meadow bird species show a decline, and for some species the situation is critical. Snipe and Ruff, which are only found in nature reserves, are doing poorly; the numbers of Black-tailed Godwit are falling across large areas of farmland; and since the 1980s three-quarters of the breeding population of Skylark has been lost.

The policy for meadow birds has a thirty-year history. Despite this continuous effort, policy objectives have shifted over time. The goal of ensuring sustainable populations of meadow birds has gradually slipped from view, even on sites managed by nature conservation organizations. For example, habitat development projects on flood plain grasslands have led to the emergence of habitat types that are less suitable for meadow birds.

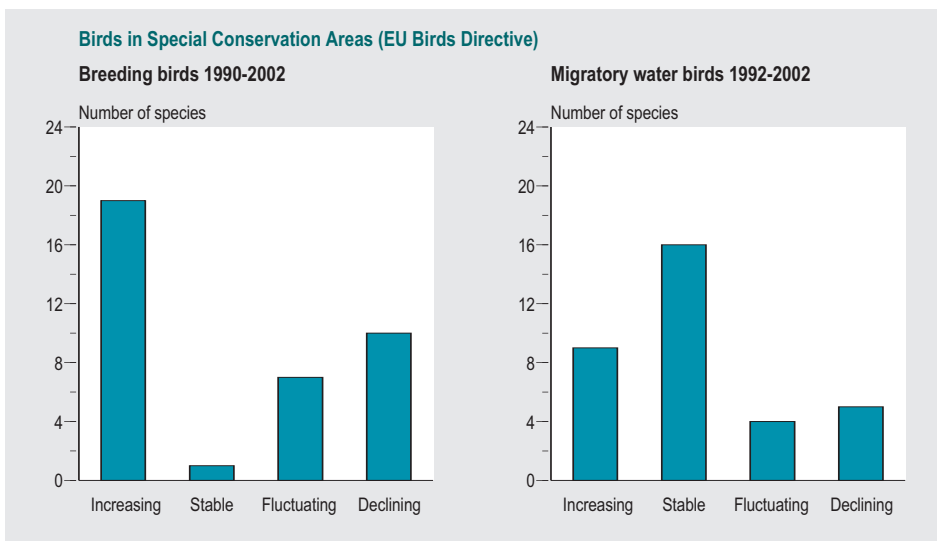


Figure 6 In Special Conservation Areas the populations of many breeding birds and winter visitors show a positive or stable trend. Fifteen species are declining (Sources: Sovon, Statistics Netherlands).

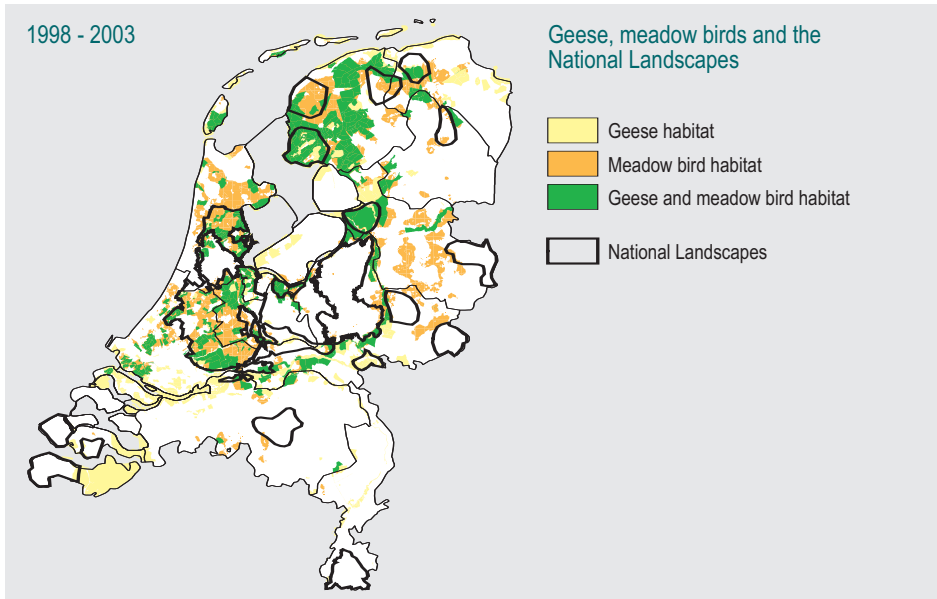


Figure 7 A number of National Landscapes identified in the National Spatial Strategy contain important areas for meadow birds and geese.

Opportunities for an area-based and integrated approach

The protection of meadow birds and other species, such as geese, requires an area-based approach. Populations of meadow birds are best maintained by concentrating efforts in large core areas. It is essential that all the required conditions are optimized together: the payments for land management, preservation of the open landscape and the right ground water levels. The obvious partners for area-based cooperation are farmers and nature management organizations. Various such groups are already working on the ground, with farmers often playing a significant role.

New policy developments also offer opportunities. The area-based approach for meadow birds and geese combines well with the policy for the National Landscapes: a number of designated National Landscapes contain important habitats for meadow birds and/or geese. Serious attention to preserving core qualities in these areas, such as openness, would improve prospects for meadow birds and geese, with greater benefits if central government funding is concentrated in the National Landscapes. Another option is to channel EU payments into 'green services' in the National Landscapes, such as meadow bird and geese management schemes. Such measures could also contribute to the protection of other species groups, such as plants, insects, amphibians, reptiles, fish and mammals.

Actors and policy

Widespread commitment to nature and the landscape

Many people in the Netherlands are actively involved in conserving nature and the landscape across a wide range of activities. Besides the well-known actors like nature conservation organizations, government authorities and volunteers – new actors such as property developers and farmers have become involved in landscape and nature management schemes. Despite the traditional conflicts between these actors, their interests increasingly overlap and coalitions are beginning to emerge.

The policy document ‘Nature for People, People for Nature’ (2000) places great emphasis on broadening public support for nature and nature conservation policies. The current government intends to devolve more responsibility to lower tiers of government and to individual citizens. The high level of support among the Dutch population for nature and the landscape would seem to provide a favourable basis for this.

The nature conservation organizations play an important role, in part because they can always appeal to European regulations to force the Dutch authorities to implement and enforce the Nature Conservation Act and the Flora and Fauna Act, which are based largely on the Habitats and Birds Directives.

Need for direction and continuity

Nature conservation organizations, property developers and others demand a transparent policy framework that provides clear guidance and coordination of action. They look to government to provide this. An example of such a framework is the National Ecological Network. Besides direction and coordination, these actors also want continuity, which is hard to find in landscape policies. Reactions to the scrapping of funding for pilot projects, in which regional actors have played a vigorous role, suggest this will have a disastrous effect on the involvement of civil society organizations. Although concentrating central government resources in the National Landscapes may create a more solid foundation, what is lacking are clear agreements on the division of tasks between central government and the provincial councils and on monitoring progress against more precisely formulated core qualities.

Civil society organizations need to have a clear indication of their scope for action, for example within frameworks defined by the European Union. The users of land near Natura 2000 areas, for example, need to know what the restrictions on external impacts mean for them in concrete terms.

The coordinating role may fall to different organizations depending on the aspect of policy involved. It is important that the results achieved by the coordinating body are evaluated at the next level up. The performance of central government’s nature conservation policies, for example, is evaluated by the European Commission; the results of an area-based process conducted by a provincial authority should be evaluated by

central government against substantive goals, such as the realization of the National Ecological Network.

Prospects for a policy for involving private participation

Coalitions are forming not only between different 'green' interests, but also between development and conservation interests. The government could pursue its policy of encouraging participation by other actors more successfully if it made better use of these coalitions. Among the beneficiaries would be the National Ecological Network and the National Landscapes, the main planks of national nature policies. Central government is the most likely candidate for making a major contribution to area-based processes, in the form of land holdings, money or regulations, which may include the use of European resources (both financial and statutory).

At the core of this policy is the reliability of government. It is important that central government makes its intentions clear and provides clear frameworks and rules for action for area-based projects. Within these frameworks, other actors (government authorities and civil society organizations) would then have the freedom to achieve these goals the best way they can, whether this involves a mosaic management of grasslands for meadow birds, the 'red for green' approach in the Randstad (financing green areas from the returns on property development) or an area-based approach to tackling eutrophication and restore lowered ground water tables. Government is also expected to play a facilitating role, for example by making European funding available. The challenge is to do this in a way that respects European objectives as well as the wishes and interests of regional actors.