

Landscape protection in the Dutch polder

Joep Dirxx
Wageningen University & Research Centre
Statutory Research Tasks Unit for Nature and Environment
joep.dirxx@wur.nl

Introduction

The role of researchers working in policy assessments, is to a certain extent comparable with the role the small child plays in Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale about the Emperor's new clothes. It is this little child that makes the crowd aware that the emperor does not wear any clothes at all. In assessing landscape policy, we often come to a comparable conclusion. Policy measures turn out to be not wearing any clothes at all.

In the last few decades the Dutch government has produced several documents on spatial planning, rural land planning and landscape planning. In all these documents the importance of the existing values of the Dutch landscape are being recognized and targets on the preservation of these landscape values are being formulated. Nevertheless hardly any of these targets turn out to have been achieved.

The result is a great loss of landscape values. The quality of the Dutch landscape has become an issue in the public debate, as is illustrated by a sharp increase in the number of newspaper articles on the so called 'disruption' of the landscape (figure 1).

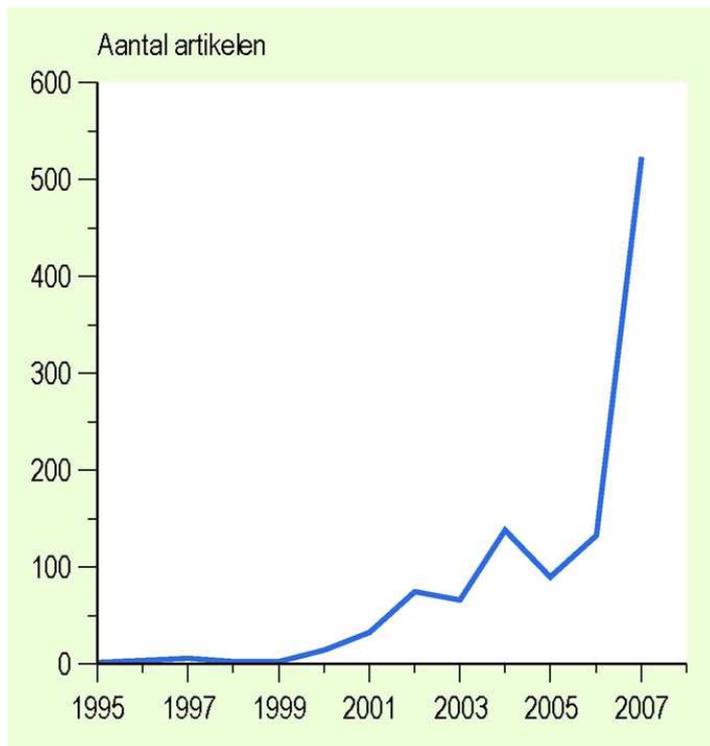


Figure 1 The number of newspaper articles (aantal artikelen) about the disruption of the Dutch landscape has increased considerably (MNP, 2007).

In 2006 the Dutch government decided on a new policy document of on spatial strategy, the *Nota Ruimte*. In this *Nota Ruimte* 20 National Landscapes are being appointed (figure 2). These are considered to provide an answer to the rapid loss of landscape quality. The areas assigned are supposed to accommodate the most important landscape values from an international or national point of view. Some of the National Landscapes are on the UNESCO World Heritage list. For

each individual National Landscape the features that have to be preserved are being assigned as so called core qualities.

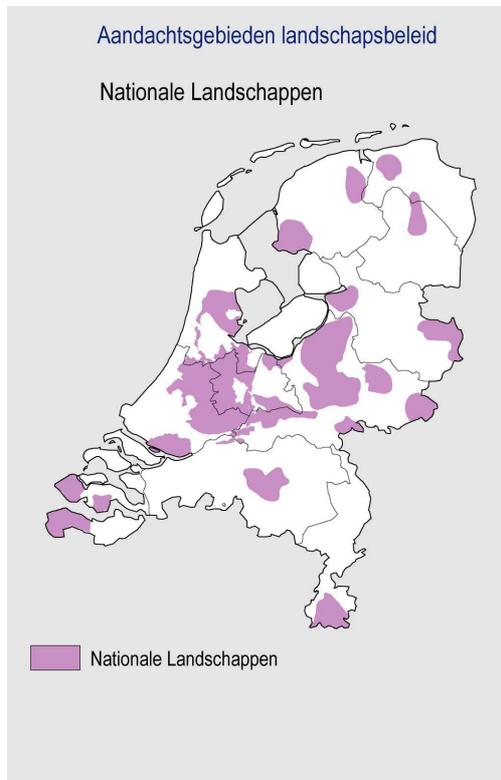


Figure 2 In the Nota Ruimte 20 National Landscapes (Nationale Landschappen) have been assigned.

The idea of National Landscapes as a means for preserving the quality of the Dutch landscape meets support in society as well as from the independent advisory boards (MNP, 2004; RLG, 2005). There is however doubt on the implementation and instrumentation of the National Landscapes.

The question that rises is whether the National Landscapes as they are elaborated in the Nota Ruimte, will indeed be able to withstand the pressure urbanization and an intensifying agriculture put on the Dutch landscape.

The facts are not encouraging as is shown by a quick scan of already existing plans for development of housing and industrial estates in those National Landscapes for which the open character is one of the core qualities (MNP, 2007). The graph shows that in all but one of these National Landscapes, the open character is being threatened (figure 3).

In my paper I will try to provide an answer to the question whether the concept of National Landscapes will achieve the desired effect, what may be causing possible failure, and what can be done to improve the concept and make it work.

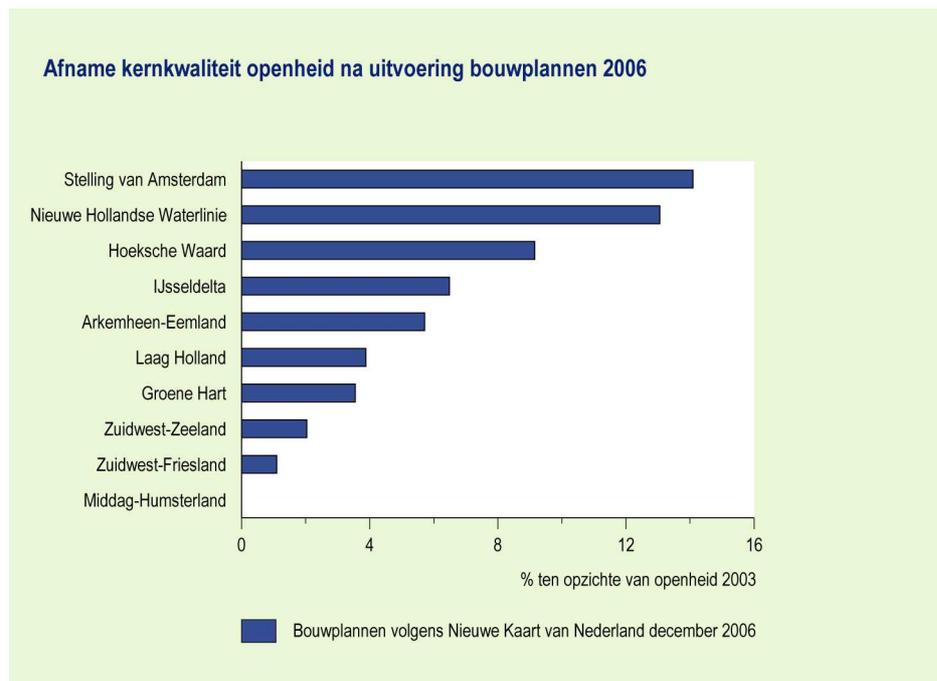


Figure 3 In 10 National Landscapes the open character (open karakter) of the landscape is to be preserved. The open character in these National Landscapes is however threatened by the existing plans for building new housing or industrial estates. The graph shows to what extent the open spaces in these 10 National Landscapes will decrease as a percentage of the existing open spaces in 2003 (MNP, 2007).

Method

The research is based upon case studies in areas in which plans are being developed that might frustrate the realization of targets the national government has put on landscape preservation (Dirkx et al., 2007). In each case study we have analyzed the planning process in order to recover the factors that are determining the outcome and the role that targets of the national government play in this process.

The case studies consisted of document analyses and interviews with the participants in the planning process.

The analyses is based on the pluricentric perspective. This is a concept in which the government is not seen as a single actor, but as a multitude of actors, working both inside and outside the government. These actors collaborate and negotiate to meet their objectives. Decisions are supposed to be taken in policy networks and arrangements including representatives of the government, private sector, NGO's and civilians. These representatives depend upon each other to meet their objectives (e.g. Allison, 1971). In this perspective, there are several factors distinguished that determine the outcome of a decision making process. The research aimed to distinguish the most important factors.

Results: The case Arkemheen-Eemland as an example

One of our case studies was carried out in the National Landscape Arkemheen-Eemland, located in the centre of the Netherlands in the province Utrecht. Because this case is representative for the results that have lead to our conclusions, It will here be used as an example.

Arkemheen-Eemland is a peat reclamation landscape. The open character of the landscape is one of the core qualities.

The implementation of National Landscapes is decentralized. The provinces have been asked to implement the National Landscapes in their territory: elaborate the policy plans with measures to be taken to preserve the core qualities and draw the precise boundaries of the National Landscapes that in the Nota Ruimte only have been broadly located.

The province of Utrecht has decided on a boundary for Arkemheen-Eemland that is criticized. The boundary as it is drawn will enable a further extension of the new housing estate Vathorst near Amersfoort. In this extension 3000 new houses are to be build.

The extension is considered to be a threat to the open character of Arkemheen-Eemland. It will almost divide the National Landscape into two parts. The opponents claim that the boundary conflicts with the National Landscape status of the area and that the province should have drawn a boundary that would not have enabled the extension of Vathorst.

The question in the case study Arkemheen-Eemland is how the decision on the boundary was established.

One of the aspects that turned out to be of importance is that the implementation of the National Landscapes did not start with an empty sheet on the drawing table. The development of plans in the area involved started well before the area was assigned as a National Landscape. Therefore new policy had to be implemented in plans that were already being developed.

Provinces are to a great extent depending on municipalities to realize their plans. In that respect they also face the need to meet the demands of the municipalities. The province Utrecht involved the municipalities in the decision making process on Arkemheen-Eemland, and has obviously taken their demands into account.

Due to the fact that there was already planning in progress in the area, the municipality of Amersfoort already entered into liabilities with other parties. This restricted its willingness to alter its plans for the further extension of Vathorst. Because doing so, in order to meet the demands of the National Landscape status of the area, would have meant that Amersfoort would have to buy off those liabilities, which would have put a great pressure on the municipality budget.

An other aspect we observed is that the province of Utrecht is being asked to implement inconsistent ambitions. The central government is not only asking to implement several National Landscapes, but also asks to realize an extensive amount of new housing estates. The central government has not geared its targets which leaves the considerations to the provinces.

In order to meet the demands on new housing estates the province of Utrecht has formulated its own policy plan in which a residential estate at the location of the extension of Vathorst is assigned. Obviously the province has decided not to draw a boundary around Arkemheen-Eemland that would interfere with her own policy on new housing estates.

The freedom to do so, is created by the lack of directions on the implementation of National Landscapes in the Nota Ruimte.

In view of the lack of directions, it is remarkable that the central government has not actively participated in the debate on the boundaries of Arkemheen-Eemland.

Conclusions

The Dutch polder model, the consensus policy in socio-economic matters, is world famous. It This is supposed to be the explanation for the economic prosperity the Dutch were enjoying until recently.

The polder model is supposed to have its origins in the history of the Dutch polders. There the inhabitants were forced to cooperate with each other and to reach consensus about matters concerning dikes and water management, just because they would individually not be able to protect their farms and houses from flooding (Pleij, 2005). Although this explanation is also criticized, one must conclude that 'polderen', the verb meaning seeking consensus with other participants, appears in many aspects of the Dutch society.

With the decision to decentralize the implementation of National Landscapes, the making of policy plans for the National Landscapes also has become a process that follows the rules of the polder model. It has become part of a planning process in which several participants will have to reach agreement on the desired development of the area. The participant depend on each other to reach their goals. None of the participants is powerful enough to establish his targets on his own. In that context the preservation of the core qualities the central government has assigned, becomes subject to negotiations between parties with different interests. In the case studies the balance of power between the actors turns out to be the main factor determining the outcome of the planning process. This means that the degree to which preservation of core qualities is established, depends on the power the participants representing this interest, have in the process. Actors that can make

use of instruments such as legal regulations, turn out to be powerful participants in the decision making process.

In the case of the National Landscapes, the central government turns out to be a not very powerful participant. The lack of directions given in the Nota Ruimte in respect to the implementation of the National Landscapes, leaves the representatives of the Dutch government more or less with empty hands on the negotiation table.

The provinces on the other hand experience much freedom in deciding upon the implementation of National Landscapes. They use this freedom to make sure that the realization of their own targets is not endangered by implementing the National Landscapes.

Policy options

With the chosen approach, the National Landscapes will not lead to an effective preservation of the chosen core qualities. There are however possibilities to make the concept work. The new Spatial Planning Act that has come into force last summer, provides opportunities to realize improvements.

The first and most obvious option is to provide provinces with detailed directions the policy plans for the National Landscapes will have to meet. Detailed directions will restrict the negotiation space and will direct the policy plans for National Landscapes in a more desired direction.

In the Dutch situation however, with a tradition in 'polderen' it is out of the question that the national government is going to direct the provinces. More detailed directions may be acceptable, but they will have to provide some room to the provinces to enable them to match the National Landscape targets with their own ambitions.

Realizing national targets within a negotiation process, also desires active participation in that process. The national government must be one of the parties present on the negotiation table, as it can not be expected that provinces or municipalities will put the ambitions of the central government above their own ambitions.

Finally it would certainly help if the national government clarifies what is really desired. As long as inconsistent targets are being formulated, provinces will be considering conflicting targets and in the balance they find their own ambitions may have a greater weight than the realization of landscape features that the central government has put forward.

The National Landscapes can prove a sound mean to protect the most valuable Dutch landscapes against the threats these landscapes are experiencing. But to able to do so, this planning concept needs to be dressed up with real clothes.