



Revitalizing landscapes

How economy and ecology become partners

by Arnold von Krefeld

It started in 1992, when WWF Netherlands set the audacious goal of doubling the area of nature in the country within 10 years. At that time, most conservationists had a defensive – conservative – strategy. Understandable perhaps, but it was the type of strategy that at best slows down the pace of destruction. WWF Netherlands wanted to do things differently and contacted Storming Consultancy. “It is possible to restore the natural river biotope along 400 kilometers of rivers”, concluded Storming in its visionary report *Living Rivers*. The most effective method of restoring nature is not to focus on nature, but to take a broader approach and find partners. Extracting clay, not as a goal but as a means to create secondary channels, and improving flood control are just a few of the functions that can

be combined when revitalizing rivers. And this is what WWF and its partner ARK Nature started doing. And continued to do for more than 10 years.

A new breed of entrepreneurial conservationists were born

In 2002 the results were presented. The target of 200,000 hectares of additional natural region was not fully achieved, but the campaign did mark a turning point in nature conservation. It was no longer a game just for defenders. The strategy of “minimizing losses” traded in for one of “maximizing gains”. Almost 55,000 hectares of natural reserve were restored and the area is still growing today. Beavers (*Castor fiber*) were reintroduced and the population

has been growing at a spectacular annual rate of almost 20% in recent years. Grazers, such as semi-wild konik horses and cattle, have been brought back to help shape diverse landscapes. Many species benefit from the restored natural riverbanks and riverine forests and have returned to the Netherlands.

The new breed of entrepreneurial conservationists was very successful in the Gelderse Poort, the area where the river Rhine enters the Netherlands. Here, a sustainable economy has been established resulting in new jobs, restored ecological processes and a more attractive landscape. Private enterprise is the driving force behind this, and there is no structural dependence on subsidies anymore. Agriculture has

lost ground – an autonomous process – but the developments have provided new opportunities, such as ‘green services’ (hedges, natural banks) and ‘wilderness meat’ and hotels and restaurants benefit from the hundreds of thousands of people that visit the Gelderse Poort annually.

Problems regarding the change of land use and river management exist along many European rivers. Problems similar to those that were found in the Gelderse Poort. A lesson learned in this area and applicable elsewhere is that just one economic driver may be enough to cause a chain reaction. Another lesson is that policy makers, politicians and umbrella organizations must avoid to deny or belittle the need for radical changes. Soothing words or subsidies for inefficient economic sectors may be attractive from a political point of view, but in fact are counter-productive as they stand in the way of new approaches.

Opportunities like these, however, are not limited to rivers. There is a silent revolution stirring in Europe’s agricultural sector. Small farmers can no longer compete on the world market and are increasingly being forced to shut down their businesses. The best land is sold to wealthier competitors. The poorer land often lies fallow and develops into woodland. This results in “digital landscapes”; either totally open, intensive agrarian production land or closed woodland. The rich, half open landscapes existing (semi-) naturally across Europe, are lost. This transformation is accelerated by changes to European agricultural policy and new member states joining the EU.

Lessons learned, application wanted

In *One Europe, More Nature* (2002) visions are presented for areas all over the European continent. An inspiring example of how a new sustainable economy can be built, is found in the Romanian town of Sinca Noua (Sinca Noua and the Tagla Mountains, 2005). The 1800 inhabitants accept the declining agriculture as a reality

that can open up new opportunities. Sinca Noua’s council developed a clear sustainable vision for the village with a mix of sheep, cattle, hay-meadows, natural pastures and forests. Among the unique characteristics of the area are an almost intact megafauna (incl. wolves and bears) and an amazing landscape. The development of tourism and a central drinking water supply are part of the new concept. Inhabitants who have started enterprising in that direction, with some outside help, have made a promising start to make this vision become reality.

The lessons learned in the Gelderse Poort are also applicable when trying to find ways of dealing with the effects of climate change. The Netherlands are extremely vulnerable: sea levels are rising, rivers receive higher drainage peaks, floods and droughts are on the increase, and salty sea water seeps further inland. Only limiting emissions of greenhouse gases is not sufficient, the Dutch need to adapt to the effects of climate change which already present themselves today. Technological solutions will remain a necessity in many places, but they are often mono-functional, very expensive, and in many cases tend to worsen future problems. A large part of the Netherlands exist, because estuaries, dunes, tidal flats and peat moors have the natural potential to grow with the sea level. But these natural processes no longer function. Dikes were built and polders drained for agriculture. Because of this, water and sediments now flow through the country straight into the sea. The growth of Sphagnum and other marsh plants stopped when moors were drained. Peat then decomposes, resulting in sinking grounds. Thus more drainage and other measures became necessary. The underlying problems are in fact comparable to the problems in New Orleans and other sinking delta’s around the world (Working with Nature, 2007, see illustration). The vision *Natural Climate Buffers* (2006) stresses the point that by giving back space to natural processes, the vicious circle of water shortages and subsiding ground can be broken. This may not be possible everywhere,

but in many areas it is. And often it can be linked with other interests like river and coastal safety, recreation, extracting minerals, nature, urban planning and urban capital. Conservation organizations – together with local governments, district water boards and companies – are currently creating natural climate buffers across the country. The Ministry of the Environment supports much of this work.

In the process many lessons were learned. One being that a good vision combines the focus on opportunities, the revitalization of natural processes, the right economic drivers and lots of inspiration. But a good vision is just a start. The most successfully implemented visions share a number of characteristics. First and foremost someone driving the process. Furthermore, pilot field projects to show how the visions operate in practice, and last but not least, open and honest communication. Success requires stamina, as there are few quick and easy wins. It is worth it though. When everything works out, the rewards can be great: revitalized landscapes offering more jobs, increased safety, new space for flora and fauna, clean water and wonderful places to live in.

Profile



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