

Images of Nature as Sources of Conflict

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One of the problems nature policy and management agents, like national governments or natural park managers, have to deal with, is that different stakeholders may have different images of nature, and therefore, give different meanings to the same natural place. Hence, even if general goals, for example nature conservation, are embraced by all stakeholders, conflicts on a more practical level may arise, due to different opinions about what real nature is, how to treat nature, et cetera. An image of nature is understood here as a relatively stable network of meanings and ideas that people attach to nature. Thus, an image of nature is a property of the mind-structure of an individual subject. It is a frame of reference guiding and organising the way people perceive and value nature, and it gives direction to opinions about nature policy. Several Dutch scholars have been studying people's images of nature (Born et al. 2001, Buijs & Filius 1998, Buijs & Volker 1997, Groot & Born 2003, Jacobs et al. 2002, Keulartz et al. 2004). Their findings show some remarkable convergences. The aim of this presentation is to provide a brief overview of Dutch studies of images of nature, stressing the major theoretical underpinnings as well as empirical findings of these studies.

The mentioned studies reveal a similar range of dominant images of nature amongst Dutch citizens. Typically, the range consists of three to five different images of nature, with a wild image on one extreme side, to a functional image on the other extreme side. For example, the different images as formulated below are found by Buijs & Filius (1998), in a qualitative study, and confirmed by Jacobs et al. (2002), in a survey study:

1. Image of wild nature (29% of subjects): only natural sites totally untouched by man are considered real nature (such as deserts, oceans, the South Pole); 'hands-off' is the ideal nature policy.
2. Image of autonomous nature (22%): nature is everything that is not made by humans (e.g. weed spontaneously growing in built areas is also natural); nature-policy should be directed towards nature itself, not to human ends.
3. Image of broad nature (23%): everything that grows is nature, whether or not influenced by man (e.g. a tree in a garden is real nature too); man is allowed to influence nature, with respect for nature, coexistence is the ideal.
4. Image of decorative nature (11%): the question what nature exactly is, is not very relevant within this image, it is an excellent place for recreation and enjoyment in the first place; nature should be made beautiful and accessible for humans.
5. Image of functional nature (15%): nature controlled by man is real nature too (e.g. agricultural areas are natural); nature should be used for the benefit of man.

The number of people in the Netherlands having an image of nature towards the wild side of the range is much bigger than the number of people having an image towards the functional side. While the images found in other studies differ slightly in details, the range from wild to functional is found over and over again.

Interestingly, the studies reveal that images of nature consist of three different dimensions: the cognitive dimension (what is real nature), the normative dimension (how should we treat nature) and the expressive dimension (what are the values re-

lated to nature). Important differences between images of nature are found to reside in opinions about what degree of spontaneity is essential for nature (for the cognitive dimension), to what degree nature may be used for the benefit of man (normative) and the degree of challenge versus safety nature offers (expressive). Several authors (e.g. Buijs & Volker 1997, Groot & Born 2003) have argued that the foundation of differences in images of nature may lay in the fundamental view people have on the relation between man and nature. Jacobs et al. (2002) found indeed that the ecocentric view (nature stands above man) correlates significantly with a wild image of nature, and that an anthropocentric view (man stands above nature) correlates with a functional image of nature.

While the existence of a spectrum of images of nature from wild to functional is confirmed by all mentioned studies, and a method for investigation is established, the same studies leave many questions open for debate and research. It is unknown whether this spectrum is typical Dutch, typical Western or universal. Moreover, it is hypothesized, but hardly tested, that someone's image of nature highly affects his opinions in specific conflicts.

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