

# Monitoring of visitor flows and safety in recreational areas around Amsterdam

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The western part of the Netherlands, concentrated around the conglomeration of the four largest cities known as the Randstad, is one of the urban areas with the highest population density in Europe, comparable to London, Paris and the German Ruhr area. This creates a much greater need for recreation opportunities than the surrounding countryside can provide (Gijsbertse, 2008). In the 1970's several recreational areas were created around these cities for the dual purpose of providing a space for recreation and for acting as a buffer insulating cities from each other. At the present day these areas have fully matured and are facing several problems associated with park-like areas in the vicinity of big cities. For example the uses of the areas by people from the big cities bring big-city safety issues. Furthermore, the areas are showing signs of age which also leads to unwanted use such as vandalism, petty crime and conflicts between different groups of visitors.

The focus of this paper will be on the areas of Spaarnwoude and Groengebied Amstelland, Spaarnwoude between Amsterdam and Haarlem and Groengebied Amstelland along the southern edge of the Amsterdam conurbation (see Fig. 1). Both areas consist of several intensive recreational areas connected by larger areas for extensive use. The latter are commonly formed by agricultural land, while the former are usually park-like in their design, albeit larger than the average city park. Each of these areas is managed by means of a 'recreatieschap' (or recreation board), a public body in which several separate governing bodies delegate part of their responsibilities to achieve a common goal. In the case of the recreational areas, the board consists of civil servants and politicians from the surrounding municipalities and the province of North Holland. To defend the costs of maintenance and to emphasize the societal benefit of the recreational areas, the politicians on the boards want insight into the use, appreciation and perception of these areas by visitors. This is the main reason we started monitoring visitor flows and polling the visitors in 2005, by means of our 'recreation monitor'. The monitor consists of two parts: Firstly counting the number of visitors in the different area's that make up Spaarnwoude and Groengebied Amstelland; and secondly by means of questionnaires for visitors in the areas themselves and of visitors and non-visitors via online-polling.

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Figure 1. Spaarnwoude and Groengebied Amstelland

The counting of visitors is conducted by means of mechanical counters positioned on the main entrances to the areas on roads and cycling paths. The use of mechanical counters makes it possible to determine the pattern in which visitors enter an area during a given day. This information is critical to assessing visitor safety and lends insight into the use of the areas during day- and nighttime. For example in some area's it was revealed that a lot of cars enter after 12 o'clock (midnight), which may indicate unwanted activities.

The second part of the monitoring is executed every other year when both in Spaarnwoude and Groengebied Amstelland 700 questionnaires are filled out by visitors of the different areas. Moreover 2500 questionnaires are collected via the Internet and filled out by visitors and non-visitors alike. Subjects of the questionnaire are use, visitor background, appreciation and safety.

The members of the recreation boards are very interested in key figures such as general appreciation and the perception of safety, which are important to communicate the success (or failure) of their policies to their constituents. Moreover, the safety of a recreational area is one of the aspects that can indicate the quality of a recreational area (Bruls, 2001). The insight into the perception of safety in the recreational areas, combined with information available through other channels such as complaints and police records, resulted in a safety plan. This plan has been heavily based on information from the recreation monitor and moreover, its implementation is monitored by it (Beers and van der Laan, 2008). This paper will elucidate what the safety issues were and expound on which aspects of the recreation monitor were used and how the information was implemented. Furthermore the safety situation in the areas will be assessed and the proposed

solutions offered by the safety plan will be discussed. The discussion will be embedded in a wider context of safety in recreational areas on a national level and the experiences with similar issues in other parts of the country. Also the difference in the perception of safety by different groups of visitors will be considered as safety is viewed differently depending on sex, ethnicity and age (Shores et al. 2007).

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