

## **Staatsbosbeheer, everything nature has to offer**

### **Harry Boeschoten**

Director Central Staff, Staatsbosbeheer (Dutch State Forestry Service)

P.O. Box 1300, 3970 BH Driebergen, The Netherlands

[H.Boeschoten@staatsbosbeheer.nl](mailto:H.Boeschoten@staatsbosbeheer.nl)

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Staatsbosbeheer, the Dutch State Forestry Service, was established in 1899 when the nation needed an organisation to plant trees in order to stop walking sand dunes from covering villages. Nowadays it is more accurate to describe Staatsbosbeheer as a 'public body guarding the natural heritage of the Netherlands'. The agency manages over 250,000 hectares of protected areas, including national parks, which amount to around 7% of the total surface area of this small, crowded country.

The Netherlands is an extremely urbanised country. This can be illustrated by the fact that 36% of the 250,000 hectares is situated within 10 km distance of a city (Staatsbosbeheer 2007). This metropolitan environment determines the task of Staatsbosbeheer to a large extent and Staatsbosbeheer feels responsible for linking urban citizens to forest and nature areas. It is our aim to recover and renew the relationship between human beings and nature (Staatsbosbeheer 2005).

This leads to a more demand-oriented, instead of a supply-oriented, recreation approach. Moreover, we intend to increase participation of user groups in both the planning and management of forest and nature areas. This change of direction leads towards the recognition and implementation of a divergent scale of nature functions. We do not limit ourselves with only nature functions, such as biodiversity protection preferred by ecologists or nature policy makers, but also towards other nature functions, such as recreation or landscape, preferred by lay people, being it more urbanised or local traditional people. Because we cannot accommodate each nature function at each particular site, we have to make choices. Consequently, for each forest and nature area we prioritise one function (ecology, recreation, cultural history, landscape, etc.) which frames the sustainable development of that area. Within this functional frame we optimise the qualities of the other functions as much as possible. Around urban areas with big shortages of forest and nature areas, we have chosen to prioritise the recreation function.

To make the demand-oriented approach more concrete, we follow trends attentively, we work with recreational motive groups, we carry recreational area analysis, we implement surveys and visitor counting, and we encourage user participation. In order to increase the desired quality, co-operation with other stakeholders such as governmental bodies (provinces, municipalities), recreation entrepreneurs, farmers, and citizens is essential. As our budget is limited it is impossible to meet all user wishes. Consequently, we have to generate additional finances derived from commercial environmental services.

In their daily practices, managers from Staatsbosbeheer encounter a number of problems. First of all, most Dutch people live in an urban environment so nearby nature areas are considered to be important. Also, people are prepared to travel long distances for extremely beautiful nature areas. However, this stagnates at too much congestion. Besides, if an area is too crowded, it decreases the experiential quality. We need more insight into the relation between the attractiveness, the accessibility and the experiential quality of it.

Secondly, we are concerned about the green playing opportunities for children and young people. One quarter of the inhabitants of municipalities with more than 50.000 inhabitants indicates that there is no 'playing green' in their neighbourhood (Crommentuijn et al. 2007). Staatsbosbeheer wants to turn back this trend. This made the organisation decide to dedicate 1% of their property into playscapes (nature to play in) which will be realised within the next 10 years. Besides this, we develop play and movement programs specifically for children (Staatsbosbeheer 2009). Some major concerns in this respect are:

- How do you deal with safety and risks with young people who are not raised in nature anymore?
- How do we find new partners in nature with whom we can constructively and financially co-operate?
- How do we connect with youth policy developed by local authorities?

- How should we design participatory decision-making with young urban people? We all know that playscapes close to urban areas are also attractive for divergent and deviant behaviour by young people?

A final problem is that not all visitors want to experience nature in the same way. Some prefer silence, remoteness and wilderness, whereas others prefer amusement and familiarity. In order to get grip on the diversity of nature experiences, we have chosen to work with experiential motives (see also Elands & Lengkeek 2000, Goossen & De Boer 2008). We distinguish five different motives with which managers are able to work as part of their daily management. Moreover, we want to explore how the notion of experiences is related to beauty and art as well as to sensemaking and religion. This should give us an in-depth understanding of the relation of our visitors to nature, which is in turn, essential knowledge in order to achieve our aim of recovering and renewing the relationship between human beings and nature.

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