

Visions of nature

For a young child, nature can be exciting, providing endless opportunities to play and discover its diversity. There are many ways to trigger and develop children's interest in nature. Regular visits to an interesting area, for instance, can spark a familiarity and a growing curiosity and knowledge about the place. A parent, a teacher or a friend might play an important role here, or even a book. The child's curiosity may be sparked by the experience of camping, hiking or cycling; or an encounter with a squirrel or a bird of prey, or maybe the smell and colours of grassland flowers on a summer's day.

Later in life, children's interests change. As they grow older they may find nature to be quiet and boring, the slow pace of change and the dominance of dull shades of, mainly, green and brown, may well be less attractive than the more exciting and colourful entertainments provided by computer games and television. By the time they have reached puberty, most have lost their interest in nature. But a minority carry this interest further, usually inspired by one of a couple of factors. Nature's aesthetic and emotional appeal may play a role; or curiosity to learn more about the animals and plants discovered in childhood.

An example of the first type of inspiration is the recently launched movie *De Nieuwe Wildernis* [The New Wilderness], about one

of the Netherlands' most important wetland reserves, the Oostvaardersplassen. This overwhelmingly popular movie frequently evokes applause from the audience – a rare occurrence in Dutch cinemas. The images in the film are not just breathtaking; for many people they present a totally new view of nature in the Netherlands. Many viewers seem surprised that this is actually filmed in their own country. The stars of *De Nieuwe Wildernis* are the koniks and red deer, large groups of which roam the area. It covers the four seasons and the cycles of life and death in the Oostvaardersplassen and gives some good examples of how small ecosystems are interconnected in a larger ecosystem. It is, in many ways, a classical traditional documentary, based on beauty, drama, spectacle, and even a little humour. In this movie, nature is the theatre with the animals as its willing actors.

De Nieuwe Wildernis's vision of nature in the Netherlands, however, is one-sided, with a strong emphasis on aesthetics and emotions. The film largely ignores the ongoing debates about whether or not weaker animals should be given supplementary food in severe winters, left to perish or be culled; and whether or not the wolf should be introduced, or allowed to enter the area on its own, to complete the ecosystem. There is even a name for this kind of incomplete human-affected nature: 'novel ecosystem', illustrating that we are still not fully aware of its precise character.

The second type of inspiration can be illustrated by the ongoing Dutch mammal atlas project, which involves the work of many people, mainly volunteers. Publication of the end result, a new book on the distribution of wild mammals in the Netherlands, is in progress. The new mammal atlas demonstrates another way in which we can deal with, and relate to, nature around us. Early childhood contacts with nature can be followed up with further study, eventually leading to more or less systematic observation. The next logical phase is the interpretation of the data, with the ever-developing insights and discussions about the surveying methods and techniques used and how the results are interpreted. Finally, this can contribute to theories about, and also the practical consequences of, a particular aspect of, say, the biology of a species, the phylogenetic relationships within species groups or material flows within an ecosystem.

The realisation of the new mammal atlas of the Netherlands is the result of many enthusiasts surveying meticulously from day to day (and from night to night!) the spatial distribution and numbers of wild mammals. Opportunistic observations, targeted monitoring programmes, recorded traffic victims, bycatches in control programmes, hunting statistics, etc., have provided a further wealth of information. The Mammal Society and all the volunteers involved in its preparation have their hands full with completing the atlas right now. We look forward to the results of their work.

What is it that drives us to accomplish such projects? Primarily of course it is curiosity, and when we channel this curiosity together, we can achieve a lot more than working alone, finding answers to questions and raising new ones. For example, we are curious whether certain species will be able to persist and what new species might arrive in the Netherlands. At present, fortunately, the state of the mammals native to the Netherlands appears to be

generally positive. But there are still species, such as the common hamster and the bottle-nose dolphin, which need special attention.

The contents of this issue relate to the more reflective vision of nature discussed above. Two papers are based entirely on observations of one single animal. The finding of a dead wolf on a roadside in the central part of the Netherlands generated a lot of media attention. The initial interpretation of this find had to be reconsidered after a thorough examination of the carcass. The use of state-of-the-art research methods allowed Gravendeel, de Groot & Kik et al. to properly reconstruct the wolf's origin; their examinations brought the authors to their surprising, new and final, conclusions, illustrating their open minds and sincerity. Another observation shows the same questioning spirit: Margry thinks it is likely that a taiga shrew, found outside its known habitat and distribution area in Norway, was dropped by a bird of prey.

Less spectacular, but of important practical use, is a new method, developed through experimentation by van Boekel for minimising mortality among shrews caught in traps as part of population surveys. Keeping them alive in their trap for as long as necessary, still can (and should) be improved. Van Boekel's experiments show how this can be done.

Van Adrichem et al. present the results of their research on brown rats in Amsterdam, showing that houses built before 1960 are more amenable to rats than more recently constructed houses, and that rats prefer urban green spaces. These and the other findings of this study are of practical use for the control and prevention of rats in urban environments, without the use of rodenticides. Dekker et al.'s study of Geoffroy's bats and how females of the species use the landscape led the authors to propose a number of practical recommendations for better protection of this rare species in the Netherlands. Finally, Hovens and

Rijkers investigate the origins of the Exmoor pony in England. They argue that Exmoor ponies may be considered as a wild type of horse, not a man-made breed. Most likely, these are not the final words on this subject.

The two – out of many! – ways of dealing with nature mentioned above are quite different. Roughly speaking, they could be spoken of as the emotional and the rational approach. Perhaps it should be considered as a challenge to confront, or even merge, the two approaches with each other. The emotional approach can be strengthened by paying attention to problems, facts, debate and solutions. Conversely, the rational approach can benefit if there is room for passion and commitment and, now and then, for some speculation.

Finally, we are happy to announce that two new editors, from very different backgrounds, have joined the board of *Lutra*. Marine biologist Meike Scheidat has dedicated most of her work to marine mammals, especially whales. She completed her PhD at Kiel University on the abundance, habitat use, behaviour and management of humpback whales in Ecuador. Maurice La Haye has been an expert on rodents for many years. He is currently working as a project manager at the Dutch Mammal Society and will soon defend his thesis on field experiments focussed on guaranteeing the survival of the common hamster in southern Limburg. Both Meike and Maurice are warmly welcomed to the editorial board!

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