

# Forests and Recreation in the Netherlands <sup>1</sup>

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I regard it as an honour and I feel much flattered indeed that the Forestry Service in Northern Ireland has invited me to tell you something about the recreational value of our Dutch forests. Before starting my lecture I might appeal for your consideration as you will understand that delivering a lecture in English does not belong to my daily routine.

Before talking about forests and recreation in the Netherlands, I think it might be useful to give you some figures first.

Holland is about  $2\frac{1}{2}$  times as large as Northern Ireland and the total forest area amounts to about 7% of this area. The Netherlands State Forestry Service owns a one-fifth part of this. Of the total area of waste land, 5% of the land surface, the Forestry Service owns nearly one-quarter. Between the years 1924 and 1940 many forests were planted on waste land: heath, moor and sand dunes, for economic purposes only as at the time recreation did not play a rôle in general. On the other hand attention was paid to nature conservancy from the beginning. A scientific advisory committee was set up in 1929. This committee gave advice with regard to the areas which, from a scientific point of view, were the most valuable. Such areas were declared nature reserves by formal decree of the Minister of Agriculture. They form a quarter part of the property of the State Forestry Service.

Before going further into the situation in Holland, I think it is important to deal with the question of what factors generally determine the recreational value of forests.

## 1. *Roads and paths.*

In itself a forest of thousands and thousands of acres has practically no recreational value. As it is, a human being generally prefers to follow a beaten track. As soon as roads and foot-paths have been provided people will use them and enter the forest.

The character of the roads determines what kind of visitors, pedestrians or motorists will make use of them.

## 2. *Structure.*

Roads and foot-paths have only a very limited effect on the recreational value if the forest is of a uniform structure. In a natural forest the surrounding factors determine its type. The more these factors differ from place to place the more variegated the picture of

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the forest will be. In a cultivated forest this depends on the choice of the kinds of tree and the distribution is in accordance with the age-classes.

3. *Topography.*

A forest in hilly or a mountainous country is much more attractive than a forest in the plains. One can ascertain this in a country where forests abound, like the United States of America where the most visited woods are situated in the mountains.

4. *Water.*

Water represents a very attractive environment for recreation. Brooks, rivers, fens and lakes may enhance the value of a forest considerably. In our country there remains only a few unregulated brooks which run through a forest. On the other hand the combination of woods and fens is rather frequent.

5. *Open spaces.*

Open spaces enhance the recreational value of a forest in different ways. In hilly country they may supply possibilities of unobstructed views. The borders of the open spaces are important, as experience has proved that the public strongly prefers the edges of the forest when sitting down or having a picnic. The recreational value varies with the location of the open space (for instance felling area, cultivated land, heathland, playing-field).

6. *The situation.*

When the other factors remain the same, a forest will as a rule attract more visitors when it is situated nearer to either a dwelling centre or a holiday centre.

It is not only the distance in a bee-line that is important but also the easy attainability by public transport, motorcar, motorcycle or bicycle. A recent enquiry in America has proved that, although for 70% of the people looking for recreation, pleasure driving means the principal entertainment, much value is attached to woodlands situated not too far away from the towns.

7. *The admission regulations.*

A charge for admission may largely reduce the number of visitors. In Holland people generally do not like to pay much only to be admitted to a forest. If tickets are not to be had at the entrance of the forest, but only for instance, in a nearby village or town, the number of visitors will be strongly reduced.

8. *The reputation.*

As a rule the general public knows very little about the recreation areas. Information by way of press, radio or television distinctly increases the number of visitors, visiting a certain forest.

What object have people to have in mind when visiting a forest?

In the Netherlands up to now we did not enter fully into this problem.

Properly speaking, one should know the answer to it before taking steps or making provisions for recreation. The method followed in Holland is to first produce the recreation facilities and then to investigate the reactions of the public afterwards. Ever since the establishment of the State Forestry Service the forests are freely accessible to visitors.

Formerly visitors never caused any problem. They were naturalists who went their own way along the many forestry roads. This changed after World War II. People, having more leisure-time at their disposal, did not come to the woods to study nature or to look at the trees but simply to be in the open air. In 1957 a special department was established at the State Forestry Service's head office with the object of supplying information on recreational accommodation. The funds supplied yearly by our Government in order to effectuate this programme amount to £100,000.

Our first problem was the signboards. In Holland one finds thousands of signs mentioning: "Admission prohibited", especially in the private woods. We have chosen a signboard with the legend: "Free walks on roads and foot-paths". The sign mentioning the warning "Admission prohibited" suggested that the owner could take legal action against a trespasser. Our signs could not give this impression as with more and more people frequenting our forests by motorcar it would not do to exclude these vehicles from admittance.

Our second problem was what to do with these motorcars inside the forest. We determined that motorcar owners principally come for pleasure driving and looked for an attractive place to spend the whole day. We built nice asphalt roads in the hope of concentrating the visitors by motorcar in certain parts and keeping the remainder of the wood quiet. We provided car parks with picnic sites with wooden tables and benches which are rather appreciated by the public. More and more walkers came to our forests by motorcar, too. This led us to the decision to peg out walks starting from the motor roads or from the car parks. These walks are marked by poles with coloured heads.

I have mentioned already that in our forests quite a number of nature reserves have been spared. These for instance may be beautiful fens with natural bathing opportunities. Our next problem was that people used them for swimming baths, and accordingly did harm to the scientific values of the fens. Therefore when selecting plans for tourist roads and walks we try to lead the visitors away from the vulnerable nature reserves and to direct them to other places of interest. In general the public are rather keen to visit a special object of their liking in the woods. This may for instance, be a remarkable tree, a point commanding a nice view or a historical site. As swimming

water is rather attractive we decided to dig pools especially for children. This costs quite a lot of money but as in our country sand can be used in many ways, for instance at building sites and for road building, it has been proved quite possible to make such pools without much cost.

Unfortunately our forests and recreation areas are for the larger part situated in the eastern part of our country, while the large towns are all situated in the western part. Therefore, many of these recreation areas are less appropriate for one-day recreation but rather more for a week-end stay or a holiday.

Camping is very popular in Holland. There are hundreds of camping sites which are managed as private enterprises. Many people nowadays use their tent or caravan as a second home; they put them up at a camping-site in spring and let them remain there till autumn. In summer-time tourists and hikers find in consequence that the most attractive spots are already taken. We have therefore established a number of camping sites especially for tourists where the period of stay is limited to four weeks. We have also a number of small and remote camping sites for old-fashioned campers who look for quietness.

Next to creating accommodation we also pay attention to what the Americans call "Interpretation". We have learned quite a lot from Freeman Tilden's booklet; "Interpreting our heritage". Especially since many more people are coming to our forests at present who have never been there before, the want of information is increasingly felt. The oldest form of information we know in the State Forestry Service is the excursion under guidance of a forester or a warden. The excursions are organised through nature reserves, to breeding places or just anyhow through the woods to get acquainted a bit with the different kinds of trees and with forestry in general.

We earned a lot of success by publishing tourist's maps of our forest beats. Twenty of these maps have so far appeared. They give specialized touristic information.

We have also published booklets of some forest beats, with a loose-leaf road map containing more extensive information.

If you ask me how many visitors are yearly frequenting our forests, I must unfortunately fail to give you an answer. Visitor-counting is very difficult, because the forests are accessible along many roads. We know that a national park of 15,000 acres in central Holland which does not belong to the State, however, attracts half-a-million visitors yearly. In our forests the figure is certainly lower, but it rises considerably every year.

Next year we hope to start counting motorcars with an automatic numerator. As far as the conducted excursions are concerned in 1963, the number of excursionists amounts to 50,000. The number of camping nights amounts to more than half-a-million.

During the past years provisions for recreation have been established in places where the need for them was felt strongest. Often they were only experiments to gain the required experience. However, to avoid mistakes in the future a long-term scheme is required. Every forest beat produces a management-plan for a period of 10 years. Formerly these were purely silvicultural plans, but since the forests are managed on a multiple use basis according to the American example, this has been altered. Reorientation has been accelerated not only by the advance of recreation and by the increase of the social value of the woods, but also by the economic prospects of forestry. While timber prices remain equal, wages continue to rise and, although part of it may be intercepted by rationalization or better working-methods, the profit-earning capacity of forestry in the Netherlands is quickly receding. This is also caused by the fact that the forests have been mostly planted on the worst of soils. In the State forest area about 25% of the total area yield 50% of the timber production. This makes it quite possible to avoid conflicts between recreation and forestry. The recreational provisions are principally accomplished in the poorest of forests, which are usually well suited for recreation (sandy soil).

The object of the modern management-plan is to develop the different aspects of the forest as well as possible. In the field of recreation this means that one has to try to comply as much as possible with the wishes of different groups. This may be done by putting into practice the principle of zoning. Motorists, cyclists, pedestrians and horsemen get their own roads and their own paths as far as can be done. Parts of the forest will have to be out of bounds for motorcars so that people looking for quietness may be able to find it. Often the road system is monotonous. An improvement can be obtained by revising it. The forest management is significant also: different plantations with varying species, long rotation, selective felling and natural regeneration enhance the recreational value. In the less-paying forests clearcutting and the regeneration of heather and shifting sands are even being considered. Expansion of forest area is being pursued also, but not at the cost of waste lands, dunes, heaths and moors. Our country has been cultivated so completely, that conserving the remaining natural areas as nature-reserves has become a first requirement. Our Government yearly spends £800,000 on land acquisition for nature conservancy. For the acquisition of forests moneys spent merely amount to about £300,000 a year. However, there still are large possibilities for afforestation in the new Zuiderzeepolders. The great Deltaplan, for sealing the country against inroads of the sea will also present new possibilities both for recreation and for afforestation. Our Government National Physical Planning Service contrives the schemes and is carrying out investigations into its recreational possibilities.

It is evident that on a holiday 60-70% of the public do not travel

more than 20 miles from the cities. Since there are few woodlands near the large towns in the western part of our country, eight large forest areas bordering them have been designed each of 2,500 acres. Land acquisition in western Holland is terribly expensive and this is the reason why this ambitious scheme has not been started yet.

I have told you already that a fifth part of the forest is State property. The remaining forest area is not less important for recreation. Another fifth part is owned by local authorities and foundations for general benefit. Under the Forestry Act the State Forestry Service is able to make grants to local authorities and nature protection organisations for the acquisition and maintenance of woodland which have great natural beauty and recreational value. There is also provision for granting subsidies for the execution of recreational schemes provided these are of national significance. The development of the recreational provisions in these forests have progressed to a lesser degree than in the forests owned by the State.

By far the largest part of the Dutch forests belong to private owners, and the coppices especially that give the landscape such a charm are in the hands of farmers. As a result of the introduction of farm machinery and better management the survival of these coppices is being threatened. However the Forestry Act dictates that forests of more than half an acre have to be reafforested.

The large woodlands form part of the properties of old castles or estates, which the owners have preserved through the ages. The high death duties which threatened the survival of these woods has caused the introduction of the Scenery Act. This fiscal act grants a reduction of death duties and property-tax on condition that the estate will be preserved for 25 years. If the forests and estates are accessible to the public the duties and taxes are reduced to less than half. At present 818 estates with a total area of 263,000 acres, have been submitted to the Scenery Act. Of this area 200,000 acres are accessible to the public.

Usually a small admission fee is charged. Trees are not to be felled and alterations are not to be carried out without the consent of the State Forestry Service, which holds the supervision. The agreement is voluntary. Owners are free to withdraw their estates from the act but if they do so within 25 years, they have to refund the tax facilities they have enjoyed.

Usually the estates offer an opportunity for walking only; other recreation facilities are not provided for as these are too costly for the owners. The normal management expenses are at present rising to such a degree that the owners have approached the Government for a grant amounting to £2½ per acre a year. They consider their proposal more advantageous for the Government. Otherwise the Government might eventually be put to the necessity to purchase the estates in order to meet the growing need for recreation.

The growing need for recreation will certainly require more and

more funds in future. A great problem is how to get the visitors to refund part of the money invested. This is also one of the questions that is being studied at present by the Bureau of Recreation in the U.S.A., that has been established in 1962. Unfortunately we have not come to a justified solution yet. We are however averse to charging any admission fees.

As you may have observed the problem of forests and recreation is rather complicated. However it is an interesting one.