Introduction

The times that scientific experts alone could run the show in nature policy are over for good. Due to recent but persistent worldwide shifts in governance - from the state to the market and to civil society, and simultaneously from the national level to supra-national and sub-national levels – the number of public and private players in nature policy has increased significantly. This in turn has increased the need for a common vocabulary to articulate and communicate views and values of nature among various actors acting on different administrative levels. In this paper, I will argue that concepts of nature can act as communicative devices in public debates and political decision-making. Note that I speak of concepts in the plural. In order to prevent conflicts and controversies to end in deadlock, the absolute notion of nature and naturalness has to give way to a relative notion, leaving ample room for different and even divergent perceptions of nature.

First I will sketch the emergence of a new paradigm in nature policy in which scientific knowledge and ecological expertise plays a key role. I will then go on to demonstrate that the implementation of this expert driven paradigm run into stormy waters. Resistance from farmers and other citizens induced an important shift in nature policy from a top down to a bottom up strategy. It was understood that to be successful policy makers can no longer restrict themselves to the views of ecologists and other scientific experts but also have to take into account the various views of the public at large. This insight led to an interest in concepts of nature as possible communicative devices between and among experts and lay people. I will conclude with the proposal to break up the rigid dualism or dichotomy between nature and culture that is still common among the majority of ecologists and environmentalists: one should stop thinking in terms of fixed boundaries between nature and culture and start thinking in terms of grades, shades and blends of nature and culture. Concepts of nature can and should be projected on a scale or spectrum from primeval nature to pure culture.

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1. The emergence of a new paradigm in nature conservation and management: the predominance of ecology

In 1990 the Dutch parliament adopted an ambitious Nature Policy Plan. This plan was epoch-making in more than one respect.

- From nature conservation to nature development

First and foremost because it marked the switch from a defensive to an offensive strategy. Rather than clinging to the protection and conservation of existing nature reserves, the overriding purpose should be to create and develop ‘new nature’. The ‘nature developers’ (as they were to be called later) dismissed the ‘old nature’ of the traditional conservationists as no more than a weak cultural extract (i.e. the cultural-historical landscape of around 1850). Real nature, according to them, had to be primeval nature.

- From cultural to ecological reference

The nature developers offered the so-called ecological reference as their benchmark: a scientific reconstruction of what living nature under given physical conditions would have looked like in the absence of human influences. As Van de Veen and Lardinois wrote: ‘The ecological reference is an objective model which leaves any subjective judgement of nature out of account. Considerations of cultural history do not enter; nature is not a matter of taste’ (Van de Veen and Lardinois, 1991, p. 79).

- Towards a National Ecological Network

In order to give nature development a chance the Nature Policy Plan claimed a considerable amount of space in the form of the so-called National Ecological Network. This network is composed of core areas, nature development areas and ecological corridors. The entire network is to cover an area of 744,500 ha (compared to 3,500,000 ha of the entire Dutch territory). At present, the total size of nature areas (including multi-functional forests) is about 550,000 ha.

- Towards a system of nature target types

This new nature policy is supported by a detailed scientific classification of all areas in the Netherlands with a natural potential into no less than 132 different nature target types. This systematic makes it possible, in the words of a former minister of Agriculture, Nature Management and Fisheries, ‘to determine in main outline how much of what kind of nature we want to conserve, restore and develop in the Netherlands’ (LNV, 1990b, p. 5). This elicited the following comment from my colleague Henk van den Belt: ‘A country that can get the nature it wants in exactly the desired quantity it wants must surely be a happy country!’ (Van den Belt, 2004).

2. The problematic implementation process

The policy, followed by the Dutch government to achieve this aim, is rightly called ‘a textbook example of classic top-down planning’ (WRR 1998, 137). On the assumption that it is up to scientific experts and not to ordinary citizens and politicians to determine the
direction of nature policy, the starting point of the entire process was ecological knowledge about the various ecosystems and the environmental conditions in which they are viable. As soon as it became clear, however, that the interests of many local stakeholders would be substantially affected, the implementation process almost came to a standstill.

This happened, for example, at an early stage in Gaasterland in the northern province of Friesland. Here the plans for the realization of a nature development area of 550 ha, for which arable land had to be acquired voluntarily from farmers, met with strong and emotional resistance from those farmers and from other local citizens. The conflict was partly about compensations and the implied restrictions on agricultural land use, but actually ran much deeper inasmuch as it was also fuelled by a competing image of nature. Against the presumed merits of new nature, local inhabitants stressed the beauty of the existing landscape as it had been established in historical and current use. Their slogan: ‘Gaasterland is already beautiful enough, we don’t need an ecological network here’.

Symbol of the campaigners from Gaasterland was an enormous picture frame that was erected at the edge of the fields, framing the view of passers-by. The message was clear: this rural landscape is a piece of art that was created and cultivated by generations of farmers.

This picture frame was copied in several other places. See for example the photo below. The text on the frame is: ‘This landscape is offered to you by Conservation Natural Helenaveen’.
3. The broadening of nature policy: shifts in governance

In response to the protest of farmers and other local people, the government gradually abandoned its centralist, top-down steering approach and increasingly switched toward methods of participatory and interactive policy-making. This shift became evident in the policy document Nature for People, People for Nature issued by the Ministry of Agriculture, Nature Management and Fisheries in 2000. ‘Nature should be at the heart of society’, so the key message of this document runs. ‘Nature should be more strongly anchored in the hearts of the people and in the decisions of citizens, entrepreneurs, social organisations, and local authorities’ (LNV, 2000: 33). To achieve this goal, our cabinet opted for a substantial ‘broadening’ of its nature policy. On the one hand, according to the policy document, nature not only exists for itself but also for the benefit of the people (Nature for People). Apart from its intrinsic value, nature also has an instrumental and an emotional value. ‘It’s about nature from the front door to the Wadden See, in keeping with the perception of the people’ (ibid., 1). On the other hand, the Dutch government expects that the responsibility for nature will be broadly supported by the society at large (People for Nature).

This shift in nature policy is part of a general trend that has gradually become visible during the last decade in many Western European countries: the shift from public to semi-public and private organizations, and from command and control to contract and negotiation (Van Kerstbergen & Van Waarden, 2001). The growing interweaving of the state with the civil society and the market has led to the emergence of all sorts of ‘multi-actor governance’. At the same time a socialisation as well as a commercialisation of policy took place. The commercialisation of policy comes to light for example in the establishment of a bureau for Public Private Co-operation by the Ministry of Agriculture, Nature Management and Fishery, and in the recent emergence of green business and green entrepreneurship. The socialisation shows itself especially in the emergence of interactive forms of policy, with an increasing emphasis on negotiations and tradeoffs between the various stakeholders involved.

But this is only one half of the story. Together with the horizontal shift from the state to the market and to civil society, a vertical shift took place as well: a shift both from the national level to supra-national (more global) levels and to the sub-national (more local) levels. This vertical shift with the simultaneous processes of internationalisation and decentralisation produced various kinds of ‘multi-level governance’. An example of the shift from the national to the local level is the ‘Decentralization-Impulse’ from 1994. Due to an ensuing covenant from 1997 the province has become the responsible agency for the realization of the national ecological network. Examples of the internalisation process are the UN Climate and Biodiversity Conventions, signed by more than 150 countries at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992.

Another important example of the shift to supra-national levels is the fast growing ‘Europeanisation’ of nature policy. On 25 October 1995 a conference of ministers meeting in Sofia, Bulgaria, approved the Pan-European Biological and Landscape Diversity Strategy in which the creation of the so-called Pan-European Ecological Network (acronym: PEEN) was perceived as the main component of an ambitious conservation strategy. The PEEN comprises the so-called Natura 2000 Network of the member countries of the European Union, established in 1992 by the Habitats Directive, and the so-called Emerald Network of non-EU countries that signed the Bern Convention.
The worldwide shift in governance both along horizontal and vertical axes has caused a significant increase in public and private players and multiplied the levels of decision-making. Increasingly, policy-makers are dealing with a wide array of groups, which do not necessarily speak each other’s language or share similar conceptions of the world. With that many voices and that many interests at stake, the specter of the Tower of Babel looms large. Especially in contested matters such as scarce natural resources, multiple conflicts arise. In sum, more than ever before, policy-makers are confronted with problems of coordination and communication.

4. Concepts of nature as communicative devices

This in turn has increased the need for a common vocabulary to articulate and communicate views and values of nature among various actors acting on different administrative levels. With regard to nature policy this need for a common vocabulary has led to an increased interest in the role of concepts of nature as potential communicative devices in public debates and political decisions about nature and landscape. So it is no coincidence that, together with the change in policy-making from top-down to bottom-up, the government became interested in public perceptions of nature. This interest became evident with the publication of the report *Nature in Mind (Natuur tussen de oren)* in 1993 by the Nature Conservation Council. The Council suggests that one of most important explanations for the stagnation of nature policy is a lack of communication between the different social groups that are involved in or affected by this policy. Because these groups generally have different or contradictory perceptions of nature, “emotions frequently run so high that it is difficult to engage in meaningful discussion” (Natuurbeschermingsraad, 1993: 12).

In response to this unsatisfactory situation the Council made an inquiry into the phenomenon of concepts of nature. By systematically mapping perceptions of nature - that people usually hold subconsciously - the Council hoped that it would make it easier for the different groups to discuss their thoughts and feelings about nature and the landscape, that it would lead to a greater mutual understanding, that people would learn to put their own position in perspective
and they would develop productive forms of co-operation. The concepts of nature are formed by means of classifications come across in the literature, of phrases and remarks in policy documents, surveys, and reports, of articles in newspapers and magazines, and of conversations with key figures from the conservation movement, the agrarian sector, outdoor recreation, hunting, etc.

- **Wild nature.** Primeval nature, wild fauna and flora in their original, free state. Nature without human influence: primeval forests, tidal plains.
- **Following nature.** Nature that is semi-natural and associated with cultivation (accompanying nature): nature in agrarian culture landscapes, rural estates.
- **Nature for use.** Nature from which non-cultivated species can be harvested, e.g. by hunting or fishing. Nature as a supply house and gene pool: the blueberry patch, the mussel bank.
- **Nature as production resource.** Supplier of energy and raw materials. Nature as a factor of production for cultivation: fields, solar energy.
- **Regulating nature.** Nature as a stabilising and purifying factor: climate, light, biological purification.
- **Nature as threat or nuisance.** Nature as the source of feelings of insecurity, inconvenience, chaos, and danger: overflowing rivers, vermin, weeds.
- **Healing nature.** Nature as a source of health: the countryside, fresh air, the sea breeze.
- **Scenic nature.** Aesthetic nature: beautiful views, landscape as a recreation area. Nature as a source of relaxation.
- **Intriguing nature.** Source of wonder, study, and education: nature excursions, survival treks.
- **Informative nature.** An indicator of the condition of the environment: dying forests, a butterfly species becoming extinct.
- **Modified nature.** Bred, domesticated animals: dogs and cats, cows and pigs. Plants cultivated in the garden and the windowsill. Genetically modified organisms: plants in testing stations.

*Concepts of nature defined by the Dutch Nature Conservation Council*

This classification is rather impressionistic and lacks system. It always reminds me of the Chinese encyclopedia of animals by Luis Borges, quoted by Michel Foucault in his introduction to *Les Mots et les Choses*. Borges distinguishes animals belonging to the emperor, sucking pigs, stray dogs, sirens, fabulous creatures, animals that just broke a jar, animals that slightly resemble flies and so on.
In the report *Support for Nature? (Draagvlak voor natuur?)*, a background study conducted on behalf of the 1997 *Nature Survey (Natuurverkenning)*, the attempt was made to give the different concepts of nature an empirical background. Therefore the study restricted itself to the more ‘physical’ concepts of nature from the report issued by the Nature Conservation Council. Healing nature, intriguing nature, and informative nature were not included. From the descriptions of the remaining concepts of nature, 35 items were selected and put before a representative sample of the Dutch population in a survey with the question to what extent these ‘nature items’ were considered as ‘really natural’, ‘somewhat natural’, or ‘not natural’. The results of the survey were then subjected to a factor analysis, which made it possible statistically to trace items that were often listed together. On the basis of this analysis, the researchers were able to distinguish five different clusters of items, which they presented as concepts of nature.

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<tr>
<th>Concepts of nature according to Bervaes, Buijs, et al. 1997</th>
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<tr>
<td>- <em>Elements</em>: sun, sea, and wind</td>
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<tr>
<td>- <em>Spontaneous nature</em>: wildplants, insects, mosses, small game, meadow birds, moulds, city birds, field woods</td>
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<tr>
<td>- <em>Nature as production resource</em>: pastures, fields, cows and pigs, landscape (!)</td>
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<tr>
<td>- <em>Constructed nature</em>: city parks, private gardens, allotments, small woods and wooded banks, roadside plantings</td>
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<tr>
<td>- <em>Domesticated nature</em>: houseplants, allotments, private gardens, cows and pigs, dogs and cats</td>
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The resulting typology of concepts of nature is not very convincing but rather problematic. Some “nature items” (cows, pigs, private gardens and public gardens) appear in several concepts of nature, while an encompassing category (landscape) is assigned to a single concept of nature, and characteristic natural forms like marshes and woods do not “score” at all. The lack of consistency and the highly counter-intuitive content of this typology affect its possible relevance to policy-making. It will probably not lead to any improvement in public communication and political decision-making at all.

### 5. The nature/culture dichotomy

If we are looking for a more convincing classification of concepts of nature, we should realize first that the majority of ecologists and environmentalist see naturalness as an absolute category, and second that this view is problematic and better be replaced by a relative notion of naturalness.

The nature developers without any doubt support an absolute notion of naturalness. In fact, they blame all the trouble and strife that surrounds nature conservation on the existence of different concepts of nature. ‘My definition of nature is not your definition. The one is just as good as the other. Where will it end? Anything is nature, so nature conservation is always OK. Soon even the farmers will be able to produce nature! Hail to postmodern nature.’ A cheap swindle, the advocates of primeval and prehistoric nature will say: ‘We don’t have five definitions of a clean environment either, or ten definitions of iron, do we?’ (Vera 1994).
The nature developers see their ‘ecological reference’ as a scientific benchmark and an objective model that leaves no room for any subjective judgement at all. This reference indicates what nature would be like in the Netherlands today if human beings had never ravaged it. Human beings have only a very modest role to play in this primeval nature, namely ‘as a hunter, gatherer or scavenger’, as the main background document to the Nature Policy Plan puts it, without the slightest trace of irony. ‘Even though, ecologically speaking, man is an omnivore, his choice of prey nevertheless puts him in the category of the large predators.’ (LNV 2000a, 40) Nature has been going rapidly downhill ever since humankind progressed beyond the primitive stage of hunter, gatherer and scavenger. This alleged primeval nature has been absent from the Netherlands since 1871 when Beekberger Woud, the last remaining patch of primeval forest, was cut down in a matter of days. To recreate this primeval nature developers use historical data (palaeoreferences), data derived from actual situations elsewhere (actuoreferences), knowledge about system functioning in general (system theoretical references) or a combination of these three sources (Lenders, 2003: 64).

Nature developers together with the majority of ecologists and environmentalists draw a hard line between nature and culture, but, curious enough, this holds true for many of their opponents as well, the only difference being that they will draw this line somewhere else. One example of this is the ongoing controversy with respect to one of the key processes of nature development: the introduction of large herbivores in newly developed nature areas (Klaver, Keulartz et al., 2002). The herbivores released are basically domesticated species that are derived from hoofed animals that were once wild, such as cattle, horses, sheep, and goats. Konik horses and Heck oxen represent a special subcategory in this group, since they are meant to “function” as semi-wild surrogates for such extinct species as the tarpan and auroch. Most of them come from farms, zoos, or small parks, in short, from quite domesticated backgrounds; when introduced into relatively “wild” areas, they will be subject to a process of “de-domestication”, that is, they have to learn to fend for themselves. The management policies of de-domestication, which entail minimizing supplementary feeding and veterinary assistance, have been most controversial.
Most controversies revolve around the “domestication status” of the animals: should they be seen as (still) domesticated or as (already) wild? On the one hand, most park rangers, herd managers and ecologists prefer to treat the released horses and cattle, ethologically and ethically, the same as wild animals in the areas at stake. On the other hand, the majority of the animal protectionists, farmers, veterinarians and visitors view them as domesticated animals to be cared for as individuals. What is more, they frequently back their moral claim for individual care with the argument that the nature areas in question are far from natural, and that there is in fact no such thing as authentic, original, or primeval nature left in the Netherlands.

6. The nature/culture continuum

As a result of this discord, people exhaust themselves in unproductive boundary disputes in which both sides claim an exclusive “moral jurisdiction” over large herbivores. This impasse can be broken if we replace the notion of a clear-cut borderline between nature and culture by the idea of a broad continuum, a hybrid middle ground, in which it is no longer a question of “either-or” but of “less or more”. Herbivores introduced in nature areas don’t simply cross a distinct dividing line between culture and nature; they don’t walk from domestication into the wild, that is, from a moral domain of individual care to one of concern for the ecological whole. They gradually move from a thoroughly cultural context to one that is increasingly natural.

What we can learn from this example is that we should abandon all absolute notions of nature and the natural and replace them with relative one’s. If we want to make persistent conflicts manageable we should give up the search for the ‘true essence’ of nature. We should try to break up rigid dualisms or dichotomies and switch from thinking in terms of fixed boundaries to thinking in terms of degrees. Instead of clinging to the idea that there exists an absolute opposition between nature and culture, we should rather learn to live with the idea of a broad continuum between nature and culture. We should project concepts of nature on a scale from genuine nature to pure culture. This idea of a continuum, scale, or spectrum is in fact far from new. Roderick Nash for example put it forward already in 1973 in his book *Wilderness and the American Mind*. In the introduction to this famous book Nash struggles with the problem of the definition of wilderness. As a possible solution to this problem he mentions ‘the
conception of a spectrum of conditions or environments ranging from the purely wild on the one end to the purely civilized on the other – from the primeval to the paved. This idea of a scale between two poles is useful because it implies the notion of shading or blending. Wilderness and civilization become antipodal influences which combine in varying proportions to determine the character of an area. In the middle potions of the spectrum is the rural or pastoral environment (the ploughed) that represents a balance of the forces of nature and man. As one moves toward the wilderness pole from this midpoint, the human influence appears less frequently. In this part of the scale civilization exists as an outpost in the wilderness, as on a frontier. On the other side of the rural range, the degree to which man affects nature increases. Finally, close to the pole of civilization, the natural setting that the wild and rural conditions share gives way to the purely synthetic condition that exists in a metropolis” (Nash, 1982: 6).

The primeval, the ploughed, and the paved – this trichotomy is deeply rooted in Western tradition from Greek antiquity onwards, under varying headings such as: primitive or wild nature, pastoral or Arcadian nature, and urbane or functional nature. These concepts of nature not only have a long history, they also constitute fully-fledged alternatives, each made up of ecological, ethical, and aesthetic elements (as I have tried to demonstrate at length elsewhere: Keulartz, Van der Windt et al., 2002; 2004).

### Concepts of nature

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<th>Ecology</th>
<th>Ethics</th>
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<td>Wild nature</td>
<td>Systems ecology</td>
<td>Ecocentric</td>
<td>Objectivist</td>
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<td>Arcadian nature</td>
<td>Structure ecology</td>
<td>Steward/Partner</td>
<td>Subjectivist</td>
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<tr>
<td>Functional nature</td>
<td>Production ecology</td>
<td>Anthropocentric</td>
<td>Formalist</td>
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### Conclusion

I have argued that deadlock in debates on nature can only be prevented or circumvented if absolute, so-called ‘objective’ and science based notions of nature and naturalness are given up, and if it is possible to find a vocabulary that will enable experts and lay people alike to articulate and communicate there different and often conflicting views on nature and its relation to culture. ‘Concepts of nature’ should be considered a serious candidate for such a common vocabulary.


**Literature**


