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Cultured Nature and Naturalised Culture

The Veluwe from 1908 to the Present Day

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A century ago, in 1908, a certain Anton Kröller purchased around 6,000 hectares of land in the Veluwe region in the east of the Netherlands. Kröller was a wealthy businessman, dealer and industrialist. He was not the only wealthy Dutchman from the traditional nobility or the newly rich bourgeoisie who bought land in this area. The Dutch royal family also purchased land there, gradually increasing their holdings to 10,000 hectares by the beginning of the twentieth century. Many others, too, especially from the world of industry and finance, bought considerable tracts of land in the Veluwe in this period.

In that same year of 1908 Anton's wife, Hélène Kröller-Müller, bought the painting *Four Withered Sunflowers* by Vincent van Gogh. It was not the first work by Van Gogh purchased by Mrs Kröller-Müller in this period, but it was certainly one of the most important. Right up to the 1930s she would collect a large

Vincent van Gogh,
Four Withered Sunflowers.
1887. Kröller-Müller
Museum, Otterlo





Entrance of the Kröller-Müller Museum.
Photo by Walter Herfst
(courtesy of Kröller-Müller
Museum, Otterlo).

number of paintings, sculptures and other works of art. She and her husband also commissioned the architect H.P. Berlage to build the architecturally striking St Hubertus hunting lodge on their estate in the Veluwe, where they lived for a while. During this period numerous people, including the famous Belgian architect Henry Van de Velde, were also hard at work drawing and planning a museum to house and exhibit all these art treasures.

A double purchase followed by a forced sale

Between 1929 and 1932, in the wake of the stock market crash, the Dutch economy took a downturn. The slump also impacted on the business activities of Anton Kröller, who actually went bankrupt. The Kröller-Müller family had no alternative but to sell its considerable assets. In 1935 they entered into an agreement with the State: the works of art were transferred to a Foundation and housed in a museum. In 1938 Mrs Kröller-Müller even became – briefly – the museum’s first director. Both she and her husband died shortly afterwards. For all manner of reasons the new museum envisaged in the agreement did not materialise, although in the 1970s the existing building was – considerably – enlarged by the addition of a new wing. Since then the museum has been constantly remodelled

Helene Kröller-Müller
(1869-1939).
Photo courtesy of
Kröller-Müller Museum,
Otterlo





Aerial view of the Kröller-Müller Museum. Photo courtesy of Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo.



The St Hubertus hunting lodge. Photo courtesy of Fotowerkgroep De Hoge Veluwe.

and adapted to meet the demands of the day. The famous sculpture garden has also been substantially extended and remodelled. The whole complex has for a long time been known as the Kröller-Müller Museum, famed among other things for its impressive Van Gogh collection and its many paintings and sculptures, mainly from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The original property has also largely been preserved intact: the St Hubertus hunting lodge and several other buildings, and above all the impressive family estate. The latter forms the basis of what is now the Hoge Veluwe National Park, of which the museum is literally the centre point.

Despite its forced sale, then, the Kröller-Müllers' double purchase – nature and culture together – has been preserved and a hundred years later is still in good condition and as contemporary as ever. Not only that, but both the museum and the estate are major tourist attractions. The museum can count on between 250,000 and 300,000 visitors a year, rising to over 400,000 in years when there are special exhibitions. The National Park does even better, pulling in more than 500,000 visitors a year, rising over 600,000 in peak years. Organisationally, the 'nature' (the National Park) and the 'culture' (the museum), have been entrusted to two different Foundations. This is logical not only from an operational point of view, but also because the management of nature and culture demand different and sometimes even opposing approaches. In any event, the Kröller-Müller is one of the few museums in Europe to be so deeply embedded in a nature park, and the park is the only nature reserve in Europe with a heavily visited museum at its heart. Yet park and museum are inextricably bound together. The two institutions themselves also think so, as is clear from their mission statements and strategies, which are dominated by precisely that combination of nature and culture. And their visitors evidently think the same: all surveys and studies show that they too greatly appreciate the combination of nature and culture. Which does not mean, of course, that this combination is still self-evident today, 100 years on.

The Veluwe as a region

The area that is broadly known as 'the Veluwe' lies in the heart of the Netherlands: between the towns of Zwolle to the north, Arnhem to the south and Apeldoorn to the east, and bounded in the north-west by the IJsselmeer. When defined as broadly as this, the area covers more than 100,000 hectares. The geological origins of what in the generally flat Netherlands is sometimes called – with some irony – the 'Veluwe Massif', lie in the early Pleistocene period, up to around 150,000 years ago, when glaciers penetrated to the centre of the present-day Netherlands via what is now the IJsselmeer. The Veluwe's characteristic hills, like those around the cities of Utrecht and Nijmegen, mark the edges of the old glaciers.

This geological prehistory also explains the poor soil of the Veluwe; farming, in common with other forms of land use, has never been really economically viable here. In the middle of the nineteenth century, too, with the exception of a few agricultural enclaves, the area consisted of a more or less continuous, slightly hilly sandy landscape where heather was virtually the only vegetation.

Photo courtesy of
Fotowerkgroep De Hoge
Veluwe.



After this, however, between the mid-nineteenth and the start of the twentieth century, the area was the scene of large-scale reforestation. This was profitable at the time because of the great demand for timber from the mining industry. At the same time, the plantations offered a means of stabilising the shifting sand to some extent. At the turn of the last century, however, the demand for timber gradually declined, so that this activity became yet another that was barely economically viable. The land was poor, of no agricultural interest, and

now also less attractive for forestry, and could therefore be purchased reasonably cheaply. This tempted wealthy aristocrats and industrialists into buying up sizeable tracts of land; these were used partly for hunting, and partly as country estates. The Kröller-Müllers too evidently saw it as a good investment. Like many landowners, however, they later sold their land again, of their own free will or out of necessity, for better or for worse.

After the Second World War especially, many of these estates came into the hands of public and private organisations working to conserve nature, forest and landscape. Of the Veluwe's original 100,000 hectares, 17,000 are now in the hands of the Staatsbosbeheer (State Forestry Service), 12,000 are held by the Vereniging Natuurmonumenten (the Society for the Preservation of Natural Monuments in the Netherlands), 6,000 by the provincial landscape organisation Geldersch Landschap and more than 15,000 by local authorities in the area. A further 13,000 hectares are owned by the Dutch Ministry of Defence. The Hoge Veluwe National Park itself covers 'only' 5,500 hectares. During the Second World War part of the former privately owned land was used by the Germans to build an airfield which is now owned by the Ministry of Defence. The area is thus divided up among a small number of large landholders. The pre-war ownership structure is still clearly visible, however, in the 10,000 hectares that belong to the Crown, and in the more than 20,000 hectares, often in large parcels, which are in the hands of a large number of private landowners.

The Veluwe as a nature reserve

As stated, the Hoge Veluwe National Park comprises only around 5,500 hectares. But it lies at the heart of the much larger area of 100,000 hectares which make up the Veluwe. This makes it the second largest contiguous nature area in the Netherlands after the Waddenzee. That such a large contiguous area has been preserved is entirely due to two factors: the poor quality of the land – nature reserves are more likely to emerge where economic activities are not (or no longer) viable – and the large size of the holdings, which prevents excessive fragmentation. Large tracts of the Veluwe now fall under European nature protection regimes, as well as under a mountain of constantly-developing Dutch nature policy. This is not to say that the Veluwe in a broad sense is managed in a uniform way: the aims and interests of the various owners differ too widely for this. Moreover, the authorities – for a long time mainly central government, but from the mid-1990s mainly the Province of Gelderland – have been somewhat inconsistent as regards nature policy. This erratic course is due mainly to constantly evolving scientific views on the one hand and the differing interests of the landholders on the other.

For all these reasons, in recent decades the Veluwe has become *the* arena in which virtually all the debates and discussions on nature management in the Netherlands have been conducted. Those discussions began as long ago as 1945, when the Dutch government first developed its own nature policy. Until then, nature management had been a matter for private organisations and wealthy individuals. But the discussions became more heated after the 1970s, when growing environmental awareness also boosted nature conservation, and along with ecology nature conservation too gained a (varying degree of) scientific legitimacy.



One general discussion concerned the question whether 'nature areas' – placed between quotation marks because these were of course areas largely shaped by humans and by culture – should leave nature to take its course 'undisturbed' or whether a more 'hands-on' management policy was required. And whether those responsible opted for a highly extensive approach, preferably with an absolute minimum of human interference, or for the opposite – intensive human intervention – in either case the question then arose of precisely what kind of 'nature' was envisaged. What, in modern terms, was the ideal image of nature: what kind of nature was to be created? For the Veluwe, as indeed for many nature areas in Europe, the period around 1900 was and remains a historical reference point. It was in that period, as later became apparent, that the biological diversity of the Veluwe – an important indicator of the quality of nature – was at its greatest.

If this was a topic discussed mainly by biologists, ecologists and other nature scientists, a second debate was of a much more social and political kind. For some, there was little appeal in the idea of a commitment to 'nature'; they felt that areas such as the Veluwe should be managed not as a nature reserve but as a cultural landscape. This was partly a question of new cultural and historical thinking and an appreciation of cultural heritage. That heritage is particularly clearly visible in (nature) areas such as the Veluwe. Partly, however, the hope was that under a culture-based policy all manner of economic and other activities would be subject to fewer constraints. The large private landowners, for example, had no wish to see the value of their land diminished by it being designated a nature area. The same certainly went for the farmers who struggled to make a living from the few poor agricultural enclaves. It also

Photo courtesy of
Fotowerkgroep De Hoge
Veluwe.



Photo courtesy of
Fotowerkgroep De Hoge
Veluwe.

applied, and especially since the 1970s still applies, to a rapidly growing tourist infrastructure of hotels, cafes, campsites and all the other accoutrements of the modern tourist industry. They too are keen to take advantage of the large numbers of visitors to the Veluwe. None of these groups, then, had anything to gain from a strict nature protection regime.

A third, constantly recurring topic of discussion concerns the question of whether the Veluwe should to some extent be 'screened off' from the outside world, in order to prevent erosion and fragmentation, or whether it should be open to all. In the 1960s, the prevailing idea was that nature areas should be segregated from the outside world; that the 'modern' outside world, with its industrial farming, its industry and pollution, its infrastructure criss-crossing the landscape and its noise, should be excluded. Whether inspired mainly by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, by romantic ideals or by ecological views, many nature conservationists saw natural monuments and nature areas as the last refuges of the pre-modern age. That strategy of shutting out the outside world helped to ensure that the Veluwe remained a relatively unspoilt, continuous area. Where cutting through the landscape with infrastructure could not be avoided, as with the A50 motorway, 'ecoducts' and 'wildlife tunnels' provided animal-friendly connections from the 1980s onwards. But the emergence of a new strategy, the more aggressive 'nature development', is taking contemporary conservation policy a step further: today a nature area must be embedded in its environment, must even try to influence it. It is for this reason that the Province of Gelderland now talks about 'the endless Veluwe': a concept which combines preserving the continuity of the area, with no internal barriers, on the one hand, with on the other the green 'arteries' which are designed to extend from the heart of the nature area and make the surrounding environment more nature-friendly. Among other things, the idea is to create 'ecological gateways' which would offer a larg-

er foraging area and more opportunities for migration to the rich local fauna. This would enhance the available resources, the intermingling and ultimately the resilience of animals of all kinds. But ranged against the idealistic picture of a Veluwe deer wandering through the Renkum valley to drink from the Rhine near Arnhem is the anxiety felt by farmers at the prospect of wild boar from the Veluwe wreaking havoc on their farms. In short, the debate about the isolation or opening up of nature areas is entering another new round. And once again, ecological rigour often conflicts with social acceptance.

The museum as a centre of culture

The history of the Veluwe reflects the changing and divergent ideals of Dutch nature policy, and in fact of nature policy throughout Europe. As the biggest nature area in the Netherlands, the Veluwe has often been both the debating chamber and the trial ground for national nature policy, with an added European dimension and impact. Participation in these discussions was also anything but optional for the Veluwe itself, where the combination of the nature park with the museum actually gave rise to extra tensions, or at least to ideals which were not obviously compatible.

Entirely in line with the wishes of its first director, Hélène Kröller-Müller herself, three elements were to guarantee the unique character and success of

Kenneth Snelson's
aluminium and steel
Needle Tower (1968)
in the sculpture garden.
Photo courtesy of
Kröller-Müller Museum,
Otterlo



the museum: the visual arts, architecture and nature. Where in 1938 painting was dominant, today it is – more than anyone could then have imagined – above all the sculptures and all manner of ‘spatial objects’ which set the tone. Along with the museum proper, the role of the sculpture garden has thus become much greater. And it is precisely that sculpture garden which in its own individual way provides a link between architecture, art and nature.

Maintaining that link is not always easy: in early 2007 the museum suffered considerable damage when a spring gale brought down about 20 trees. That is not a problem likely to trouble the average urban museum. This is a mere anecdote, but it does make clear that for a museum situated in the middle of a nature or park area just to exist, project itself and attract visitors is no simple matter. Its location inevitably imposes constraints on visitors, on their travel routes, on their ability to stay in the immediate vicinity, etc. Partly because of this, the museum pursues a very active marketing strategy. It employs all manner of activities in the effort to raise its profile, activities which deliberately stress the combination of nature and culture. One of its most recent initiatives was the children’s book *Hélène’s Secret* (Het geheim van Hélène, 2007) by the well-known Dutch children’s author Lydia Rood, which tells the story of Hélène Müller and the way in which she established her art collection. More than a purely historical account, the book was primarily intended to arouse the interest of children in this special combination of civilised, tamed nature and carefully selected culture.

The National Park as a tourist attraction: nature as culture



The sculpture garden.

If there is a great deal of discussion about the management of the entire nature area known as the Veluwe, of course the same also goes for the Hoge Veluwe National Park. Without going into technical details, in managing the National Park, too, conflicting objectives have to be reconciled: nature conservation and tourism; nature education and the peace and safety of the flora and fauna. To some extent, as in other nature reserves, this is achieved by ‘zoning’: different parts of the Park are designated for different primary uses, each governed by different protection regimes, and with different activities permitted in them. For this reason, a clear distinction is made in the National Park between the heath lands (wet, dry and sparse grassland), the forested areas (reserve, coppice woodland and cultural woodland), the fens, sand drifts and a number of other areas. And the area of the Park immediately surrounding the museum is an out-and-out park landscape and is managed, or, as those responsible put it themselves, manicured as such.

This zoning and the various associated restrictions help to sustain nature in a civilised way. But anyone who visits the Hoge Veluwe National Park wants to be able to cycle around, preferably everywhere, and especially in those areas where there are animals to be seen. The educational objective that has been part of nature conservation from the start is no longer a matter of folders and boards didactically imparting information on the surrounding nature and its inhabitants. Spoiled by Discovery Channel and other spectacular and civilised images of nature, visitors to the park – and by no means only child visitors – are eager to see a wild boar, even more eager to see a doe, and yet more eager still to see a stag, the pinnacle of photogenic and endearing nature. And the Park

White bikes used to
cycle around the Hoge
Veluwe National Park.



does indeed advertise *'the chance of an unexpected encounter with a stag'*. But more or less guaranteeing such an attraction places considerable demands on the management of nature and its resident wildlife. A hundred years after H  l  ne and Anton's initial purchase, their ideal of intertwining nature and culture is as valid as ever; but it is no more self-evident today than it was then. ■

National Park: www.hogeveluwe.nl

Museum: www.kmm.nl

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