

Nature and Woodland in Flanders

Policy in Times of Short-Term Thinking

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[P I E T E R L E R O Y]

What is the state of the natural environment in Flanders? There are a few bright spots, but on the whole the situation is not good. And how about environmental policies? The so-called concrete ban, which is intended to preserve what is left of our open spaces, seems like good news, but there is every reason to be sceptical. After all, governments nowadays are rarely in a position to ensure that long-term policies are actually implemented. In contrast to fifteenth-century Venice which was able to do so through enlightened self-interest.

In 1713, Hans-Carl von Carlowitz, a German forester, published his *Sylvicultura oeconomica*, a comprehensive handbook on forestry based on the scientific insights of the time. Modern environmentalists know this text through its emphasis on sustainability as a leading principle of successful forestry. The book is a perfect example of mercantilist and early modern thinking on capital management. Forests are an important capital asset, and should therefore be treated by governments as an important national possession.

Of course, that idea goes back much further than the eighteenth century. The most striking example is Venice, which despite its vulnerable geographical position, was able to dominate the Mediterranean for a century and a half, between about 1400 and 1550. The Doge and his entourage were well aware of the importance of systematic forest management and practised it, not always very gently, even at great distances from the city itself. Venice appropriated forests deep into the Alps and as far away as modern Slovenia and Croatia. The city was heavily dependent on them. Wood was needed for building houses and ships, for armaments and trade, for water management, as a source of energy and so on. Archival research shows that the Venetians had a sophisticated system of forest management based on the careful recording of which types of wood had to be available, in what quantities, how often, and for what uses. Long-term thinking in the fifteenth century was inspired by economic, military and political needs and the defence of independence. And as Von Carlowitz was to write two centuries later, forestry should not only benefit the here and now, but should be long-lasting and sustainable, and should benefit future generations. That emphasis on sustainability was not inspired by ethical considerations, but primarily by enlightened self-interest. The utilitarianism of the here and now had to be reined in by self-restraint and long-term considerations. It



was perfectly acceptable to regard today's timber yield as a return on investment, so long as the base capital of that natural resource was preserved for the future. After all, one was dependent upon it.

Zaventem, 2009
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The minister and the entertainer

'The function of a tree has always been to be felled.' This observation by Joke Schauvliege, the Flemish minister responsible among other things for Environment, Nature and Forestry as well as Agriculture, gave rise to widespread critical comment. It was May 2016 and she had been under fire for a year. It started in the summer of 2015, when forty-three academics published an open letter expressing concern about Flemish environmental policy as a whole: its lack of ambition, lack of money, and lack of performance. Then in September 2015, Wouter Deprez, a cabaret performer and not a conventional environmentalist, highlighted one particular event: the felling of eleven hectares of woodland in Genk for the expansion of a transport business. He was scathing and to the point, he pulled no punches, he was scientifically accurate and he used social media. Flemish ministers criticise each other on Facebook and Twitter about everything but they are not very good at dealing with tweets directed at themselves from outside government circles. Deprez, acting on his own, was like the chorus in a Greek tragedy, passing comment, without mandate, disinterested, well informed and with surgical precision. While he was attracting wide support, the minister faced mounting criticism for the proposed clearing

of the woodland, for a number of howlers in her defence of the decision, and subsequently for the failure of the fund that was intended to compensate for deforestation by planting new trees. An investigation by the parliamentary Audit Office revealed that the ministry's books were neither geographically nor financially in order. What fifteenth-century Venice had been able to do seemed to be beyond the competence of the Flemish government in 2015. Moreover, government spending on buying up forest and nature reserves in Flanders was in decline. Not surprisingly, minister Schauvliege found herself in the firing line. She avoided the media for some time but finally appeared in a TV programme in the middle of May 2016 where once again she was given a hard time, though this time less skilfully. Apparently, that's the trend in modern journalism. And then at the end of May 2016 came that controversial statement: 'the function of a tree has always been to be felled'. Factually it may be accurate, but Von Carlowitz would have added the proviso: so long as enough trees are left standing for the future. And the minister had added that more or less.

But the evil was done. For there was no suggestion of sustainability, of a vision beyond the here and now or concern for the future. The result was that yet again nature-loving Flemings laid into the minister. And things were soon to get even worse.

Ambivalent motives for protecting the environment

Protecting the natural environment as an end in itself is a recent phenomenon. Environmental historian Joachim Radkau rightly observes that only societies which have solved the problems of hunger and poverty can permit themselves the luxury of protecting a swamp for purely aesthetic reasons. Incidentally, aesthetics was only one of the motives behind the first wave of environmental

Lemberge,
Aldegondiswegel
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Stadspark, Aalst
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protection, from 1860 in the USA and a few decades later in Europe. 'For the Benefit and Enjoyment of the People' has been hewn into one of the entrances to the Yellowstone Park, a quotation from the law which led to the establishment of the park in 1872. President Roosevelt unveiled the stone in 1903. There are many photos of the same Roosevelt, not necessarily in Yellowstone, standing proudly next to an animal which presumably he had just shot. It reflects the ambivalence of nature protection at that time which was prepared to protect it here and there, but primarily for the use and pleasure of human beings. Not everybody thought that way; the establishment of nature parks in the mid-West and West of the USA was accompanied by the compulsory and disruptive expulsion of 'native Americans'. Early nature protection was not only anthropocentric; it was also demonstrably ethnically discriminatory.

Similarly, the motives behind early European protection measures, say between 1880 and 1914, were ambivalent. In an echo of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, anti-modernism certainly played its part. Natural areas were seen as oases of authenticity and places of poetry and philosophy, as one can read in Frederik van Eeden. There was also scientific curiosity and, inspired by Alexander von Humboldt, great efforts were made to record and protect as much as possible against the rising tide of modernisation. What applied to Europe, applied even more to the exotic environments of the colonies. The arguments and strategies used by the colonial powers to set up nature reserves in their overseas territories reveal a remarkable mixture of high-minded motives of emancipation, academic interest, and crude economic and political repression of local populations.

The second wave of European nature protection was delayed by wars and poverty and developed more or less in parallel with the growing environmental awareness which took off around 1970. In particular, it was the damage to nature, landscape and open spaces caused by urban development, traffic and industry that aroused opposition. In Flanders, for instance, many a battle was

fought over the proposed push-towing canal between Oelegem and Zandvliet and the A24 through Limburg. Nature, or at least its beautiful landscapes, had once more to be protected against advancing modernisation. Most of these battles were lost, but in some the outcome was deferred and something approaching an environmental policy began, hesitantly, to emerge.

Nature: what is it actually?

Meanwhile, across Europe it was abundantly clear that nature had long ceased to be 'unspoiled'. It was certainly true of Flanders: churned up by endless wars, hardened by centuries of urbanisation and transport, turned over to industry for two centuries, and to industrial food production for half a century. And what was left, in spite of great opposition, was being built over. There was no hint of environmental planning, let alone restraint on behalf of future generations. There is no more room for nature.

Elsewhere in Europe, attitudes towards nature and its protection have been changing during the past few decades. Just as in Von Carlowitz's time, science has played a crucial role in this. Three aspects deserve emphasis: space, quality and biodiversity, and then via a fourth, ecosystem services, we end up very close to Von Carlowitz's position.

Nature reserves remain very important. They are, after all, the location and storerooms of biodiversity and of specific species and habitats. Space must therefore be set aside for them. But even outside these nature reserves, where population density, intensive agriculture, industry and transport is putting great pressure on available space and the environment, it is essential to call a halt to further asphaltting, urbanisation and fragmentation. To phrase it more positively, open spaces must be safeguarded and buffer zones and connecting strips for migrating species have to be laid down. Environmental policy is therefore to some extent also town and country planning. Secondly, these areas must be of such environmental quality, physically, chemically and biologically, that nature can thrive. Environmental policy is therefore also policy on

Below left
Warandepark, Brussels
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Below right
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the quality of air, water, and other natural elements. And thirdly, Nature as a gigantic, complex and delicate system is at its most robust and resilient when there are many different species, when there is great biodiversity. Environmental policy, therefore, is also partly a species policy for plants, animals and habitats. Not homogeneity, but variety.

Like many others, I am sceptical about the chances of success for an environmental policy that is only driven by ethical, aesthetic or scientific motives. Enlightened self-interest is a much stronger motive. After all, what is true of forestry is also true of nature in general. We need nature now and we shall need it in the future. We are dependent upon it and that realisation cuts across the presumption that modernisation can make us independent of nature, and that trees can simply be cut down. In direct opposition to such presumption is the relatively recent concept of ecosystem services which at its core is very factual and straightforward. Nature, the ecosystem, automatically provides at no cost to us all kinds of services such as oxygen, water, food, raw materials, a protective ozone layer and much more. These ecosystem services, just like Von Carlowitz's forests, are capital goods, which should be protected. The authorities of today must ensure that short-term interests are likewise constrained by the long-term protection of these essential ecosystem services. The hole in the ozone layer, climate change, and all the other current environmental issues show how essential and valuable they are. Perhaps we could set a price on them? Perhaps an economic and financial valuation of nature would in the long run prove to be its best protection?

Preserve nature? Yes, but not in my back yard

Flanders went through all this between 1990 and 2003 when under the so-called 'Main Green Structure' plan an attempt was made to establish a comprehensive environmental policy for Flanders. However, as soon as it was published, a coalition of convenience sprang up between farmers and landowners, Christian democrats, liberals and Flemish nationalists, hunters and developers, householders and speculators who viewed the setting aside of land for nature and the environment as a totally unacceptable limitation of freedom. Protecting nature was all very well elsewhere, but not when it came to their own back yard. Their terrain, after all, should be 'for the benefit and enjoyment of the people'. Open spaces and nature were given an exclusively private and short-term meaning and value. Neither the interests of the community nor long-term considerations were seen as sufficient reason for restraint, and the 'green spaces' element of environmental policy was torpedoed. Its political impact turned out to be too high.

Remaining ambitions

So, what is the current state of the natural environment in Flanders? The answer to that question depends on what is understood by the environment, which parts of it you want to protect and why. Farmers, civil servants, conservationists and scientists all have very different opinions, as do Sunday rambles and



Ronse, 2005
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pensioners on their electric bikes. Nevertheless, agreement has been reached in Europe and in Flanders on what is of value and how to preserve it. There is also international agreement on how to assess the condition of the environment and how to report on it. In Flanders, in addition to various inventories drawn up by butterfly lovers, bird counters and woodland specialists, the Research Institute for Nature and Forests plays a crucial role. Its Nature Reports contain long lists and time series for many dozens of indicators, including how ordinary people experience Nature.

On the basis of those lists, one thing has become clear: the natural environment in Flanders is not flourishing; on the contrary, it is in a bad way. Of course, one can qualify this assertion endlessly by citing the numbers of water birds, butterflies, and fresh water fish, the extent of managed nature reserves and accessible woodland, and the measures relating to defragmentation of the countryside or nitrogen deposits. But the conclusion would still be the same. Admittedly, the number of protected nature reserves and their surface area has increased during recent decades. Depending on which of the various conservation regimes one chooses and the degree to which they overlap, between about 100,000 and 120,000 hectares in Flanders are now subject to a regime of environmental management. Nevertheless, almost fifteen years after the date prescribed by law, only 74% of the Flemish Ecological Network, and a mere 3% of the connecting areas have been demarcated. Elements of the original Main Green Structure plan have meanwhile been renamed and watered down. In other words, the designation of the core natural areas, the original reserves, has been reasonably successful, but the sections linking them hardly at all. Beyond

these spatial aspects of environmental policy there is little good news to report. Within the protected areas, the quality of the environment is extremely variable. Some species are flourishing but more than half of the 'species of European importance' are in a 'very poor state of preservation'. There is little natural diversity in Flanders. Outside those areas, the quality of the environment ranges from critical to negative. That has everything to do with a third aspect of environmental management: the admittedly improved but still poor quality of water and air. Flanders continues to breach European regulations particularly in the case of phosphates, nitrates and particulates. That is not only unhealthy for the environment but also for humans.

This regrettable situation is neither accidental nor ascribable to any one particular minister. Since 2004 Flanders has had a succession of governments none of whom has given priority to nature and the environment. It even appears in their policy statements, in such phrases as, 'we shall do no more than what is required by Brussels'. In fact, they have done even less than that. First of all, as we have already seen, budgets have been cut. Secondly, there has been a demonstrable failure to observe many EU regulations, for instance in respect of air quality, phosphates, nitrates and particulates. And whenever Brussels threatens to enforce them, complex and intricate covenants designed simply to keep everyone quiet, to maintain the status quo and obtain a deferment from the EU of between six and twelve years are sought out. The so-called Programmed Approach to Nitrogen (PAS), is the most recent example of this kind of manoeuvre. Thirdly, what lacks priority is usually badly administered. It is therefore not surprising that the regulations for forest compensation have still not been approved by the Audit Office and that the appropriate expertise, organisation and administration is lacking. The (non-governmental) forestry and environmental organisations, if only because of their contractual obligations, are better run than the Flemish government. All of which leaves any minister extremely vulnerable.



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From short-term to long-term

Recently a fresh breeze has been blowing through Flemish town and country planning. Partly through the influence of the government architect, the Flemish government has decreed a future concrete ban. The civil servants in the Flanders Spatial Department have been busier than ever with inventories, studies and reports. The heart of their proposal is to safeguard, even expand the scarce open spaces in Flanders by discouraging and even forbidding the spread of new housing developments on, for instance, obscenely large plots of land outside existing built up areas. The counterpart of that policy will be to increase the density of housing within the cities and urban centres.

Most of the arguments in favour of a concrete ban have been familiar for decades. Flanders is messy and ugly; in Flanders there is no clear demarcation between town and countryside; the spread of housing leads to unnecessarily high levels of traffic and transport; it leads to needlessly high costs for collective infrastructure, from energy networks to sewers, from postal deliveries to public transport. But there are also two relatively new arguments. The first is climate change. Higher density housing would open up the prospect of lower and more sustainable energy use by households and traffic. It would also make it easier to adjust to the impact of climate change on, for instance, the risk of flooding and rising urban temperatures.

The second 'new' argument is not actually new, but is only now catching on. Open spaces are a communal good and important for the future. Only open spaces can provide ecosystem services. Encroaching on them therefore carries a price which has to be paid. Building in the countryside should ideally be banned and certainly be made far more expensive. That is Von Carlowitz in modern dress. I am surprised that that idea has proved more successful than all the efforts of well-meaning architects and planners, as well as the environmental movement, and has finally broken through to the highest government circles. At least, I am told that important ministers are attracted by it. So the recent Structure Plan for Flanders includes an ambitious plan to give the concrete ban proper form and content by 2040/2050. It has not shied away from imposing do's and don'ts, or using financial instruments. It is no 'soft policy'. The Flemish government is persisting, at least verbally, in its Jacobin mind-set.

From the long term back to that one map

It goes without saying that a concrete ban is most welcome, even essential, for the Flemish environment. Flanders would once again be able to enjoy open spaces, a more attractive social climate, and better living conditions. Nevertheless, I remain sceptical. For two reasons. Firstly, because of the length of time involved. Governments are hardly able to lay down and sustain a policy for ten years, let alone for several decades. Their attention is constantly distracted by the illusion of the day, the hype of the week, or the investment of the year. Furthermore, the cycle of elections and changes of government encourages discontinuity. The Dutch Scientific Council for Government Policy reported recently on the institutional, legal, budgetary and organisational conditions



Meldert, 2004
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needed to pursue long-term policies successfully. Climate change was the example that they used, but the Flemish ban on concrete will require comparable conditions. From where I stand, none of those conditions have yet been satisfied in Flanders.

One of those conditions is the second reason for my scepticism. Just when everybody thought that the Minister for Environment, Nature, Forestry and Agriculture had survived her worst possible crisis, she faced an even greater crisis in 2017, with the so-called Forest Map. The intention, in brief, was to protect all woodlands, even those located in areas that had been designated for other purposes such as housing, business parks and so on. It affected about 12,000 hectares of woodland which did not fall within the regional planning guidelines. That in itself reflects the modernist pretension that we can impose a homogeneous order on nature. Whether it was much or little, the policy required an agreed and workable definition of what constituted a forest, or a woodland for that matter, a reliable inventory of where these were to be found, and the transfer of all that information on to a map. After much argument in the cabinet, as a result of ten times as much lobbying outside it, the map was presented in mid-May 2017. Opposition immediately broke out in a well-organised campaign. Obsolete data, factual errors, wrong geographical coordinates and particularly the threat of financial loss led to a coalition of convenience between employers' organisations, tradesmen, farmers, householders and others. The map was withdrawn straight away and the parties continued to squabble. The party disagreements were not particularly interesting. More important is to observe that the Forest Map protected a much smaller area than the Green Structure Plan had done earlier. Yet in spite of its reduced demands, the plan was still shot down because of the Flemish government's self-inflicted lack of expertise, administrative capacity and political will. That makes me sceptical about the concrete ban in 2050. 'And what about nature?' I hear you ask. What nature would be left by then? ■

Translated by Chris Emery