

STROLLING THROUGH THE NEIGHBOURHOOD AND CARING FOR THE CULTURAL LANDSCAPE

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Abstract:

In 2007 Landschapsbeheer Nederland (LBN) held a contest, searching for local initiatives on walks and strolls. More than 450 initiatives for short walks locally were admitted! The winning initiative received € 30.000 to realize the actual new walk.

Walking in the countryside has gained in popularity, but the opportunities to do so are limited. Many former footpaths across farmland were closed after the re-allotment of land in the 1960's and 1970's. On top of that, many Dutch farmers want to allow no access to their land via footpaths. They fear disease and / or harvesting problems for which they are not compensated.

In a new project LBN is realizing 30 new footpaths across farmland. Initiatives have come from the local inhabitants. Consulting with farmers and local authorities, LBN is searching for ways to compensate the farmers (e. g. national or European subsidies) and making it possible once again to walk through the countryside. Inventories of former footpaths have been made using old maps and oral history. Local authorities are very willing to participate but don't have the knowledge. The locals are enthusiastic but need help to realize their plans. LBN and the provincial organizations are well equipped to organize the process and to realize the eventual footpaths together with the farmers and locals. We play a key-role in this process.

After realization, the provincial organisations will organize together with the locals groups for the maintenance of the footpaths.

In this way LBN will make it possible for local residents to take small strolls again and at the same time preserving the cultural heritage and landscape. Also offering a little extra income to landowners. As a result, the appreciation for cultural landscape will rise and the willingness to take responsibility for their own residential environment.

Biography

Edwin Raap (1969) studied historical-geography at Amsterdam University. He co-published the memorial book of the "Salland"waterboard (1996) and worked as historical-geographical researcher. He now is a project manager at the NGO for Landscape Management in the Netherlands. He has published several articles about the Dutch landscape and has been involved in the World Heritage nomination of Grand-Pré (Canada.).

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Text

Landschapsbeheer Nederland (LBN) is a NGO in the Netherlands. In each of our 12 provinces a provincial organization is working on maintaining the cultural landscape. The provinces are facilitated by a national office in Utrecht, where the authors works.

Over the years we have restored thousands of so-called 'small landscape elements', like pruned willow trees, lanes, hedges, fruit orchards and historical footpaths. We have done that with the help of over 35.000 volunteers. We are not landowners ourselves, all activities are done for the landowner and in cooperation with them. E.g. if a farmer owns a row of pruned willow trees, we can prune the trees for him once in every 4 years. He pays for it, we do the work. Local municipalities ask us to do work for them or ask us for advice. Our aim is to work bottom-up and small-scale, we show the results and continue.

Our mottos are first of all "Landscape is in yourself" meaning that landscape isn't a matter for NGO's or the government. It's your landscape and you are part of it. Be aware of that and please take your responsibility for taking care of it. The other motto is 'Realizing attractive and accessible cultural landscape for men and animals'.

Combining these mottos is exactly what this paper is about. If people are able to go in the countryside and enjoy the landscape, we are convinced that it helps them to take responsibility for that landscape. And the best way to go in is to go on foot.

Under the ongoing influence of European agricultural regulations the accessibility of the Dutch landscape has declined dramatically since the 1960's. The EU stimulated the growth of agriculture by providing subsidies to farmers and by stimulating rationalization. It has been calculated that over 30.000 km of footpaths was cleared, so there was no choice left than to take the remaining paths. And everybody did. The result of that was, that it either got to crowded or that people stopped walking. The latter happened more... But that was not all: also many other paths were closed for the public. Whereas in Britain the so-called 'right of way' continued to exist, it almost disappeared in the Netherlands.

It almost seemed as if the people were not welcome anymore. Landscape was a production area with no recreational function left.

Since the 1970's, if you went out, you had to enjoy the landscape from public roads, which in the Netherlands are very crowded during weekends with bikes and cars.

Walkers wanted to go in IN the landscape, in order not to be ran over by bikes and to really enjoy the landscape. In several areas initiatives were taken to actually get in the landscape. A real national programme lacked, but especially the 'Wandelplatform' worked hard to promote walking. Their focus was mainly, but not exclusive, on Long Distance Walking. The 'short walk from home' or 'Ommetje' seemed to be forgotten.

A survey in 2008 showed that there is a substantial demand for (short) walks in areas where there are practically no opportunities to go out. The far right picture and the far left picture are each others mirrors. The right one coincides with 'urban Netherlands' with the exception of the 'Green heart' in the west. In other words: the demand for walks is there where many people live. Especially in urban fringes there is a great demand for walks.

Not only the landscape itself had become inaccessible, it even became more and more difficult to walk from home straight into the countryside due to infrastructural barriers.

Since our motto is realizing an attractive and accessible landscape, walking through the countryside is part of that.

Our projects

Some five years ago, we started with the first 'walkingproject'.

It was a new subject for us. The focus was mainly on learning and exploring:

- How do we reconstruct old footpaths?
- Where do we find the money to reconstruct? Are governments willing to participate?
- Do landowners want people to cross-over?
- Where and how can we find people that have good ideas
- If we have all people together: how to organize things in order to get the work done?
- All things were put together in a new handbook 'Ommetjes'.

At the same time, thanks to growing interest by the public and therefore ongoing pressure on politicians, the minister of Agriculture announced a new subsidy, "boerenlandpadregeling". Farmers receive €0,45 per meter per year for letting people to walk over their land. In exchange they make sure that their land is accessible and they maintain the path. The regulation is closely connected with the earlier identified shortage in walks at urban fringes. The regulation therefore focuses on these parts.

Encouraged by the project in 2005 we wanted more. In 2006 we decided to open a competition for 'Ommetjes'. With money from the Postcode Lottery, people were asked to send us their ideas for new walks in their residential environment. The national winner would get €30.000, each provincial winner €10.000. It was a huge success with over 450 new ideas and the jury was impressed by the quality of all proposals. They had a difficult task, but perhaps not surprisingly decided to nominate a proposal in the western part of the Netherlands, in the middle of the 'Randstad', between Leiden and Haarlem. We were able to

get attention from not only local press, but also from national press and many newspapers paid attention to the competition and its winners. The national and provincial winners were all able to create their path within the following 18 months.

Since that time, the subject remained in our focus and in that of governments. They do realize that the people want to go out and that it is relatively easy for them to support local initiatives.

So we wanted to go on with the subject. If we were able to get people and governments interested in walking close to home, a new project was logical. We formulated a project in which the public played a major role and the provincial organizations were the connection between those people, the governments and the landowners. We searched for cooperation with important stakeholders, such as the already mentioned 'Wandelplatform' and the national board of small villages in the Netherlands.

The aims of this project, which is still going on, are:

Creation of 30 new walks, preferably originating from the 450 proposals from 2006, but new ideas were also welcome

Learning how to cooperate with locals and how to make them work together with professionals in the field of walking

From that: making a checklist of the do's and don'ts during the process

How to organize and manage the maintenance after the walk is opened and everybody has left.

The public

If you really want to create new footpaths, you shouldn't wait for the government to act, but do it yourself! And that is exactly what is happening. In the Netherlands, and I think also on other places in Europe, there is a good tradition that on every threatened subject there is a local interest group trying to protect things.

For this subject, we were looking for local initiatives on walking. Existing initiatives from the 2006 competition were mostly taken by local groups, so contact with them was relatively easy. But such local groups need special attention, they are volunteers and not professionals.

Local support is important, because it raises public awareness and helps people to take responsibility for their own environment. It helps in creating a more beautiful landscape and finally, it puts pressure on policy-makers to take action.

If you work with volunteers in this field of work, you must be aware of several things.

- Keep the focus on the project. Don't do too many extra things apart from the walk.
- The new footpath must be there within 2 years.
- the scope of the project must remain local.

- Personal contacts are very important. Without their support, the project is more or less doomed.
- Make sure that the landowners keep informed. If they don't want anymore, the project is dead.
- Public involvement comes quickly, but leaves just as fast.

Example: Witteveen (Drenthe)

Witteveen, a small village in the province of Drenthe, in the North of the country was one of the local initiatives that participated in the project. There was an active community of locals. Witteveen is a young village grounded in 1926. Around 50% of the inhabitants is 'import' from other parts of the country.

The possibilities for walking were not optimal and a local interest group took the initiative for a short walk. The walk was one of the 450 walks that was part of the 2006 competition. Although they did not win, they decided to go on. The local government was asked to help them. In other words: the group kept on pushing for the walk and were able to gain a basis in the village itself, apart from the first project. That turned out to be crucial in the new project.

When the new project started, Landschapsbeheer Drenthe quickly contacted all the contestants and informed them about the new project. It that became clear, that the local group was already going on and that they had been able to get subsidy by the local government (€4000). Landschapsbeheer Drenthe helped them during the project and contacted other partners like the provincial government. They soon were able to go on on their own once they understood how and where they could apply for subsidies.

In the project we developed our own markings for 'ommetjes', which was used by Witteveen. Also, some new trees were planted in the villagecenter to cheer up the village green. So a relatively small effort, resulted in a huge spin-off effect. The locals were supported in the beginning and we gave them instructions on how to raise funds and from that moment all went well.

The walk was finished this spring, and on July 2nd it was officially opened. At the same time the Dutch footballteam played (and beat) Brazil, but as you can see, lots of people were at the opening! You can easily say that the village is very proud of the new walk.

Project results so far

At this moment 25 of 30 walks are opened. Each time when a walk is opened, the local press is present, as shown on the middle picture. You see the municipal councillor being interviewed. He is wearing a 19th C hat, like the one Napoleon did. The walk is called 'Napoleons way, because in 1811 or so Napoleon did go over the path by carriage)

Also, the handbook from 2005 is being reviewed at this moment. All new knowlegde about the project will be put in.

At the national level there are still contacts which resulted in a meeting between us, 15 all initiators of new walks, and a member of parliament. She is very interested in the subject and perhaps it is an coincidence, but 3 weeks after that meeting, an extra 1 million € for walking was approved by the parliament.

The provincial organizations and we at the national office have learned a lot about walking and working with local interest groups. Moreover we have made many new contacts in this field of work.

All results will be presented not only on the Walk21 conference, but also on the PECSRL conference last august in Latvia and on our own symposium later this month.

Conclusions

From the 2 projects I presented here, I am now able to draw the following conclusions.

- Access to the cultural landscape is scarce in the Netherlands, but the demand for going in and make short walks is growing (1+2)
- Creating new walks in and around villages is a process that **MUST** be done bottom-up. Without the help of the locals and of the landowners, you are nowhere.
- For professionals in this work, working with volunteers is special. Although we do lots of work with volunteers, this line of work requires new skills, esp. in learning people how to raise funds and how to act during meetings with governments.
- As shown in the Witteveen example, often just a small effort can lead to a huge spin-off. This is not always the case, in many projects we must keep in close contact to the local people.
- LBN and the 12 provincial organizations are able to make the connection between national goals ('we want people to walk again, we want the landscape to be more accessible') and the local needs.
- At the end of 2010, 42 new walks have been created, with a length of about 250 km. As far as we are concerned, that's only the start.
- Hopefully the end of this national project doesn't mean that in the provinces new walks will not be made again. Not only provincial organizations, but esp. local governments must take their responsibility. We have shown that the demand is there, and that it is relatively easy to create walks.