

Culture-Nature Dualism: A Strong Dichotomy or Coming Closer in Harmony?

A case study on nature conservation and recreation in Tholen



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would like to thank the visitors for making time when they were visiting nature reserves, or when they invited me to their homes for the interview. The nature reserve managers, policymakers and advisers also made space in their schedules to do an interview with me, something that was very valuable. It was nice to see where they work and what they work on. My internship organisations, ANWB, Gemeente Tholen and Zuidwestelijke Delta, provided me with the network of nature organisations and governmental bodies. Without their help, it would have been a lot harder to reach these respondents. And, of course, thanks also to my supervisor, Alana Osbourne, who gave me a lot of feedback and inspiration in the research process.

Picture on the front page: salt marshes in National Park Oosterschelde in Tholen. Salt marshes in Tholen are popular for harvesting sea vegetables. At the same time, they are valuable breeding sites for vulnerable bird species. The harvesting of sea vegetables on salt marshes is one of the main points of discussion between nature reserve visitors and managers in the municipality of Tholen, as nature reserve managers consider (recreational) harvesting practices to be a threat to the vulnerable delta nature. On the other hand, visitors of salt marshes who practice harvesting sea vegetables argue that harvesting sea vegetables is a valuable tradition that must be preserved. Currently, harvesting sea vegetables is allowed with a permit. For 2023, 284 licences have been granted (Provincie Zeeland, 2022b). Image source: Staatsbosbeheer (2022)

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Introduction

Nature reserves and recreation

There is increasing recognition that nature-based recreation has benefits for human physical and mental well-being (Brymer et al., 2019; Winter et al., 2019). Nature-based recreation can for instance reduce depression (Berman et al., 2012), enhance vitality (Van Den Berg et al., 2016) and trigger positive emotional responses (Roe & Aspinall, 2011). Furthermore, interacting with nature can contribute to enhancing social connections and increasing conservation awareness (Goldy & Piff, 2020). Bai and colleagues (2017) found for instance that exposure to awe-inspiring nature increased feelings of belonging to one's community, and Piff and colleagues (2015) found more prosocial behaviour in a natural setting compared to an urban setting. Increasing conservation behaviour was for example found as a result of performing simple activities in nature such as smelling wildflowers or collecting shells (M. Richardson et al., 2020). These identified benefits of outdoor recreation exemplify the contributions of nature-based experiences to individual, community, and societal resilience and sustainability (Winter et al., 2019).

In the light of these benefits, it is of no surprise that human participation in nature-based recreation has been increasing (Beery et al., 2021; Goossen et al., 2010; Kerbiriou et al., 2009). In 2018, the forest, for instance, was the most visited area for many forms of recreation, such as walking, cycling (including mountain biking), running and horseback riding (CBS et al., 2024). Especially since the corona crisis, nature reserve managers and forest rangers experienced a steep rise in visits (Lycklama & Huijgen, 2020). In many provinces, such as Noord-Brabant (Visit Brabant, 2023), Gelderland (NOS, 2020; Provincie Gelderland, 2023), and Noord-Holland (Lycklama & Huijgen, 2020) this popularity also has draw-backs for nature reserves. Nature reserve managers and researchers often state that nature reserves are too busy with human visitors, which has negative effects on visitor experience and biodiversity (Cil & Jones-Walters, 2011; Ecologische Autoriteit, 2023; Goossen et al., 2010; Vliet et al., 2022). In Tholen, the area that this thesis focusses on, nature recreation is a point of discussion. It leads to conflicts between visitors who wish to make use of the reserve for recreation, and conservation managers who need to reach particular conservation goals (Gemeente Tholen, 2023; Omroep Zeeland, 2022). Nature recreation is an additional negative influence on the already troublesome circumstances many nature reserves are in, as these are highly impacted by human interference in the form of nitrogen deposition, pollution and fragmentation (Ecologische Autoriteit, 2024).

Protected areas in the Netherlands

In the Netherlands, the reduction of the amount of space that is reserved for nature is one of the highest in Europe. Forest and 'open nature' are among one of the lowest in surface in comparison to other European countries (CBS, 2014), while the country has the second highest population density (Eurostat, 2023). This high population density leads to a very high recreation pressure on natural areas (Krijgsveld et al., 2022). Furthermore, natural areas are prone to other factors, such as high pressures of acidification and eutrophication (Strien, 2023),

processes that are stimulated by nitrogen. When present in high amounts, such as is the case in the Netherlands (RIVM, 2021), nitrogen and accompanied acidification and eutrophication have damaging effects on specific plant types and non-human animals (Wamelink et al., 2023). Also, the degradation of nature is highly driven by the fragmentation of non-human animal habitats due to the construction of highways, housing and intensive agriculture (Council for the Environment and Infrastructure, 2022). These impacts are visible in the poor conditions most protected nature areas are in: the Dutch Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality (2023) assessed that 53% of the protected natural areas is in a very bad state, while only 12% of the nature reserves is in a good state.

As Oudman (2022) mentions, part of the problem is that nature in the Netherlands is bordered in protected containers. Oudman frames it as putting a “fence around protected areas with allocated nature, and doing whatever you want outside of it” (2022). While nature is often very well enclosed, outside of reserves we keep on polluting via industries, agriculture, and construction. The emissions that result from these processes, such as nitrogen, affect the nature areas we aimed to protect (Beunen, 2022; Roest et al., 2021; Wamelink et al., 2021). Dutch nature policies are mostly only focussed on protected areas, and lack in extending the assessment of ‘external’ factors and applicability of nature policies beyond the bordered nature reserves (Council for the Environment and Infrastructure, 2022). As Egberts (2019) also showed with her case study on the Wadden Sea, the Dutch government creates artificial borders around nature areas; the area on which its protection regime focusses. “The narrow borders and definitions of the Wadden Sea area have made the coherence between nature and culture, sea and land a blind spot” (2019, p. 68). Nature policies are directed towards setting nature apart in protected areas, away from industrial, agricultural, and residential areas, and fail to recognize that each protected nature reserve is part of much bigger ecosystems. In fact, these policies fail to recognize that humans are also part of those same ecosystems. The ecosystems that start at our front door (SER, 2001). By putting ‘nature’ in protected areas and limiting nature policies to those areas, we move our responsibility to care for nature to only those areas that we assigned as nature, not caring for the nature close to us, the nature of which we are a part. The Netherlands even moves the responsibility to care for nature overseas, as a majority of Dutch nature preservation efforts focusses on regions beyond its borders. The Netherlands have been very active in preserving nature in the global South, being involved with land appropriation and green violence through the Peace Park Foundation (Büscher & Ramutsindela, 2016; Lenggenhager & Ramutsindela, 2021; Spierenburg et al., 2008), while having only a fraction of its own territory protected as nature (The World Bank, 2022). Nature is protected where it is the cheapest (Büscher & Fletcher, 2020), far away from Dutch society. The Dutch way of managing ‘nature’ shows that there is a strong dichotomy between humans and nature. In the context of this strong dichotomy, it is difficult to enhance the resilience and quality of ecosystems, whereas biodiverse and well-functioning ecosystems are, in the light of life-threatening climate change, highly urgent (Caillon et al., 2017).

Degrading ecosystems and dualism

Life on planet earth is greatly impacted by anthropogenic factors to such an extent that we are facing changing climate, biodiversity loss, and degradation of ecosystems, among other

complications (e.g., Butchart et al., 2010; Habibullah et al., 2022; Rockström et al., 2021; Steffen et al., 2015; Stern & HMSO, 2006). As Hickel (2022) stated in his book *Less is More*, it mainly has been this deeply rooted dualism between humans and nature that contributed to the exploitation of nature and accompanied degradation of ecosystems in the first place. As Hickel described, people in capitalist societies today grow up with the idea that humans are distinct and superior to nature. By seeing nature as a mechanistic object, something without spirit, as non-living, one could morally use it as a natural resource in the never-ending search for as cheap as possible inputs to power capitalist societies (Hickel, 2022). But as the negative effects of human action have become more and more clear in the form of biodiversity loss, climate change, and human-triggered nature disasters (Rockström et al., 2021; Sanjayan, 2015; Steffen et al., 2011), the realisation has been growing that this unbounded exploitation of nature comes with a price.

The climate crisis makes it ever clear that culture and nature are inseparable (Keskitalo, 2023), and there is an urgent need for humans to realise that “saving nature is about saving themselves” (Sanjayan, 2015). In the need of enhancing ecosystems and diminishing climate change, moving beyond the human-nature dichotomy and acknowledging the liveliness of the planet may lead to a different relationship and hierarchy between humans and nature, increasing responsibility on the part of humans towards contributing to ecosystems instead of only exploiting them (Caillon et al., 2017). While the notion of the world as living being, inseparable from human and non-human life, seems radical and novel in Western philosophy, it is highly important to realize that this idea is central to Indigenous philosophies and cosmologies that were already present many thousands of years ago (McGregor, 2005; Te Ahukaramū, 2005). These narratives were however suppressed by the human-nature dividing, and imperialist and colonialist practices that expanded during Europe’s Enlightenment period. Indigenous views and practices of relating to the Earth are in sharp contrast to the western Enlightenment-inspired ways of viewing the world in which nature is there to be tamed and exploited by and for humans. The current ecological crisis gives opportunities to move beyond western paradigms and urges to confront the colonial extractive relationship with the planet with more regenerative relationships that exist in the multiple ontologies that are and have been present on Earth (Banerjee & Arjaliès, 2021; Hickel, 2022).

In this thesis I will build on the blurring of the nature-human dichotomy that is taking place among scholars across the social sciences¹. In these fields there is more and more consensus that the dualistic Western way of seeing the world is highly problematic. Taking inspiration from indigenous studies (Caillon et al., 2017; McGregor, 2005; Te Ahukaramū, 2005) and political ecology (Adams & Hutton, 2007; Büscher & Fletcher, 2020; Hickel, 2022), I will contribute to conversations on how the human-nature dichotomy shapes nature conservation

¹ The blurring of the nature-human dichotomy has been developed across fields within social sciences such as anthropology, geography, and sociology (Banerjee & Arjaliès, 2021). It has been translated since the 1970s into more specialized fields such as environmental philosophy (Schouten, 2013; Valenti Possamai, 2013), environmental history (see e.g. Cronon, 1996; Merchant, 1980), political ecology (Adams & Hutton, 2007; e.g. Büscher & Fletcher, 2020; Hickel, 2022; Keskitalo, 2023), and economic anthropology (Hickel, 2022).

and nature recreation. In so doing, my aim is to investigate how, despite the pressure it can give on ecosystems, recreation might be considered to bring humans closer to nature and to blur the strict border between human and nature. Nature recreation brings humans in nature, and can, through human's interaction with nature, even lead to humans taking the responsibility for sustainable use and conservation practices (Elands et al., 2019; Stenseke, 2014; Wolf et al., 2019). Yet, the form that nature recreation currently has in the Netherlands often does not fit to the needs for enhancing ecosystems. Current recreation pressures lead to disruption of non-human livelihoods and damage to vegetation (Ecologische Autoriteit, 2024).

Aim and case study

This thesis aims to investigate how nature recreation and nature conservation can help to move beyond the human-nature dichotomy. Through this research, I explore and question how the dichotomy between nature and humans shapes nature preservation and recreation in the Netherlands, and I investigate the tensions that exist between nature preservation and recreation. This research is of societal relevance, as the climate crisis asks for other ways of relating to nature. The Dutch government argued that a shift in thinking is needed: "Nature belongs in the midst of society. And not only in protected nature reserves" (Rijksoverheid, 2019). The government acknowledged that this transition cannot be enforced by laws, regulations, and subsidies, but needs input from society as a whole (Rijksoverheid, 2014). In this thesis, I research the position of nature among nature preservation managers and visitors of nature reserves, and thus investigate where nature currently stands in society. Furthermore, with this thesis I contribute to going beyond colonial practices of conservation, as the focus is on nature preservation in the Netherlands and not on any area overseas. In a world that is in the midst of a climate crisis, it is of utmost importance for the Netherlands to take action within the country itself, instead of moving the responsibility to countries that only have a minor role in fostering climate change (see Gupta, 2014). Bringing together literature in environmental philosophy and political ecology, I show how a focus on the paradigm of the human-nature dichotomy can help us to understand how embedded power structures within the dichotomy still influence Western attitudes towards nature today. Whereas there has been done research to human attitudes to nature (De Groot & Van Den Born, 2003; van den Born, 2006), this thesis differs from other studies as it mainly takes a qualitative approach and combines attitudes of nature reserve managers and visitors which are put in the wider historical context of the philosophical and historical dualism of humans and nature. I doing so, I challenge the idea that that recreation and conservation are mutually exclusive and only perpetuate this dichotomy. Instead, I argue that nature recreation and nature conservation together can strengthen the relationship between people and nature.

This research focusses on a specific case, the municipality of Tholen, which consists of former islands Tholen and Sint Philipsland in the Dutch province of Zeeland. Tholen is located in the south-west of the Netherlands, and is known for its surroundings of tidal flats and salt marshes. It is home to many protected nature areas, such as the Krabbenkreek, Rammegors, and Pluimpot, and is one of the municipalities that is part of National Park Oosterschelde. National Park Oosterschelde is the largest National Park of the Netherlands and is popular for recreational activities such as walking, cycling, boating kitesurfing and diving (NP

Oosterschelde, n.d.). Many parts of the protected nature areas in Tholen are part of the Natura 2000 network, and are habitats of many species of birds, and of many plants that can flourish in the salt tidal environment.

Tholen is part of a province that knows a lot of coastal tourism along the North Sea (Provincie Zeeland, 2022a). To relieve the recreation pressure on the coastal beach towns and coastal nature areas, Tholen can serve as an area that can attract more visitors. The municipality values the increasing popularity of the island, but is at the same time is also reluctant to bring more disturbance in the nature areas that are located on Tholen (Omroep Zeeland, 2022). Besides other pressures of human interference, recreation is an important factor impacting nature values of the nature reserves in Tholen: “With increasing recreational pressure in nature reserves, the preservation of plant and animal species is an important task in Zeeland's nature and outdoor areas, especially the Natura 2000 areas” (Gemeente Tholen, 2023). Furthermore, the National Park is surrounded by areas of intensive agriculture, industries and urbanisation, which exemplifies the artificial border created between nature and human society. The human pressures on nature that are at play in and around the nature reserves of Tholen make it, in the light of the climate crisis, urgent to research how the dualistic relationship between humans and nature affect preservation and recreation in the nature reserves of Tholen. This will be more specifically researched through the following research question:

- *How does the dichotomy between nature and humans shape nature conservation and recreation in the Netherlands?*

This question will be answered through four sub-questions:

- *What is the dichotomy between nature and humans?*
- *What forms of nature conservation and nature recreation exist in the Netherlands?*
- *How does the dichotomy between nature and humans shape nature conservation in the nature reserves of Tholen?*
- *How does the dichotomy between nature and humans shape nature recreation in the nature reserves of Tholen?*

The first two sub-questions are descriptive questions, designed to understand the theoretical dichotomy between nature and humans, and to investigate what forms of nature preservation and current debates on nature preservation are at play. The third and fourth questions are explorative and explanatory, and split the main research question in two divisions: nature conservation and nature recreation.

The thesis will be constructed on a theoretical foundation that is built out of three main topics, which are the human-nature dichotomy, nature conservation, and nature recreation. These topics and the accompanied theoretical debates will be outlined in the next section.

Theoretical Foundation

In this section a theoretical link will be made between human-nature dichotomy, nature conservation, and nature recreation. I will briefly go through the historical theoretical development of human-nature dualism, give insight in how this dualism has been debated in fields like (environmental) philosophy and history, political ecology and indigenous studies, and how this still shapes power structures today. Furthermore, various visions and theories of nature conservation will be highlighted and connected to the debate on dualism. Lastly, I will go into nature recreation and present the current insights within this domain and relate this to how humans are and are not perceived to be connected to nature.

The meaning of the term ‘nature’ in this thesis is adopted from Caillon et al. (2017), who used the term “when noting human perceptions and conceptual interactions with the environment”. ‘Human’ is often equated to ‘culture’ when speaking of the nature-human dichotomy. In this thesis, I will use the words human and culture interchangeably, both relating to the physical presence and actions of humans; an animal that treats itself as distinct from nature.

The origins of the dualism of nature and humans

The funny thing is, that it is only an assumption. The idea that we as humans are superior to nature is only a thought. And that thought has emerged in our culture more than 2000 years ago, in ancient times, by philosophers that lived in cities. (...) The great thinkers from classical antiquity found that the human stood very high above nature, because it had reason, and nature did not have reason and did not have any consciousness. This thought has become very prevalent in our culture. Ultimately, it has been translated to the thought ‘God has created nature for humans.’

Matthijs Schouten, 2023

Imposed Western paradigm of dualism

While many authors take the Scientific Revolution, that took place in Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries, as starting point for the disruptive relation between humans and nature (e.g., Büscher & Fletcher, 2020; J. W. Moore, 2015; Sundberg & Dempsey, 2009), dualism knows a much longer philosophical tradition. In the 5th century BC already, Western philosophers constructed their thinking around the idea of a world divided in two: one part consisting of a transcendental realm, distinct from an earthly, material realm. Plato stated that humans had a soul, which set them apart from other beings who, according to Plato, did not have any soul (Hickel, 2022; Motzer, 2022). Later on, the assumed dualism between humans and nature was translated into the *scala naturae*, through which Aristotle further organized animals, plants, minerals and human animals in a hierarchical system of perfection in which humans were on top and non-human creatures on the lower rungs (Hodos, 2009; Lovejoy, 1936).

These classical ideas came to inspire and inform the Christian idea of the existence of a spiritual heaven against a sinful, decaying worldly realm; an idea that found its way through Europe by

expansion of the Christian Roman Empire and the Church (Hickel, 2022). According to historian Lynn White (1967), the human, made in God's image, is, from a Christian perspective, distinct from nature. The entire physical creation was set in motion to the ends of human's benefit and dominance. While Lynn White's thesis is also criticized (Kanagy & Nelsen, 1995), the notion that the Christian view of human and nature is a view of separate entities with humans being superior to nature, is seen as the 'default Christian view of nature' (Wilkins, 2022).

There has been a lot of agreement among certain environmental philosophers (Schouten, 2013; Valenti Possamai, 2013), feminist philosophers (Federici, 2004; Merchant, 1980), historians (Harrison, 2009; Merchant, 1980; Patterson, 2002; White, 1967), and political ecologists (Henderson, 2012; Hickel, 2022) that the Christian view of nature highly influenced how nature and humans have become seen in the Western world during later centuries. This partially has been the line of reasoning because the Church has been very influential in suppressing animistic ideas from the 15th century onwards. During the Doctrine of Discovery, the Church granted full and free power to conquer people who weren't Christian, including their original territories (Biewe & Westervelt, n.d.; Merchant, 1989). This colonial development went together with a new economic system: capitalism. Or, as Robinson (1983) calls it: racial capitalism, as the underlying structures of capitalism were essentially racial directions. The Christian colonial system was deeply intertwined with slave trade and was the engine of the new capitalist society (Marx, 1909). Capitalism required different relationships with the land, soils, minerals (Hickel, 2022), and racialized people (Burden-Stelly, 2020). It was based on logics of accumulation, and required a relationship of possession, exploitation, commodification, and ever-increasing productivity. The idea of dualism that we know from Christian ideas and ancient classical thinkers was not only used to justify the appropriation of land in the colonies, but also of the bodies of the colonized people themselves (Hickel, 2022).

In the same time as Western colonialism, accompanied slavery and the first foundations of capitalism took off, the lines drawn between humanity and animality hardened (Merchant, 1989; Sundberg & Dempsey, 2009). This development was powered by influential thinkers such as Bacon and Descartes, who were key figures of the Scientific Revolution (Valenti Possamai, 2013). The dualism of the Scientific Revolution became highly influential, and led dualist thought become Western mainstream from the Enlightenment onward. Capitalism thrived by the philosophies of Descartes, as it was a system that always sought as cheap as possible resources to feed its never ending need to grow. Once nature was rendered as a dead object, one could justify its use as a resource, and externalize the costs. It was there to serve as means to an end, as also Immanuel Kant wrote in his book *Lectures on Ethics*: "But so far as animals are concerned, we have no direct duties. Animals are not self-conscious and are there merely as a means to an end. That end is man" (Kant, 1779, p. 239).

From Genesis to the 20th century, there always have been Western thinkers and movements who put humans and non-human nature closer together and celebrated the life in nature (Hickel, 2022), but the paradigm of a dichotomy in which humans had dominion over non-human nature has still remained very powerful and has kept on overruling animistic approaches (McWhorter,

1989). This cannot only be assigned solely to the powerful Church, nor only to colonialism, the Scientific Revolution, or capitalism, but altogether these movements and accompanied paradigms were highly influential in how we perceive the human-nature relation today. Altogether these structures co-constructed each other, and strengthened the power structures within. Capitalism exists by the means of colonial mechanisms, as Robinson (1983) described in his book *Black Marxism*; and colonial pursuits are driven by capitalist motives (Marx, 1909). These systems were developed within a deep history of Christianity in which the capitalist ethos constantly had been reaffirmed (Weber, 1930).

The Western *assumption*, as described by Schouten (2023) in the citation that opens this section, is constructed in a discourse of dualism that has been imposed by capitalist structures of power, nourished by historical structures of Christianity, colonialism and the Scientific Revolution. These structures of religion, science, capital, and power are deeply embedded in western history, and are results and drivers of the production of knowledge. State and market-led interests in increasing capital accumulation remade life and standardized nature - including bodies - into mechanical structures to facilitate capital accumulation. Seen from this perspective, the non-paid work of nature is not just a form of plundering but actively created through symbolic and political structures of power, and the inexhaustible search for capital accumulation (Moore, 2015). Philosopher and historian Foucault stated that it is the circulation, production and accumulation of the discourse of a certain truth that constitute and structure the social body: “We are subjected to the production of truth through power and we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth” (1980, p. 93). Through the new 'political anatomy' one could control other bodies, producing 'docile' bodies, ideal for the new economic system. The body is thus subject to wider power structures that directs its behaviours and thoughts, degrading it to an obedient entity (Foucault, 1995). Dualism should be seen in the context of a long history, reinforcing systems of power which have been reinforced by dualistic paradigms themselves overtime. Its power structures uphold and reinforce themselves (Merchant, 2018), making dualism still very powerful today (Valenti Possamai, 2013).

Indigenous ways of living and scientific approaches

Such mechanisms of power and knowledge are also highly visible in the ways the Western nature-human view has been spread over the world through colonial practices. Many non-European societies knew and still know a completely different way of interacting with the world around its people. There are many societies and communities that embrace the Earth and all its non-human inhabitants as living beings that are linked to each other. Yet, these knowledge systems have been systematically suppressed by the colonial powers that legitimized extensive land appropriation in the name of civilizing missions to break down indigenous societies through violent domination. Western visions of truth pushed out other epistemic practices and ontologies (Banerjee & Arjaliès, 2021; Sundberg & Dempsey, 2009). It shows how powerful the Western dualism is in dominion of other practices and knowledges of the human-nature relation.

This colonial suppression of knowledge and practices is still highly visible in Western nature preservation (Te Ahukaramū, 2005). Authors in Indigenous studies state that imposed Western

scientific ideas of nature do not rhyme with the thousands-year-old indigenous ways of interacting with the world around them. As an illustration, researcher in indigenous environmental justice studies Deborah McGregor (2005) cites Winona LaDuke: “There is no way to quantify a way of life, only a way to live it” (LaDuke, 1999, p. 132). Western academics fail to recognize that in the perspective of many indigenous societies, ‘preserving’ nature is not about measuring nature in terms of sufficient quantities of particular animals and plants. Rather, it is about *living* with nature. It is about the relationship itself (McGregor, 2005). Yet, the Western views of what nature should be, and in what quantities for instance animals can be hunted, still suppress the ideas of local communities (Blaser, 2009). And while currently the interest to knowledges of indigenous people who *live with* nature is growing, this form of interest is often still involved with colonial mechanisms of appropriation. McGregor (2005) explains, for instance, that the research field Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK), which involves knowledge on traditional ecological practices, is a field that is dominated by non-indigenous people, focused on obtaining knowledge to preserve and control original natural territories of indigenous communities. Often, these indigenous communities are even being displaced in the name of nature preservation, as conservationists have a tendency to desire a ‘return’ to pristine wilderness, where there is no (or very little) room for humans. I will elaborate more on this in the next section.

Nature conservation and human-nature divisions

By the end of the 19th century, the appreciation and considered importance of nature started to grow again. Yet, the dichotomy between human and nature remained ever powerful. The increasing industrialization turned nature from something in which humans had to fight for their survival into something that was being threatened by anthropogenic developments. Nature increasingly had been pushed away from society. The increased appreciation paradoxically can be explained by the fact that humans became increasingly distant from it. Furthermore, natural spectacles were witnessed in areas that before were blank spaces on the world map. Via illustrations, awe-inspiring nature reached the people (Meulen, 2022). Nature evolved, originally in Northern America, into something that was romanticized, leading to increasing popularity to preserve nature, but merely in its pristine form: wilderness (Demars, 1990).

Remarkably, in the 18th century the concept of wilderness had been used for quite negative framings. Back then, to be wilderness related to being “savage” or a “waste”. But while in the past wilderness had been abhorred, the longing to the romantic, sublime wilderness grew. Paradoxically, this longing in romanticism was, according to Cronon (1996) inherited from biblical ideas of the wilderness. The wilderness was something in which Christ fought with the devil and his temptations, and where Moses and his people had wandered for forty years. The wilderness was the closest one could get to God. This doctrine of sublime and romantic notions of wilderness, along with movements for longing for primitivity, “helped transform wilderness into a sacred American icon during the nineteenth century” (1996, p.13). To protect wilderness can be seen as an attempt to preserve the nation’s sacred myths of creation.

The establishment of enclosed areas of ‘wilderness’ is part of an American founded approach called fortress conservation. This approach is associated with the creation of national parks and the accompanied prevention of human disturbance therein. The establishments of such parks came with major displacements of local people, who had been living in the destined protected areas (PA) before their enclosure. Accordingly, the wilderness that colonizers desired to preserve, a return to pristine nature, has been based on the *appearance* of unpopulated wilderness, political ecologists Büscher and Fletcher stated in their book *The Conservation Revolution* (2020). Local communities which had been managing the parks for centuries (Marris, 2021) were expelled from nature park establishments and their access to life-sustaining resources such as food, water and firewood was deprived. Poor rural people were displaced while the world’s wealthy could enjoy their nature on voyeuristic holidays in parks. Also symbolically, people were being displaced, as parks write local residents out of the landscape’s history, underscoring that they do not belong (Brockington et al., 2010). It makes that wilderness is imposed upon these landscapes and its communities, while maybe already having known human life for thousands of years. In these critiques is often referred to Cronon, who stated that

the myth of the wilderness as ‘virgin’, uninhabited land had always been especially cruel when seen from the perspective of First Nations people who once called that land home. Now they were forced to move elsewhere, with the result that tourists could safely enjoy the illusion that they were seeing their nation in its pristine, original state, in the new morning of God’s own creation.

(1996, p. 15).

Cronon, environmental historian and writer of a fundamental text in conservation called *The Trouble with Wilderness* (1996), challenges the American idea that wilderness ever existed. He stated that the protected areas that formed America’s national parks were *created* uninhabited places, as they had been inhabited already before. Cronon argued that there is thus nothing natural in the concept of wilderness; it is merely a culturally constructed idea, a belief that is rooted in the dualistic assumption in which humans are completely set apart from nature.

Fortress conservation and primitive accumulation

The fortress approach of conservation established itself as the most popular way to preserve nature during the 20th century. PAs according the national park model were not set up in North America alone, but the model was also copied to other parts of the world, such as in the continents of South America and Africa, where colonizers created large protected areas, freed from human life as much as possible. After World War II, the amount of PAs increased tremendously, and today it is still a popular way to preserve nature (Adams & Hutton, 2007).

But along with Cronon, the critiques to the fortress approach started to grow. The social impacts of national parks started to be acknowledged more and more from the 1970s onwards (Büscher & Fletcher, 2020), and are main topic of discussion in conservation today: over the last years, numerous papers and books have been written on the negative social consequences of the fortress approach (see for instance Brockington et al., 2010; Büscher & Fletcher, 2020; De

Pourcq et al., 2019; Kashwan et al., 2021). But not only these social impacts, also the realisation that mainstream conservation such as the fortress model has not been able to halt the biodiversity and extinction crisis (Butchart et al., 2010) contributed to the growing criticism on this mode of conservation (Büscher & Fletcher, 2019). While the amount of PAs has been growing, biodiversity trends continue to decline (Pulido-Chadid et al., 2023). As Büscher and Fletcher state, the main problem of the fortress approach is that it seeks to save nature with the very same dichotomy that destroys it:

The irony (...) is that the very effects of the nature-culture dichotomy leading to the death of nature were increasingly countered by a deepening of this same dichotomy, in materially and discursively separating people from nature, through conservation generally and, especially, through the development of protected areas. In other words (...), conservation and capitalism have intrinsically co-produced each other, and hence the nature-culture dichotomy is foundational to both.

(2020, p. 72)

The dichotomous structures of capitalism and conservation are intrinsically linked, which can be seen in the fact that the creation of PAs through the fortress approach contributed to what Marx called primitive accumulation; the capitalist act of forcing people off the land through (violent) acts of dispossession and enclosure, pushing them to find employment for urban wages in a town (Marx, 1909). Political ecologist Alice Kelly emphasized this in her paper *Conservation practice as primitive accumulation*, in which she argues that PAs “appear to be examples of Marx’s primitive accumulation, complete with acts of enclosure, dispossession, dissolution of the commons and accumulation” (2011, p. 683).

Cheap nature

Fortress conservation, or mainstream conservation as Büscher and Fletcher (2020) also call it, is deeply entangled in capitalist ways of dealing with land. It has come to the point where the idea that nature can only be ‘saved’ through capitalist logic of the market is dominating conservation discourses (Büscher, 2009). Political ecologist Prakash Kashwan and colleagues (2021) describe how current conservation practices in the global South still show colonial practices through monetary valuation of ecosystem services for instance, and cite a study by McAfee (1999) to argue that a model in which nature has to earn its own right to exist through market solutions often deteriorates social and economic vulnerabilities while not offering an enduring and effective solution to nature conservation. Such underlying capitalist mechanisms and inequality is highly visible in a recent study on global restoration potential (Strassburg et al., 2020), in which (densely populated) areas in the global South are painted red and yellow, indicating high priority for restoration. The global North is painted blue, indicating a low priority for restoration. Such studies are often framed as being a technical and objective scientific modelling, while the claims about the economic efficacy of concentrating global restoration initiatives in the global South in this study and other conservation studies “often rely on an implicitly racist discounting of the lives and livelihoods of people in these previously colonized places” (Kashwan et al., 2021, p. 13).

In a world system that is neoliberal, the system's actors will not only be sought to as cheap as possible nature to produce, but also for the cheapest nature to conserve. Under influence of neoliberalism, uncritical cost-benefit analyses are leading in determining which areas to conserve. As Kashwan and colleagues follow, "it seems that when it comes to economic optimization of global conservation, the lives of white people matter more than black and brown lives" (p.15). Conservation seems to go where the opportunity costs are considered to be the lowest, leading conservation practices to be focussed on the global South. It reinforces a separation between the rich industrialized societies and societies with 'natural' spaces (Büscher & Fletcher, 2020).

The results of such inequalities in conservation practices are visible in the Netherlands, for example. Being one of the richest countries in the world (OECD, 2023), it only has 22% of its land area protected. This is relatively low compared to countries such as Zambia (41.3%), Namibia (37.9%), and Mozambique (29.5%) (The World Bank, 2022); all countries in which the partly Dutch Peace Parks Foundation (PPF) is actively financing and creating PAs (Peace Parks Foundation, n.d.). The Dutch are very active in preserving nature in the global South, in which Prince Bernhard of the Netherlands played a key role through his co-founding of the PPF and World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) (Büscher & Ramutsindela, 2016). It shows how most funds for nature conservation flow from North to South; to the area where 'natural capital' is considered to be the cheapest (Büscher & Fletcher, 2020).

While the Netherlands does not know any large structures of PAs where also displacement of people is currently present, it significantly contributes to the dualistic fortress model, mainly outside of the country. But also in the inland conservation practices, the dichotomy between humans and nature is highly present. The conservation focus in the Netherlands is often on framed pieces of nature, which are not integrated in society. Yet, another difference compared to PAs in the global South, is that outside these areas, there are a lot of negative factors influencing the quality of nature, such as high pressures of acidification and eutrophication (Strien, 2023), processes that are stimulated by nitrogen emission (RIVM, 2021). Furthermore, in countries of Western Europe, many native forests and wild animals do not exist anymore (Kashwan et al., 2021). It shows how we set nature so far apart from us, to the – for western society – most remote corners of the planet. We only tend to care for nature that is wild and far away, 'untouched', or, 'cheap'.

Alternatives in conservation: new conservation and neo-protectionism

The PA-approach is still very powerful and yet the main mode of conservation. While critiques on mainstream conservation led to more inclusion of local communities (community-based conservation), at the same time conservation practices became more and more entangled in the imaginaries and practices of contemporary capitalism. Especially since the 1990s, Western conservation practices have been increasingly conjoined with capitalist development and accompanied market-based instruments, such as (eco)tourism, bioprospecting, and payment for ecosystem services, in which constantly a combination is sought between conservation and economic development. Capitalist forms of conservation have become mainstream as they are

globally hegemonic, but also as they are endorsed and fostered by globally dominant actors such as World Wide Fund for nature, the Nature Conservancy, ABN AMRO, Unilever, and Tata Steel, which found each other in the Capitals Coalition² (Büscher & Fletcher, 2020).

Whereas mainstream conservation is still very dominant, critiques to the fortress model gave way to new radical alternate proposals in the conservation debate over the last two decades. Two of the most prominent paradigms are new conservation and neo-protectionism, or half-Earth movement (Büscher & Fletcher, 2019).

New conservationists acknowledge that humans have changed the global ecosystem to such an extent that nature now needs to be managed as an enormous ‘rambunctious garden’ (Marris, 2011). New conservationists reject the nature-culture dichotomy and found themselves together in accepting and involving anthropogenic change of nature and support human development in conservation. But while rejecting the dichotomy, it still prioritizes humans. It focusses on setting not nature at the centre, but human interest, especially that of the poor. In this focus, it embraces the Anthropocene and capitalist economic growth, and seek value in new species that emerge in the current environments, rather than mourning the lost ones. As new conservationists Kareiva and Marvier stated:

Given the magnitude of human impacts and change, conservation cannot look only to the past. Instead, it must be about choosing a future for people and nature. Forward-looking conservation protects natural habitats where people live and extract resources and works with corporations to find mixes of economic and conservation activities that blend development with a concern for nature. It also seeks value in novel ecosystems and remains open to some of nature’s modern experiments, such as the recent evolution of large coyotes in North America that have received genes from wolves that make them bigger and more capable of taking down deer and even elk.

(2012, p. 968)

These ideas received great criticism by traditional conservationists, such as Michael Soule (2013), who argued that the term *conservation* for such a movement is even inappropriate, as it does not conserve biodiversity for its own sake, but sets humanitarian protection as main focus. He argues that new conservationists believe that economic development will trickle down to benefit biological diversity, while in fact economic development tends to lead to an increasing ecological footprint instead. Furthermore, the belief in capitalist solutions of new conservationists perpetuates the poverty they wish to overcome (Büscher & Fletcher, 2020).

Neo-protectionists stand with Soule’s position and do not believe in the positive sides of human involvement in nature. They, instead, ask for the return to increasing protected areas and enforcement of these, in which nature is being put back in charge and is set apart from humans. Neo-protectionists, part of what is also called the new ‘back to the barriers’ movement, go even

² See <https://capitalscoalition.org/the-coalition/organisation-directory/> for all organizations which are part of the Capitals Coalition. ABN AMRO and Unilever are (originally) Dutch organisations.

further than traditional conservationists, as they believe the amount of protected areas should at least encompass half of the Earth. Hence, the nickname and title of the book *Half-Earth*, by Edward O. Wilson (2016). Their ideas reject capitalist forms of conservation, but reinforce the human-nature dichotomy (Büscher & Fletcher, 2020). ‘Conservation targets should be based on what is necessary to protect nature in all its expressions’, and thus needs to be protected for its own sake, away from humans (Locke, 2013). The main lines of this idea find itself also back in European policies, in which member states are asked to have at least 30 percent of their land surface assigned as protected nature area by 2030, known as the 30-by-30 goal (European Commission, 2020; Wageningen University and Research, 2022).

Neo-protectionists have also been criticised, mainly in the same lines of fortress approach criticism. To set apart half the earth, implies major displacements. Furthermore, it blames biodiversity loss often to population growth, especially the poor, which is a problematic assumption. Lastly, proponents do not explain *how* they want to keep capitalist intrusion beyond the barriers of PAs (Büscher & Fletcher, 2020).

Convivial conservation

In response, Büscher & Fletcher (2020) recently have coined a new conservation approach, which combines some aspects of neo-protectionism and new conservation: convivial conservation. While not accepting the support for the capitalist mechanism that is accepted and embedded in new conservation, the authors want to support moving beyond the problematic nature-culture dichotomy. Neo-protectionists reject capitalist forms of conservation, but the half-Earth thesis they propose will have too damaging (social) impacts. Combining the two, convivial conservation rejects capitalist forms of conservation, and refuses the nature-culture dichotomy by bringing humans closer to nature. According to Büscher and Fletcher (2020), convivial conservation centres the need to let nature flourish more freely, and to let humans be part of it. Furthermore, it desires a transformation of the world economy. The current economic system burdens the planet. Convivial conservation asks for better balancing human life with life of the rest of the planet, and advocates degrowth politics: an economic system that turns its back to the endless pursuit of economic gain. Rather, degrowth entails a period of planned economic contraction and a focus on local living, ethical banking, cooperative property and firms, basic income and income caps, extraction limits and resource and CO₂ caps, among other matters. But above all, degrowth focusses on well-being instead of welfare (Kallis et al., 2015).

In convivial conservation, one of the main principles is the focus on integrated spaces where humans and other species co-exist in a respectful and equitable way. Acknowledging that humans always have shaped the ecosystems in which they live, by which they co-produced many living landscapes throughout the world, (which on their turn shaped the people that lived within them), convivial conservation aims to go beyond the dichotomy that has been so powerful in traditional conservation and other domains of the Western worldview. This also means that we have to value the nature around us, close to where we live. This also means that, under convivial conservation, a move away from the longing to the spectacle, romanticized, wild nature is necessary. Instead, the focus should be on the everyday nature, “in all its

splendour and mundaneness''. It is there, where we find the most meaningful relationship with nature (Büscher & Fletcher, 2020).

This builds on the ideas of Cronon, who states that the value is in the nature close around us:

Wilderness gets us into trouble only if we imagine that this experience of wonder and otherness is limited to the remote corners of the planet, or that it somehow depends on pristine landscapes we ourselves do not inhabit. Nothing could be more misleading. The tree in the garden is in reality no less other, no less worthy of our wonder and respect, than the tree in an ancient forest that has never known an ax or a saw -even though the tree in the forest reflects a more intricate web of ecological relationships. (...) Both trees stand apart from us; both share our common world. The special power of the tree in the wilderness is to remind us of this fact. It can teach us to recognize the wildness we did not see in the tree we planted in our own backyard. By seeing the otherness in that which is most unfamiliar, we can learn to see it too in that which at first seemed merely ordinary. If wilderness can do this - if it can help us perceive and respect a nature we had forgotten to recognize as natural - then it will become part of the solution to our environmental dilemmas rather than part of the problem. This will only happen, however, if we abandon the dualism that sees the tree in the garden as artificial - completely fallen and unnatural - and the tree in the wilderness as natural - completely pristine and wild.

(1996, p.24)

Instead of focusing on PAs in areas far away, the rest of this thesis focusses on nature conservation which is close to me, in the Netherlands, and how the human-nature dichotomy shapes nature conservation there. In the Netherlands, nature has been reduced to little postage stamps, which are under high anthropogenic pressure: "The Netherlands is an interesting and extreme example of a country where nature has been pushed back behind fences, fragmented by roads, supplanted by new housing estates and industrial areas" (Meulen, 2022, p. 15). After decades of declining interest in nature among Dutch people, support of nature has been growing since 2006 (Boer, & Langers, 2022). The increasing popularity of nature again has been witnessed during COVID-crisis, in which masses of people visited nature reserves for recreation (Meulen, 2022). Nature recreation might help in decreasing the gap between humans and nature. In the last section of this theory chapter, I elaborate more on nature recreation and offer an overview of the current insights on nature recreation, and how it might help to go beyond the human-nature dichotomy.

Nature recreation as a means to move beyond the dichotomy

One way of integrating humans better with nature is through nature recreation, also called nature-based recreation. Nature-based recreation is broadly understood as leisure activities carried out in natural settings, such as hiking, canoeing, wildlife-viewing, cycling, horse-riding and dog-walking (Rosa et al., 2019; Steven et al., 2011). While nature-based recreation can have negative consequences on the environment, as reviewed by Steven and colleagues (2011), it may increase human connectedness to nature (Brymer et al., 2021; Crawford et al., 2017; Hanna et al., 2019; Winter et al., 2019). Rosa et al. (2019) found for instance that participation

in nature-based recreation during childhood leads to more connectedness to nature, stimulating nature-based recreation later in life. Recreation in nature and the associated enhanced connection to nature are also considered to lead to pro-environmental behaviour (Wells & Lekies, 2006). Research showed that when people have participated in outdoor recreation at a young age, this shows more pro-environmental behaviour at later stages in their life as well (Evans et al., 2018; Wells & Lekies, 2006). But also in general, engagement in outdoor activities lead to experiences of a fusion of the human-nature dichotomy and greater pro-environmental attitudes and behaviour (Hanna et al., 2019). Nature recreation also has been of important concern among researchers and practitioners because of its well-being benefits such as depression reduction (Berman et al., 2012), enhancement of vitality (Van Den Berg et al., 2016), and triggering of positive emotional responses (Roe & Aspinall, 2011). Furthermore, it may enhance leisure satisfaction (Rosa et al., 2019), and can improve social connectedness (Bai et al., 2017; Goldy & Piff, 2020).

Recreation as an ecosystem service

Nature-based recreation can be seen as a practice that can challenge the human-nature dichotomy in nature areas. Yet, nature recreation can also act in favour of the human-nature dichotomy. Many authors argue that nature recreation might become the main end of conservation, instead of the nature itself (Fairhead et al., 2012; Mathews, 2021; Ojeda, 2012). Fairhead and colleagues (2021) describe how, from the 1980s, environmental economists increasingly started to analyse environments in terms of what financial value ecosystems could offer, in terms of products and services. Recreation can also be seen as such an “ecosystem service” (Costanza et al., 1997). While ecosystem services initially had been narrated as a mechanism to seek support for resource conservation by expressing the extensive economic value of ecosystems, over the last decades it has transformed into a system which focusses on attracting payments for ecosystems, on the assumption that such remuneration will ensure their provision. This encourages market mechanisms for conservation, which in turn leads to financialization connected to capitalist mechanisms of accumulation (Sullivan, 2011). In the case of nature-based recreation, nature is then mainly protected by means of economic revenues generated by recreation, driven by dichotomous mechanisms that are embedded within capitalism. This rather increases then decreases the gap between humans and nature.


Environmental philosophers Schouten (2013) and Possamai (2013) argued that we are experiencing a paradigm shift in our attitudes to nature. According to these authors, we no longer perceive humans and nature as two separate entities, but rather as a continuum, as a whole (Valenti Possamai, 2013), and we have transformed ourselves from dominators and stewards of nature to partners and participants (Schouten, 2013). The attitudes that Schouten (2013) used to identify this paradigm shift are based on a classification of attitudes towards nature formed by Zweers (Zweers, 1989), which later has been reformulated by Kockelkoren (1995) and adapted by van den Born (2006).

Attitudes towards nature

Kockelkoren (1995) divided the attitudes of humans towards nature in four main attitudes: dominator, steward, partner, and participant. I will briefly elaborate on these. *Dominator* is

used to identify an attitude in which humans are the dominators of nature. Nature is subordinate to human existence and humans see nature merely as a source of functional raw materials. The dominator is constantly seeking to utilize nature at maximum benefit. Nature needs to be controlled and subdued, especially due to its unpredictable elements (earthquakes, hurricanes, etc.). The *steward* has a more nature-oriented attitude, in which nature is something that humans should care for, be it towards future generations or as a responsibility towards the Creator. Human interests stand above that of other animals, but interests of other animals and plants may not be sacrificed for purely economic benefits, unless animal and plant-damaging actions serve some ‘higher interest’ (while it is debatable what ‘higher interest’ means). People with a *partner* attitude still distinguish themselves from nature, but acknowledge that other animals and plants have their own input when intervening in human lives. Nature has intrinsic value to a certain extent. In this attitude there is a freedom to view nature as something biologically correlated with humans, or as something with which we have a closer relationship with. Technological interventions are still the norm, but natural equilibria need to be respected. The last attitude is the *participant* attitude. People with a participant attitude see themselves as integral part of nature and see nature as representation of the totality of interdependent and interwoven life forms. Nature has intrinsic value and is, with humans as a small part of it, seen as a complex world of interactions between all life forms. Participants try to follow the natural structures of elements as closely as possible when intervening in the landscape.

Table 1. Attitudes towards nature. Adapted from Schouten (2013).

| Attitudes on human-nature relationship | Characteristics | |
|----------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Dominator | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Humans and nature are separated - Humans stand above nature - Humans are free to intervene in nature | anthropocentric  ecocentric |
| Steward | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Humans and nature are separated - Humans stand above nature - Humans bear responsibility to care for nature for future generations and/or the Creator | |
| Partner | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Humans and nature are separated - Humans and nature coexist with equal value | |
| Participant | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Humans and nature are not separated | |

Although Schouten (2013) and Possamai (2013) argued that people’s attitudes in Western societies have changed from dominator to the attitudes of partner and participant, van den Born (2006) found a different result and argued that among people in Europe the steward attitude is the most dominant attitude towards nature. This thesis questions the statements of Schouten (2013), Possamai (2013), and van den Born (2006), by investigating how the dichotomy between humans and nature shapes nature conservation and recreation in Tholen.

Methods

Research approach

This thesis uses a qualitative research technique to research the perspectives that people have on human-nature relations in relation to nature preservation and nature recreation. The basis of this research is a case study on nature reserves within the municipality of Tholen. I performed in-depth interviews with nature reserve managers, nature policy makers, and advisors, and visitors of nature reserves on Tholen. I also conducted a survey among visitors of Tholen as part of my internship at ANWB, Municipality of Tholen, and Zuidwestelijke Delta. Yet, for this thesis the survey will only cover a small part of the research. I chose to focus more on interviews, as ideas on the relation between human and nature ask for a qualitative technique to come to the surface. In-depth interviews not only help to provide information, but are also excellent for providing understanding. This method helps the researcher to understand its interviewees' ideas on motivations, norms, decision making, and processes for example. In-depth interviews are able to uncover not only facts, but also the meaning of experiences and perspectives (Guest et al., 2013). Furthermore, interviewing also helps to understand why and how people construct the world in certain ways (Morris, 2015). With this qualitative approach, there is also more space for interviewees to elaborate on their ideas with personal insights than in a quantitative technique, something that is very valuable when researching complex thought on a certain topic.

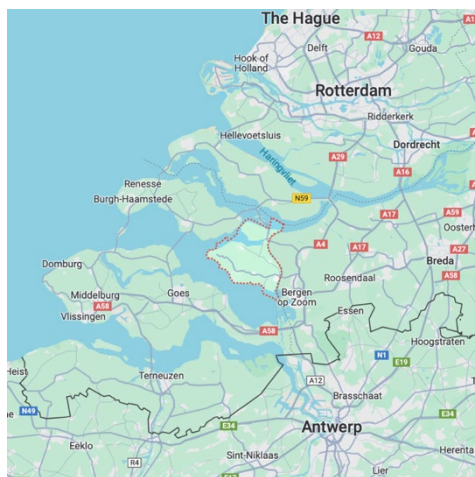


Figure 1. The municipality of Tholen is located in the middle of this map (encircled by the red dots). Source: Google Maps (2024)

Respondents

The dataset consisted of 26 interviews. 29 people in total have been interviewed, as some visitors were in duos. I conducted 8 in-depth interviews with visitors, varying in length from 20 to 35 mins. The sampling method for this group was a non-random purposive sampling method. By placing a call for research participants online on social media, I could gather some interviewees via friends and other connections. The largest part of respondents came via the survey I executed for my internship at the municipality, in which I included the option to participate in an in-depth interview. Although the sampling method for this group involved some element of convenience sampling, the specific requirements for involvement in the study (being a visitor of nature reserves in Tholen) make this research design purposive (Campbell et al., 2020). All of the respondents gave permission to have their interviews recorded. The remaining 10 visitor interviews were shorter interviews of 5 to 10 mins. These interviews were recruited using the same sampling technique as the longer in-depth interviews. However, participants were not recruited online, but in the field during two days of fieldwork on the coast of the Oosterschelde, in the south of Tholen. I recruited these interviewees in the nature reserve itself, making sure that they would meet the

requirements for participation in the study. To not disrupt the flow of speech, I chose to not record these interviews, but to make mental notes and to quickly write everything down after the interview had been finished. Within the complete visitor research group, the aim was to find a diverse group in terms of age and gender. It resulted in having 9 women and 9 men in the research group, with ages varying from 25 to 75.

The other part of the interviews consisted of 8 interviews with nature reserve managers, nature policy makers, and advisors of Tholen and surroundings. The research sample was constructed with a purposive homogeneity strategy. This strategy was appropriate because I was looking for people with more or less the same profession, namely nature reserve managers and nature policy makers. This method is also useful to focus on the similarities within this group (Palinkas et al., 2015). The sample included representatives of all the largest nature reserve organisations in Zeeland: Staatsbosbeheer, Natuurmonumenten, Zeeuws Landschap and the Province of Zeeland. Furthermore, environmental federation Zeeuwse Milieufederatie, World Wide fund for Nature (NL), and a nature policy consultant, who leads conversations between nature reserve organisations, governmental organizations, companies and other stakeholders in Zeeland, were interviewed. The contact details for these participants were provided by my internship organisations. These interviews each had a length between 30 and 50 mins. It is important to mention that not all interviewees spoke for their organization during the entire interview. Some statements of the employees of the Province of Zeeland were made on their own behalf. When this was the case, it is indicated in the result section.

Survey

For researching visitor perspectives, I also conducted a survey. This survey was executed as part of my internship for the internship organisations. Via the webpage of the municipality and online media channels, the municipality posted calls to participate in the online survey. It consisted of certain statements that were about one's view on nature; cases in which the respondents needed to select which action is preferred; and a question on how close the respondent places itself to nature. It also gave an overview which recreational activities respondents undertake when visiting nature reserves. The survey was inspired on a survey created by researchers of Wageningen University and Heimans en Thijssse Stichting (van Vliet et al., 2022). Results of their survey were only used at a symposium at Wageningen University and have not been officially published. Yet, I have been granted permission by Heimans en Thijssse Stichting to base parts of my survey on their survey. I adjusted the questions to the context of Tholen and added some new questions to the survey. I only used descriptive analysis for analysing the survey. Summarising the survey data fulfils for this thesis, as the main method is in-depth interviewing.

This survey adds nuance to the results of the interviews. Some respondents' perspectives may not have emerged during the interviews because they were not actively prompted by questions. As I wanted to prevent steering respondents too much in certain directions, it could be that certain perspectives did not come up. For instance, I did not want to ask 'How do you think humans and nature are connected?' or 'How do you think humans are part of nature?', as there is an assumption in these questions that humans and nature are connected and humans are part

of nature. For the interviews, I found this undesirable. The survey, however, consists of statements on human-nature relationships, making it easier to actively prompt certain perspectives on particular topics (while it increases risks of question and social desirability biases). Furthermore, a much larger sample can be reached and easily be processed. This enhances credibility, on which I will elaborate more later on in this chapter.

Interview guide

The interviews were semi-structured and constructed on the basis of predefined themes. Every visitor interview consisted at least the orange-coloured and purple-coloured questions. For the group of nature reserve managers, nature policy makers, and advisors, a few questions were added, with a larger focus on nature preservation. The questions for this group are coloured grey and purple.

- *Human-nature relationship*
 - *What is nature?*
 - *Where does nature start?*
 - *How do you see yourself in relation with nature?*
 - *How do you think about the relationship between humans and nature?*
- *Nature preservation*
 - *What is your role in nature (preservation)?*
 - *What do you think of nature preservation measures?*
 - *What is the purpose of nature reserves?*
 - *What does nature management mean?*
 - *How do you think of borders around nature?*
 - *What is the most ideal form of nature conservation?*
 - *What is the effect of nature conservation on humans?*
- *Nature recreation*
 - *What do you think of recreation in nature?*
 - *What do you think of the possibilities for nature recreation in Tholen?*

This interview guide served, as the name already says, as a guide. The interviews had a natural flow and were open to follow-up questions. Furthermore, the semi-structured interviews gave participants room to elaborate on their thoughts extensively. The other interviews, the brief ones that were carried out along the coast of Tholen, consisted of the same questions as the other visitor interviews. However, in these interviews respondents elaborated a bit less extensively on their perspectives.

Thematic analysis

This research relies on thematic analysis as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This technique is used because of its flexibility, and its usefulness to structure data and interviews. “Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 6). In this thesis, it is a method that helps to report meanings and realities of interviewees. It is a more interpretative method instead of content analysis, for instance, which is more descriptive. The thematic analysis fits in the contextualistic approach this thesis takes, acknowledging that knowledge and meanings of respondents are affected by the broader social context. Besides, thematic analysis fits the type

of qualitative data that is used in this thesis, which is researcher-generated instead of pre-existing documents (Wheeler, 2022).

The themes did not emerge from the interview data itself. Rather, these were predesigned on the basis of the theoretical foundation and research questions of this thesis. This led to the following themes: human-nature relations, nature conservation and nature recreation. The themes were not set in stone, as the dataset functioned as an endorsement of these conceptual themes, where the classification and order of the themes could still be adjusted. Through this approach, the design of the thematic structures could constantly be evaluated. During the data generation and coding processes, I found that the predesigned themes were suitable for identifying patterns of the data. Yet, these patterns could be further structured by creating and assigning subthemes. These subthemes were founded on the basis of a combination of asked questions, interview answers and literature. The thematic approach for this thesis thus balances between an inductive and deductive approach.

Table 2. Themes

| <u>Human-nature relationship</u> | <u>Nature conservation</u> | <u>Nature recreation</u> |
|----------------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------|
| What is nature | Conservation approach | Disruption |
| Attitude | Fragmentation | Decreasing H/N dichotomy |
| H/N relationship in general | Ideal conservation approach | Accessibility |
| Value of nature | Role in nature | |
| Dependency on nature | | |
| Anthropogenic pressures | | |

I collected all the data myself. The data was also transcribed and coded by me. For the semi-structured interviews, transcriptions of the data were constructed using transcription software (Whisper) and checked by listening to the voice recordings that were made during the interviews. The interviews were transcribed verbatim. Only completely irrelevant information was omitted, such as information about specific past friends or personal history if it was completely unrelated to the focus of the study. Data collection for the shorter street interviews relied on notes made after the interview had taken place. For these interviews, only the most relevant parts were written down, as it was difficult to remember all the information that was given. Doing the whole data collection and analysis process myself, I became more familiar and gained more feel of the data. This helped me through the formal coding process. During the coding process, it became clear that the themes were difficult to separate, as links emerged between the themes. Yet, the theme structure helped to identify these links and to structure the result section, which was written with themes that were designed in mind.

Trustworthiness and Positionality

Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of qualitative research is often doubted in positivist circles. Perhaps, this is because quantitative concepts such as reliability and validity are not possible to be applied in the same way in naturalistic, qualitative research approaches (Shenton, 2004). Yet, there are

researchers that constructed measures with which trustworthiness in qualitative research can be better assessed. Guba (1981) constructed four criteria, namely credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability. I will assess the trustworthiness of this thesis along these criteria, which are extensively described by Vicent Anney (2014).

Credibility is used to examine how consistent the findings are with reality. It describes how much confidence the researcher can have in the accuracy of the results (Anney, 2014). A limitation of this research is that I did not do member checks. Member checks contribute to eliminating research bias, as respondents are allowed to view and evaluate the interpretation made by the researcher (Anney, 2014). Due to time constraints, I could not make room for member checks. However, credibility was enhanced by the use of peer debriefing. I was provided scholarly guidance and extensive feedback. This helped me in testing my developing insights. Data triangulation also contributes to credibility. While I do not really want to speak of methodological triangulation, as the survey that I carried out for this thesis was of a relatively small scale, it still adds some strength and nuance to the findings. By asking questions on the same topic to members of the same target population with different methods, the findings of perspectives of visitors in this thesis are more accurate to the actual visitor perspectives. It “cross-examines the integrity of participants responses” (Anney, 2014, p. 277). Lastly, the results are not limited to interview and survey derivations. I added extensive quotes that provide more insight in how interviewees said certain things. These quotes give a better idea of the characteristics of the interviewees, and help to get to know how respondents think about certain topics.

Transferability refers to the degree to which the findings of this thesis can be transferred to other (geographical) contexts with different participants (Anney, 2014). Although transferability of this research can be difficult, as Tholen has a specific kind of nature, which is vulnerable delta nature, purpose sampling contributed to transferability as it enables the possibility to look for respondents with likewise characteristics in a different context. I also provided a thick description of my methods, as I described the methods in detail. This helps other researchers eventually repeat this research with somewhat similar conditions in a slightly different context, and assists in evaluating how well the research context matches other situations (Anney, 2014).

Dependability refers to “the stability of findings over time” (Bitsch, 2005, p. 86). It implies that if another researcher were to conduct this study with a similar participant group and context, the findings of that other researcher should be in line with the results of this thesis. By asking feedback from others and showing the process to other experienced researchers I tried to minimise subjectivity. I also ensure that an audit trail is possible. The data collection and analysis process can be cross checked as the raw data, such as transcripts and audio recordings, but also the code book are stored locally until 2026 and are available upon request. This also adds to the confirmability of the research, which refers to the degree by which the results of the research could be confirmed by other researchers (Anney, 2014).

Positionality

My world view and the way of seeing the world consists of specific ontological and epistemological assumptions (Darwin Holmes, 2020). This affects the data that is gathered and analysed at all stages, as “there is no method or technique of doing research other than through the medium of the researcher” (England, 2017, p. 2). I consider myself as someone that loves nature, and I find it important that we seek balance between humans and nature and that humans are a part of nature instead of dominating it. I am very critical of current governmental policies and I actively look for ways that bring humans closer to nature. This motivation can affect the research findings, as it can lead to certain institutions being criticised too much, when, for example, they might also be doing good things to bring people closer to nature. These good things did not come up so much during my research.

I speak from a position in a country that has been trying to dominate natural systems for a very long time. In the introduction and literature sections of this thesis, I wrote about indigenous livelihoods and the close relation some have with nature, something that is completely different from how we in western societies treat nature. I have to rely on other researcher’s truths to get a grasp of how these relationships work, and also these researchers’ life experiences and accompanied ontologies and epistemologies have an influence on their results. This is important to realise, because being a human and having a Western background, these relationships are hard to *really* understand. Yet, other-than-Western relationships between humans and nature inspired me to research human-nature relationships in the Netherlands, even though I might not completely be able to understand how human-nature relationships work in different environments.

Ethical complications

Giving back

Participants participated without getting a reward for their involvement in the study. However, I provided participants with a one-page summary of the research. By doing this, I give something back without doing any harm to the respondents, as no sensitive information for respondents and no personal names are included in the summary. The summary is in Dutch and consists of understandable language without using difficult words. This makes it for most respondents accessible to read.

Privacy and protection of data and respondents

I made all respondents aware that they were participating in a study by a Radboud University student, which I carried out as my MSc thesis. Names of the respondents are changed in this thesis due to privacy reasons. The names of participants are known by the researcher. I was also transparent about the purpose of the research, as I explained the purpose of the interview at the end of the conversation. Interview data, such as transcriptions and audio files, are stored offline only and only available upon request and exclusively for research purposes. Interview data will be removed by the end of 2025. Survey data is anonymous and not possible to link to anyone. Survey data also will be removed by the end of 2025.

Results

In this section the results of the interviews are described. It gives an overview of what has been retrieved in the data collection process, divided in two sections. The first section is focussed on the insights of nature reserve managers, policy makers and advisors. All of the people interviewed in this section have an influence in policy making and nature conservation in and around Tholen. I also included key quotations from the interview data to illustrate the major findings. The second section encompasses the findings of interviews with visitors of nature reserves in Tholen. The quotations in this section provide some detail in the various visitor's perspectives. This section will also include a brief summary of the survey that I executed among visitors of nature reserves in Tholen.

Nature reserve managers, policy makers and advisors,

In general, nature reserve managers and nature policy makers and advisors are on the same page when it comes to their view on the relation between humans and nature. Almost all nature reserve managers and policy makers and advisors that were interviewed see humans as integral part of nature. While some interviewees mentioned that nature and human are seen as separated entities in the Netherlands, nearly everyone stated that human beings are part of the whole picture; part of nature. Nature in their view is everything and everywhere. In the cities, in the rivers, in the forests. This was also expressed by an employee of Word Wide Fund for Nature (WWF):

For me that's basically everything. Our whole environment and ourselves. I'm within that city now, then it's just a little; a lot of houses and stones and so on, so to speak. But for me that's also already nature, and the trees, and the water, the air, the earth, the clouds.

Two respondents, however, see nature slightly different. An account manager and team leader of governmental organization Staatsbosbeheer, the largest nature conservation organization of the Netherlands, sees nature more as an 'appearance' of a natural system. He mentioned that everything that is not human-made is nature. But this is a difficult definition, as he acknowledged that the whole of the Netherlands is culture in that respect. That is why Staatsbosbeheer prefers to use the term nature to refer to the natural system, or, something that has the appearance of a natural system through conservation and nature management practices. This view on nature relates slightly to what the nature policy maker of the Province of Zeeland mentioned, who stated that nature primarily is in the green areas. She limits the definition of nature to green spaces. Green spaces where the greenery reaches your knees and where nature has a pristine character. Preferably, she sees less humans in areas that are nature according to her. While highlighting that it is not the policy of the province, she thinks it is better to leave some room for nature to flourish, without human interference: a particular degree of wilderness.

The visions of the latter mentioned interviewees highlight a dichotomy between humans and nature. But remarkably, this is what most respondents essentially stated, despite their view of

humans being part of nature. Their ideal view (not essentially for Staatsbosbeheer though), humans being part of nature, often is not present in the current practices of the relationship between humans and nature in society. The human-nature relationship is distorted, as an employee of Zeeuws Landschap explained:

I think that one [human-nature relationship] is tremendously distorted. All the species that walk around on this planet, they take what they need, and humans take much more than what they need. And therefore, the whole planet is out of balance.

Humans cultivate nature, instead of acting as if they were part of it. Also, a policy advisor of the Province of Zeeland stated that anthropogenic drivers such as the economy and water safety for instance tremendously disrupted natural systems, to such an extent that nature reserve managers (humans) need to manage nature reserves to minimize the negative impacts of economic and water safety goals on nature. Nature that the account manager of Staatsbosbeheer called ‘the appearance of a natural system’. Systems that nature reserve managers try to maintain with intensive conservation and nature management practices. The landscape of the Netherlands is cultivated to such an extent that it is not possible anymore to let nature try to recover out of itself. Or, to recover to a state that humans desire or need to have for their existence, as someone stated. An ambassador of Natuurmonumenten, one of the main national nature conservation organisations, highlighted this as follows:

People ask me more and more often: ‘Why do you work as an ambassador for Natuurmonumenten in Zeeland? And why do you stand up for that nature so much? You must be a very big nature lover.’ And I say more and more often, nature will get there. With or without people. The question is whether people will survive after we have destroyed nature. That is the open question you have. Humans need nature much more than nature needs human. I’m convinced of that.

The ambassador of Natuurmonumenten explained that nature does not need humans. But he raises the question if humans could survive without nature, to consequently state that humans depend more on nature than the other way around. He and others underpin that conservation practices are essentially not for nature itself alone. Mainly, conservation measures are there to protect the nature that people want and need. In a country where anthropogenic pressures on the natural system are high, the desired natural system can only be reached by intensive nature management, executed by humans.

In essence, all nature that exists today in the Netherlands is affected by humans, culture, or as the district chief of nature management organisation Zeeuws Landschap mentioned, the nature in the Netherlands *is* culture. Not all respondents mentioned this so clearly, but all acknowledged that the pressure of humans on nature is high. High to such a degree that nature even can be ‘destroyed’, as a programme manager of Zeeuwse Milieufederatie (ZMf), an environmental federation which focusses on nature conservation, environment and sustainability, mentioned. The cultivation of the whole country of the Netherlands made nature highly affected by fragmentation and marginalised by industrial and agricultural expansions. The result is a bordered landscape in which nature is constrained to separate containers. It makes

natural systems very vulnerable. The programme manager of ZMf highlighted that we should border nature less and give more space to natural flows. Not only limited to protected nature areas, but crossing the borders of such spaces which leads humans being more intertwined with nature. This was also mentioned by Staatsbosbeheer, which would like to see more intertwining of nature through the country, instead of managing everything in bordered areas.

In Zeeland, the bordered character of landscape planning is highly visible. Not only on paper and in policy documents, but also in the landscape itself. Some respondents highlighted the presence of the many dikes in Tholen to illustrate how the landscape is literally separated. The dike is 'separating two worlds' (ZMf programma manager). Originally, land-water borders are more gradual, but the dike is a real boundary setting the two apart. The dike sets humans apart from nature, according to the employee of ZMf. It pushes humans out of nature and constrains nature to an area far away, while the inland arable fields of Tholen are machined in a wide variety of ways, pushing all life out of the inland areas. On the island itself, one finds itself in an unpleasant fight for space. Efficiency-thinking led to the belief that the inland areas must be 'productive' areas. This is also illustrated by the fact that the Province of Zeeland does not want to give up any more arable land for nature. A strategy advisor for nature in the Dutch delta explained how these developments have been making nature a distant entity over the years:

The whole food production, of course, is very much economically driven. And optimization driven. So, there has been continuous refinement on that over the years, after the war. (...) And you also see at the same time that because of efficiency thinking, all parties are very much focused on, what they call it, their core business. Rijkswaterstaat, or a water board also has a very core business. That is efficiently maintaining high dikes, for instance. I also have a lot of discussion with them: you guys just co-own a very large area. You happen to have a high dike, but it's part of a very large area. Thus, you can't pretend it's not there. You're actually co-responsible for that area. Because of that efficiency effect, there has been a kind of cramping of the view and also the involvement or the feeling of co-responsibility for an area everywhere. And nature organizations have increasingly emerged as a counterforce. They have to guard those little postage stamps that are still there. They say to me: 'ideally, we put a fence around them.'

Fencing areas is done by all nature management organisations that were interviewed. Also Staatsbosbeheer, which manages most of the nature reserves in the municipality, restricts access to some of the nature reserves. This especially involves the outer-dike areas. The disruption by human recreation is leading to too much pressure on the nature outside the dykes. More human presence will have a disastrous effect on natural values. First, a strengthening of the natural values is necessary, accompanied by different, less impactful uses and attitudes of people.

But more ideally, nature reserve managers do not put a fence around nature but pursue a more convivial conservation style. Nature that is accessible and all around us. A view that rhymes with how most of them essentially see the human-nature relationship. But as the strategy advisor stated, due to efficiency thinking and the Dutch fragmented way of managing land; consisting of bordered pieces with a particular core business land-use plan, nature reserve organisations find themselves in a situation in which they more and more go back to a style of barriers and

access denial. As also the employee of WWF stated, in the Netherlands ‘nature has been very much subdued. Thus, it is controlled and destroyed on a large scale’. The space left for nature is just too small. Some respondents even speak of postage stamps. This was also illustrated by the district chief of Zeeuws Landschap:

In the Netherlands, we have really reduced nature to small postage stamps. That's where nature is still allowed to be. That's where species are still allowed to occur and outside of that, not really.

It leads nature reserve managers to trying to reduce human pressures on nature reserves by mechanisms that they still can control a bit, which is active management (harvesting, planting, etc.) and the accessibility of nature reserves for humans. Due to the small amount of space that nature gets in Tholen, nature reserve managers try to reduce disruption of nature by humans. In Tholen, this led to tense discussions, mainly around the activity of sea vegetable harvesting, a local, long-standing tradition. In essence, the impact of cutting sea vegetables is quite low. But for nature site managers it is an undesired practice. Witnessing the deterioration of nature, nature managers try to adjust the variables that they still can influence a bit, while the recreational activity essentially is not the main problem. Yet, the issue of disruption by recreational activities (such as harvesting sea vegetables, but also walking and cycling) was mentioned many times in all interviews. While all respondents highlighted the importance of bringing humans closer to nature and to break down the separation between humans and nature, the recreational pressure of nature areas remained a large issue. Everyone is convinced that nature should be open for humans to connect with nature and to feel more belongingness to and respect for nature. But due to anthropogenic pressures we should be very careful with giving space for humans in nature areas. Disruption and recreation seem to go in one breath, widening the gap between humans and nature. The general perspective can be illustrated quoting the ambassador of Natuurmonumenten:

I totally understand that as Tholen you want to allow new settlement of residential recreation, small-scale or whatever. But we should not make all those people in Tholen choose to go back to the only nature they have. That is, after all, that delta nature. That is very vulnerable at the moment. Look, I would also like it to be in fantastic shape. And then we wouldn't have had to say that. But now we have to manage that very well. I said there, for example, please create more recreational nature on the island near the new residential recreation, so that people see that delta nature as a one-time trip.

It brings us back to what the policy maker of the province stated, who desires to see less humans in nature. But she also stated that the province board itself sees it different and wants to devote a lot of efforts to recreation. She thinks that is understandable, as it is one of the main sources of income for the area. Furthermore, she sees the importance of bringing humans in nature, as it will also bring more respect and a sense of connectedness to nature. But with the small amount of area that is labelled as nature, disruption by recreation is quickly becoming a large issue. Remarkable is that nature reserve and conservation organizations such as Natuurmonumenten, Zeeuws Landschap and ZMf state that they do not only protect nature for their own goals, but that it is also done by order of the province and the state, in line with provincial and national

goals. That is striking, as the government also gives a lot of space to nature damaging factors. As the employee of Natuurmonumenten stated:

Yes, and that [nature protection goal] doesn't even come from us. That just comes from a government that has a goal and that just has to be met. So that's part of it. And then what do we see in practice.... So unfortunately, we desperately need that there are areas where nobody comes. And we see in practice that everybody comes everywhere, to put it bluntly.

The small space that is left for nature has to be managed well, according to the respondents. For governmental organisation Staatsbosbeheer, it is evident that we need to care for nature and conserve it in the best way. However, it is important to mention that the state's nature reserve management organisation speaks of acting as stewards: 'we certainly have a duty to act as stewards and take good care of nature'. The other respondents speak more from a partnership perspective. This deviation from the other respondents is also visible in how Staatsbosbeheer described why we should 'take good care of nature':

(...) to ensure that future generations can enjoy nature and, in addition, use nature. After all, if we take good care of nature, nature will also take care of us.(...) So basically we have to make sure that nature is robust enough again, that there is a 'plus' on it and that plus, which is actually almost the same as what I just said about management, that is the interest that we can prudently use.

The narrative of Staatsbosbeheer comes close to what the government practices. The government navigates a strategy in which nature is seen as a sector. Nature is categorized on the square meter. But in essence, that is not what nature is, as also the employee of Natuurmonumenten mentioned. It is the basis on which our country is constructed. And to make it more accessible and stronger, the solution is, according to the other respondents, more acreage. There needs to be more nature. In the ideal situation, almost no nature management is needed, according to the respondents. But then there needs to be enough space for nature. The policy advisor of the province speaks of green-blue veining, in which green and blue areas are more intertwined in our environment. To reach this, some respondents are inclined to search for market-based mechanisms, as an employee of WWF for instance mentioned a solution in which creating space for nature can go together with recreational accommodation (holiday homes) to earn something from that space. In that case, nature can earn itself back and initiators can earn some money on top of that. But others also state that we have to be very careful with 'marketing' nature. As an employee of ZMf explained:

We also know the term ecosystem services. This is a very rational idea of looking at nature and being able to give a value to everything. And that can be done in lots of ways. A recreational value. And what it brings to us intrinsically. You name it. At the same time, I don't think we can ignore the following either. If you put a value on everything, you could actually also put it in a scale: well, okay, but then we think this is worth a bit more. It's always a danger, of course. Because when do you then reach the tipping point where you no longer need nature, because

we find other things more important as a value? That, of course, is the risk you start thinking about in this system when we only think about euros and economic profit.

The general perspective is that we should be very careful with treating nature as an economic sector. Rather, we should celebrate the intrinsic value of nature. But also, that nature is good for us, but not there for us. Nature is also there for itself. Yet, we should see the advantages for human's health and well-being, and bring nature to people and people to nature. This should be done by creating much more space for nature, or as WWF desires, a doubling of the acreage. Then, you can also open up everything, and bring humans and nature closer together, also through recreation for instance. However, for now, this is not the case. Currently, the primary goal is reaching nature conservation goals. Nature experience and recreation runs therefore behind. The protected nature areas have become small postage stamps; containers which are being managed by turning the little knobs that can still be adjusted, of which recreation is a major one. It leads to a situation in which humans are not coming closer to nature, but even being put further away from it. This is also illustrated in how the employee of WWF ended his interview with a description on nature recreation in Zeeland:

That mostly takes place in the dunes and on the beaches. And along the water, where you still have all these super sad bits of salt marsh, you know, where the tears come to your eyes, so small they are. You just see our delta nature dying there, as you cycle around there. A kind of graveyard. I always get severely depressed by Zeeland. And except then, on the beach and with those dunes like in Kwade Hoek or so, you can still feel, still taste something of the grandeur of our delta nature. Or the Dronkenland van Saaftginen, which, incidentally, you cannot enter at all. Except for a tiny little boardwalk thingy, which is really too sad for words. Zeeland is cycling over dykes and watching nature relics, where you then disturb all the breeding birds. And then all of us, with all the Germans, massively making those dunes uninhabitable for all the birds and stuff.

Providing more space for nature to develop and flourish is not aspired by the Province of Zeeland. The creation of transition areas for instance, which would be zones around Natura 2000 core areas, would provide many more opportunities for recreation, nature experience and nature-inclusive agriculture. The province, however, is not planning to work on transitional areas. There are no new zones indicated as future nature reserves by the province on Tholen, 'so there is no task to complete the nature network on Tholen with new nature' (Staatsbosbeheer). The municipality of Tholen itself is also very reluctant to give up agricultural land for nature, 'So I assume there is no political will locally to make room for this either' (Staatsbosbeheer).

Tholen finds itself in a situation wherein nature is under pressure. Space for nature is needed, but this is politically not feasible. For now, nature conservation organizations find themselves in a situation in which they have to close off nature areas to prevent any more disruption of those vulnerable areas. They do this to reach particular goals, goals of which the most are set by the government. The government subsidizes all interviewed organisations to reach these goals. A government which at the same time allows large anthropogenic factors such as pollution and fragmentation that lower the strength of nature reserves. As a result, human beings

are pushed further away from nature, while nature reserve managers essentially want the opposite. In the next part, the results of interviews with visitors of nature reserves will be discussed.

Visitors

In contrast to what many nature reserve managers and nature policy makers and advisors mentioned, it is not what immediately comes forward when talking about human-nature relationships: humans being part of nature. In the discourses of respondents, nature was almost always a separate entity. This was visible in statements such as ‘Nature is all living things around me’ and ‘Nature is all around you’. It shows that nature is close, but not the same as humans in the perspectives of visitors.

For most respondents, the position of human beings in relation with nature is one of having stewardship over nature, taking good care of nature. There were also some people who described that nature is something owned by humans, or that humans can be at the expense of nature. But also these interviewees, and all other respondents, mentioned the importance of caring for nature and living in harmony with nature. In most interviews, this harmony of caring for nature does not have a form in which humans are intrinsically part of nature. More than that, humans have stewardship over nature. A role in which they have the right to use nature, but have to treat it properly and with respect. As Sanne, a woman of 42 years old, sitting along the coast of the Oosterschelde while her child is playing in the water, described:

Nature is given to humans by the Creator [God]. Nature is given to humans to take very good care of. That is a mission I believe in. (...) Human beings are at the centre.

Sanne comes from Tholen and stated that nature has been given to humans by God to use and take very good care of. In Tholen, which still knows a major religious (mostly Christian) tradition, this perspective came up in the interviews sometimes. But also without involving the Creator, the stewardship role was often mentioned. Anja is a woman of 52 who has an enormous garden around her house in Tholen and who is a passionate gardener. She grew up in a farmer’s family. Her view on the relationship between humans and nature was as follows:

I see it more as something entrusted to us. To take very good care of that. So you may, as in agriculture, you may reap the benefits. But not exhaust it. I think it's a pity that sometimes that balance is a bit off.

The role as steward of nature gives the impression that humans stand above nature, but that is not how most respondents see it. Some respondents even explicitly stated that nature stands above humans, as Wendy, a 40-year old holiday resort employee from Tholen, mentioned for instance:

I find that nature stands above humans. We can't do anything against water, for example. We try, but if it really comes, then it will come. And with the wind here, if it really gets going, you can try to pin everything, but it will be blown away. So we have to be careful with nature.

Having respect for nature and taking care of nature came up as an important result from the interviews. But humans were not explicitly categorized as nature. The next part describes what is considered to be nature for the respondents. As I wrote at the beginning of this subchapter, in many interviews, nature was described as something around us. But where does it start?

For many respondents, nature starts at the backdoor and backyard. It is the moment when they walk out of their backdoor where nature starts. Also in the city, nature can start at the backdoor. Tom and Sabrina are around the age of 30 and come from Antwerp. They came to Tholen to dive in the Oosterschelde. For them, nature starts in the backyard:

Nature starts in the backyard. It is the first little sprite. It is all around us.

Or as Patrick, the 70-year old founding father of a botanical garden in West-Brabant, stated:

Nature is all the living things around me. nature starts in my garden. But true nature is native planting.

Patrick specifically points at the importance of native plant species in his definition of nature. Other respondents also included roadsides, agricultural lands (while some explicitly do not see this as part of nature), the camping, the space, the weather, the air, the clouds, and more. But there were also some respondents who stated that nature does not start at the backdoor, but that nature is only nature when it is pristine, growing from itself, or starting where the public road stops:

Nature, that is basically anything that is green and preferably something that has also started to grow by itself. Here on the island of Tholen, nature is just landscaped nature. Real nature can be found near Bergen op Zoom on the Brabant side, but here on the island you won't find real nature anymore. Nature here is also the Scheldt, the salt marshes and mud flats, which are also very beautiful. The Tholen dykes are very, yes, I think that is also a piece of nature. It is planted, but it is just nature. The dykes here on the island are of course dykes from the 16, 17, 1800s after all the reclamation and they still have the natural shape of the watercourses, which is a piece of nature. But if you look in the Scheldt-Rhine Canal, they've also planted a forest there, but that's just totally straight. There you can shoot a cannon between the trees. That's not nature. It's green, but no. I think nature, I always saw that in the mountains too, you take a few steps and the whole environment changes. (...) [Nature] is actually most in the forests, where the public road stops. Where there is a footpath or a cycle path. And then just a cycle path, not a cycle path next to the road or something. I think that's actually the most natural part of nature.

Coen, a 73-year-old man with whom I spoke at his home, told me very calmly that nature is only nature when it is pristine. This also holds for some other respondents. In a country that is

completely cultivated, such nature is very hard to find. Such a perspective makes nature something that is far away from humans, something you have to travel for.

The inland of Tholen is a highly cultivated landscape with a lot of agriculture. While some respondents also pointed at the beauty of the agricultural landscape, others find that the current agricultural practices stand too far away from nature. Kees is 62 years old and volunteer at Natuurmonumenten. He gives tours in nature reserves in Zeeland and is very passionate about nature. Kees stated that the landscape of Tholen can be seen as one large industrial area, being not natural at all:

You can only preserve natural areas, and maintain biodiversity, by creating buffer zones. With agricultural use. I am not at all against agricultural use. No. You know, I was just thinking this morning: actually, Tholen is a big agricultural industrial area. It is industry. And should you in such an agricultural industrial area, can you develop nature there? Is that possible? Does that go together? I don't think so. No. If you want to develop nature there and do nature conservation, you have to do organic farming. And if you do organic farming, you protect nature.

Yet, he thinks that nature is always around him. And there are respondents that classify the agricultural lands also as nature. Wendy for instance sketches how she loves the flower fields. Or Coen, who, despite his thoughts about that nature needs to be pristine to really be nature, likes to stroll between the farmlands, which he also classifies to be nature (when talking about nature recreation).

Still, respondents also think that the agricultural practices lead to too many anthropogenic pressures such as nitrogen and pesticide pollution. According to the interviews, such practices show that the human-nature relationship is disrupted.

Disruption was one of the first things that came up in almost all interviews when speaking of human-nature relationships. The state of the relationship between human and nature, is in general considered to be disrupted. This disruption is visible in the littering of humans in nature, but also in light pollution, disruption of natural cycles, and roadside mowing for instance. Kees his ideas about the landscape of Tholen are rooted in his perspective on the disrupted human-nature relationship:

I consider nature one of the basic elements in my existence. Without nature, I don't exist. I depend on nature. And nature does not depend on me. While in the perception of many people... And speaking of Tholen... In the perception of many people, they are masters of nature. That is the biggest lie there is. Nature is the master of you. You depend on nature. And nature is not dependent on you. And Mother Earth will always beat you back.

And also Coen mentioned that he sees how our relationship with nature is one of disorder. He never sees real darkness anymore in Tholen:

A lot of light destroys nature in that respect. It used to be really dark here. Yes, well, I'm almost 71 now. It used to be really, really dark here. And since the arrival of GenElectric, the industry of Moerdijk and of Rotterdam, you can see the light from those cities, you see it here. It never gets dark here again. No. That's, I think that's a shame sometimes. Yes. You don't see that here anymore.

There are people who state that the relation between human and nature will not get better anymore. But there also are people who believe that the relationship is getting better again. Both sides came together in a conversation with Nikki and Karin, visitors from Belgium who were picking shellfish from the Oosterschelde when I approached them:

*[Karin:] We are breaking up nature. But, yeah, I am doing it myself too. That does not get any better, I'm afraid. But children are more into it. That gives hope.
[Nikki:] No, I don't think so, if I look around me.*

Every visitor of nature reserves in Tholen I spoke to mentioned that we should take more care of nature and live more in harmony with nature. Someone mentioned that people who do not have any job could use their time to care for nature. Others sketched the importance of educating children about nature to ensure more support for nature. And Aron, a 43-year old municipality employee, stated that we need to make important decisions in recreation and accessibility of nature, especially when it comes to outer-dike cycling (a sensitive topic among residents and visitors of Tholen):

And then sometimes you have to make choices. But that issue comes up more and more. Because, as I just said, you have recreation and tourism increasing. And nature is deteriorating. Ideally you would like to see both going forward of course. An important discussion also from the past is cycling outside the dykes, for example. As an example for Tholeners: for many Tholeners and tourists, that is very important to be able to do. But yes, I just think, you can't do it everywhere. That's such a typical example. Which is just very difficult.

Cycling outside the dykes (along the Oosterschelde) is a sensitive topic, as according to nature reserve managers this practice leads to disruption of particular bird species that are on the Red List, a list with endangered species constructed by the Ministry of agriculture, nature and food quality. This discussion even splits people who want to protect nature in two, as some of them believe this practice should be allowed, while others think this should be disallowed as much as is necessary to protect the birds. This latter position is against the grain of Anja for instance, who finds it more important to bring humans back to nature:

There are quite a lot of stretches that are closed. And I would say: why, when you point out to people and children how beautiful something is. And that you should therefore be careful with it. And that you should... That they learn to see the beauty in that. And appreciate it. That is better than closing everything off. (...) Yes, make children familiar with it. (...) We set up a really big vegetable garden here at school. And then you see how much effort you have to put into something. And if it turns out to be a bit of a crooked tomato with a spot on it, but you took care of it all the time, then you're very happy with it. Then that spot doesn't matter anymore! That

you learn, that's how it grows in nature. That you can enjoy it. And can see the beauty in it. But you have to experience that then. And that it's quite nice, the rain on your face. Or the wind through your hair. Every weather has something beautiful, right? Or look at the water. That it is completely windless like a mirror. Or when it's really rough. That's beautiful too. I think it's always beautiful. It's always different. That's natural in nature. I think, from childhood, you have to point that out to them and make them familiar with it. I'm not in favour of closure.

Anja also educated children and elderly people about nature thinks it is important to bring humans closer to nature instead of refraining them from access to nature. She sees this as a way to increase the connection of humans to nature. According to many respondents, a better human connection to nature is necessary.

Many respondents see education of people and letting people experience nature as the way to bring humans closer to nature and to increase support for nature. But the opening of nature reserves is a difficult subject that can count on a great division in opinions. Some people say too much is closed. As Wendy described:

I had been walking down the same path for twenty years [with dogs], and suddenly there is a sign that says I am not allowed to enter anymore [with the dog]. Then I also call a nature reserve manager, such as Staatsbosbeheer or Zeeuws Landschap to ask for an explanation. But yeah, it's a pity. (...) The closing of nature areas needs to be more flexible. People have to pay respect for nature. The Pluimpot is for instance a nature reserve. If you walk through it, you should not let your dog loose, as it is a nature reserve. Or not going there with your dog at all. But I also heard at the municipality that they want to close off one area completely. I do not know if that's a good idea. But yeah, I think that we need to respect nature and be quiet and not be screaming or racing for instance through it with mopeds for instance.

And also Aron describes that it is important for him that Tholen does not become a nature reserve:

For me, it is important that Tholen should not become a nature reserve. So, I would not like to see nature reserves all closed off soon. Forbidden access. That really goes too far for me. I would just like it to be respectful, balanced and handled with common sense really. And I'm kind of afraid of which direction it will go.

Yet, many respondents witnessed how it is too busy with recreants in nature and state that it is one of the drivers of disruption of nature. It makes that some interviewees do not have any problems with the closing of particular areas. Iris is a 36-year old woman who drove from Bergen op Zoom (other side of the river) to Tholen and walked with her child along the coast. She was showing her kid the living creatures of the Oosterschelde. Iris stated that the denial of access to some nature reserves for humans is okay for her, because it is necessary:

I think there should be as little recreation in nature as possible. (I contradict myself, because I am here of course). But I think making parts inaccessible is okay because it is necessary. There is still so much space where recreation can be done. (...) We

have to respect nature. We should let nature 'be'. The other day I saw someone going into that forbidden area anyway. Then I thought, why? There is plenty of space, isn't there?

The interviewees are very much divided when it comes to access to nature reserves for recreation. One part does not understand why areas should be closed off (*'those little birds definitely won't fly away'*), while others understand the closure of some areas to protect the nature that is still there. There was consensus on the goal of nature reserves. Nature reserves are created to protect nature. But experiencing and enjoyment are also very important to the respondents, and with a reason. For many, it is considered to be the way to bring humans closer to nature.

For a lot of respondents, their role towards nature stops there. They are experiencers and enjoyers, but do not claim to have any other role in nature protection. Peter, a 57-year old man staying on campsite the Zeester, acknowledges that he mainly takes from nature, but does not give anything back:

Nature brings me peace and inspiration. The other day, for instance, I briefly didn't know what colour to paint something in (I do portraits of musicians). I went for a walk and tried not to think about it and when I came back I knew again. That's what nature brings me. But actually, I bring nature too little myself.

Some other respondents mentioned that they do not disrupt, litter or break down nature when recreating in nature reserves. There were three respondents who did have a more active role in nature. Anja for instance performs, next to her volunteer work in nature education, organic gardening, in which she also pays attention to insects. She also has a special way of handling the birds:

I don't protect my plants with pesticides. I do have a shed for my small fruit, though. Because I have a lot of birds here. I have one cherry tree and they are allowed in there. And that always works well in itself. So, I didn't pick those and then at the same time my raspberries were ripe. So, then they weren't on the raspberries, as they were in the cherries. But now I have actually spoiled those birds too much, that there are so many of them, that they are now in my raspberries AND in the cherries anyway. Yes well, but sometimes I try a little, yeah, live and let live.

And Kees is a guide for Natuurmonumenten and does a lot of voluntary work in nature. His focus is also on educating others about nature. Patrick is the founding member of a botanical garden in which he still does voluntary work. For most of the respondents however, their role in nature is limited to experiencing and enjoying it, be it with respect for nature, without littering and disrupting nature.

In sum, most visitors of nature reserves in Tholen do not see themselves as part of nature. Rather, they see the human being as steward over nature. A steward that needs to take good care of nature to protect it for future generations. It is clear for all respondents: the human-nature relation is disrupted. This disruption shows itself in pollution in forms such as pesticides

and littering. But also recreation was mentioned as a disrupting factor. For everyone, there was the desire to a greater harmony between humans and nature. Human beings should take greater care of nature, although there was some uncertainty if that is really going to happen. This uncertainty is also legitimate when looking at the roles that people assigned themselves in relation to nature. Most of them are enjoying and experiencing nature, but do not have any explicit role in protecting it.

Survey results

As part of the internship for ANWB, Gemeente Tholen and Zuidwestelijke Delta, I also executed a survey on visitor's perspectives. I will briefly elaborate on the result in this part of the result section. The survey was answered by 235 visitors of nature reserves in Tholen, of whom 93% were also resident of the municipality of Tholen.

Most of the respondents (n=180) visit nature reserves because of the quietness and rest it brings them. But also the sounds that can be heard (n=97), the animals that can be seen (n=100), and having a moment for myself (n=89) were popular motivations to visit nature reserves. Most respondents perform walking (n=195) or cycling (n=121) when visiting nature reserves on Tholen.

Respondents were asked if they think humans and nature are two different entities. The results are shown in table 3. The majority of the respondents (62%) answered that they do not agree with the statement 'Nature and humans are two separate things.' It shows that most respondents have the opinion that humans are somehow part of nature. On other related statements, such as 'Nature should be more interwoven into society', respondents also showed that they think nature should be closer to humans (65%). This was also visible for instance when looking at the responses on 'Nature should have no place in urban areas', with which a large majority did not agree (79%).

While most respondents agreed on that nature delivers 'free' goods to human beings (67%), this did not translate in an attitude of not caring for nature. Almost all of the respondents acknowledged that nature has intrinsic value (90%), and that human beings bears responsibility for nature towards the Creator and/or towards future generations.

The question is, if this care for nature is for the sake of nature or for human-beings. The answers on for instance 'Nature is there for humans' are much more divided, with 26% respondents agreeing and 42% disagreeing. Yet, a majority (63%) finds that humans do not stand above nature, and 54% even thinks nature should have recognized rights in the legal system.

Table 3. Results of the survey.

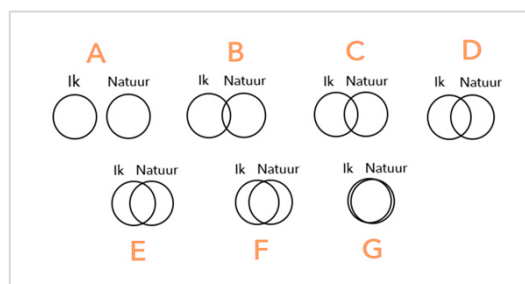
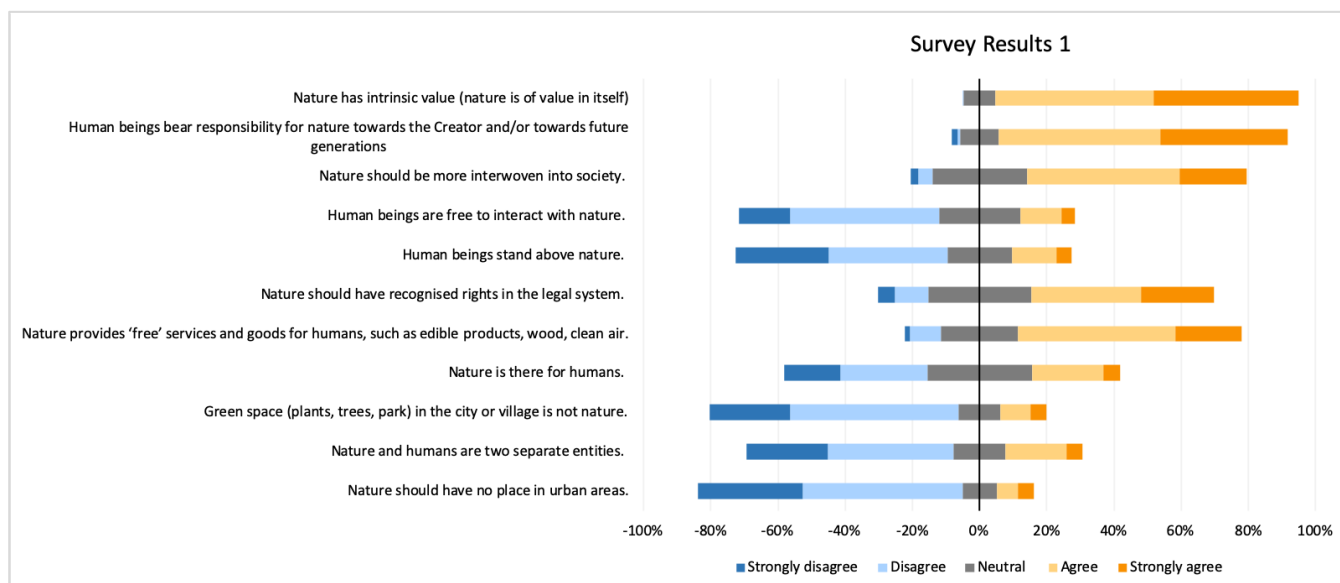


Figure 2. Circles representing 'Me' ('Ik') and Nature ('Natuur').

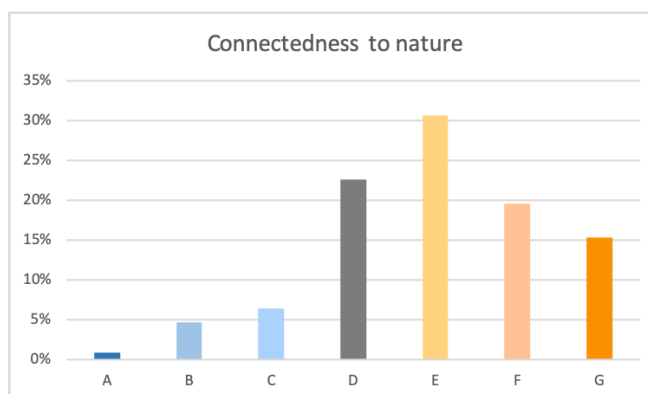
large sense of connectedness to nature. 'A' was only chosen by 1% of the respondents, while 'G' was chosen by 15%. The difference is also visible when comparing 'B' (5%) and 'C' (6%) to 'E' (31%) and 'F' (20%).

Respondents were also asked what to do in specific cases. In the survey, six cases were presented in which respondents had to choose what they would do in such a particular situation.

One of the cases for instance, was about birds on the mudflats and salt marshes. Respondents were asked what they would do when they would see a group of birds that they do not know. The majority, 54% people, answered 'Leave the birds alone and walk around them with a curve.' 31% selected 'Taking a closer look at the birds, but making sure they don't fly up'. 'Approaching the birds and perhaps taking a picture of them, at the risk of the birds flying up' was only selected 5% of the times. It shows that respondents are willing to act to not disrupt the birds and are willing to show pro-environmental behaviour. This was also the case at most other presented situations. Only with a proposed construction of a new

The idea of visitors of nature reserves in Tholen of being part of nature is also visible when asking to their sense of connectedness to nature. In the survey a picture was shown with two circles. One represented 'me' ('ik') and the other 'nature' ('natuur'). Respondents could indicate to what extent they feel connected to nature and select the corresponding situation (varying from A to G). The answers on this question mostly show a relatively

Table 4. Connectedness to nature



bike path outside the dykes, respondents would choose to construct the bike path, taking the risk of increasing the disruption of bird habitats.

The survey adds nuance to the interview results about visitors' perspectives. For example, where during the interviews humans were often not seen as part of nature, the majority in the survey does not see humans and nature as separate entities. And also urban green space was classified as nature in the survey, whereas some interviewees saw nature only as something that needs to be pristine. On other aspects, the survey confirms the interview data. The main discourse in the interviews was that humans should care for nature towards future generations or the Creator. This result was also seen in the survey, in which the majority agreed with this statement. But also the survey statement 'nature should be more interwoven into society' confirms the interview findings, as respondents mentioned that the connectedness between humans and nature should be increased. Some aspects that were addressed in the survey did not come up during the interviews. In the survey for example, nature was considered to have intrinsic value. In the interviews, this was not explicitly mentioned. In sum, this survey adds nuance to the interview results on the one hand, and confirms the interview results on the other. Furthermore, it helped me to gain some data on extra topics that would otherwise have gone unnoticed.

Discussion

The human-nature dichotomy has an influence on all actors on Tholen related to nature preservation and recreation. The Western philosophical and historical human-nature dichotomy is still deeply embedded in Dutch culture and manifests itself in nature preservation and nature recreation practices. In Tholen, this unravels itself in how nature reserve managers close parts of nature reserves for people to prevent human disturbance in fragile delta nature areas. It is also visible in how most visitor roles are limited to enjoyment of nature, instead of having a more reciprocal character. Additionally, all actors find that the relationship between humans and nature is disturbed.

However, this thesis shows that the human-nature dichotomy does not affect all actors in the same way. Nature reserve managers and policy makers, for instance, strive for a balance between humans and nature in which humans are a part of nature. Most of them view nature as something that entails everything and is everywhere and of which humans are not dominators but a component of the whole. Putting this within the framework of (Kockelkoren, 1995), these actors have a partner and participant attitude towards nature: an attitude in which nature and humans are of equal value and not separate, and in which humans are at the interface between being respectful users of nature and being participants in nature. Furthermore, the majority of this group sees nature as something that is all around and in human lives. Nature reserve managers and policy makers acknowledge the intrinsic value of nature and see nature as something deeply interwoven in human society. This interwovenness is also translated to their desire to increase human connectedness to nature.

While the majority of the survey respondents argued that humans and nature are not separate entities, most interviewed visitors of nature reserves in Tholen did not mention that they were part of nature. Nature is something that is around humans, starting at their backdoor, but it was not explicitly mentioned as something that entails humans themselves. Rather, these respondents argue that humans have a responsibility to care for nature. For some, God gave nature to humans. These respondents feel responsible to the Creator to care for God's creation. Most respondents however feel a responsibility to care for nature for future generations. The urge to care for nature for future generations or towards the Creator was also expressed in the survey. These attitudes and motivations towards nature refer, in the terms Kockelkoren (1995), to a stewardship attitude. This corresponds to what was found by van den Born (2006), who stated that the Dutch population is mostly into the stewardship attitude towards nature. She also stated that more eco-centric visions of nature are part of attitudes of Dutch humans, something that was also found in this thesis. Survey respondents believe nature has intrinsic value, and some interviewees expressed a sense of spiritual connection with nature. Yet, stewardship is the most dominant attitude among respondents in this thesis. This is also illustrated for instance by the minor roles that visitors have in contributing to nature preservation, and in the major part of survey respondents that sees nature as something that is there for humans. Furthermore, the majority of the survey respondents agreed that nature offers free goods and services, a statement

that goes against the characteristics of the participant attitude for instance, which puts a more reciprocal kind of relation at the centre.

The differences between the attitudes of visitors and nature reserve managers and policy makers show that the more people are in relation with these nature reserves and the more they bear responsibility for them, the more their perspectives seem to shift. The partner and participant attitude specific to nature reserve managers and policy makers can be explained by the relatively close relation they have with nature and the high responsibility they bear to preserve nature. While nature reserve managers and policy makers are actively involved in the protection of nature, visitor roles are mostly limited to visiting and experiencing nature. It can make them more distant to nature than people who are actively preserving it.

Yet, visiting nature reserves contributes to getting humans more connected to nature. This was widely supported among the respondents. Both nature reserve managers and policy makers as well as visitors argued that they see visiting nature reserves as a means to increase human connectedness to nature. This perspective is not limited to a vision. As the theoretical foundation of this thesis has showed, the gap between humans and nature can be decreased through nature-based recreation (Brymer et al., 2021; Crawford et al., 2017; Hanna et al., 2019; Winter et al., 2019). Especially engaging people in outdoor activities at a young age helps to stimulate pro-environmental attitudes later in life (Evans et al., 2018; Wells & Lekies, 2006). This could help to further break down the dichotomy between humans and nature in Tholen, and might help to change attitudes towards nature.

Ideally, nature reserve managers and policy makers would like to contribute more to nature based recreation and pursue a convivial conservation style. While not mentioning to aspire a transformation of the world economy that is part of Büscher and Fletcher's (2020) convivial conservation, all interviewees of this group would like to see nature that is more accessible and more embedded in our society. Through increased green-blue veining, the fading of borders between nature areas and arable lands, and the expansion of nature acreage, the ideal nature conservation approach of most nature reserve managers and nature policymakers comes close to the convivial conservation approach as coined by Büscher and Fletcher (2020). According to the respondents, this conservation style is the way to strengthen nature and to be able to open up nature areas more for nature recreation. This is also said to enhance human connectedness to nature.

In the cultural landscape of the Netherlands, the kind of wilderness that has been abhorred by Cronon (1996) is thus not the preferred goal for nature reserve managers. Rather, they would like to see nature that is more entangled with humans. However, nature preservation organisations find themselves trapped in not being able to provide enough space for nature recreation. Nature conservation in Tholen is risking to become something that looks more like a 'back to the barriers' approach, coherent to a (neo)protectionist approach, as nature reserve managers increasingly try to protect what is still left.

As Dick van der Meulen (2022) described, the Netherlands is a country which is characterized by fenced nature. The nature in the Netherlands is fragmented by infrastructure networks and marginalized by industrial and urban areas. The findings of this thesis illustrate how nature is treated as a sector and reduced to postage stamps by the state. While on the one hand the government has certain conservation goals and funds conservation organisations and projects to reach these, it reduces opportunities for nature to flourish on the other hand. This is also seen in Zeeland, where nature organisations such as ZMf are funded by the province, while the province refuses to give more space for nature development. The Dutch governmental bodies fund the development of nature, but do not give the space that is needed to reach its own nature preservation goals. At the same time, they give ample opportunities for polluting industries. This fits in the perspective of a country paying off its responsibility instead of caring for the nature within its own borders. This monetary structure exists on a national scale, in which governmental bodies subsidise nature organisations while making it impossible to meet local preservation targets. But it also touches upon the capitalist mechanisms that the Netherlands uses on the international stage to move their responsibility to care for nature abroad, as was described in the theory chapter of this thesis. The Dutch pay for nature that is cheap and far away, but refuse to care for the nature that is around its own residents. With these practices, the government sustains the dichotomy between nature and humans. Even more so, it goes into its own vision, in which nature is destined to ‘belong in the midst of society’ and to transgress the borders of protected areas (Rijksoverheid, 2019). Instead, the Netherlands fragments nature into small, bounded areas and risks pushing nature further away from humans.

The appalling nature management strategy of the government puts nature reserve managers and nature policy makers in a difficult position. While highlighting the importance of nature recreation, nature reserve managers and nature policy makers cannot help but close parts of nature reserves to prevent human recreation. While the pressure on nature is mainly caused by industrial pollution and fragmentation, nature reserve managers try to reduce human pressures on nature reserves by mechanisms that they still can control a bit: active management and the accessibility of nature reserves for humans. This makes recreation being singled out as the main culprit, when in fact it is not. Yet, the creation of more opportunities for recreation in existing nature areas in Tholen is a difficult topic for nature reserve managers and policy makers. In the eyes of the nature reserve interviewees, more recreation equals more human disturbance in vulnerable delta nature, while many visitors would like to see nature to be more accessible. Nature reserve managers and policy makers find themselves in a conservation strategy in which they risk to push humans further away from nature instead of getting them closer to nature. This could diminish the support for nature, while this support is very much needed at this moment.

It is necessary that nature gets the space it needs to flourish. This enhances the opportunities to decrease the gap between humans and nature. It brings nature closer to human lives and makes nature more accessible for nature recreation: once there is more nature and nature can sustain itself better, human disturbance by recreation would have much less impact. However, with the current political movement in the Netherlands, it is not likely that this will happen soon. In the meantime, it is important to make use of the possibilities that are still there and put effort in

bringing especially younger people in touch with nature. This enhances their connection with nature and stimulates pro-environmental behaviour later in life (Evans et al., 2018; Wells & Lekies, 2006). Perhaps these young people will later be in a position to really move beyond the human-nature divide.

For further research, it would be interesting to investigate whether the dilemma of nature conservation and nature recreation in Tholen is also present to the same extent in other areas in the Netherlands. Tholen and its surroundings are characterised by fragile delta nature that is very specific to the coastal parts of the Netherlands. Although nature site managers and policymakers in this thesis also referred to the Netherlands as a whole when answering some questions, it would still be interesting in what form tensions exist between nature recreation and nature conservation in other parts of the country, parts where nature reserves consist of (less vulnerable) forests for instance. Eventually, these results could be compared to other European cases on nature recreation and nature preservation.

Conclusion

The dichotomy between humans and nature knows a long western tradition and is still very visible in the Netherlands today. This dichotomy affects actors in different ways. Nature preservation managers and nature policy makers see humans as integral part of nature, whereas most visitors see nature as something that is around them. An important finding of this thesis is that the more people are in relation with these nature reserves and the more they bear responsibility for them, the more their perspectives seem to shift. This offers opportunities to bring humans closer to nature. Brining humans in closer relation to nature might change their attitude from dominator to steward, or even partner and participant. This contributes to moving beyond the human-nature dichotomy.

The Netherlands is dominated by conservation structures that are characterised by fences and fragmented nature. Nature is diminished to bounded areas which are subject to external forces. Around the fragmented nature areas, industrial processes lead to pollution which have negative effects to nature reserves. The nature that is still there in the Netherlands is due to preservation motives sometimes made inaccessible for humans. This has something of a back-to-the-barriers approach, while that is essentially not a conservation method that nature reserve managers and policy makers aspire.

In general, nature reserve managers and policy makers see humans as something that is part of nature. Nature is everywhere and we humans are just a component of it. However, in reality nature reserve managers and policy makers see that the human-nature relationship is disturbed. This is also seen in how governmental bodies of the Netherlands treat nature, which is against their own vision statements. While nature reserve managers and policy makers would like to see nature that is more embedded in human lives and society, they are risking to push humans further away from nature as they close parts of nature reserves for humans. Human disturbance in the form of recreation is one of the only variables that they still can adjust. This thesis highlights that this strategy makes recreation appear as the main culprit of disturbance of nature, while the real cause is much more complex. The paradigm of governmental bodies in which the human-nature dichotomy is very prominent makes it very difficult to provide nature the space it needs. This indirectly pushes people further away from nature, as nature reserve managers leave no stone unturned to strengthen natural cycles and systems.

This results in recreation being the potential loser of conservation. That is a shame, as this thesis shows how visitors of nature areas are part of decreasing the gap between humans and nature. Visitors of nature reserves think we should care more for nature, have a strong sense of being connected to nature and acknowledge the intrinsic value of nature. Even more so, this thesis argues that the more people are in relation with nature reserves and the more they bear responsibility for it, the more connected they are to nature. It shows the importance of nature recreation and other practices related to nature.

Conservation is at a crossroads (Büscher & Fletcher, 2020). In Tholen, this manifests itself in how nature reserve managers face difficult dilemmas: reduce the accessibility of nature to protect the fragile delta nature, or, on the contrary, increase the accessibility to enhance human connection with nature. As I wrote in the introduction of this thesis, bridging the gap between humans and nature is highly desirable, especially when it comes to the prevention of climate crises and environmental pollution. This thesis confirms this desire, as the majority of the respondents argued that we should live in closer harmony with nature. However, current constraints in nature preservation practices make it difficult to move beyond the human-nature dichotomy. As long as nature does not get enough space and recreation keeps on being seen as the disrupting factor, it is not likely humans and nature live together in harmony soon.

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