



## Netherlands study visit learning report

Wednesday 6th – Thursday 14th June 2018

Funded by Europarc Atlantic Isles as part of *Erasmus + Protected Area Vocational Education and Learning (PAVEL)* programme

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Co-funded by the  
Erasmus+ Programme  
of the European Union



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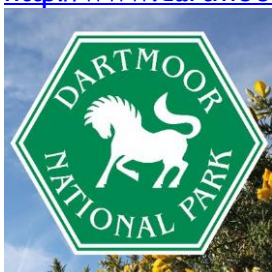
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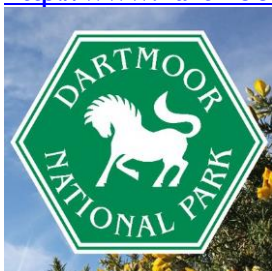
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This report aims to showcase some of the highlights of our trip to the Netherlands, including the lessons we learnt whilst there. We'd like to say thank you to Anita Prosser, from Europarc Atlantic Isles for promoting the trip and her help in coordinating it.

A huge 'dank je!' also go to our hosts and the people who looked after throughout our time there:

- Hans Schiphorst from Samenwerkingsverband Nationale Parken (SNP) – who helped to coordinate the trip
- Ineke Zuiderhoudt from Oosterschelde National Park, and Eric van de Weegen from the Dutch Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management – as well as Dirk Staveren, and his son, Abel
- Jurr van Dalen at Weerribben-Wieden National Park – and Bea from Natuurmonumenten
- Catrien Scholten from Drents-Friese Wold and Dwingelderveld National Park - as well as Nico from IVN Natuureducatie, Casper de Jong and Willem Borjeson from Natuurmonumenten, and Bob Veldman from Huygens Huys
- Kees Folkertsma from Drentsche Aa National Park and André Brasse from IVN Natuureducatie

### **Day One – Wednesday 6th June**

We all travelled from our respective areas of the UK to the Netherlands. We met at the Lake Hotel near Schiphol Airport, where we enjoyed dinner and a walk together to get to know each other.



*The beautiful view from the hotel*

We had spoken quite a lot via email and telephone in the run-up to the trip, and we'd all shared our photos and personal contact details too – so it was nice that we already knew each other a little bit, before the initial face-to-face meeting.

### **Day Two – Thursday 7th June**

On Day Two we travelled back to the airport to pick up the hire cars, before setting off on the journey to our next accommodation, Grenshotel de Jonckheer in Aanwas.



At the accommodation, we met Hans, who took us to see the 'Turn of Bath' in the Westerschelde Delta. This is effectively a very tight corner of water that huge cargo ships and other ocean liners must steer around carefully to make it into the port. The water is very shallow in some parts, and so huge precision and focus is needed for this very intricate manoeuvre. We were lucky to witness several boats make the manoeuvre whilst we were there.

To create the Turn of Bath, there was a land exchange between Netherlands and Belgium; working together towards international conservation efforts. The Netherlands gave land to widen the shipping channel, and Belgium mitigated this by designating land to wildlife conservation.



*Lizzy, Savannah, Ben, Adam, Alison and Ceri with Hans at the Turn of Bath*

During the evening we enjoyed dinner with Hans and chatted more about our respective roles at national parks, ANOBs and landscape partnership schemes across the UK.

Following dinner, Hans gave us a presentation about his role for SNP and national parks across the Netherlands. SNP is an umbrella organisation for Dutch national parks and it's Hans' role to coordinate them all, so they're working in unison.

The first two national parks in the Netherlands were started in the 1930s: Vulwezoom and De Hoge Veluwe. The latter is privately owned, and you need to pay an entry fee. There are now 20 national parks across the Netherlands.

The main goals of the national parks are:

- Enhancing natural qualities
- Interpretation and education
- Promoting sustainable tourism
- Promoting scientific research

There's recently been de-nationalisation of National Parks, and now there's a question about who's going to take responsibility? Provincial government now take care but they have no budgets; they don't really have staff. The government provides €500,000 to each national park.

We were shocked to learn that many Dutch national parks have very small numbers of full/ part time staff! The national park staff work incredibly closely with local stakeholders including business owners, entrepreneurs and residents, who identify themselves within the national parks and act as proud ambassadors.

## Day Three – Friday 8th June

We visited Oosterschelde National Park (NP), where we met Ineke and Eric.

Ineke showed us one of the national park's visitor centres, which we were pleased to have a look around and enjoy some of the interactive displays about the wildlife and other sights you can enjoy in Oosterschelde NP.

Education and communication is very important in this NP. They have dedicated staff members and a visitor centre to help spread the message. There are also notice boards around the park depicting the wildlife you can spot. The staff members visit local schools to engage with young people. A lot of wildlife is under water – so they have experienced divers who go under to take photos/ artefacts where possible to showcase to the wider community.

**Facts & figures**

Surface area: 37000 acres (370 km<sup>2</sup>)  
of which 35000 hectares  
of water

Shore length: 179 km  
East-west 40 km, North-  
South 27 km. With the  
tide flows 800 billion liters  
of water in and out of the  
Oosterschelde

Tide battle: 3.25 m  
Average depth: -9 mtr NAP  
Max. depth: -42 mtr NAP

**International understanding**  
A National Park is an internationally  
recognized concept. Around the world  
valuable natural areas and ecosystems  
are preserved, protected and developed by  
identifying them as a national park.



One of the exhibits at the visitor centre

*Some facts and figures on display at the visitor centre (NAP = Normal Amsterdam Level)*

After the visitor centre, we met Eric, who took us to visit the humongous Eastern Scheldt Barrier; an important safety dam between the Eastern Scheldt and the North Sea.

We were fascinated to learn that 75% of the Dutch population lives below sea level, and this dam plays a vital role in deterring the risk of flooding for up to 9 million people.

Some stats about the barrier:

- 9km long
- Took 10 years to build
- €5.5 billion to construct
- Takes 40 to 70 mins to open and close
- €80m to maintain per year
- [Oosterschelde National Park website.](#)
- [More information about the Eastern Scheldt barrier.](#)



*The sea storm barrier*



*Ceri and Adam on the sea storm barrier*



*Alison listens in as Eric explains the barrier's magnificent power*

Oosterschelde National Park is the largest and wettest park of the Netherlands – so it was only right that during the afternoon we stepped on board a boat to enjoy it thoroughly!

We had a fantastic guided boat trip with Oosterschelde National Park ambassador and ex-merchant navy captain, Dirk and his son, Abel. We visited Yerseke, a small fishing village, where some of us enjoyed (or rather, didn't, for that matter!) some 'salty delights' (oysters). We also spotted seals, and got the chance to steer Dirk's boat, *The Butskop* (translated as a type of dolphin), and received a certificate for our efforts! [You can read our sailing report log, written by Dirk, here.](#)



*Alison, Becky and Ceri*



*Group selfie!*





*Ben knocks an oyster back*



*Alison trying her dreaded 'salty delight!'*



*Dirk and Abel*



*With Ineke on board The Butskop*

## Day Four – Saturday 9th June

On Saturday morning we travelled to Weerribben-Wieden National Park, where our accommodation was in Giethoorn, a typical and idyllic 'honey pot' village that was quaint and beautiful with thatched-roof houses and canals, but overtaken by tourists during the whole weekend!

In the afternoon, we met Jurr, the director of Weerribben-Wieden National Park, and Bea from Natuurmonumenten.

Natuurmonumenten – from what we understood – is somewhat like the Dutch version of the National Trust. It owns land and raises funds to restore and take care of habitats across Dutch national parks. It has 700,000 members nationally; 600 staff and eight visitor centres across the Netherlands.

Jurr and Bea took us on a wonderful cycle tour of the local area and explained more about the habitats, wildlife and working with the local community to encourage residents to appreciate the local area, including constructing a bird hide.

Bea explained about 150 hectares of new housing in the local area. The building company underwent a land trade with farmers and created a new nature reserve to balance the construction of the homes.

Otters were reintroduced to the park 20 years ago; 15 years ago there were 31 pairs, now there are 200 pairs! Staff analysed faecal matter (using DNA testing) to work out how many individuals there are.

Previously the area had a lot of peat and reed cutting, creating a mosaic habitat. Now they're artificially recreating this habitat because it's so good at giving lots of wildlife a place to live. This is a great example of commercialisation and nature conservation working together, as the reed cutters come in and cut the stands of reeds in rotation so there's always a mix of different habitats for wildlife. When they are excavating new channels they use the silt and the substrate to reinstate old islands and repair shoreline, creating habitats for wading birds.



*Bea, Savannah, Ben, Adam, Lizzy, Alison, Becky, Jurr and Ceri flying the flag for Weerribben-Wieden NP!*



## Day Five – Sunday 10th June

We met up with Hans today who sailed his traditional Dutch boat to our accommodation and took us out on the lake for us to have a go at sailing. This type of boat was used before road vehicles to transport items including milk and materials, and in the bigger boats, even cattle!





*Adam, Savannah, Ben and Ceri on board*



*Lizzy is Chief Officer whilst Alison plays Captain!*

### Day Six – Monday 11th June

On Monday we enjoyed a cycle tour around Giethoorn and the surrounding towns including Blokzijl and Sint Jansloooster. We also stopped off at a beautiful Weerribben-Wieden National Park visitor centre, run by Natuurmonumenten.



*Which way next? Becky and Alison check out the map*



*The beautiful windmill at Sint Jansloooster*



*The Weerribben-Wieden National Park visitor centre*



*The town of Blokzijl*



*Ceri, Lizzy, Alison, Adam, Ben and Savannah enjoy Blokzijl*



*Lizzy takes the weight off her feet for a moment at the visitor centre*

### Day Seven – Tuesday 12th June

Here we met Catrien from Drents-Friese Wold and Dwingelderveld National Parks in a small town called Frederiksoord. She introduced us to Bob Veldman, a local entrepreneur and NP ambassador who the NP works with closely to promote the area and the 'Colonies of Benevolence.'

The NP, like others across the Netherlands, work with local business owners and residents who act as 'ambassadors' of the national parks and promote the area to both local residents and tourists. Bob explained that in their local area, they'd developed guides for walking, cycling and horse riding. A horse riding route that was shared on social media received 15,000 clicks/ likes in the first couple of weeks after launch; so they were very pleased with its success!

We were treated to hot drinks and homemade apple pie whilst Bob explained more about the Colonies of Benevolence, and we then enjoyed a fantastic guided tour of the local area on-board a buggy driven by Bob. The Colonies of Benevolence were founded by philanthropist, Johannes de Bosch in the early 19th century. There was a lot of poverty across the Netherlands so he bought uncultivated land and gave people houses and agricultural jobs. They earned money to pay back for rent, clothes and healthcare. There were 500 homes in the area, and 80 still stand today. The colonies had their own type of money, which they could spend in local shops... but they didn't sell alcohol! If you were caught committing a crime, or even found to be pregnant before marriage, you'd be sent to the prison colonies.

The area has been nominated for UNESCO World Heritage status, which has been a long and time-consuming process. But they should find out very soon if they've been successful in getting the prestigious title!

[Find out more about the Colonies of Benevolence.](#)





*The original entrance to the Colonies of Benevolence*



*Selfie with Catrien and Nico on the buggy tour*



*The special buggy that we toured on*



*Catrien, Nico, Savannah, Lizzy, Ceri, Ben, Becky and Adam  
at Drents-Friese Wold National Park*

After our tour with Bob, we stopped off at Drents-Friese Wold NP en-route to lunch, to look at a restored wetland area that had used EU LIFE funding to transform an agricultural site back to heathland/ mire habitat.

During the afternoon, we visited the main visitor centre for Dwingelderveld National Park in Ruinen – where 170,000 visitors go every year!

We met educational manager, Casper de Jong who explained more about the special wildlife in the area including row deer, crane, Drenthe heather sheep, badger, Erica and viper. The key themes of the national park visitor centre are: sheep, birds, water, children and history – and the displays are interchangeable depending on the season.

We then enjoyed a guided walk led by ranger, Willem who explained more about his volunteer role, which has spanned more than two decades!

- [Drents-Friese Wold National Park website.](#)
- [Dwingelderveld National Park website.](#)





*Dwingelderveld National Park visitor centre*



*Catrien, Nico, Adam, Casper, Alison, Willem, Becky, Ceri, Lizzy, Ben and Savannah*

## Day Eight – Wednesday 13th June

On our last full day, we travelled to Zeegse to meet Kees Folkertsma from Drentsche Aa National Park, and André Brasse who works for IVN Natuureducatie, and is the communications and engagement lead for the park.

The pair gave fantastic presentations explaining more about the national park. Some key stats include:

- The park receives two million visitors per year who're mainly from the local area
- They consider it the 'Hyde Park' of the area, because it is nestled between major cities
- These cities get their drinking water from the national park
- In the national park there are 21 villages with 35,600 residents
- Since it started, it's completed 234 projects, pumping €42.5m into the local area
- The park is funded by provincial government which is very proud of it, and wants it to continue
- The park has its own management plan; worked up by all stakeholders involved to get the best for it
- It has 7 main themes: water; agriculture; nature, landscape and cultural heritage; recreation; liveability; education and communications; and charity funding
- The charity fund was started in 2011 and since then, they've raised €40k per year to spend on small community projects including transporting heritage cows from Denmark, producing flyers and other leaflets, building small bridges, art, volunteer clear ups and viewing points
- The communications and PR is 'low profile' and mainly targeted to the local area as that's where the NP's visitors come from. The key journey for visitors is to:
  1. Awaken interest
  2. Increase knowledge and experience
  3. Get involved and support
  4. Active participation
- **Local communications:** They get local residents/ business owners involved in NP events via courses, resident's days, local radio and newspapers, website and social media, and an NP magazine which is distributed twice a year
- They have a strong schools programme and host activity days and guided walks for young children right through to older students. They can receive qualifications for their work, which they share with parents/ carers and grandparents to boost promotion of the area as they want to bring their families back! They work closely with all schools in four close communities – in and outside the NP boundary
- **Visitor communications:** The NP does not own any visitor centres in this national park – however there are some owned by State Forestry, which owns much of land across the area. When André started his role in 2003, the question he was asked was: "How do you reach visitors to the area?" They started up a national park visitor network; a course for local businesses to gain knowledge and information about the NP to help spread the message about it – and these businesses and other organisations help to tell

the story for them! Currently 170 local people are trained on the programme. They also produce an external newsletter which is distributed to local B&Bs, restaurants, hotels etc. for visitors to pick up. Each business that's trained on the programme receives a plaque and a flag – which we saw many of throughout the day! Local businesses are proud to be ambassadors for the park. Every year, the visitors get together for a networking event to meet and chat to local, likeminded people. There's also an email update which is sent out once a month with information, events and updates about the NP

- The park also has approx. 25 volunteer guides who host guided walks and events – there are approx. 50 excursions per year. They are the heart and soul of the NP – they're passionate and know the area very well. The NP hosts training/ refresher sessions for volunteers five to six times per year



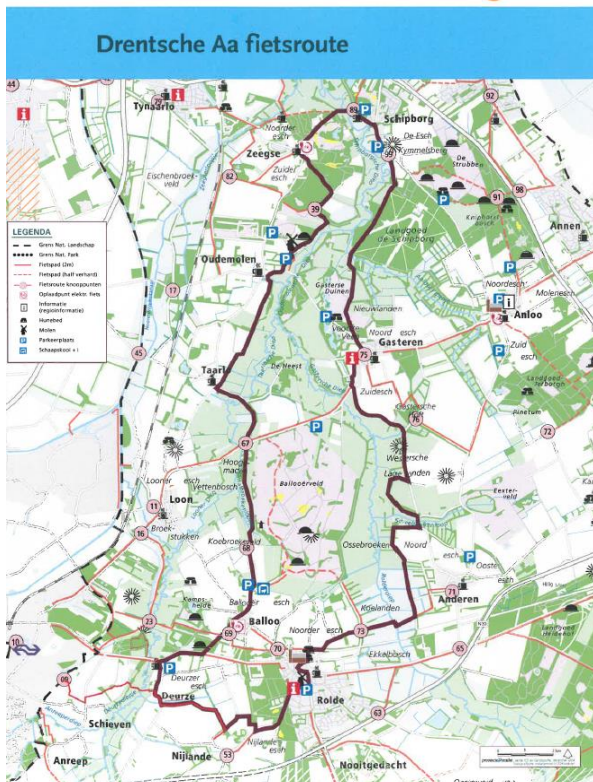
During the afternoon we enjoyed a fantastic guided cycle tour with Kees and André, with stop off points to showcase different areas around the national park. We saw an information centre, sheep fold, dolmens, a windmill, and lots and lots of local businesses and other organisations proudly flying the Drentsche Aa National Park flag!

- [Drentsche Aa National Park website.](#)



*The State Forestry-owned visitor centre*





## Our cycle route map



*The sheep fold – Alison got her wish to have her photo here!*



One of the many sacred dolmens we saw on the trip



*Savannah, Alison, Ceri, Lizzy, Adam, Becky and Ben with Kees, who's proudly showing off the national park's management plan*





Alison, André, Kees, Adam, Ceri, Lizzy, Savannah and Ben on top of the first hill we'd seen all week!



The windmill near Oudemolen

## Day Nine – Last Day – Thursday 14th June

It was time for our Netherlands study visit to come to an end and head home. We packed up from our B&B and travelled back to Amsterdam where we said our goodbyes throughout the day. Some of us were lucky enough to enjoy Amsterdam city centre for a few hours before our flights home:



Lizzy, Adam, Ceri and Becky in Amsterdam



## Lessons learnt:

- The Dutch NPs have fantastic relationships with local businesses who act as ambassadors for the national parks
- Some of the NPs educational programmes are inspiring; engaging with young children from primary schools to distil NP messages, education and engagement from a young age
- The land purchase opportunities that we learnt about are an amazing opportunity to buy up land from agricultural use and return them back to 'nature'
- The landscape plans that NPs work from are also inspiring – they've had to get agreement from a huge number of stakeholders to get these approved and printed, so that in itself is a huge feat – and they're all working towards the same goals to help enhance and protect the national parks.
- Fun fact from the trip (thanks Adam!): It is said that some Dutch workers used to throw their wooden shoes, called 'sabots' (clogs) into factory machines to break them – hence the meaning of the word 'sabotage'!

Again, a huge '**Dank Je**' to all of our hosts on the trip – we had an absolutely fantastic time!

We hope that our paths may cross again in the future. If you're ever in the UK and would like to visit one of us, please get in touch via the contact details above!