Concepts of Nature as Communicative Devices: The Case of Dutch Nature Policy

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ABSTRACT

The recent widespread shift in governance from the state to the market and to civil society, in combination with the simultaneous shift from the national level to supra-national and sub-national levels has led to a significant increase in the numbers of public and private players in nature policy. This in turn has increased the need for a common vocabulary to articulate and communicate views and values concerning nature among various actors acting on different administrative levels. In this article, we will examine the role of concepts of nature as communicative devices in public debates and political decision-making. We try to show that the now dominant functionalist approach to concepts of nature, due to its focus on interests, threatens to narrow public and political communications to purely strategic negotiations. Instead of this functionalist approach we put forward a structuralist approach, which focuses not on interests but on values.

KEYWORDS

Concepts of nature, nature policy, multi-level governance, pluralism

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INTRODUCTION

Many modern democracies are witnessing a shift from 'government' to 'governance'. In fact, what is taking place is a double shift: a vertical shift from the national level to supra-national levels (such as the EU) on the one hand, and to sub-national levels (such as the region) on the other; and a horizontal shift from public to semi-public and private organisations, and from command-and-control to contract-and-covenant. As a consequence of this double shift, the number of administrative layers as well as the number of public and private players has increased significantly. This multiplication confronts policy-makers with problems of coordination and communication (section 1).

What is needed, among other things, is a common vocabulary that will enable various actors on different levels to articulate and convey their ideas and wishes in a way intelligible to each other. With regard to nature policy, this need for a common vocabulary has led to an increased interest in the role of concepts of nature as potential communicative devices in public debates and political decisions about nature and landscape. At present in the Netherlands there is a definite tendency to approach concepts of nature exclusively from the functional interests of specific professional and population groups (section 2).

The problem with this functionalist approach is that it strengthens the prevailing neo-corporatist policy culture (the famed Polder model), which continually threatens to narrow the process of political communication to purely strategic negotiations between well-organised interests. As a supplement to the now dominant functionalist approach to concepts of nature, in this article we introduce an approach that we will call 'structuralist', and in which the main concern is not interests, but values. By exposing the complex axiological infrastructure of concepts of nature, we hope to avoid the reduction from communicative to strategic interaction (section 3).

Our structuralist approach inevitably raises the question of how to deal with conflicts of value. This question is all the more urgent because deep-seated value conflicts in pluralist societies like the Netherlands will only rarely be resolved via a rationally motivated consensus. This is also the main reason why policy-makers prefer methods in which conflicts of value can be transformed into conflicts of interest, which at least offer the possibility of a fair compromise. This transformation of values into interests, however, because of the curtailment of public deliberation and political decision-making that goes along with it, is not an adequate answer to the problem of pluralism. Our own answer, whose consequences for nature policy we will sketch at the end of our article, is as follows: insofar as the possibilities for a rational consensus and a fair compromise are eliminated, we should strive for something like an 'equal coexistence' (section 4).

1. NATURE POLICY AND THE SHIFTS IN GOVERNANCE

The Problematic Implementation Process

On 25 October 1995 a conference of ministers meeting in Sofia, Bulgaria, approved the Pan-European Biological and Landscape Diversity Strategy, in which the creation of the so-called *Pan-European Ecological Network* (acronym: PEEN) was perceived as the main component of an ambitious conservation strategy.[1] The PEEN comprises the so-called Natura 2000 Network of the member countries of the European Union, established in 1992 by the Habitats Directive (92/43/EEC Article 3), and the so-called Emerald Network of non-EU countries that signed the Bern Convention (Fernàndez-Galiano 1998; Julien 1998).

The successful establishment of a European Ecological Network depends on local implementation. To date, experiences are not very promising. In the Netherlands the local implementation of the Nature Policy Plan, which aims at the creation of a national ecological network, was initially planned as a top-down approach radiating from the central government. On the assumption that it is up to scientific experts and not to ordinary citizens and politicians to determine the direction of nature policy, the starting point of the entire process was ecological knowledge about the various ecosystems and the environmental conditions in which they are viable. As soon as it became clear, however, that the interests of many local stakeholders would be substantially affected, the implementation process slowed down. In response, the government gradually abandoned its centralist, top-down steering approach and increasingly switched toward methods of participatory and interactive policy-making

In France the implementation process with respect to the Habitats Directive and the creation of the Natura 2000 Network also ran into stormy waters (Alphandéry and Fortier 2001). The selection of the sites for protection and the delineation of their boundaries, which was thought to be a purely scientific exercise (cf. Julien 1998), were first set up following a top-down approach. Consultation of the regional and local rural actors was planned as a second stage in which only the appropriate management measures for the selected sites would be discussed (cf. Pinton 2001). However, fierce opposition from rural groups – foresters, huntsmen, farmers – already during the first stage of the implementation process forced the French Ministry for the Environment to abandon this dual approach. After the implementation was suspended in 1996, a relaunched policy initiative in 1997 placed much more emphasis on consultation and consensus seeking.[2]

As these examples clearly show, there is a distinct tendency towards new forms of governance: the scientific ecologist has had to give up his presumed monopoly over the determination of nature policy, and the emphasis is more and more on negotiations and trade-offs between the various interests involved.

However, the results of the more participatory and interactive modes of policy-making are far from clear. Some welcome this tendency to incorporate the interests of all stakeholders and the attendant integration of nature objectives in other policy fields, while others lament the 'dilution' of the original nature goals, in the sense that less hectares will be designated as nature areas, and that the type of nature to be realised will shift from deeper to lighter shades of green (Swart, Windt et al. 2001).

The tendency toward new forms of governance is not only questionable with respect to the effectiveness of nature policy but also with respect to its legitimacy. While some applaud this tendency as a triumph of local democracy, others fear the emergence of neo-corporatist politics and the attendant formation of power blocs of special interest groups and social movements that assert themselves as defenders of the public interest without a clear democratic mandate (Keulartz, Windt et al. 2002).

A Double Shift

This focus on interactive policy goes hand in hand with a certain blindness of policymakers as well as researchers to the international dimension. As a result of the shift from rules and regulations to consultation and consensus, the scope of nature policy was significantly broadened from intrinsic values to aesthetic and instrumental values (Raad voor het Landelijke Gebied 1998; LNV 2000). But exactly due to this broadening Dutch nature policy is no longer in line with the European nature directives, which require that the selection of sites ought to occur on the basis of scientific criteria only (Zouwen and Tatenhove 2002). Moreover, the Dutch interactive 'green Polder model' appears to be at odds with the much more rigid European policy model (Top and Zouwen 2000).[3] In the end, the effect was that the European Commission reprimanded the Dutch government more than once because of the inadequate implementation of the nature directives. To correct this blind spot we must fully recognise the fact that the shift from 'government' to 'governance', that occurred during the last decade is actually a double shift, which took place along two axes.

Horizontally, there appears to be a shift from public to semi-public and private organisations, as well as from the legislative bodies proper to the judicial bodies, and from command and control to contract and negotiation (Kersbergen and Waarden 2001). The growing interweaving of the state with civil society and the market has led to the emergence of all sorts of '*multi-actor governance*'. At the same time a socialisation as well as a commercialisation of policy took place. The commercialisation of policy comes to light for example in the establishment of a bureau for Public Private Co-operation by the ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Fishery. The socialisation shows itself especially in the emergence of interactive forms of policy.

Vertically, there appears to be a shift both from the national to the supra-national level and from the national to the sub-national or regional level. The increasing interaction between regional, national and supranational levels of governance has resulted in the emergence of all kinds of '*multi-level governance*'. An example of the shift to the supranational level is the 'europeanisation' of policy, including environmental and nature policy. Already in 1997 the former Dutch minister De Boer maintained that 50% of the legislation and the policy with respect to environmental protection originates directly from Brussels and that this will only increase in the future. An example of the shift from the national to the regional level is the 'Decentralisation-Impuls' from 1994. Due to an ensuing covenant from 1997 the province has become the responsible agency for the realisation of the national ecological network.

These vertical and horizontal shifts often take place simultaneously and form complex connections: the national government not only has to reckon with the market and with civil society but at the same time has to take account of higher and lower administrative bodies. To do justice to this complexity we have to give up the one-sided focus on multi-actor governance and also pay attention to multi-level governance.[4]

Whereas horizontal fine-tuning amounts to a multiplication of actors, vertical fine-tuning implies that actors have to be active at various levels of governance. That is why policy takes on the characteristics of a simultaneous game of chess. To make this complicated game possible and to support the necessary horizontal and vertical coordination processes an important role is reserved for concepts of nature as communicative devices.

2. CONCEPTS OF NATURE AND INTERESTS

It is no coincidence that, together with the change in policy-making from top-down to bottom-up, the government became interested in public perceptions of nature. This interest became evident with the publication of the report *Nature in Mind* (*Natuur tussen de oren*) by the Nature Conservation Council in 1993. The Council suggests that one of most important explanations for the stagnation of nature policy is a lack of communication between the different social groups that are involved in or affected by this policy. Because these groups generally have different or contradictory perceptions of nature, 'emotions frequently run so high that it is difficult to engage in meaningful discussion' (Natuurbeschermingsraad 1993, 12).

In response to this unsatisfactory situation the Council made an inquiry into the phenomenon of concepts of nature. By systematically mapping perceptions of nature – that people usually hold subconsciously – the Council hoped that it would make it easier for the different groups to discuss their thoughts and

feelings about nature and the landscape, that it would lead to a greater mutual understanding, that people would learn to put their own position in perspective and they would develop productive forms of co-operation. The Council's attempt to strengthen the communicative role of concepts of nature seems very promising, but its approach also invites certain objections.

The Functionalist Approach

The Council admits that its typology is rather 'impressionistic'. As a reason for this the Council mentions the lack of 'hard' research data. To compensate for this lack, the Council based its typology on disparate sources. The concepts of nature are formed by means of classifications come across in the literature, of phrases and remarks in policy documents, surveys, and reports, of articles in newspapers and magazines, and of conversations with key figures from the conservation movement, the agrarian sector, outdoor recreation, hunting, etc. Altogether, this resulted in the typology of nature perceptions in Box 1 (opposite).

However, the Council's categories are in fact less impressionistic than it professed. In classifying concepts of nature, it has allowed itself to be led by a specific criterion. All of the concepts of nature it names are an expression of a present-day Western relation with nature. 'A characteristic of this is functionality: what does nature offer me, what function does it fulfil [for me]' (Natuurbeschermingsraad 1993, 23). The Council distinguishes between material and nonmaterial functions. Material functions include means of support, production and regulation. These functions are above all coupled to professional groups, such as farmers or foresters. Under nonmaterial functions they include information, inspiration, education and recreation. These functions are coupled to a hobby, such as sport fishing, hunting, or canoeing, and further to an ethical perception or ideology.

The Council is of the opinion that its typology can aid the dialogue between different interested parties about the future of nature and landscape. It bases this judgment on the following consideration: because no one identifies completely with his/her function or profession, no one, according to the Council, adheres to just one concept of nature. Everyone's concept of nature is therefore a combination of the concepts specified by the council. 'There is no farmer for whom nature only exists as production resource and for whom, for example, nature has no scenic value. Similarly, there can be no conservationist who has no regard for nature as production resource and is only concerned with intriguing nature' (ibid., 35). This 'compoundness' forces people, as it were, to qualify their own concepts of nature, thereby advancing mutual understanding. Above all, on the basis of this phenomenon it can be expected that the perceptions of nature held by people from different population and professional groups will overlap, which makes a good starting point for discussion.

- *Wild nature*. Primeval nature, wild fauna and flora in their original, free state. Nature without human influence: primeval forests, tidal plains.
- *Following nature*. Nature that is semi-natural and associated with cultivation (accompanying nature): nature in agrarian culture landscapes, rural estates.
- *Nature for use*. Nature from which non-cultivated species can be harvested, e.g. by hunting or fishing. Nature as a supply house and gene pool: the blueberry patch, the mussel bank.
- *Nature as production resource*. Supplier of energy and raw materials. Nature as a factor of production for cultivation: fields, solar energy.
- *Regulating nature*. Nature as a stabilising and purifying factor: climate, light, biological purification.
- *Nature as threat or nuisance.* Nature as the source of feelings of insecurity, inconvenience, chaos, and danger: overflowing rivers, vermin, weeds.
- *Healing nature*. Nature as a source of health: the countryside, fresh air, the sea breeze.
- *Scenic nature*. Aesthetic nature: beautiful views, landscape as a recreation area. Nature as a source of relaxation.
- *Intriguing nature*. Source of wonder, study, and education: nature excursions, survival treks.
- *Informative nature*. An indicator of the condition of the environment: dying forests, a butterfly species becoming extinct.
- *Modified nature*. Bred, domesticated animals: dogs and cats, cows and pigs. Plants cultivated in the garden and the windowsill. Genetically modified organisms: plants in testing stations.

BOX 1. Concepts of nature defined by the Dutch Nature Conservation Council.

However, the question remains as to whether this remedy works. As the Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR) decreed in their 1998 report, *Politics of Spatial Development (Ruimtelijke ontwikkelingspolitiek)*, the present policy shows strong *neo-corporatist* traits, meaning that policymakers increasingly seek support from well-organised interests for their plans. Citizens are first

addressed as representatives of a specific interest, for example as farmers, conservationists, vacationers, or entrepreneurs. Consequently, people act as inflexible negotiators who want to obtain the best result for themselves and their supporters, with the unintended effect that attitudes often become more rigid. The communication about the future of nature and the landscape threatens to narrow to purely strategic negotiations in which the means of power are the deciding factor. A functionalist vision of concepts of nature will strengthen rather than weaken this tendency, precisely because it fits in so well with the dominant neo-corporatist policy culture.

Nature as a Sum of Natural Forms

Because of its emphasis on interests, the functional approach is not only counterproductive but also highly selective. It only focuses on those aspects of concepts of nature that seem relevant from the perspective of a specific job or leisure activity. This means that concepts of nature are reduced to a number of artificial combinations of concrete natural forms such as wild seas, grassland birds, wooded banks, cats, or houseplants.

The reduction of concepts of nature to concrete natural forms was put into effect in the report *Support for Nature?* (*Draagvlak voor natuur?*), a background study conducted on behalf of the 1997 *Nature Survey* (*Natuurverkenning*). Here the attempt was made to give the different concepts of nature an empirical background. Therefore the study restricted itself to the more 'physical' concepts of nature from the report issued by the Nature Conservation Council. Healing nature, intriguing nature, and informative nature were not included. From the descriptions of the remaining concepts of nature, 35 items were selected and put before a representative sample of the Dutch population in a survey with the question to what extent these 'nature items' were considered as 'really natural', 'somewhat natural', or 'not natural'. The results of the survey were then subjected to a factor analysis, which made it possible statistically to trace items that were often listed together. On the basis of this analysis, the researchers were able to distinguish five different clusters of items, which they presented as concepts of nature (see Box 2).

The resulting typology of concepts of nature is not very convincing but rather problematic. Some 'nature items' (cows, pigs, private gardens and public gardens) appear in several concepts of nature, while an encompassing category (landscape) is assigned to a single concept of nature, and characteristic natural forms like marshes and woods do not 'score' at all. The lack of consistency and the highly counter-intuitive content of this typology affect its possible relevance to policy-making. It will probably not lead to any improvement in public communication and political decision-making at all.

- *Elements*: sun, sea, and wind
- *Spontaneous nature*: wild plants, insects, mosses, small game, meadow birds, moulds, city birds, field weeds
- *Nature as production resource*: pastures, fields, cows and pigs, landscape (!)
- *Constructed nature*: city parks, private gardens, allotments, small woods and wooded banks, roadside plantings
- *Domesticated nature*: houseplants, allotments, private gardens, cows and pigs, dogs and cats

BOX 2. Concepts of nature according to Bervaes, Buijs, et al. 1997.

Apart from the objection of misplaced concreteness and the resulting lack of coherence, there is another important objection to the functionalist approach. This approach is very restrictive: it only has regard for the instrumental value of nature and gives no insight into its intrinsic value. This omission occurs also in *Support for Nature?* There, the idea of function is 'so broadly conceived that nature can also have a function "for itself". Nature is not only important for people, but also has an "intrinsic" value of its own' (Bervaes, Buijs et al. 1997, 25). But this solution rings false since, based on the survey, the intrinsic value of nature was rated extremely high. 'Almost everyone (92%) finds the intrinsic value of nature important, while no less then 17% find this "function" more important than all the other functions that nature can have for people. They find that nature, above all, has a value in itself, independent of its importance for humankind' (ibid., 27).

3. CONCEPTS OF NATURE AND VALUES

Although a functionalist approach to concepts of nature surely can be helpful, because of its one-sided emphasis on interests it runs certain risks, which can be avoided if it is supplemented by an approach that we will term 'structuralist'. In this approach, values, not interests, are emphasised. Values are not negotiable, as interests are; they cannot be justified by strategic means but only by argumentative means.

The Axiological Infrastructure of Concepts of Nature

The reduction of concepts of nature to natural forms can be avoided by focusing attention on the axiological infrastructure of concepts of nature. Concepts of nature can be described as enclosing frameworks that direct and structure the perception and appreciation of nature and environment in three fundamental respects (see Swart, Windt et al. 2001). In the first place, they establish how we view nature in *cognitive* terms, for example what empirical entities there are and what causal relations exist between them. In the second place, concepts of nature establish how we judge nature in *normative* terms, for example what moral status we assign to animals and plants, species and ecosystems, and what forms of management are consequently desirable or unwanted. In the third place, concepts of nature determine how we experience our environment in *expressive* terms, what we find beautiful and ugly, what awakens our admiration, inspires aversion, or leaves us entirely indifferent. In short, concepts of nature form complicated value structures made up of cognitive, normative, and expressive elements. They must at the same time provide answers to the questions how reality should be scientifically represented, ethically judged, and aesthetically experienced.

Using this definition of concepts of nature, citizens' preferences are not automatically granted weight without deeper reflection, even if they are numerically strongly represented. To be taken seriously, these preferences must be exposed to public discussion along the whole spectrum of values. But above all, this multi-dimensional view opens the possibility of coming to a real typology of concepts of nature that is more than just a hodgepodge of random opinions. In this light, a report of the Advisory Council for Research on Spatial Planning, Nature and the Environment (RMNO) offers a good point of connection. Beginning with the ideas that were developed in the last century by nature conservation organisations, the Council distinguishes three visions that can be considered as 'full' alternatives because they compete with each other over the whole width of the value scale: the nature development vision, the classical nature conservation vision, and the functional vision of nature. This three-part division recurs in the 'three-track approach' of the Ministry of Agriculture, Nature Management, and Fisheries (1995). Track A relates to large self-regulating nature areas, the so-called 'almost-natural' and 'limited-control' areas. Track B addresses mainly small-scale areas, the 'semi-natural' areas and track C relates to the 'multi-functional' areas (see Klaver, Keulartz et al. 2002).

In the *nature development* vision the new 'wild' natural landscape is central. This vision relates to 'primeval nature', and people set themselves the goal of disturbing natural *processes* as little as possible. To attain this, human intervention must be kept to a minimum: *hands off* is the motto. In the *classical nature conservation* vision, the old 'Arcadian' historico-cultural landscape is central. Here we are dealing with 'semi-nature'; efforts are made to maintain *patterns*

that evolved throughout the history of human habitation and cultivation. Therefore, human intervention is essential. The classical nature conservation approach refers to the landscape of around 1850, when Dutch society underwent large-scale industrialisation and urbanisation. In the *functional* vision of nature, the modern city landscape (or townscape) is central. This vision does not relate to natural processes or patterns of landscape, but above all to *production*. In this vision nature is dependent on the possibilities of 'coupling' with other functions, such as land reclamation, reforestation, fishing, water collection, and recreation. The modern city landscape is dynamic and is characterised by the flexible use of land and space.

In this section we wish to show that these three types of landscape or concepts of nature can indeed be regarded as complete alternatives, because each one exhibits a strong interrelation between cognitive, normative, and expressive elements. It should be borne in mind, however, that the following outlines should be provided with a historical and geographical index; they are in a sense snapshots that reflect preoccupations relating to a specific time and place.

Wild Nature

For a more specific characterisation of the wild image of nature, Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac* offers a promising point of departure. In this work he makes an explicit attempt to systematically relate ecological, ethical, and aesthetic considerations (Flader and Callicott 1991, 3).

Initially Leopold, following Frederic Clemens, took up the idea of the natural world as a super-organism, in which species are the organs and individuals are the cells. Later he used as a guideline the community ecology of Charles Elton, in which biotic communities were depicted as extensive food chains. Later still, Leopold looked to the systems ecology of Arthur Tansley, in which the entire biosphere is seen as an enormous recycling system of energy and matter, kept within certain limits and maintained in balance by a series of feedback mechanisms. What Tansley, Clements, and Elton have in common is a holistic vision of nature. Individuals are just the cells of an organ, or links in a food chain; they finally evaporate into temporary configurations in energy fields or local perturbations in energy streams.

This holistic ecology meshes perfectly with an ecocentric ethic, with its well-known moral creed: 'A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise' (Leopold 1949, 224). It follows from this, according to Callicott, that the individual members of the biotic community cannot lay claim to something like a 'right to life'. From an ecological perspective we have the duty to save as many species as possible from extinction, particularly the species at the top of the food pyramid: the large carnivores. Above all, the 'world-wide pooling of faunas and floras' must be avoided, meaning the arbitrary introduction of exotic

and domesticated species with the resulting disruption of populations of native wild plants and animals (Callicott 1989).

From an aesthetic viewpoint, only objectivistic approaches come into consideration. Thus, the morphological and ecological characteristics of a landscape are the determining factors in the perception and appreciation of landscape qualities. A good example of an objectivistic approach is Leopold's 'land aesthetic'. According to Leopold, the aesthetic appeal of a landscape 'has little to do with its adventitious colours and shapes – and nothing at all to do with its scenic and picturesque qualities – but everything with the integrity of its evolutionary heritage and its ecological processes' (Flader and Callicott 1991, 9). Or, as Leopold himself concisely put it: 'The melodies of nature are music only when played against the undertones of evolutionary history' (ibid., 229). The aesthetic experience of landscapes becomes richer as our knowledge of nature grows. Whoever cannot see beauty in a virgin landscape does not have an ecologically trained vision: 'Any ugliness here is in the eye of the beholder' (Rolston 1988, 240). Aesthetic appreciation is not so much a question of 'sight' but much more a question of 'insight' into the drama of life (ibid., 241).[5]

Arcadian Nature

While the wild image of nature is characterised by aiming to allow natural processes to run their course as much as possible, the Arcadian image of nature aims to maintain patterns that have evolved in the course of human habitation and cultivation, and thus have a certain historico-cultural meaning.

Because of the emphasis on patterns which often have been artificially established with the help of old agrarian techniques, the central ecological paradigm in the Arcadian image of nature is structure ecology, including phytosociology. This concept of nature is characterised by classification in plant communities subdivided into separate species, with landscapes described in biological and physical geographical terms serving as larger connecting entities.

The patterns that one wishes to maintain refer especially to the proto-industrial or pre-industrial landscape, where one can speak of a peaceful coexistence between culture and nature. From the ethical point of view, the Arcadian image of nature must be situated halfway between the poles of anthropocentrism and ecocentrism. Generally one can speak of a weak anthropocentrism and the basic ethical position can be described as secular 'stewardship', in which there is a moral duty to treat our cultural heritage with care. But there is also a more future-directed variant, which has 'partnership' as its basic ethical position.

Given the ideal of the peaceful coexistence of culture and nature, objectivistic approaches to aesthetics are often combined with subjectivist approaches, in which the perception and appreciation of landscape qualities are determined by psychological, social, or cultural features, in accordance with the well-known

slogan ‘beauty is in the eye of the beholder’. Knowledge of elements and structures that recall the history of habitation and cultivation, such as dolmens, dikes, wooded banks, and canals can enrich the experience of the landscape, just as knowledge of gardening or landscape painting can.

Functional Nature

In the functional image of nature, nature for the most part is subordinated to culture. In the Dutch situation this has taken a nature-directed form, for example in integrated water management and integrated reforestation. Nature exists primarily for the benefit of humans, but this benefit is not expressed purely as direct, short-term benefit.

From an ecological point of view, the functional image of nature is based mainly on production ecology. In the analysis of natural processes, the accent here lies on ‘primary production’ of ecosystems, communities, or species. ‘Crop ecology’ and fishery biology are important forms of production ecology, which are entirely at the service of human needs, but also contain a notion of sustainability.

The ethic is strongly anthropocentric and shows definite utilitarian qualities, in which nature is not seen as an independent ‘source’ of value, but as a reservoir of useful ‘resources’. From the resourcist point of view, nature is viewed above all as a provider of biomass, minerals, and energy, as a waste station, as the substratum for building and infrastructure, as stabiliser and purification plant, and finally as a source of knowledge, education, recreation, and inspiration.

From the aesthetic viewpoint, formal criteria dominate and landscapes are appreciated in terms of variety, contrast, harmony, and texture, apart from geomorphological, ecological, or historico-cultural features and insofar as they do not contradict the requirements of actual use. Importance is attached to a degree of ‘well-cared for-ness’, and also a certain amount of dynamic is sought, at least inasmuch as this springs from or meshes with human activities.

	Ecological theory	**Ethical perspective**	**Aesthetic perspective**
Wild nature	Systems ecology	Ecocentric	Objectivist
Arcadian nature	Community ecology	Steward/Partner	Subjectivist
Functional nature	Production ecology	Anthropocentric	Formalist

TABLE 1. Concepts of nature according to their cognitive, normative, and expressive dimensions.

These three concepts of nature constitute fully-fledged alternatives, each made up of ecological, ethical, and aesthetic elements. Historically, each stems from a long tradition dating back to Greek antiquity and, moreover, fulfils a deep-seated anthropological need: functional landscapes respond to our need for *safety*, which implies a certain degree of control over and distance from nature; Arcadian landscapes embody recognisable regional identities and respond to our need for *familiarity*; and wild nature answers our need for the unexpected and unpredictable, for excitement and surprise – in short, for *mystery* (see Drenthen 1999).

Because all three of these concepts of nature reflect human needs and desires, each has the right to an independent existence, but so far this has not been recognised. Instead, what we have seen is a protracted and often bitter conflict. The advocates of new nature landscapes have accused their adversaries of 'ecological illiteracy', only to be portrayed in turn as 'cultural barbarians' by the defenders of the old historico-cultural landscapes. The propagandists of functional nature accuse the traditional nature conservationists of having a nostalgic predilection for feudalism, only to be branded as cold-hearted technocrats themselves. In short, in the current debate each party claims its own view of nature is the right one (see Keulartz 1998).

4. CONCEPTS OF NATURE IN A PLURALIST SOCIETY

This 'struggle for nature' becomes so heated because, in essence, it involves conflicts of values that can only seldom be resolved through a consensus that is satisfactory for all those concerned. One should not underestimate the deep divisions that exist in pluralistic societies as to what constitutes 'the good life', and the incommensurability or even incompatibility of the different values that are at issue here.

Moral versus Ethical Discussions

As Jürgen Habermas (1997) has demonstrated, consensus can only exist in what he designates as 'moral discourses'. Such discourses revolve around issues of justice in which the question 'What is equally good for all?' is central. In contrast, 'ethical discourses' turn on the issue of the good life and on the question 'What is good for us?' as members of a specific nation or local community, inhabitants of a region, etc. Ethical discourses attempt to reveal, through critical reflection, the deeper consonances in a common form of life that can bridge differences of opinion. Unlike moral consensus, such ethical consensus is not (and cannot be) entirely rationally motivated. Participants in an ethical discussion can, after all, never free themselves from the cultural context of the form of life that is the subject of their deliberations.

Ethical consensus can only exist *within* a single community. In modern pluralistic societies, however, discussions take place primarily *between* different communities, which often hold competing views of the good life. In that situation, ethical consensus is impossible. Precisely because there is no chance for rational consensus, the temptation is great to transform conflicts of values into conflicts of interest whereby, through strategic negotiation and tactical 'trade-offs', workable compromises can be arrived at. According to our analysis, this is exactly what occurs in the neo-corporatist nature policy of the present moment. In our view, however, such a translation of values into interests is problematic, not only because discussions consequently take on a purely strategic character, but also because it can damage the sense of the identity or self-perception of certain individuals or groups. For example, it makes quite a difference to farmers whether business continuity in the agricultural sector is perceived as an interest or as a value. The first is a question of income, and a compromise is conceivable through which farmers receive a financial subsidy or compensation in the event that they give up or relocate their business. In the second instance, an existential and a cultural way of life are at issue. In that case one cannot bargain nor make concessions without compromising oneself and one's integrity (see Bohman 1996).

The Ideal of Equal Coexistence

The question is, then, how to handle deep-seated value conflicts if the possibilities for consensus and compromise are eliminated. The answer we would suggest is that we should aspire to an 'equal coexistence' of different ethical convictions.[6] The ideal of equal coexistence requires a certain attitude from the conflicting parties. They must appreciate the fact that they are competing for primacy within the same universe of discourse with others who cannot beforehand be branded as unreasonable. Such reflexive awareness rejects the naivety of dogmatic beliefs, recognises its own fallibility and leaves room for 'reasonable dissensus'. Only then can there be a balanced debate in which one party, without renouncing its own claim to validity, is able to respect the other parties as allies in the common quest for genuine truths. Such a reflexive attitude makes it possible for people to modify their views according to continually changing circumstances.

As with visions of 'the good life', visions of nature are able to persist because of their capacity for *self-transformation*, their ability to formulate alternatives and assimilate external impulses. They thrive not through exclusion, but through exchange. Once people stop denouncing each other, and engage in debate in a 'sporting' manner, once people feel challenged to formulate a convincing answer to an opponent's claim, the various viewpoints can begin to move and grow under the motto of 'interactive diversity'. The possibilities for new

developments, surprising combinations and alliances thereby increase (see Keulartz 2001).

This ideal of equal coexistence not only requires the warring parties to adopt a certain attitude, but also makes certain claims on government policy. The government would be well advised to invest more energy in stimulating public debate by opting for a less corporatist and more *democratic* approach to stakeholder planning. Moreover, in view of the dynamic character of the developments affecting nature policy, public debate should be organised on a more or less *permanent* basis. And, given the existing pluralism of concepts of nature, contrived attempts to reach consensus should be replaced by policies that encourage the articulation *and* acceptance of *differences of opinion*. Such a change in culture is essential if we are to transform the 'struggle for nature' into a civilised debate in which the various viewpoints have a role to play. This would widen the scope for creative solutions.

CONCLUSION

Finally, it is important to notice that our plea for a more democratic approach to stakeholder planning is far from unequivocal. The shift from government to governance along horizontal and vertical axes has considerably widened the gap between two opposing views of democracy that have kept political philosophy divided for a long time. In one view the representation of citizens in state organizations is supposed to be as direct and proportional as possible in order to honour the claims of the majority of the population in political decision-making as completely as possible. In the other view the quality of a democracy is judged from the extent to which minority rights are guaranteed. To face the possible danger of a 'tyranny of the majority' this view advocates a strict division of powers in combination with an elaborate system of checks and balances.

Supporters of the first view will in an increasing degree have to cope with a serious credibility problem. Their ambition to maintain or restore the primacy of representative democracy seems by now devoid of the necessary sense of reality, all the more if the European dimension is taken into account. Apart from being impracticable this ambition also seems undesirable because the increase in democratic legitimacy would inescapably go hand in hand with a decrease in administrative effectiveness.

Supporters of the second view in a sense have to cope with the opposite problem. Under present circumstances their proposals show a greater sense of reality than the proposals of the advocates of an unconditional primacy of representative democracy. After all, they do not adhere to the idea that there is only one single model of democracy, but on the contrary embrace the idea of a large variety of policy arena's and political forums with various forms of representation and accountability. Even though administrative effectiveness

will no doubt profit from such a pluralist system, the democratic legitimacy of decisions will be in jeopardy because of a lack of transparency – the notorious 'backroom politics' as it is called in Holland.

So the normative question, which we cannot answer within the scope of this article, is how to raise democratic transparency and legitimacy without loss of administrative effectiveness? How does a system of checks and balances look that will enable us to find a new equilibrium, between the various forms of political representation and public accountability, that will meet the combined demands of effectiveness and legitimacy?

NOTES

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[1] 'The Pan-European Ecological Network will contribute to achieving the main goals of the Strategy by ensuring that a full range of ecosystems, habitats, species and their genetic diversity, and landscapes of European importance are conserved; habitats are large enough to place species in a favourable conservation status; there are sufficient opportunities for dispersal and migration' (Council of Europe 2001).

[2] In Denmark, Flanders, and especially in Finland the implementation process engendered similar conflicts with similar outcomes (Jongman 1998; Hiedanpää 2002). In the UK the situation is not different. Many of the UK's international obligations under EU legislation, including Natura 2000, are fulfilled via the mechanism of its Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). The majority of SSSIs, which comprise approximately 8% of the area of England, are privately owned. The government has set itself the target to bring 95% of SSSI land in favourable or recovering condition by 2010. However, due to widespread resistance to the visions of the policy-makers, at this moment this percentage amounts only to 56.5% (English Nature 2002).

[3] The Natuurbalans 2002 concludes: 'The Dutch policy of nature development doesn't mesh well with the European policy of nature conservation' (RIVM 2002).

[4] Attention to the vertical dimension is of later date than attention to the horizontal dimension within governance theory itself as well (Mayntz 1999).

[5] The ecological nature aesthetic shares this emphasis on insight with the current art aesthetic. The aesthetic appreciation of art works also depends to a large extent on knowledge, for example of the historico-cultural techniques used. But the nature aesthetic distinguishes itself from the art aesthetic by its entirely positive quality: you can criticise art, but not nature! (see Carlson 1984).

[6] This suggestion is derived from Habermas (1997), who introduced the notion of 'equal coexistence', but did not develop it further in the context of his discourse ethics.

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