

Article on regional transition to more nature, based on the “Boundless Parks, Naturally!” Interreg project, 29 September 2005

Can regions plan and implement transition to nature?

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Transition to more nature is possible and desired

Many regions in Europe with valuable and beautiful nature are situated near cities and feel the pressure of citizen's demand for recreation and leisure space. Often economic activities such as farming, mining, airports, industry and military exercise grounds have also left their imprints in these regions. This article describes three such regions, near large cities and in or near a National Park. Their efforts to start and support a transition process to reach higher quality nature was part of a European project, in the framework of Interreg.¹ The project showed that transition to more nature is possible and it shows which investments, cooperation between partners and policy instruments are needed and why financial support (e.g. from the EU) is good value for money.

Results of this project were published early in 2005² but we now see that they agree with the recommendations of the European Nature Conference made later that year.³ At this conference, representatives of Europarks, Eurosites, European Centre for Nature Conservation, European Environment Bureau and many NGOS, including the Dutch Natuurmonumenten who celebrated its 100 birthday, adopted the Apeldoorn Appeal. The Appeal reminds us of the Gothenburg EU Summit decisions to halt biodiversity loss by 2010 and ask all partners to increase their efforts by connecting nature areas, people and nature and improve connections between policy and practice.

The present situation and the transition goals

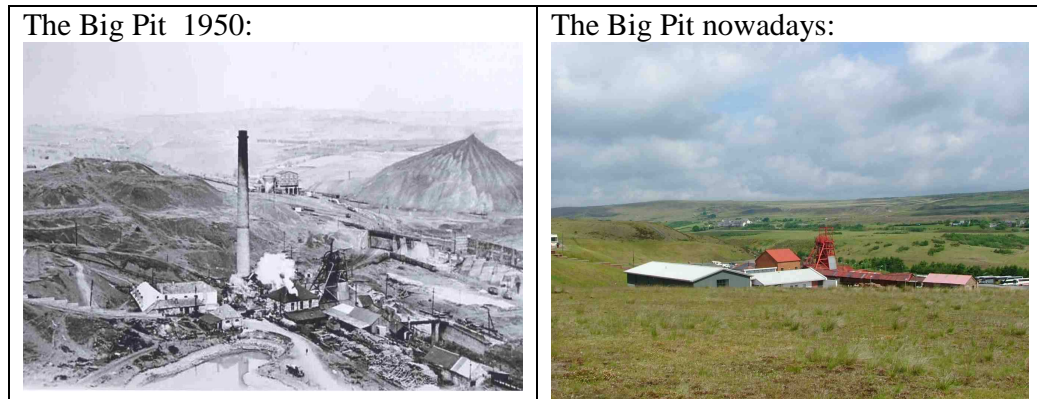
Nature and biodiversity improvements were explicit goals of the three partner regions. However, they also wanted to respect the wishes of the citizens in the region (in both rural and urban areas) who want to continue living and working there, and who enjoy the landscape and the nature. The project was multi-disciplinary and multi-stakeholder as it dealt with ecological, social and economic interests and perspectives. The following pictures show the type of transition that was aimed at.

Picture 1- Transition to more nature in Blaenavon (Wales): the site of the coal mines and iron industry became a United Nations World Heritage Site.

¹ The three regions were: Blaenavon World Heritage Site (UK, Wales), Hoge Kempen (Belgium, Flanders) and the Veluwe (the Netherlands, Gelderland) in the Interreg project “Boundless Parks, Naturally!”. See www.boundlessparks.com.

² See the Transition study report on www.boundlessparks.com, under Projects and under Transition.

³ Held in September 2005 in the Netherlands, see www.natureconference.org.



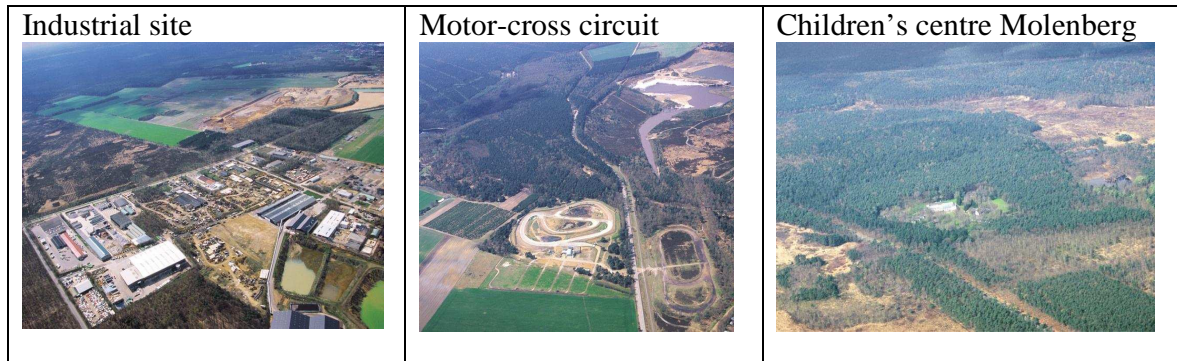
Picture 2- Transition to more nature in The Veluwe (the Netherlands): among others the removal of a factory from an ecological corridor connecting the National Park to the Rhine



Picture 3- Transition to more nature in The Veluwe (the Netherlands): buying farm-land and returning it to nature



Picture 4- The Belgian case- The mixed character of the Hoge Kempen region in Belgium, where the plan is to remove isolated buildings from inside the nature area



The regions wanted to learn how to speed up their transition to nature by looking critically at their own process and by learning from each other. They also wanted to help non-partner regions who are in similar situations. Finally, the project's goal was to produce recommendations to the EU on how such regional transition processes should be supported financially. The latter recommendations are of particular interest in the light of the consultations and debate concerning the new European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD).⁴ This new fund which combines financial aid to farmers for agri-environmental measures with aid to Natura 2000 sites and aid to the development of other economic activities in rural areas such as tourism. For learning at these different levels and reaching recommendations to other regions and to the EU, the partners hired a consultant.⁵

The methodology used and the main results

Given the goals of the partners, there was a need on the one hand for case studies that shed light on each particular region. On the other hand, a common analytical framework for producing more general results was needed so regions could learn from each other, including non-partner regions. Indicators and tools for measuring transition to nature were sought, to be able to describe objectively the present and the future situation.

The case studies were as follows. In Wales we looked at what was called industry related transition: moving from an ecologically, socially and economically degraded area, due to intensive coal mining and iron industry, to an attractive region with the international status of a UN World Heritage Site. The Belgium case dealt with social/ institutional transition: the removal of a children's centre from the wooded area inside the National Park de Hoge Kempen. The Dutch case dealt with agricultural transition: the buying up of a farm so that the lands could revert to nature, managed by a nature NGO, Natuurmonumenten.

⁴ The proposal for a new European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) was made in July 2004 (text: COM(2004) 490 final) and was adopted by the EU Council on 19 September 2005. See text in French only at the moment by opening <http://register.consilium.eu.int> and look for document nr 8688/05 using "advanced search".

⁵ Rainbow Advice in the Netherlands, specialised in bringing together different interest/ perspectives / points of view was awarded the study. Helena Berends and Boudewijn van Schagen worked on this project. They included Sophie House and Dirk Criel from GHK (in the UK) and Econnection (Belgium).

Based on these cases, results were found concerning the positive factors that stimulate transition and the impeding factors, be they ecological, social/institutional or economic. The results are given in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1- Factors stimulating transition to nature

- A situation needing improvement
- Involvement of all relevant stakeholders in the region
- A common vision
- A good plan
- Leadership
- Public/ political support
- Finances (Interreg, Province, Government, private money)

Table 2- Factors slowing down transition

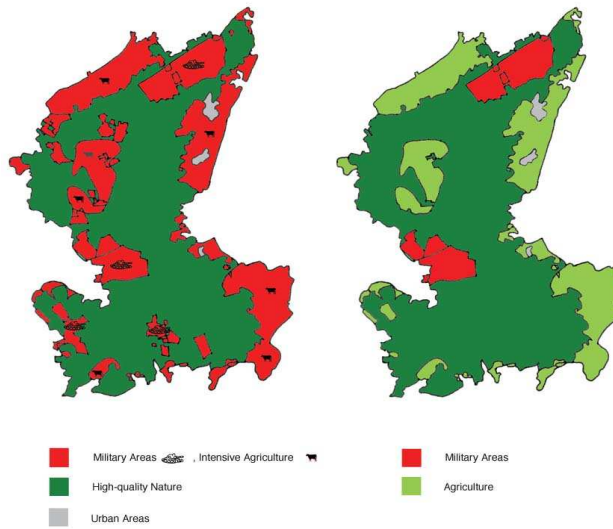
- Transition takes time!
 - Fear of change (institutions, farmers)
 - Policies don't use the concept of transition
 - Most support schemes don't include support to transition
 - Financial support is too often ex-post
 - Physical planning is often one-dimensional and does not treat the region as a whole
 - Lack of supportive data on costs and benefits of improving nature
- Pure quantitative indicators for measuring and presenting the case for transition were more difficult to find as each region had its own data collection and way of presenting it. Nevertheless the study did develop and apply a common framework that will be useful for other regions. The project also made maps of the before and after situations, with a distinction between "disturbing activities" such as intensive agriculture, military areas, "nature friendly areas", "high quality nature", "sites of special scientific interest". This proved to be useful to show and compare the scale of the different regional efforts. See Maps 1 and 2.

Map 1- Before and after in the Veluwe plan: from Red (disturbing: military, intensive agriculture) to Light green (agriculture) to Dark green (high value nature, incl heather)
Grey: urban areas

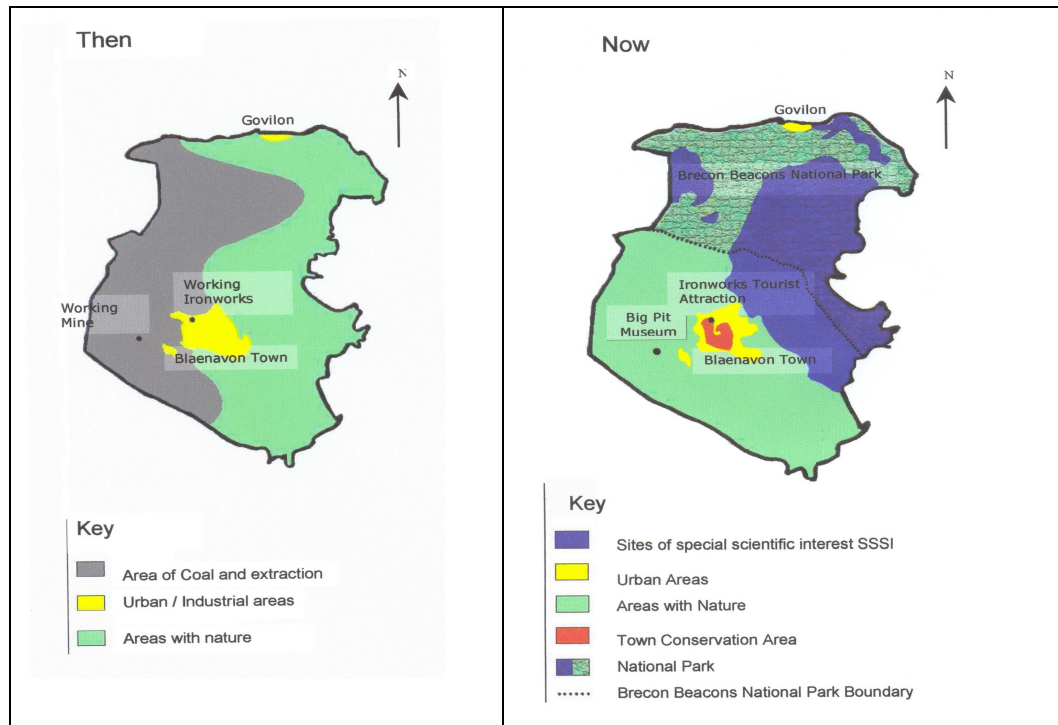
MAP OF THE VELUWE, THE NETHERLANDS

BEFORE TRANSITION

AFTER TRANSITION



Map 2- Before and after maps of the Welsh area: from Grey (area of iron extraction) to Green (natural areas or National Park- to the North) and Purple (sites of special scientific interest). Yellow: urban areas



The past situation and the plans to counteract

As said before, the three regions in this project had a hybrid or mixed character. The fragmentation of nature occurred as regions were left to themselves in the past, which meant that nature was often overlooked or overexploited. The regions had lost or were losing their natural capital, their coherence and identity and consequently were losing their value for visitors/ tourists/ artists but also for new (nature friendly) businesses or citizens seeking to work and live near nature in the countryside or in nearby cities. This is probably occurring in many other regions in the European Union.

Large rehabilitation or transition projects were therefore developed in the three regions of this project. They recognised their similarities and started to work together, asking for financial support from the EU. Other regions suffering from the same type of fragmentation/ degradation can also do this!

What the three regions had in common was their wish to invest in their natural and cultural capital. These plans are described in detail in the Report on Transition⁶ but their main characteristics are:

- The Welsh region was very advanced in the transition process as it had already become a UN World Heritage Site. Partners in the region, including Torfaen County Borough Council spent 4,2 € million between 2000 and 2005 making

⁶ See the Transition study report on www.boundlessparks.com, under Projects and under Transition.

- gateways, cycle and walking paths in the area, turning the old mines and steel factories into museums and sites of historical interest, etc.
- In the year 2000 the region of Gelderland in the Netherlands and other partners agreed on a programme in favour of nature and spatial quality in the Veluwe. This plan, called Veluwe 2010, foresees investments of €500 million, mostly in activities related to nature: building of eco-ducts, buying of agricultural land, subsidising farmers who have become nature managers and compensating them for production losses due to nature improvements, removing or displacing factories and tourist businesses from ecologically sensitive areas, etc. The buying up of agricultural land in favour of nature was, as an exception, allowed and supported by the EU in this Interreg project under the condition that a study be made of the possibilities and benefits of transition to more nature
 - The Belgian region had a well prepared plan for the National Park de Hoge Kempen and the financial means for its implementation (€ 87 million). It foresees the removal of buildings from the central wooded areas, halting sand and gravel quarrying, moving an industrial site, investing in nature development. The new cycle paths, gateways and information means have allowed a larger number of visitors to the area, enjoying its nature.

As can be noted, these are not traditional investment plans, focussing only on economic growth in the form of more business parks, information and communication technologies and infrastructures such as roads. Other studies show how great the benefits can be when regions maintain and invest in their natural capital.⁷ Among others, beautiful regions attract tourists. The money they spend circulates in the region and increases as it passes from hand to hand (multiplier effect was 1,5 in two Dutch regions). Not only tourists but also people who want to live and work in a nice environment are attracted and bring capital with them. As such “nice” regions tend to disappear when left to their own development, promoting transition to a greener environment is ecologically, socially and economically good!

Lessons from the Dutch case

On the willingness of partners (farmers, the Hoge Veluwe National Park authorities, NGOs, the Province) to support transition to more nature we can conclude that:

- Many farmers in the Dutch region were willing to become nature managers instead of full time farmers if compensated for loss of production,
- Some were willing to revert to old ways of farming (e.g. inside the Hoge Veluwe Park, in Oud Reemst),
- Some partners agreed to lower or remove fences to allow deer to migrate to other areas,
- One farmer in Nieuw Reemst stopped farming altogether and the nature NGO Natuurmonumenten took over.

⁷ For two fairly small “green” regions in the Netherlands it was calculated that tourists spent € 70 million per year (in the Achterhoek) and 180 (in the Kempen). Alterra report nr 487 by Helena Berends and Jan Vreke, 2002. see www.alterra.nl, report nr 487, Wageningen, 2002.

- Many farmers in the region are however suspicious about receiving enough and continuous compensatory payments by the national government, for loss of production or for damage by wild animals.
- The overall success of the Dutch plan has partly been due to a so called “Polder model” where partners talk and talk until they agree, i.e. civil servants, industrialists, farmers, tourist operators, politicians, etc.

On the willingness of the national authorities to support such transition:

- The Dutch government has been very conservative in using EU subsidy schemes for compensating farmers who apply agri-environmental measures or are situated in “less favoured areas”.⁸ Less than 5% of the utilised agricultural areas in the country falls under agri-environmental schemes, while in other countries this is much higher (more than 40% in Austria, Germany).⁹
- The level of the payments made to farmers for a more environmental friendly production were also much lower in the Netherlands than in other countries, with an average of € 15.3 per hectare of UAA (Utilised Agricultural Area), while Germany for instance has paid € 40.6 per ha and Sweden €83.6.
- Payments to farmers designated as “less favoured” were also very low in the Netherlands: € 1,5 per hectare of UAA (Utilised Agricultural Area), as compared to € 17.2 in Germany and € 14.6 in France or € 88 in Austria.

The case study shows that the Dutch government could do much more to help farmers in the Veluwe move towards more nature friendly farming, by using EU subsidies.

Lessons from the Belgian case

The Belgian case study showed what difficulties can arise when a building which has a social function (in this case the Molenberg childrens day care centre) is to be moved out of the nature area and back to the city. Even though the potential buyer (the National Park authorities) and the seller (a social institution) have agreed to remove the building, there are legal, institutional and political problems holding back this type of transition to nature.

- The Masterplan for the Hoge Kempen National Park has enough funds to execute all its plans, including for buying up of buildings in sensitive areas. However no specific funds were earmarked for this particular building and so the governmental agency that is responsible for buying the property (LISOM, the regional Strategic Development Agency for Limburg) cannot move ahead.
- Another bottleneck is the fact that a Belgian law forbids the destruction of publicly owned capital. The demolition of the building, which would then be owned by the state, could be seen as such. However, many privately owned buildings built on state land (in the dunes) have been demolished as they were in a nature area, so we can expect that the Molenberg can also be demolished eventually.

⁸ Several EU Regulations allow member states to compensate farmers for their agri-environmental activities, or help farmers in “less favoured areas” like mountainous areas, areas with extreme climate but also (paragraph 20) which could be used more by the Dutch as it refers to areas with certain socio-economic-environmental conditions.

⁹ From the European Environment Agency (and UNEP) Report nr 1/2004: “High nature value farmland: characteristics, trends and policy challenges”.

- Economic simulations/studies of the economic benefits of making a larger nature area (as result of the demolition) might convince politicians and other decision makers to buy and demolish the building.
- Political sensitivities were also found in this case but there was a lack of verifiable information as to who exactly is blocking progress.
- Seeking a broad public participation and consensus might be another necessary (also sufficient?) condition to get this project moving.
- The “project bureau” of the National Park Hoge Kempen has an active role in initiating the debate. All relevant stakeholders are brought together and work with the bureau staff to find a solution.
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Lessons for the EU

This Interreg project suggests that farmers in or near Natura 2000 sites, such as the farmers in this project, should receive compensation if they adopt nature friendly measures such as removing fences to allow for foraging and migrating species.

Many EU schemes for rural development are underused (the 7 structural measures, including the agri-environmental ones). Therefore farmers in nature areas or adjacent to nature areas don't use these schemes, while the study shows it would be good to compensate them for damage by wild animals or when they stop activity, letting farmland revert to nature.

Even though the definition of less-favoured areas now seems to allow the inclusion of farmers in nature areas or adjacent to nature areas (paragraph 20), the regulation does not explicitly mention such areas. Possibly this is reason why the scheme is not being used for such cases. However this type of aid to farmers would help transition to more nature.

The proposal for a new EU fund combining support for the environment and for rural development looks very promising but would need to include explicit support to transition.

CONCLUDING

It is possible to encourage regional transition to more and better nature by making a multi stakeholders and multi disciplinary plan that foresees substantial investments in nature improvements or conservation. This has been shown by the Welsh case in which a transition has been made from an economy based on coal mining and steel-making to an economy based on natural and cultural heritage, cultural tourism and non polluting industries. The Dutch case shows that farmers are willing to stop production or adapt production methods so as to allow for more nature and tourism. They have however not sufficiently been supported by the Dutch government because of a too restrictive interpretation of EU regulations. The Belgian case shows how a plan for a national park that has been approved can still encounter many obstacles, and how removing them will take time.

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