

Wilderness—Between the Promise of Hell and Paradise: A Cultural-Historical Exploration of a Dutch National Park

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Abstract—‘Wilderness’ is often seen as an ideal state in contemporary debates on ecological restoration. This paper asks what is left of ‘wilderness’ in present-day Western Europe and explores this question by drawing on a case study of the Hoge Veluwe National Park in the Netherlands. An overview of intellectual histories of wilderness ideas is used as a backdrop to analyze how an area such as the Veluwe has been perceived and shaped by land use through history. It is argued that historical and contemporary land use is characterized by inherently paradoxical ideas that can be conceptualized as a dichotomy of the ‘hell’ and ‘paradise’ sides of wilderness. Both sides are essential in constituting the attraction of wilderness. Ecological restoration policies focusing on just one side of the paradoxicality of wilderness are likely to miss the character of the very place they aim to restore.

Introduction and Approach

Wilderness can be manifest in different shapes and sizes, and one can recognize wilderness-like qualities in natural areas other than those in International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) category Ib; even in a crack of the pavement (Birch 1990). The distinction between wilderness as an object of desire, a biophysical entity, or a cultural construct is at times useful, but unsuitable when looking at cultural histories in which these distinctions were seldom made, and when aiming to understand the broad role that the concept of wilderness plays in contemporary cultures and land management.

We consider wilderness here as a subcategory of ‘nature,’ as an interpretation of the natural environment that holds extreme promises. We explore what is left of the wild in contemporary Western European culture by means of a case

study of the Hoge Veluwe National Park in the Netherlands, and address three main goals: (1) to analyze Western cultural-historical relationships with wilderness from conceptual and local land use perspectives in order to (2) diagnose current relationships with wilderness and to (3) explore implications for contemporary wilderness restoration practices. This is done by mirroring a seven-step conceptual history of the idea of wilderness, first with a land use history of the Dutch natural area the Veluwe, and more specifically the Hoge Veluwe National Park, which is situated within the Veluwe (fig. 1). Building on this, we explore what is left of the wilderness of the Hoge Veluwe and what this means for contemporary relations to wilderness; and finally, we discuss implications for wilderness restoration.

Rather than adding to primary research in the cultural history of wilderness ideas or the land use of specific areas, we bring these often separated strands together, using a variety of (secondary) sources, and aim at a synthesis of histories to come to new insights into contemporary wilderness issues.

Case Study Selection

Wilderness desire in Dutch society is bound to be ambiguous; there are almost 400 people per km², every piece of land is altered by humans, and were there no dykes, over half of the Netherlands would fall victim to the wilderness of the sea. In this paradoxical setting, an examination of the wilderness of the Hoge Veluwe promises to be particularly interesting. The Hoge Veluwe is a 50 km², privately owned national park within the largest Dutch natural area on land, the Veluwe (1,000 km²; fig. 1). Building on a century-old history, the Hoge Veluwe National Park has become a national icon, constituted by a remarkable combination of art (e.g. the internationally renowned Kröller-Möller Museum), nature, and tourism. Given its relatively small size, long history of land use, the art collection, and a strong tradition of intensive conservation management, the park is by no means a biophysical wilderness. Yet, it is all the more interesting as both its history and contemporary features exemplify many ambiguities of the ongoing wilderness (restoration) debate.

Historical Wilderness Perceptions in Seven Big Steps

An examination of the history of the concept of wilderness reveals that wilderness projections often reflect extremes of the same spectrum: danger-safety, dark-light, bad-good,

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Figure 1—From left to right: The Netherlands, the Veluwe, and the Hoge Veluwe National Park.

original Eve-fallen Eve, pristine-Fall, hell-paradise (also pointed out for nature in general by Glacken 1967; Worster 1977; Schama 1995; Merchant 1996; Schouten 2001).

Prehistory: Duality of Home and Hazard

Both Nash (1973) and Oelschlaeger (1991) suggest that hunter-gatherers—like many contemporary indigenous hunter-gatherers—probably did not conceptualize wilderness as such, simply because they were part of it. In this context of the “Paleolithic wilderness mind” Oelschlaeger (1991) speaks of a 200,000 year hegemony of “the Great Hunt” during which prehistoric people lived in an “Eden-like condition.” By contrast, Nash (1973) thinks that prehistoric people were foremost occupied with fear and security.

Whoever may be right, it seems safe to say that hunter-gatherers lived in a wilderness that was a continuous threat to, but at the same time the primary source of, their livelihoods. Wilderness was both home and hazard at the same time.

Neolithic: A First Conceptualization

Hunter-gatherers’ livelihoods evolved toward a more agricultural and sedentary way of living in the Neolithic. In the Mesopotamian epic *Gilgamesh* (around 2100 BC), the

hero crushes the forest guardian to subsequently use his timber for building beautiful cities (Schouten 2001). The epic symbolizes not only the triumph of civilization over wilderness, in which wilderness provides the raw material for (agri)culture, it also shows how wilderness was perceived from another realm, namely the city, and from there defined as such. By denoting a sphere separated from, and possibly forming a threat to, culture, a first concept of wilderness was born.

Antiquity: A Mirror for Society

In antiquity, wilderness remained a loathed sphere for most: Earth swarms with wild beasts and its woods are filled with anxious terrors, says Lucretius in the first century BC (Nash 1973). But the rich ancient Greeks and Romans also created so-called paradises: pieces of wild land protected by a wall, used for fishing and hunting (Hughes 2003). In a paradise, one could catch a rosy glimpse of the wild, as it was stripped of most fearful elements. Yet, many Romans perceived the wilderness (especially the woods in the North; Caesar translated 2003) as a dangerous place, sheltering hostile tribes. At the end of the 1st century AD the Roman historian Tacitus (translated 2006) holds a mirror for his own decadent society. He still talks of dreadful woods and swamps, but implicitly glorifies the happy, primitive and

virtuous German warrior tribes in the northern woods. The wild, in the form of noble savages, obtained for the first time in history a positive connotation of pure and original.

Middle Ages: Restoring Paradise and Soul

Just as it must have been the case in antiquity, medieval times show a large gap between the wilderness of the poor and the wilderness of the elite. In view of the clerical elite, the relationship with God had been disturbed by the fall of man, and humankind was moved away from the garden of Eden to the wilderness of uncultivated land. To restore the pre-fall paradise, many monastic orders set out to cultivate wilderness and make it productive and orderly again, thereby having an enormous impact on the natural environment (Schouten 2001). Medieval hermits on the other hand, following biblical examples, used the direct physical hardship of the wilderness to restore their relationship with God (Bratton 1988; White 1972; Williams 1962). The two pathways to God could not be more contrasting. Although with a specific aim in mind, the hermit accepted the wilderness and its satanic features; wilderness was encountered without the need to change it. The restorers, on the other hand, followed the Greeks and Romans and altered wilderness according to an image of paradise.

Early Modernity: Gradual Changes

Voyages of discovery, not uncommonly also searching for the actual Garden of Eden (Mabey 2005), marked the early modern period of the rise of nation states and the accompanying political tumult and warfare. In these times wild forests became an important symbol for early German (Schama 1995) and Dutch-nationalist sentiments (Breman and Hofman 2009). Building on the strand of primitivism and the first conceptualizations of the sublime, a more favorable attitude towards wilderness developed in the 17th century (Cronon 1996). The sublime landscape had a religious connotation: John Ray described mountains, previously regarded as waste lands, as “the handiwork of God if not His very image” (Nash 1973). However, these transitions came about only partly and in any case gradually: about 50 years later, around 1750, De Buffon still said that mountains had the appearance of old age and decrepitude (Botkin 1992).

A Place of Direct Desire

The religious side eventually gave way to more secularized interpretations of sublime, wild landscapes in the Romantic Movement. Romantic authors like Shelley, Coleridge, Wordsworth, and a bit later in America, Emerson, Thoreau and Muir created a personal relationship with the natural world, away from quantification and laws. This was a search for beauty, divine presence, knowledge of the dark side of the self, and answers were found in a transcendental wilderness (Oelschlaeger 1991). Indeed, the longing for the wild at times reached the level of a theology (Cronon 1996; Schouten 2001). The brutishness of the wilderness changed into mystery and wonder (Adams 2004) and wilderness became a place of direct desire.

19th and 20th Century

Building on the Romanticists' reaction to the Industrial Revolution, and accelerated by the work of Perkins Marsh, the 19th century saw the rise of the environmental movement. A science-based awareness arose that humankind was vulnerable and that its survival rested on the survival of the Earth as a functioning entity. Legal protection for wilderness areas was formulated and national parks were created (the first was Yellowstone in 1872). Ever since, science became more dominant in general wilderness perceptions, leading up to today's discussions about in what way wilderness protection relates to, for instance, the conservation of biodiversity (Sarkar 1999; Willis and Birks 2006). Interconnected with this development, national parks and other wilderness areas became a real attraction for recreation and tourism, and these in turn an essential part of modern life. In recent years, both environmental awareness and tourism globalized (Adams 2004); the last biophysical wildernesses have become dearly cherished symbols that need to be recovered “if we hope to save the planet”—as Cronon (1996) ironically puts it—and turned into hot spots for science and tourism.

Between Paradise and Hell

The themes of hell and paradise are particularly striking and seem to subsume the above identified attributes (table 1). This is not only the case because they have frequently passed by in the preceding historiography, but also because they cluster a whole range of paired opposites, and seem to imply that the threat of hell can be avoided and the promise of paradise realized. In line with this, some even claim that attempts to rebuild paradise have shaped people's relationships with their ‘natural’ environment just as much as they have influenced the broad development of Western civilization (Mabey 2005).

History of Veluwean Land Use

The Rise of Marks and Drift Sands

Human presence in the area of the Veluwe goes back many millennia, and perceptions of hell and paradise can be found throughout the Veluwean history. The earliest traces of hunter-gatherers date from the Mesolithic (8800-5300 BC; Derks and others 2007). Thereafter, Beaker and Iron Age cultures settled (Derks and others 2007). Throughout the reign of the Roman Empire, the Veluwe was a borderland (Hegener 2002), imaginably a hell for the scared legionary on the frontline. Medieval sources show that the area was a dry and dangerous place. Many roads were impassable for travelers and it was said that there were more wolves and foxes than people and homes (Venema 1933).

Between the 6th and 13th century, poor settlers increasingly populated the Veluwe, but because of the dry soils and low water table they generally would go no higher than the borders of what is known today as the Hoge Veluwe (meaning the “High Veluwe”; fig. 1). To regulate the use of common heath land and forest, the 13th century saw the rise of agricultural commons or ‘marks’ (Beukenkam and Sevink 2005). This system, based on sheep, was basically the only agricultural possibility on the infertile lands of the Veluwe,

Table 1—Summary of historical projections of wilderness between hell and paradise.

Era	Hell-like aspects	Paradise-like aspects
Prehistory	Constant threat to life and livelihood	Primary source of life and livelihood
Neolithic (revolution)	Threat to culture	Raw material to cultivate and use for culture
Antiquity	Home to human hostility and brutishness	Raw material to create physical paradise, mirror for society, projections of virtue, simplicity and originality
Middle Ages	Land deprived of God, purgatory, antithesis of useful land	Anteroom to paradise, cultivatable to earthly paradise
Early Modernity	Shelter for hostile resistance, old age and decrepitude	The handiwork of God, national symbol
Romanticism	Dark side of the soul	Place for (theological) desire, transcendence
19th And 20th century	Symbolic reminder of the destruction of planet Earth and humankind	Epitomizing environmental movement, precious object for science and recreation

but eventually took its toll. Grazing, cutting of heath sods, deforestation, and burning led to an ongoing degeneration of the vegetation. Although the larger drift sands arose partly because of climatic changes (Koomen and others 2004), human activities triggered and maintained drift sand formations (Riksen and others 2006). A first mentioning of drift sands dates from the 10th century, when settlements were abandoned because of the devastating effects of the encroaching sands (Beukenkam and Sevink 2005). In the following centuries, sand formations continued to increase in number and size. In the last half of the 19th century, a desert of about 150 km² (1/7th of the total area) marked the Veluwe, possibly constituting the biggest desert in Europe (Snijders 1984).

Brighter Practices

Not everybody saw the Veluwe as wasteland. Dukes hunted at the Veluwe since the Middle Ages and so did the Dutch Royals from the mid 17th century up until the end of the 20th century. One of them literally spoke of the Veluwe as a paradise (Snijders 1984). There were also others who saw the Veluwe in that light. But strikingly, just as with the aristocratic hunters, their livelihood was not depending on a physical working relationship with the land; they were in many ways just visitors. Nineteenth century artists painted old oaks and some poets got inspired by the wild land of the Veluwe (Paasman and Van der Vlist 1989). Interestingly, the inhospitable sandy wilderness of the Veluwean core was never an important inspiration for Dutch artists (Wigman 1957).

In the 19th century the Veluwean waste lands became the focus of concerted economic development. The idea slowly spread that the only way of controlling the sands, cultivating the land and its people, and making a profit, was through forestry (Beukenkam and Sevink 2005). New landowners came in, sheep largely disappeared because of the collapse of the mark system (Haak and Hofman 1995), the drift sands

were successfully controlled (Derks and others 2007), and the Veluwe became wooded again.

One of those new landowners was millionaire Anton Kröller. By 1921 he had bought around 50 km² of hunting ground in the core of the Veluwe. Contrary to her husband, Helene Kröller-Müller put most of her energy into collecting art, which is nowadays displayed in a museum in the centre of the area (fig. 1). Ultimately, the land was designated as the Hoge Veluwe National Park. With both the land and museum open to the public, recreation became the most important connection between park and society (Van der Windt 2005).

The Hoge Veluwe and Contemporary Relations to Wilderness

Fencing Culture

Shortly after his acquisitions, Kröller placed a 40-km fence around his grounds. As such it was a direct continuation of Stadholder Willem II's hunting fence in 1648, but in broader terms an act deeply rooted in Veluwean history. For millennia, early versions of fences, namely embankments, physically separated wilderness from culture (Hegener 2002). However, the peculiar thing about Willem II and Kröller's fences was that these were supposed to protect rather than exclude the wild, thereby materializing the shift from wilderness as a threat to wilderness being threatened. Today, the fences are still in place but become more controversial as many feel that they separate the natural Veluwean heart from its body (Hegener and others 2007).

Nature-culture divides were also put in place in another way. In 1910, a handful of poor farmers were generously bought out (Haak and Hofman 1995), and when the writer Den Doolaard as a boy brought groceries and saw Madam approaching, he hid in the bushes because she didn't want to see people in her park (Den Doolaard 1975). These examples bear resemblances with so-called fortress conservation, in

which the wild is preserved by separating (local) people from nature (Adams 2004), but no racial or violent aspects against local people cling to this history. Indeed, initial symptoms of snobism turned, perhaps out of financial necessity, into an unequalled, intellectual and physical legacy to Dutch society.

The Hoge Veluwe derives its identity largely from its unusual and explicit combination of culture and (wild) nature. The Hoge Veluwe is a nature area that is defined, protected and accessible as such, but at the same time a place where culture deliberately steps back to allow for the enjoyment and relishing of the otherness of nature. This paradoxical tension, so typically illustrated by the fences that protect wild nature from its environment and vice versa, makes the Hoge Veluwe simultaneously a place devoid of, and defined and protected by, culture.

Access and Danger

From the start Kröller was looking for an ideal collection of game species. Today 200 red deer, 300 roe deer, 50 wild boar and 200 mouflons roam in the park (De Hoge Veluwe 2009). These numbers are set for an optimal visibility in line with the perceived carrying capacity, and closely managed by a hunting club (Hegener 2002). Although none of the mentioned large game species are predators (for Dutch standards unusually good), the possibility of seeing large wild mammals is the most important attraction for the average visitor (Zwetsloot 1978).

With 1700 freely available white bikes and 43 km of paved bike path, cycling in the Hoge Veluwe is a particularly odd but popular activity (Van Essen and Pelzers 2005). In 2007, the Hoge Veluwe had more than 500,000 paying visitors. Such a number on a total area of 50 km² requires regulation, and although there is no limit to the number of visitors allowed at the Hoge Veluwe, the visitors' behavior is carefully guided with observation posts, museums, restaurants, three entrances to the park, and bike paths.

By contrast, what makes the Hoge Veluwe almost one of a kind in the Netherlands is the possibility to enter the wilderness (save a few sanctuaries) wherever one pleases; the park is open to those who wish to saunter in solitude like Thoreau and Muir. Then, the sphere of culture disappears. Death may be encountered in the form of animal corpses, protective wild boar mothers and ticks carrying Lyme disease should be watched out for, and one can—rather special for the Netherlands—even get lost for a half a day or so. Although most visitors settle for wilderness-like aspects that can conveniently be enjoyed, those who are looking for the wild only, may find it.

There are thus two partly intermingling and paradoxical tensions inherent to what the park offers. First, the opportunity to encounter the wild and its otherness while others look for only a rosy glimpse of the wild, is striking; the Hoge Veluwe is a friendly home and refuge and, at the same time, a potentially dangerous and alienating place. Second, one can experience the wilderness of the park in solitude, without losing out on accessibility and facilities, while on the other side one can come across hundreds of cyclists without being deprived of wilderness experiences.

Restored Drift Sands

By 1905, as a result of the reforestations at the end of the nineteenth century, half of the area of the Hoge Veluwe was afforested drift sand (Van der Windt 2005), but after World War II, the sands slowly became valued for aesthetic reasons (Hofman and Haak 2006). In 2001, by order of the park authority, about 1 km² of drift sand was restored (De Hoge Veluwe 2009; fig. 1). The restoration was controversial, not only in the context of today's worldwide, and the Veluwean centuries-long, combat against desertification. An argument arose around how this local wilderness should look (Turnhout 2004). The Foundation for Critical Forest Management argued that the Veluwean wilderness should be a natural, autonomous forest. But the National Park authority had different ideas about its own land, and wanted to restore a drift sand area for several reasons: drift sand had cultural-historical value, was an important habitat for rare flora and fauna, and had recreational appeal as a special landscape (De Hoge Veluwe 2009; Turnhout 2004). By restoring the sands, a balance was sought between natural autonomy on one hand and cultural heritage, biodiversity and species protection (such as tree grayling and tawny pipit) on the other.

The drift sand restoration of the Hoge Veluwe illustrates not only that the protection of natural autonomy, endangered species, biodiversity, and (historical) landscapes are fundamentally related (although not necessarily concur), and often lead to different interpretations of what represents 'true' wilderness; it also makes clear that the act of wilderness protection and restoration is deeply paradoxical, which already speaks from the fact that bulldozers were used to recreate a specific type of natural autonomy.

Contemporary Paradoxes of Wilderness

What makes the Hoge Veluwe a wilderness lies foremost in the above-identified paradoxical frictions, constituted by a Western history of the idea of wilderness as well as a long local land use history. Table 2 lists paradoxical sets of opposites, and is organized according to the hell and paradise themes.

It seems appropriate to ask to what extent the Hoge Veluwe is different from other natural areas, and thus to what extent the identified paradoxes apply to other natural areas as well. We argue that these wilderness paradoxes can be recognized in any natural area that is labeled as such. What makes the Hoge Veluwe rather unusual is that its paradoxes are extremely well materialized and, therefore, well recognizable.

Table 2—Wilderness paradoxes derived from the Hoge Veluwe case study.

The 'paradise side' of wilderness		The 'hell side' of wilderness
Danger and otherness	↔	Home and refuge
Solitude	↔	Accessibility
Devoid of culture	↔	Defined and protected by culture
Natural autonomy	↔	Conservation management

Conclusions: Wilderness Restoration and Acknowledging the Paradoxical Nature of Wilderness

Contemporary relationships with wilderness are generally inherently paradoxical (see also Drenthen 2005 for wilderness as a paradoxical moral boundary concept capable of giving meaning), as seemingly contradictory elements simultaneously characterize and constitute what is valued about a wild place. Given the deep historical roots of the paradoxical nature of wilderness, we argue—rather than ignoring, neutralizing, or problematizing—to accept this paradoxicality as a strength of our contemporary Western relation to wilderness.

But how then can restoration practitioners productively make use of this paradoxicality? This will depend on a wide range of factors, such as local history and culture, the extent to which one is willing to articulate the paradoxicality, and the general conservation aims of the area. In this respect there always will, and should be, a plurality of wildernesses. But if both sides of the paradoxes are essential in constituting the attraction of wilderness, it follows that a unilateral orientation on the 'paradise side' of wilderness can easily lead to a lack of unpredictability, mayhem and renewal that Mabey (2005) experienced in the constructed indoor biomes of the Eden project in Cornwall. More generally it could mean missing out on the productive potential and 'dark' appeal of wilderness. Alternatively, given the cultural-historical roots of wilderness, it is deceptive to believe that the restoration of the 'wild side' of wilderness automatically means that relationships with wilderness are thereby restored as well. If wilderness has been, throughout history, characterized and constituted by the tension between hell and paradise-like aspects, ecological restoration that reduces wilderness to one of its extremes might miss the character of the very place it aims to restore.

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