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New wilderness in the Netherlands: An investigation of visual preferences for nature development landscapes

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Abstract

The present research investigated visual preferences for nature development landscapes among 500 residents from six plan areas in The Netherlands. Significant differences in relative preferences for wild versus managed scenes were found between landscape types and respondent groups. Development of wild nature was evaluated less positively in a forested area than in more open, rural areas. Among the background variables included in the study, place of residence, age, socio-economic status, farming background, preference for green political parties, and recreational motives were found to be systematically related to relative preferences for wild versus managed nature scenes, accounting for 16% of the variance in preference ratings. These findings are discussed within an applied decision making context in The Netherlands.
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1. Introduction

> "The wildness pleases. We seem to live alone with Nature. We view her in her inmost recesses, and contemplate her with more delight in these original wilds than in the artificial labyrinths and feigned wildernesses of the palace" (A.A. Cooper, third Earl of Shaftesbury, The Moralists, 1709/1999)

Anthony Ashley Cooper, third Earl of Shaftesbury (1671–1713), was one of the first modern thinkers who advocated the virtues of wild nature. In the three centuries that have passed since his pioneering work, the traditional notion of wilderness as an ugly and evil place has become slowly replaced by a new vision of wilderness as a unique and valuable type of environment (Nash, 1967; Thacker, 1983). In the United States, this new vision of wilderness has ultimately resulted in the legal protection of wilderness areas by the Wilderness Act of 1964 and the creation of a National Wilderness Preservation System (NWPS). Likewise, other countries around the world have established laws and strategies to protect the values of wilderness (cf. Jongman et al., 2004).

In recent years, some countries have adopted more pro-active strategies to safeguard the values of wilderness (SER, 2002). In The Netherlands, for instance, the Dutch authorities have decided to establish a National Ecological Network that involves the transformation of more than 50,000 ha of farmland into new natural areas (Ministry of Agriculture, Nature Management, and Fisheries, 1996). Some of these former farmlands will be actively managed by regulative activities such as mowing and clear-cutting. Other former farmlands will be more passively managed and left undisturbed to evolve into "new wilderness". Enhancing the scenic quality of the landscape is one of the major aims of this Dutch nature development policy. However, because nature development practices are based on ecological principles rather than on lay people's aesthetic preferences, it remains to be seen how far the newly developed natural areas will be appreciated by the general public (Gobster, 1999; Parsons and Daniel, 2002).

The central aim of the present research was to gain more insight into people's visual preferences for nature development landscapes. In the following paragraphs, we first discuss different strategies for nature development and their relation to the concept of wilderness. We then review prior research on indi-

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vidual differences in visual preferences for wild versus managed natural landscapes along with the potential relevance of place of residence, socio-economic variables, and recreational motives to explain these differences. Finally, we present the results of a survey among 500 residents from six nature development areas in The Netherlands.

1.1. Nature development and the concept of wilderness

The Dutch nature development policy can be understood as part of an international movement that has set forth ecological restoration as the new standard in nature management practice (Hobbs and Norton, 1996; Davis and Slobodkin, 2004). In general, ecological restoration may be defined as human intervention intended to recover nature's integrity which is considered to be threatened or even absent because of human activities such as agriculture, industry, mining, and recreation (Swart et al., 2001). A distinctive characteristic of the Dutch plans for ecological restoration is that the interventions will be carried out mainly in agricultural production areas, which will be transformed into completely new natural areas. To achieve this, several kinds of nature management strategies may be applied, ranging from active strategies that guide natural processes by means of regulative activities, to more passive strategies that encourage the development of spontaneous natural processes by minimizing human activities in an area (cf. Hobbs and Harris, 2001). Application of active nature management strategies promotes the development of orderly, managed natural landscapes, while application of more passive strategies promotes the development of wild, unmanaged natural landscapes. In The Netherlands, these latter landscapes are commonly referred to as "new wilderness areas".

The term "new wilderness" for humanly redeveloped landscapes may sound like a contradiction. However, this contradiction only arises when one defines wilderness as pristine areas which are completely untouched by humans. The latter definition is often used in legal documents (cf. the American Wilderness Act, 1964). However, it is also possible to define wilderness from a more subjective, psychological perspective. Results of landscape perception studies indicate that lay people use the term wilderness to describe any natural area without *discriminable* human influences (Wohlwill, 1983; Kaplan and Kaplan, 1989). Thus, the appearance of an environment, rather than the actual amount of human interference, determines whether an individual perceives it as wilderness or not. On the basis of this psychological definition of wilderness it is possible to refer to humanly redeveloped landscapes as wilderness landscapes.

The planned nature development will drastically change the appearance of the Dutch countryside. Consequently, the scenic consequences of nature development plans as they are experienced by those who live, work, and recreate in the designated areas constitute an important element in land management decisions. In recognition of this notion, Dutch nature development policy has included enhancement of the landscape's scenic quality as a criterion for environmental planning and management next to ecological criteria such as increase of biodiversity and naturalness. By doing so, the Dutch government has shown an awareness that public or scenic aesthetics should be distinguished from ecological values (cf. Gobster, 1999; Parsons and Daniel, 2002). However, details on how the scenic quality criterion relates to the various restoration options have not been specified. It would therefore be useful to gain more insight into how local people evaluate the scenic quality of different types of nature development landscapes, in particular wild versus more managed landscapes.

1.2. Visual preferences

When people are asked to categorize natural scenes, they typically put wild, disorderly scenes together in one pile, whereas they put more managed and structured scenes together in another pile (cf. Hartig and Evans, 1993). Degree of human influence thus represents a key dimension underlying people's landscape perceptions. The evaluation of this dimension varies considerably between individuals. Indeed, settings reflecting either low or high degrees of human influence tend to elicit the most individual variation in environmental preferences (Dearden, 1984; Gallagher, 1977; Orland, 1988; Strumse, 1996). Accordingly, there exist important individual differences in visual preferences for wild versus more managed natural settings.

Kaplan and Kaplan (1989) have reviewed the available evidence on individual differences in landscape preferences. Their analysis suggests that differences between members of various subcultures and ethnic groups can nearly always be interpreted in terms of the preferred balance between natural and human influences. Some individuals tend to display a preference for wild natural landscapes, whereas others tend to display a preference for more managed nature. Unfortunately, the studies reviewed by Kaplan and Kaplan (1989) do not allow any firm conclusions concerning the cultural or ethnic variables that underlie these differences, because the subcultures and groups that were studied differed on more than one dimension (e.g., urbanity, familiarity, age, race, income). In the following paragraphs, we consider the empirical evidence for three types of variables that are often mentioned as possible correlates of individual differences in preferences for wild versus managed natural landscapes: place of residence, socio-economic characteristics, and recreational motives.

1.3. Place of residence

A first potential source of individual differences in preference for wild versus managed nature is place of residence. Studies among rural residents have sometimes reported negative evaluations of plans to protect or develop nearby wilderness areas (e.g., Fiallo and Jacobsen, 1995; Durrant and Shumway, 2004). For example, results of a recent survey indicated that residents of six south-eastern Utah counties displayed negative attitudes toward the designation of wilderness study areas in their county (Durrant and Shumway, 2004). Such negative attitudes have been attributed to perceived impacts on livelihoods or disagreement with local planning procedures, which may give rise to a 'resistance to change'.

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