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Authors: Thomas Mattijssen, Arjen Buijs, Birgit Elands

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The benefits of self-governance for nature conservation: a study on active citizenship in the Netherlands

Authors and affiliations: Thomas Mattijssen^{a,b*}, Arjen Buijs^{a,c}, Birgit Elands^a

a Wageningen University Research, Forest and Nature Conservation Group, P.O. Box 47, 6700 AA Wageningen, The Netherlands

b University of Copenhagen, Section for Landscape Architecture and Planning, Rolighedsvej 23, 1958 Frederiksberg, Denmark

c Wageningen University Research, Wageningen Environmental Research, P.O. Box 47, 6700 AA Wageningen, The Netherlands

*corresponding author: thomasmattijssen@gmail.com

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Abstract

An increased involvement of citizens in the management of European green spaces raises questions about its contributions to nature conservation. In this research, we study the effects of different types of active citizenship in green space. Combining qualitative and quantitative methods, we look at the *benefits* of 50 *green self-governance practices* in which citizens aim to realize, manage or protect green space in the Netherlands. While most of these practices contribute to nature conservation (80%) and/or the conservation of cultural landscapes (50%), our analysis shows that the benefits of green self-governance are much broader. This includes so called 'co-benefits', social, cultural and economic benefits such as the use function of green for human activity (78%), environmental education (88%) and social cohesion (50%).

The benefits and co-benefits of green self-governance strongly depend on the type of practice. Using a typology of green self-governance, we show that a majority of practices focuses on direct benefits to nature conservation through hands-on activities and/or political actions. However, we also show that this focus is regularly combined with efforts to realize co-benefits. Practices with an explicit focus on co-benefits often also produce benefits - and vice-versa. In this way, co-benefits can provide a first step towards the realization of more direct benefits to nature conservation. Even so, there are also tensions between benefits and co-benefits, for example when an increase of recreation negatively affects biodiversity values or when 'wild' nature is being replaced by a cultivated garden. Relating to co-benefits can be an effective strategy for governments or environmental NGO's, but we have to be aware that the benefits generated by green self-governance are generally of a much smaller scale than those realized by 'traditional' managers of green space such as authorities.

Keywords

Nature conservation, governance, biodiversity, active citizenship, co-benefits, self-governance

Introduction

Green self-governance and nature conservation

While in most EU-countries the management and protection of green space traditionally was a task of authorities, private landowners and large environmental NGOs, recent years show an increased involvement of citizens and local NGOs (Rosol, 2010; Van der Jagt, Elands, Ambrose-Oji, Geróházi, & Steen Møller, 2016). This trend towards *active citizenship* results in a more important and more autonomous role for citizens in the management and protection of nature and biodiversity values (Paloniemi et al., 2015). This is reflected in forms of co-governance where citizens and authorities work together as equal partners (Olsson, Folke, & Berkes, 2004) as well as in the manifestation of many bottom-up initiatives with varying degrees of autonomy for citizens (Van der Jagt et al., 2016).

Research also highlights the need for authorities to adapt their green space governance approach from delivering services towards facilitating and regulating delivery by others (Rosol, 2010). Authorities increasingly see the involvement of stakeholders as important for sustainable and legitimate governance of green spaces (Suškevičs, Tillemann, & Külvik, 2013). Declining management budgets and encroachment have put pressure on the quantity and quality of many green areas, which has spurred an

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