



Photo: Martelle van Dop

Spirituality in Dutch nature conservation and management

There is growing interest throughout Europe in spirituality derived from contact with nature. In the Netherlands, books, workshops and courses abound on our personal relationship with nature. The search for a deeper and more meaningful relationship is at present largely confined to individuals. However, it is starting to spill over into the work environment. This article presents a few examples of how mystical experiences of nature, just one aspect of spiritual wellbeing, are starting to be listened to at the institutional level.

A few years ago the InnovationNetwork, an independent body set up by the Dutch Ministry of Agriculture to develop sustainable radical new concepts in agriculture, agribusiness, food and rural areas, posed the question 'Is there any profit to be gained from mystical experiences of nature for nature management?'

Gerwine Wuring, author, ecologist and druid* says: 'We are experiencing a time of transformation in the West. We are in a 'luxury' position as we have the money and time to search for alternative ways of living. There is also a widely felt urge to return to a deeper belief system, perhaps because formal religions are not fulfilling this need. This can be seen in the growing number of schools, retreat centres, study groups and communities of practice where people exchange their visions, theories and experiences. Much of this 'new' thinking is based on a mix of ancient wisdom, new psychology and social development, and has re-awakened our deeply rooted inner wisdom as well as many social-psychological, educational and spiritual renewal movements.'

Sense of oneness

In an effort to come up with answers to the question posed by the InnovationNetwork, Gerwine gathered some insights from people she encountered through her own Network of Nature, Environment & Spirituality. Gerwine: 'One important step that is needed before mystical experiences of nature can be

*An ancient pre-Christian Celtic order of priests, teachers, diviners, and magicians.

taken on board is to debunk the widely held belief in the western world that we are separate from nature. Mystical experiences are always derived from a sense of oneness, and this is seldom acknowledged in management and policy making. Luckily, in the Netherlands at least, there is a growing willingness, for example among professional nature conservation managers, to discuss the one-sidedness of our over-rational thinking. People are starting to experiment with different ways of 're-searching' our deeper relationship with nature.'

Ecotherapy

One example is Ecotherapy, a practice which is attracting growing interest in the Netherlands and other European countries. Ecotherapy is about balancing

energy; it is a method for improving the vitality and self-organisation of ecosystems and organisation-systems, in co-operation with the responsible manager (referred to as the energy guard or guardian). Gerwine: 'Ecotherapy can be applied both on a small and large scale. The targets of the guardian are usually met within a year. Work has been done to restore energetic health to areas of woodland and other natural landscapes, for example by working with the energy (or ley) lines. The Centre for Ecotherapy offers a four-year vocational training course in its methods.'

Ecotherapy practitioners Jan Lamers and Ruud Pleune applied energy balancing

techniques to a small pond, the Plas van Beek, in a residential neighbourhood in the town of Ermelo. The pond was a neglected natural feature in the area - there was no management and little interest in it from local inhabitants. The pond contained an excessive amount of algae and thus a shortage of oxygen.

After diagnosing the balance of negative and positive energy, Lamers and Pleune set about readjusting the balance between the cosmic and earth energy, and neutralised the blocking energy of nearby mobile transmitters and other wireless stations. These measures were aimed at promoting the pond's sustainability, and after their implementation the amount of algae in the pond decreased, which paved the way for increased biodiversity. Interest in the pond

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has since grown, both from local residents who now find it an attractive place to visit, and from the local council which has now included upkeep of the area in the municipal budget.

Spiritual forestry management

More recently, a spiritual group approached the State Forestry Commission (SBB) to take into account their experiences of energies at an ancient sacred site in a forest area, Het Strubben-Kniphorstbos in the province of Drenthe in the east of the Netherlands. Gerwine: 'This nature reserve is the first in the country where the management plans take



Photo: Kees van de Veen, DvN

April 2009. Princess Irene, sister of the Queen of the Netherlands, walks behind a woman dressed as a wood nymph, on the day that a number of forest areas in the province of Drenthe were declared sacred and returned to nature.

into account not only the forestry management, but also the area's cultural-historical heritage. In drawing up the management plan, SBB also consulted the local residents about their wishes, which included maintaining a secluded area where people can go to experience mystical or spiritual engagement with nature. When SBB made an inventory of the ecological, historical and archaeological values of the nature reserve they also invited the spiritual workgroup to contribute information on their spiritual experiences in the area.' This new approach was reported in one of the Dutch national newspapers.

Signs of change

Progress is slow, however. Gerwine: 'There is still much resistance, caution and even shame attached to openly admitting the importance of the spiritual dimension of our relationship with nature if we are to safeguard the future of our nature and our own wellbeing. Whether this comes from centuries of 'enlightenment', fear of our own sensitivity, or of being accused of not being scientific or exact enough, there is still a lot to do. Most people working in nature management or farming are sensitive to the energies in their environment, but they have never learned to deal with them, and may not even be

Interacting worldviews in Dutch nature management

Spiritual

Reconnecting with energy fields and ancient wisdom in contemporary nature management.

Social

Sharing intuitions in research on the deep connection between man and nature and ways of working with these.

Material

Developing and planning nature management according to the self-healing capacity and inner knowledge of humans and nature.

aware of their own sensitivity, let alone how to use these to enhance their other management and technological tools.'

Initiatives like the ones described in this article indicate that change is on the way. Returning to the question posed by the InnovationNetwork, the profit that nature management can gain from mystical experiences of nature lies in the field of spiritual wellbeing of mankind *and* nature. Recognition is slowly growing in the Netherlands that profit should be measured in more than financial terms only.



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www.innovatienetwerk.org/en

www.ecotherapie.org