



## Ornithology from the Tree Tops

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Source: Ardea, 95(2) : 175-176

Published By: Netherlands Ornithologists' Union

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5253/078.095.0201>

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## Ornithology from the tree tops

Over the centuries, the Dutch landscape has been gradually transformed from waterlogged wilderness into a highly industrialised society where even the countryside is now the scene of heavy machinery working day and night. Particularly drastic were the land consolidation schemes in the 1960s and 1970s, meant to boost productivity and improve efficiency but leading to overproduction, poor-quality bulk food and wholesale havoc wreaked upon plant and animal life in the countryside. Today, even a basic player in the ecosystem, the Common Vole *Microtus arvalis*, has declined such that vole-eating predators like Eurasian Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus* and Long-eared Owl *Asio otus* have become scarce or absent over wide stretches of land. By purposeful and tough negotiation of a few dedicated nature protectionists, small patches of land have been spared the sorry fate of the rest of the country. It is therefore the more shocking to see that presently these patches are also turned into money-making businesses, notably by facilitating mass recreation. This trend is not only apparent in governmental organisations, in The Netherlands not noted for their care in protecting nature reserves, but even in private nature protection societies. One would think that, particularly in an age where nature is under increasing stress from human disturbance, such organisations would double their efforts in

protecting reserves from further onslaught. But on the contrary, money-making is the codeword, even literally so expressed by the newly established president of Nature Monuments, a private organisation specifically founded more than 100 years ago to safeguard valuable nature from human greed.

Now what has this diatribe to do with *Ardea*? The weird thing is that all these far-reaching decisions are made against better judgment. Were it founded in science-based facts, for example if human disturbance were repeatedly found to have no impact on bird populations or fitness, then it would be easier to understand the present development. And no kidding, the pile of literature dealing with human disturbance is sky high: googling for human disturbance on the internet shows 558 000 hits (9 October 2007), for instance. Even in *Ardea*, not specialised in applied ecology, such papers can be found. Nevertheless, not a single thread of this evidence is taken into consideration. It is even worse than that: this literature is completely disregarded, or at best – and only when published in Dutch (scientific literature from across the border is not read at all) – trivialised. I am convinced that in The Netherlands even fewer conservation decisions are based on primary literature than in the UK, where Sutherland *et al.* (2004) recorded a meagre 2.4% in 61 management

actions surveyed. This is particularly true for decisions in the realm of recreation. I have yet to meet the first person responsible for boosting recreation who knows what he is talking about when other animals than humans are taken into consideration. Utter incompetence and lack of interest, and downright damaging to the reserves that were instigated to protect plants and wildlife against precisely that kind of greed. So much for the reach of science in Dutch nature conservation.

Clearly, it is quite easy to disregard glaring evidence based on facts, and instead use common sense (often proved wrong when tested; Sutherland *et al.* 2004), perpetrate myths ('more visitors means more support for nature conservation') or rely on wishful thinking.

The situation is going from bad to worse. A particularly successful tactic to market nature reserves has been the creation of National Parks, in which several landowners with various backgrounds are brought together under the same umbrella. Although in theory still in charge of their own reserve, in practice they are outvoted or overruled on many issues that were until recently out of the question. Moreover, the constant bombardment of initiatives to facilitate nature reserves in favour of humans, from within the National Park (where also pressure groups are represented) and from outside (where the local populace quickly jumps on the money-laden bandwagon), inevitably leads to corruption of former viewpoints. This law of shifting perception is operational because management is based on short-term decisions by job-hopping managers who are not

fed with scientific data (locally produced, or otherwise). Furthermore, large amounts of money are pumped into National Parks, inevitably leading to spending to spend. Only tiny proportions of this money are allocated to research, if anything at all. In this context, research is a big word for quick consultancies and volunteer-based fieldwork, both often methodically of poor quality or not suitable to answer management questions. Instead, the money is put into boosting recreation, or projects euphemistically called 'nature restoration'. To add insult to injury, the recent trend is to circumvent nature protection laws by formulating and signing covenants that are *de facto* meant to continue economic activities even when such laws are violated.

Maybe the situation in The Netherlands, a country noted for its mercantile spirit rather than its effective nature conservation (Kleijn & Sutherland 2003), is worse than elsewhere. Speaking for Britain, Newton (2007) recently surmised that the accumulated knowledge is now being put to good use in conservation, so that appropriate management can take place. So there is hope...

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