

TREATMENT OF RURAL LANDSCAPE

by

R. J. BENTHEM,

Chief Landscape Department,
State Forest Service, Holland.

Man's influence on the landscape is as old as the human race itself. Only recently however the whole of soil and organic life we call „the landscape” has come to be explicitly recognized as an element of world economy which might be endangered and deserves special attention and care. By the beginning of the 20th century the inroads made on the landscape and the apparent waste of natural resources warned mankind that an intelligent study of this matter was urgent. As a reaction this newly discovered danger gave rise to a movement for protection of nature.

Originally this movement was almost exclusively directed towards preservation of natural areas. When the steadily progressing need for intensification of land use and the correspondingly increasing interference with natural conditions was however fully taken into account, it became clear that mere preservation no longer constitutes an adequate solution to the problem of nature and landscape roused by the belated interest in flora, fauna, climate, soil conservation, etc.

The more all social and economic concerns are getting entwined and all parts of human society are becoming interdependent, the more complex these problems are growing.

Even if it should be possible to preserve all the remaining fragments of „natural” or „semi-natural” landscapes, careful treatment of the extensive areas outside the reserves would remain necessary. Our heritage of flora, fauna and characteristic rural beauty can never be confined to reserves, which are of necessity relatively small.

The giving of this treatment, which is creative, to nature and landscape outside the reserves is a great problem that practically all densely populated countries should now face; its solution will become one of the tasks of the national governments. As the areas in question are those parts of the earth's surface where human activity will be permanent, our policy should be adapted to the dynamic character of these landscapes. All this is convincingly shown by the development in the Netherlands with their dense population and intensive cultivation of the soil.

There will hardly be a country in the world where the necessity as well as the possibility of changing the existing structure of the landscape is as great as in the Netherlands. A more detailed exposition of this subject was given in my report on „Reconstruction of the landscape in the Netherlands”, presented to the IUPN conference at Lake Success. I take the liberty to mention once more some of the chief points.

In the agricultural areas of the Netherlands, where practically every square meter of the soil is somehow made productive, the major changes in the landscape are the results of agrarian activity. Some tens of years ago this chiefly meant the reclamation of the then waste lands, which were converted into fields and pastures. But now that such lands are hardly to be found anymore, the reconstruction of the landscape is mainly a result

of the improvement of existing arable land or pasture and still more of re-allotments.

When agriculture is rationalized and mechanized, many capriciously shaped lots that have been formed in the course of time do not come up to present-day standards of efficiency. Moreover, greater accessibility through new roads or the improvement of existing ones becomes inevitable and in most cases better drainage of the land is also necessary.

All these technical activities on behalf of agriculture which are largely financed by the government, cannot but have a profound influence on the landscape. Rows of trees or shrubs along boundaries between adjoining parcels or estates that are thrown together must fall, water courses and roads are widened and remodelled. Their avenues or hedgerows must be cut down. On the other hand a new landscape has to be created. New plantations have to be designed and planted. Valuable nature elements, refuges for wildlife, should be spared as much as possible and if necessary be protected by ditches, dams or otherwise.

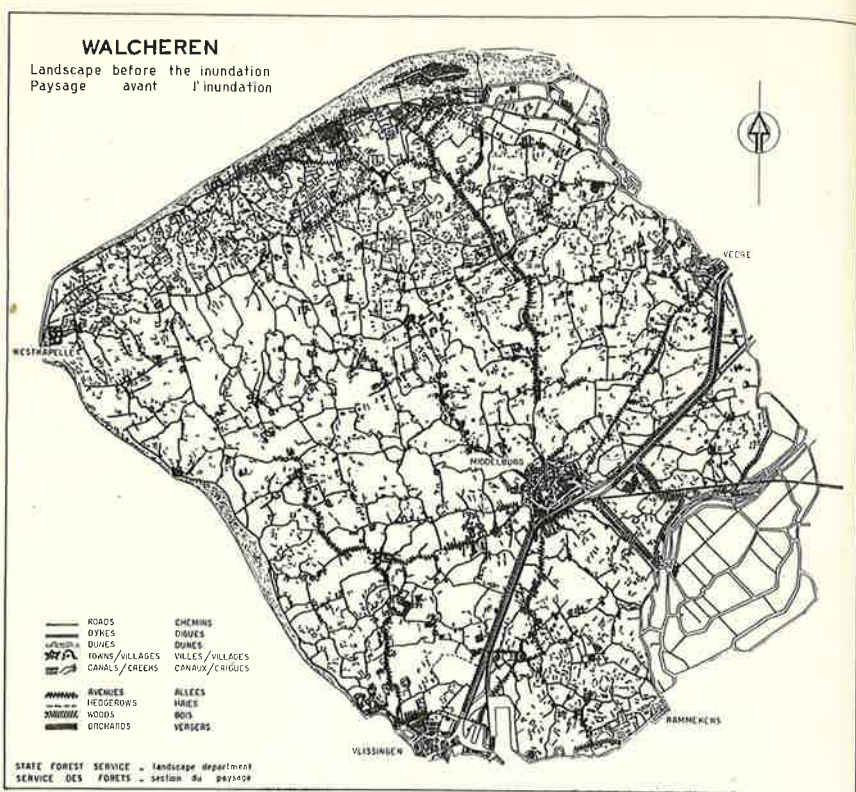
All these measures for the reconstruction of the landscape are incorporated in special *landscape plans*. The Dutch Government has entrusted the drawing up of these plans to the National Forest Service, which has created a special branch for landscape planning. This department closely co-operates with various experts in the fields of agriculture, biology and physical planning and takes into account soil mapping.

A striking example of this kind of agrarian and scenic reconstruction is the rebuilding of the island of Walcheren; as its dykes were bombed in World War II, practically the whole island was flooded by salt water. A remarkable landscape, which possessed great beauty but could never meet the demands of the 20th century, was lost. The old country of Walcheren was characterized by a maze of many fine impractical narrow and winding roads, inefficient parcelling of land and an abundance of hawthorn hedges, the remains of an obsolete hedgerow country.

Reconstructing this landscape meant that the land had to be re-allotted, the size of the farms enlarged, the network of roads improved. Effective roadside plantations are planted, while some natural areas are preserved and partly planted. We submit two maps of Walcheren, one of the old country that has gone and one of the new landscape that is now being built up.

Landscape plans of this kind are now in course of preparation or execution for large parts of the Netherlands and the nature of the new agricultural landscape of the low-lands will to a great extent be determined by the success or failure of such-plans.

In addition to the plans for re-allotments, landscape plans of a similar nature are made and executed for the reclamation works, such as those in parts of the former Zuyderzee. One of these plans, viz. the design of the northeast polder in the Zuyderzee, is shown on a third map. The entirely different geological structure of the land and the opportunity to draw up a land division scheme without having to take into account existing conditions have led to a landscape design entirely different from the one for Walcheren. Bold, regular fields, long straight shelter belts, situated at smaller intervals near the west coast, carefully planned woods and orchard areas, farms, villages and small country towns form the basic pattern of this new open polder landscape.



WALCHEREN BEFORE THE INUNDATION

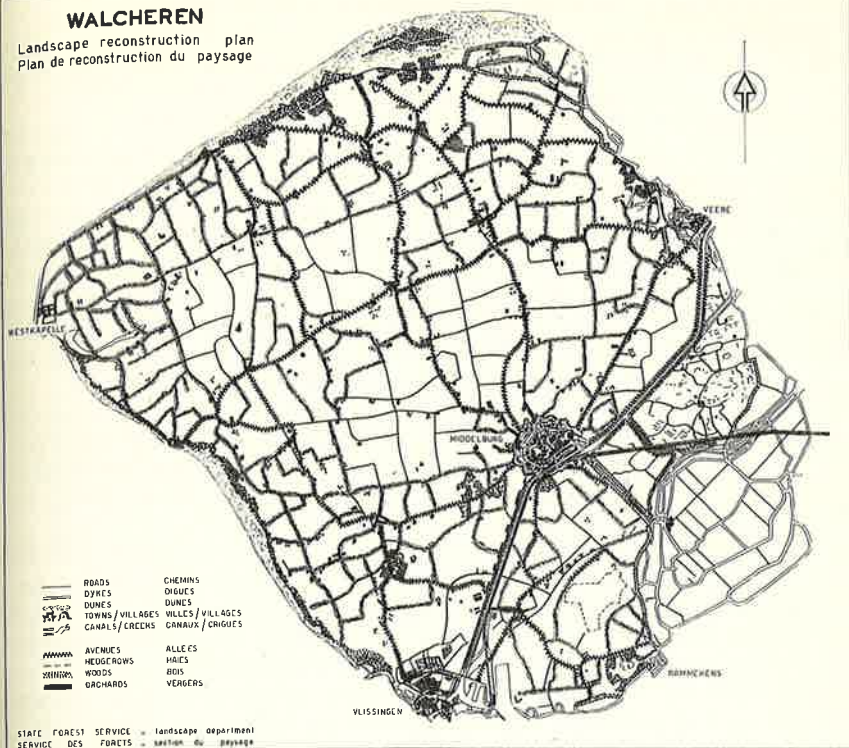
Outline of the landscape of the isle of Walcheren (Netherlands) before Worldwar II. Characteristic were the crotchety, primitive network of roads and the scattered remains of the former hedgerow-landscape.

WALCHEREN AVANT L'INONDATION

Carte sommaire du paysage de l'île de Walcheren (Pays-Bas) avant la guerre. Les éléments caractéristiques étaient le réseau de chemins irrégulier et primitif et les restes éparés d'un paysage de haies.

WALCHEREN

Landscape reconstruction plan
Plan de reconstruction du paysage



THE RECONSTRUCTION OF WALCHEREN AFTER THE INUNDATION

A new landscape has been planned for the island of Walcheren (Netherlands). Attention should be given to the new network of roads adapted to the present-day requirements of agriculture and to the carefully planned plantations.

LA RÉCONSTRUCTION DE WALCHEREN APRÈS L'INONDATION

Plan pour le paysage de l'île de Walcheren (Pays-Bas). Dans ce plan le réseau de chemins renouvelé et adapté au besoin de l'agriculture contemporaine et la distribution systématique des plantations méritent l'attention.

In this report it is impossible to deal in greater detail with the various aspects of landscape planning in the Netherlands, e.g. in planning the arterial roads, planning the open spaces in cities, towns and villages, the planting of forests, of trees along dykes, in farmyards, etc.

Of more general interest is the fact that a planned development or reconstruction of the landscape is becoming of vital importance to various other European countries and maybe to other parts of the world.

Everywhere valuable nature areas need protection. Agricultural regions with villages, farms and fields where the landscape has been impoverished inconsiderately should be planted in a simple but efficient way. And in a great many agricultural regions where fine and well-planned landscapes are still to be found – we need only mention the landscape of the British enclosures – critical attention will have to be given to their maintenance.

Large-scale landscape plans will have to be executed with government support. For without much planting of and special care for the landscape, our posterity will only see some scanty remains of landscapes which we now cherish as a precious heritage from former generations.

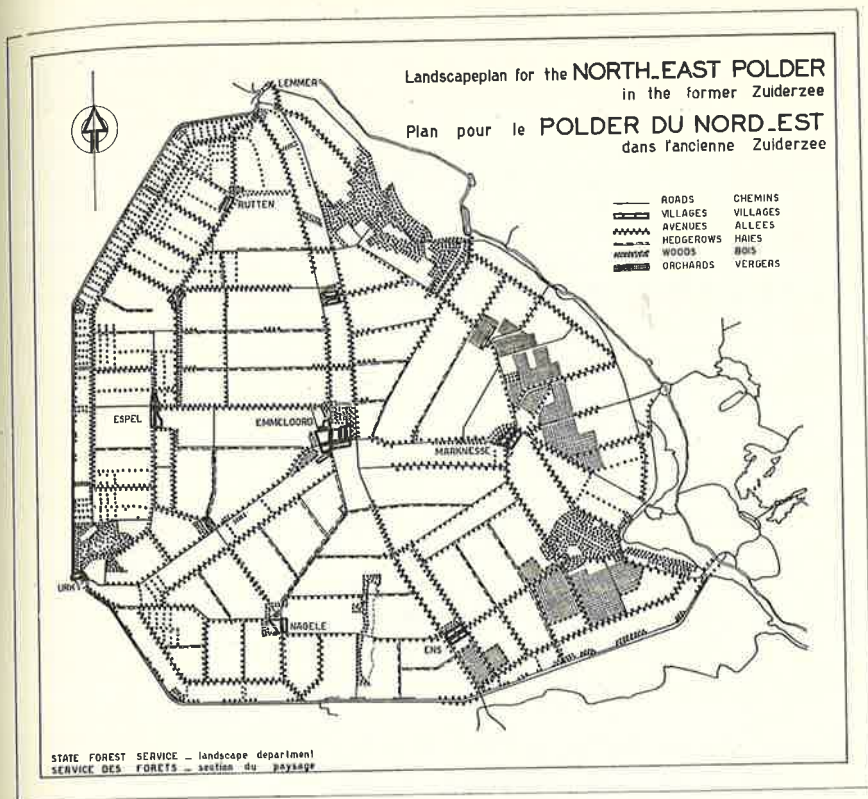
In certain cases we should even take in hand new projects for places where conditions are favourable to the development of habitats or vegetations that are no longer existant. In other words, the creation of new-nature-areas in suitable places where they are lacking is part of the landscape planner's task.

The development of the natural sciences, especially of ecology, and the experience gained in very intensive cultivation of the soil in densely populated countries have clearly shown the functional importance of a well-planned and healthy man-made landscape. We have learned to see the landscape and its parts not exclusively from the point of view of either aesthetics or profits. What we need now is a wider, more comprehensive occupation with nature and landscape than we have known before.

The preservation and management of nature reserves, the protection of certain species of plants and animals will be an essential part of this more comprehensive policy, *but still only a part*. And this policy should not be a national concern only. On the contrary international co-operation in this field is urgently needed. We may expect that these activities for the „treatment of nature“ or the „treatment of the landscape“ – in which both reconstruction and preservation will be main themes – will, on account of their greater comprehensiveness, also meet with more support and understanding on the part of the many other movements aiming at better relations between man and nature. We need only mention the advocates of soil conservation, improvement of the climate, increase of rural beauty, conservation of natural resources, nature study, game preservation, etc.

In this way it will become possible to appeal to a much larger portion of the world's population than is the case now, when interest in these matters is virtually confined to a small group of specialists. For an idea is only likely to become the driving force of a powerful social movement if it is accepted by large groups of people.

Teachers and school-children, scholars, scientists and plain workmen, farmers as well as town dwellers in search of recreation areas, all these and many more are involved in the struggle for the preservation of the world's natural wealth. To convert them to these ideals would mean an important step in our common action for a better world, a world in which



NORTH-EASTERN POLDER OF THE FORMER ZUYDERZEE

Unlike the reconstructed Walcheren, this vast, new agrarian area is divided up and ornamented by long straight avenues and windcreens, extensive woods and orchards and massively planted yards. These elements impart to this area a character not of romance, but of vigour and harmony.

LE POLDER N.E. DE L'ANCIENNE ZUYDERZEE

Par opposition au paysage de l'île de Walcheren celui de cette région agricole vaste et nouvelle est accentué par des allées et des écrans d'arbres longs et droits, des bois et des vergers étendus et de larges enclos plantés. Ces éléments donnent à cette région un caractère peu romantique, mais fort et harmonieux.

the closely interwoven interests of man and nature will be reconciled. Therefore the movement for the protection of nature should not remain in „splendid isolation”, but it will have to make known its ideals and to practice what it preaches wherever possible.

As a conclusion to my plea for planned constructive action towards the solution of the problem of nature and landscape I would like to quote one of the pioneers of the conservation movement, Professor Tansley:

„Whether we like it or not, large-scale planning for the postwar world is inevitable; but just as we can plan for freedom as well as for order, efficiency and material well-being in the political and social spheres, so we can plan for beauty and dignity in our physical surroundings. This matter involves the lay-out of our cities, towns and villages, but is also concerned, and no less vitally, with the treatment of the countryside”.