

Not lost forever: Restoring wilderness in Europe

A study featured in PAN Parks' 2002/2003 Winter Courier concluded that only 134 out of the examined 2926 European protected areas have PAN Parks' potential, with only a handful in Western Europe. Most protected areas are simply too small

and/or lack a suitable wilderness core zone. Experience teaches us that this number will dwindle even further. Can't the trend be reversed? Stroming is a consultancy firm. Its mission is to show that the trend can be reversed.

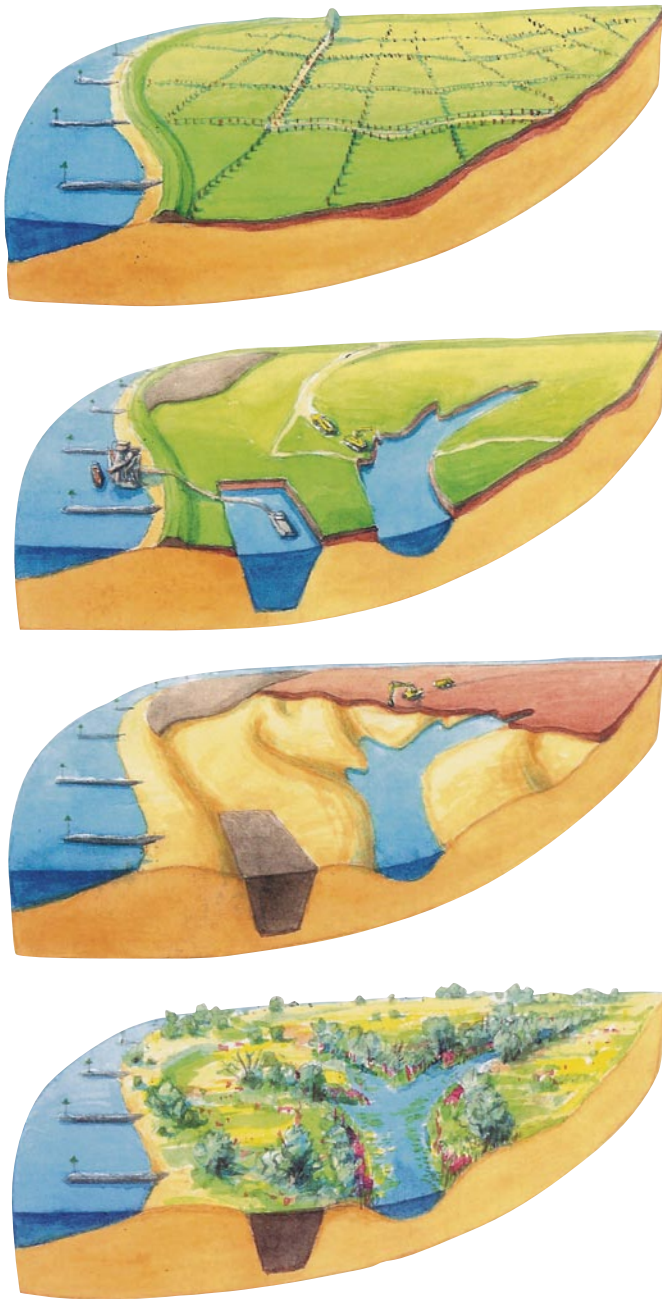


Figure 1:

Clay mining as a catalyst for nature restoration (Drawing by Jeroen Helmer)

Stroming is based in the Netherlands. With less than 4 million hectares and over 16 million, people the potential for restoration seems very limited. Still, that is what is happening. It may even be possible to establish a Dutch PAN Park within 10 years from now. And if this can happen in the Netherlands, why not anywhere else?

Living Rivers

In 1987, a report was launched stressing the point that river in nature is dynamic and will restore itself when given enough space and time. Commissioned by WWF Netherlands, Stroming pushed these ideas one step further in the Living Rivers report. This influential report describes how it is possible to restore ecologically the 400 kilometre-long Dutch river system. Living Rivers lead to WWF Netherlands' 1992 target to establish 200,000 hectares of new nature in the Netherlands within 10 years. The target was not fully achieved, but progress has been remarkable, with 55,000 hectares of conserved land and existing plans existing for another 90,000 hectares.

Stroming's approach

Crucial in Stroming's approach is the concept of the Genius of the Place. What are the ecological processes characteristic of an area and can those that were lost be revived? What social and commercial interests exist in the area?

The process in Figure 1 benefits the sand- and clay mining company; without a broadly accepted plan the company would not get a permit to mine. Nature obviously benefits as well. Furthermore river safety increases because there is more space for flood retention. An overwhelming majority (recent research shows 90%) of local people typically also support nature restoration, as they get extra recreational possibilities. Production of drinking water and local tourism companies may get new opportunities too. One would expect farmers to object because they lose land. However, in the vast majority of cases, farmers cooperate when they are adequately compensated - either financially or with (better quality) land.



Figure 2: Hondsbosche Zeewering; less dikes, more safety (Drawing by Jeroen Helmer)

Fewer dikes

Figure 2 is one of Stroming's answers for how to respond to rising sea levels because of climate change. At present a gap exists in the dune system of the province of North Holland. A large dike (the Hondsbosche Zeewering) fills this gap. Because of continuous coastal erosion the dike currently lies 100 m before the coastline - the weak spots being the "joints" with the dunes. On top of this, the area behind the dike is slowly sinking whereas the sea is rising. Stroming proposes to open the Hondsbosche Zeewering. A very un-Dutch thing to do, but wise nevertheless. It will result in a valuable 400 hectare estuary in which the sea will deposit sediments. The land will grow again: more than 3 meters in a century to 2 meters above the new (higher) sea level. The old sea dike (on the right in Figure 2) combined with the naturally "growing land" in front of it and the Hondbosche Zeewering acting as a breakwater, is strong enough to protect the land behind it.

The area will provide lots of opportunities for tourism. Restaurants can be uniquely positioned on both sides of the gap in the Hondsbosche Zeewering. There will be wonderful spots for campsites and bungalows. An extra advantage of this plan is that it will be easier to discharge surplus water from the polders into the sea.

A European dimension

In 2002 WWF asked Stroming to come up with nature restoration plans for a number of European areas. The future of the European landscape is to a large extent determined by agriculture, as this form of land-use takes up over 50% of Europe's land surface. Several millions of hectares may however be taken out of production. This could clearly have dramatic social impacts, but it also provides opportunities. Especially nature and tourism can benefit, with local economies changing and diversifying. Stroming looked at areas all over Europe and identified possible solutions, partners and new ways forward (see www.stroming.nl and click on "Europa").

When linking this way of thinking to PAN Parks, the conclusion has to be that there are many more than 134 potential PAN Parks in Europe. Areas wishing to become a PAN Park, but presently not meeting the Principles & Criteria, could try to identify the local Genius of the Place. Maybe things that were lost were not lost forever. Maybe commercial parties exist who are interested in participating in and paying for restoration. Stroming has learned that it is a long way from plan to implementation. But a long way is clearly better than no way at all.

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