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Hidden heritage in Dutch forests; management in practice

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Abstract

The interest in the management of cultural heritage in the Dutch forests is rising rapidly. After recreation and biodiversity it seems to become the topic in the years to come. Cultural heritage could be an interesting carrier for forest management. The goals of cultural heritage can be easily mixed with the other forest functions, such as biodiversity, wood production and recreation. It can sometimes be awkward in forest management, but it can also be a valuable source of inspiration for both forest management and afforestation.

The first step in the sustainable management of cultural heritage is to know what you have. Several methods can be used for this, e.g. historical maps, aerial pictures, historic field names, archives, oral history and in The Netherlands also the so-called 'Actual Heightfile Netherlands' (AHN). The Dutch woodlands contain ten thousands of historical elements. It is impossible to preserve all these elements, because it would turn the Dutch forest into a sort of open air museum. It will be necessary to develop a decision tool for forest managers to decide which elements to protect and which not with criteria such as rarity, completeness, characteristicness, information value, replacibility, etc. On the basis of this decision tool or a sound decision by forest managers the most important elements will have to be preserved, restored, renovated or accentuated. In day-to-day management many practical questions will have to be answered and many tough decisions being made.

1. Introduction

The interest in the management of cultural heritage in the Dutch forests is rising rapidly. After recreation and biodiversity it seems to become the topic in the years to come. It is widely recognised that not only urban areas but also landscapes with a historical entity are highly appreciated by their habitants and visitors. Rural tourism is an increasing economic driving factor for the Netherlands. In 2005 Stichting Probos has published a book on the history and management of our cultural heritage in Dutch forests and has reported on this in Sunne, Sweden (see proceedings). It is widely seen as a good starting point, but more steps have to be taken to enlarge the knowledge to forest management in practice.

2. Cultural heritage as a carrier for forest management

Cultural heritage could be an interesting carrier for forest management. The goals of cultural heritage can be easily mixed with the other forest functions, such as biodiversity, wood production and recreation. Cultural heritage is on the opposite site of the spectrum of naturalness, but many historical elements are important features for biodiversity as they are gradients in the forest. Embankments for example are important features for rare plants, mosses and amphibians. Historical roads and paths have a high value for light and sun demanding species such as butterflies.

Wood production was a mayor driving force behind afforestation from 1750 to 1935. Most of the Dutch woodlands have been planted in this period as the forest area grew from 100.000 ha to

360.000 ha nowadays. Wood production is therefore an integral part of forest management focused on cultural heritage.

People love to walk and bike in areas rich in historical heritage and discover their roots this way. This is probably also the main reason for the sharp incline in interest in cultural heritage. It might be some sort of reaction to globalisation. The tourism industry starts to acknowledge the value of historical landscapes, including forest, by promoting tourism based on cultural heritage.



Figure 1.
Mechanised harvesting of coppice woodlands to reduce costs

3. Cultural heritage as a source of inspiration

Cultural heritage can sometimes be awkward in forest management. For example, when trying to restore the natural hydrological situation historical elements can be destroyed. A tough decision is necessary in these situations and a thorough consideration of all different values is necessary (interest assessment). However, in practise we see the destruction of many historical features without this proper consideration or even without the knowledge of the values or the existence of these features.

In many cases cultural heritage can also be a source of inspiration for both forest management and afforestation. Every year about 1.500 to 2.500 ha of new forests are planted every year in The Netherlands. Cultural heritage only plays a limited role in the design process. Historical roads and path are for example planted and new paths established. Why not use the old paths and roads? And why not try to incorporate old loam pits into the design?

There are two ways to use cultural heritage as a source of inspiration for designing a new forest. First, it is possible to maintain the specific features of the agricultural land where the forest is being planted, e.g. the shape of the agricultural lots. Second, it is also possible to extend the typical features of nearby forest into the new forest, thereby maintaining the typical local or regional character of the forest. Not only the visible historical features can be used as a source of inspiration. Also the historical management, legends and folk tales and oral history can be used in the management today.



Figure 2.
Restoration of loam layer to keep the 'spreng' (manmade water channel) waterproof

4. Know what you have!

The first step in the sustainable management of cultural heritage is to know what you have. Only few woodlands in The Netherlands have been thoroughly inventoried on historical elements. The few that have shown an amazing number of elements, many of whom were not known before the inventory. Several methods were used in the inventories. Historical maps, aerial pictures and historic field names were studied, archives visited for relevant material, local people interviewed for their knowledge on more recent history (oral history) and the so-called 'Actual Heightfile Netherlands' (AHN) were investigated. The AHN-file reveals height differences of up to 10 cm in the field. Especially the AHN-file led to the discovery of many 'new' elements, such as Celtic fields and historical embankments.

After the first inventory it is not always clear what the elements are. What was it used for? How old is it? How was it managed? Again, relevant material from archives can be used for the analyses and oral history for the more recent elements.

5. What to protect?

The Dutch woodlands contain ten thousands of historical elements. It is impossible to preserve all these elements, because it would turn the Dutch forest into a sort of open air museum. However, there is no tool available to forest managers who tells them what to protect and what not. Such a tool is available for historical buildings and the first steps have been taken to develop such a tool for historical forest elements as well. It is obvious that criteria such as rarity, completeness, characteristicness, information value, replacibility, visibility and the consequences for other forest functions will be part of this decision tool for forest managers.



Figure 3.
Removing vegetation of manmade pool



Figure 4.
Removal of wildshoots to improve the visibility of this 11th century fortress wall

6. Management strategies

Four management strategies are available for historical features. With historical elements active management is nearly always necessary to preserve the current situation (preservation). Without active management many historical elements will be lost in time. With the upcoming of tourism based on cultural heritage, the visibility of our past is becoming more and more important. The second management strategy is therefore focusing on accentuation of the elements (picture 4). Restoration is possible if the element is still physically there. We call it reconstruction when there are no traces left of the elements other than the word it has been there.

7. Management in practice

Many forests are the outcome of the work of many generations. Every generation has left its traces and can still be seen in the forest today. This sometimes requires tough decisions. For example, a former boundary between agricultural land and woodlands consisted of an embankment with oak coppice planted on top (picture 5). The embankment can still be seen, but the original slope has been heavily eroded and most oaks have been outcompeted by the beeches that have been planted afterward. There are many management questions. For example, is it worthwhile to spend the money on restoring the original slope of the embankment and ditch? And does it have to be accompanied with the replanting of oak coppice on top of the embankment? As a light demanding species this would require the removal of many beech trees. To show the original function of the embankment it would be worthwhile to remove some of the forest on the former agricultural land. Just how far do you want to go in restoring the original landscape?

In the same forest area another interesting management question arises. Prehistoric burial mounds are seen as important historical features. The standard advice is to remove any vegetation from trees or shrubs from these mounds, because they could damage them. But what do you do when you have 122 burial mounds in your small forest area?



Figure 5. Speulderbos, The Netherlands



Figure 6. Restoration of part of 15th or 16th century forest embankment (total length 12 km)

8. The future

The interest in cultural heritage in The Netherlands is booming. It probably won't keep this position for very long, but for now we have to take advantage of it by doing the right thing. First, to avoid the destruction of historical elements unknowingly, many forest areas are inventoried for historical elements. Hopefully we will have a decision tool ready in the near future for forest managers to decide which elements to protect and which not. On the basis of this decision tool or a sound decision by forest managers the most important elements will have to be preserved, restored, renovated or accentuated on the basis of a thorough analyses.

However, the management of cultural heritage is expensive. It is therefore necessary to give it an economic basis. Cultural tourism is seen as a possible source of income, when forest owners and the recreation sector join hands. Some initiatives have already shown that it is certainly possible to stimulate cultural tourism to support local economies.