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Hoge Kempen National Park, Regionaal Landschap Kempen en Maasland vzw, Belgium

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HOGE KEMPEN NATIONAL PARK (Belgium)

In 2006, Regionaal Landschap Kempen en Maasland realized the first and up till now only national Park in Belgium. The realization happened on behalf of a wide consortium of governments (Flemish, provincial, municipal), administrations and agencies, and organizations who are working in the fields of nature and landscape care, heritage, recreation and tourism, regional development etc.

A multidisciplinary and continuously Project Agency was founded as an answer to (1) the constant need for integration (spatial planning, mobility, tourism, heritage, nature, landscape), (2) the complexity of the project and (3) uniform imaging and communication. Involvement and participation of all actors, inhabitants and visitors, are key in the operation of the Project Agency. That is the way to achieve recovery and constant protection for this grand and exceptional

landscape: involvement leads to the highest form of protection, which is often stronger than legal protection. Public indignation if something threatens to go wrong in 'our' National Park landscape, is a powerful tool in landscape management and conservation.

The National Park agency functions as an organization that stimulates administrations and organizations to take care for the quietness and space of the National Park, and – if and where possible – to cooperate. This comes from the core idea that a national park should keep on offering beauty, nature, silence, quietness, contemplation, space, fresh air, heritage,... Sustainable beauty is one of the core themes of the project. It proves to all visiting parties that taking care of a landscape is a responsibility for all of us dealing with nature, health care and stress relieve, spatial planning, economic development, science and culture, public transport and traffic.

The objective of the Hoge Kempen National Park project is to preserve the intrinsic value and quality and functional coherence of the Hoge Kempen landscape, to restore it where possible and to enhance it where necessary. With this in mind, a National Park occupying approximately 60 km², was demarcated in the centre of the Hoge Kempen region (2006) and supplied with quality reception infrastructure. Besides, the activities of the Project Agency are spread over the whole region of 200 km²

The project's implementation involved seven areas of activity:

1. Delimitation

Although the project is located in the broader Hoge Kempen region, the central and most valuable part was demarcated as a National Park in accordance with international norms and standards for national parks. Eighty percent of this area is public property and the government is implementing an active policy to acquire the remaining land and/or to make long-term agreements with the owners regarding appropriate management of the land. This perimeter will be consistently translated into policy instruments for nature and landscape care, spatial planning and so on, to guarantee sustainable protection.



2. Reducing fragmentation

In a densely populated region such as Flanders, it's proved to be impossible to protect an area without being intersected by roads. Therefore, the project also involves a far-reaching plan to reduce fragmentation with the road network managers.

One local road (4 km) and one main road (3 km) have been closed to all traffic and transformed into cycling paths.

An existing bridge spanning the E314 motorway was transformed into an 'ecoveloduct'. The 'Kikbeekbron', another ecoduct – for wildlife crossing – has become an important landmark.



3. Enclaves

As a result of poor spatial planning policy in the past, there are several conflicting functions within the perimeter of the National Park such as sand and gravel extraction, an industrial site, a automobile racing circuit and care institutions. An exit and transition scenario was developed for each of the ten enclaves.

In the meantime, two of the three large sand and gravel quarries (300 ha) have been reconstructed and integrated into the surrounding landscape. A sand processing factory (4 ha) was dismantled. Three car parks (3 ha) in the area were vacated and a care institution (30 ha) was purchased with a view to redeveloping it.

Exit scenarios were fine-tuned for other enclaves such as the automobile racing circuit and the industrial site (35 ha), but due to the duration of existing operating licenses, these scenarios are subject to a long lead time.



4. Organisation and management

The Agency for Nature and Forests is implementing an ambitious nature and landscape restoration plan. The focus is on blurring the sharp, man-made boundaries between woodland and heathland. The large concentrations of heathland were substantially increased due to the accelerated transformation of coniferous plantations.

Other efforts involve forcing back non-native species, restoring the hydrology and traditional heathland management.



5. Heritage

Management of the National Park and the surrounding woodland and nature areas is based on the preservation and enhancement of the cultural landscape of the heathland. It represents an ancient rural economy with an exceptional biodiversity.

Furthermore, since the beginning of the 20th century, the Hoge Kempen landscape has been marked by one of the largest coal mining operations in western Europe. The skyline is not just defined by the headgear and slag heaps but also and especially by the garden cities, which are unique ‘architectural landscapes’.

This rare combination of an interwoven and contrasting rural and industrial landscape is so unique that on 25 May 2011, the Hoge Kempen was included on the Belgian Tentative list to be considered as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The cultural value of the National Park is especially one of a cultural landscape that embodies obvious relicts of traditional land use. It can be combined with the coal mining heritage around the borders of the National Park. This is the core theme of the nomination file.

The National Park project devotes special attention to increasing the knowledge on this heritage site as well as on improving its protection and access.



6. Improved access and shared recreational use

Welcoming residents and visitors in a responsible and sustainable manner is one of the project’s key objectives.

Basically, the number of facilities does not need to be increased, just improved.

For example, the existing range of signposted walks was critically evaluated, resulting in a new, less extensive but better quality network of walking routes. Horse riders and cyclists are also

channelled through specific routes and not just in the National Park, but throughout the Hoge Kempen region as a whole, distributing the recreational strain more efficiently. As a result, the scope of the undisturbed zone in the National Park could be systematically increased.

A permanent maintenance service, comprising twelve workers, guarantees an outstanding landscape quality (cleaning up litter and illegal dumping, replacing damaged peripheral infrastructure, mowing verges, pruning vegetation alongside paths, etc.).



7. Welcoming visitors and tourism

The creation of six 'Gateways' into the National Park is key to this operational activity. Each one recounts part of the landscape story to the visitor, provides the necessary facilities (car park, sanitary facilities, cafeteria, information desk, etc.) and represents a tourist destination in itself (planetarium, petting farm, rail-cycle, barefoot trail, etc.).

Because the gateways are located outside the National Park, sometimes even a few kilometres away, they ensure that the landscape quality boost created by the National Park is spread across the region. Moreover, they prevent excessively high levels of recreational stress in the actual National Park and help manage mobility (collective car park, range of public transportation). Many car parks in and around the National Park have been vacated.

The gateways were given a landscape 'facelift'.

In **Kattevennen (Genk)**, the existing buildings were demolished and the facilities were reorganised into a single, central building. The domain was pedestrianised and an impressive stone garden emphasises the Hoge Kempen's geological value.

The oldest railway station in Limburg, **Station As (As)**, was restored, the platforms were reconstructed and a replica of a wooden derrick from the pioneering coal mining period was installed.

In **Lieteberg (Zutendaal)**, which is located in an old gravel quarry, a landscape plan was implemented that transformed the site into a green oasis. It forms the basis for a much broader landscape restoration plan for the southern edge of the Kempen Plateau. The 'Panorama der Kempen' (1954, Charles Wellens, oil paint, 33 m x 2 m), which found permanent refuge here, is highly significant.

In **Mechelse Heide (Maasmechelen)**, a factory site was redeveloped to create a gateway and the landscape was reconstructed. Visitors with disabilities can explore the Hoge Kempen's most striking landscapes using the wheelchair route (which includes the dunes, marsh- and heathland).

In **Pietersheim (Lanaken)**, a landscape restoration plan was established for the 80 ha castle domain. Lanes were restored, grassy fields were transformed into meadows and the area around the castle was pedestrianised.

The unique water castle ruins were consolidated and reclassified, in a very daring manner, as a visitor centre. It led to winning the Flemish Monument Award in 2010.

A main gateway has recently been opened (April 2014): **Connecterra**. It is located on the former mining site of Eisden (Maasmechelen) and holds the two shaft towers (listed as monument). The gateway offers visitors a unique panorama of lakes and 'mountains' – the result of former industrial activities at the site and subsequent redevelopment actions.

All gateways are designed using the same landscape elements (wood, pebbles, lean grassland, tall oaks) for a consistent visibility throughout the region. The design of the gateways was honoured with the award for best design of public spaces in Flanders (2008).

At the moment, annual visitor numbers to the (region of the) National Park amount to 800,000: these include walkers, cyclists, horse riders and people visiting one of the gateways.



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