

Accompanying text for the candidate file

Kempense Heuvelrug between Kleine Nete and Aa, Antwerp Kempen, where a biography of the landscape brings together the past, future and people.

Landscape conservation with a vision for the future: from scientific biography to experiential landscape

In the heart of the Antwerp Kempen, the Kempense Heuvelrug stretches like a 15 km sand ridge through the municipalities of Kasterlee, Lille, Herentals, Vorselaar and Grobbendonk. This striking landscape structure — formed by millions of years of geological processes — not only connects dune and valley systems, but today forms the backbone of an innovative area-based initiative that uniquely connects landscape, heritage, tourism and local communities.

The **Kempense Heuvelrug area initiative** is a pioneering project based on an innovative methodology of **landscape biography** and **landscape vision**. Since its first application in Flanders in 2015, this approach has grown into a recognised methodology for integrated area initiatives around landscape. The methodology was rolled out across the entire ridge (5,000 ha), with the aim of not only protecting and better caring for the landscape, but also making it **legible, experiential and meaningful** for residents and visitors.

Mapping the soul of the landscape

A landscape biography reads the landscape as a layered story of geological origins, natural processes and the interaction between people and the environment. It describes how the landscape has been formed, used and appreciated over time. This approach, linked to a forward-looking vision, offers an integrated strategy for landscape conservation, heritage protection, tourism and spatial planning.

The publications '**Landscape Biography and Vision of the Kempen Ridge**' between Lichtaart and Kasterlee (2015) and '**Kempen Ridge and Valleys: Herentals and Surroundings**' (2021) formed the basis for a renewed collaboration between local authorities, nature conservation organisations, tourist services and heritage partners. The impact of these publications is tangible: **more than 1.5 million euros in investments** were made in landscape management, landscaping, heritage conservation, tourist reception and product development.

An integrated approach with lasting impact

The Kempen Ridge has become an **example of integrated landscape management** in Flanders. By connecting sectors and focusing on **experience, understanding and protection**, the landscape became the compass for a variety of policy objectives: climate adaptation, recreational development, heritage conservation, biodiversity enhancement and broadening support.

Over the past ten years, this has resulted in numerous achievements:

- more than **10 hectares of nature conservation and landscape restoration** (restoration of dune landscapes, heathland vegetation, fens, burial mounds, Celtic field complexes, historic fields and hedgerows)
- better **forest management at sensitive sites** such as Celtic fields and parabolic dunes,
- **softening of roads**, construction of slow roads and tree management plans,
- development of educational and recreational products, including the tourist project '**The Sleeping Giant**', with land art, wheelchair-friendly paths and play infrastructure, and

experiential offerings that draw on the area's natural and cultural-historical riches.

Tourism was deliberately used as a lever: not merely for experience, but as a driver for landscape conservation and awareness. **Geo-tourism products** such as walking routes, information points and landscape art highlight the unique geological values, cultural-historical landscapes and stories of the area and region.

The Sleeping Giant awakens

The landscape vision was translated into tangible form in the '**Sleeping Giant**' tourism development plan, which focuses on geology, archaeology and cultural history as vehicles for experience. Visitors are invited to read the landscape through mystical stories, heritage sites, sandpits with prehistoric urns and relics, the **Giant Roller Path** for people with disabilities, an autism-friendly offering, and playful and fun tourist products for the whole family, such as interactive audio trails like the Trekjan trail, which explores the mythical and ancient stories of the area.

A highlight of this plan is the **land art project 'A Giant Sculpture'** by Gijs Van Vaerenbergh, beautifully embedded at the top of the Hoge Mouw parabolic dune. The sculpture responds to the centuries-long interaction between man and nature, and how this sculpture has emerged as an archaeological chance find. At the same time, it highlights the vulnerability of the landscape and the erosion-prone dunes.

The combination of art, nature and landscape tourism not only enhances the identity of the place, but also strengthens support among residents and local entrepreneurs. Catering establishments received training to become **ambassadors for the landscape** and more than 70 **landscape guides** were trained.

A model for Flanders, with a European perspective

The Kempen Ridge became the **testing ground for Flanders**: 15 landscape biographies have now been completed and two new ones are being started. The methodology inspires other regions and demonstrates how a landscape vision supported by broad partnerships can lead to concrete, sustainable change on the ground.

The collaboration is now firmly established, with the participation of local authorities and Flemish agencies, but also has **transnational potential**, including through the recent establishment of the **Bodemverbond Kempense Heuvelrug (Kempen Hills Soil Alliance)**, which is further developing and researching the creation of a **geopark**. The region has the potential to become a **geopark destination**, with a focus on soil richness, natural processes and the story of man in relation to the landscape.

Implementation of the European Landscape Convention

The Kempense Heuvelrug project is a striking application of the **European Landscape Convention**, with a focus on:

- **awareness-raising and education** (through guides, publications, films, educational packages),
- **participation** (more than 1,500 books distributed, interactive routes and experiences, working with partners and citizens on and in the area)
- **sustainable tourism** (tailored to capacity, natural values and heritage, people with care needs or limited mobility)
- **policy anchoring** (integrated into local policy, incentive for implementation of Flemish and European policy),
- **heritage and landscape conservation** (design and management with an eye for soil, geology, cultural history).

Landscape as a starting point, not an end point

The Kempense Heuvelrug proves that a landscape biography is not merely a scientific report, but a **driver for transformation**. It is an invitation to cooperation, solidarity and care for our living environment. This project not only made a unique landscape legible, but also developed an innovative working method that is future-oriented, participatory and integrated.

The Sleeping Giant is no longer a mythical figure, but a living landscape — awake and wiser — showing the Kempen, Flanders and Europe how landscape can connect, inspire and strengthen.

More information

Website: www.kempenseheuvelrug.be

Promotional film: [EXPERIENCE THE KEMPEN HILLS](#) 

Submitted by: Regional Landscape Kleine and Grote Nete in collaboration with

Partnership: Tourism Province of Antwerp, IOED Land van Nete en Aa, Province of Antwerp, Provincial Domain Hoge Mouw, municipalities of Kasterlee, Lille, city of Herentals, Agency for Immoveable Heritage, Agency for Nature and Forests, Bosgroep Kempen Noord, Natuurpunt Kempen, KU Leuven, De Brink youth domain Hopper, school GO! 3master Kasterlee, Erfgoed Noorderkempen, local guides.