

UNESCO Man and Biosphere *Maasheggen*

Project Summary:

De Maasheggen is a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve that focuses on the relationship between humans and their environment. It combines the protection of landscapes, heritage, and nature with the promotion of the development of both people and their living surroundings. The preservation of the landscape is supported by local communities, with economic activities balanced alongside ecological and landscape values. It is a place where people live, work, enjoy, and thrive together.

Since being granted UNESCO status in 2018, significant developments have taken place in the Maasheggen area: several kilometers of new hedgerows have been planted, existing hedgerows and trees are being restored and better managed, land parcels have been exchanged, streams have been addressed, and ponds and other landscape elements have been created. Local hedges are being forged and placed, and the craft of hedge laying has been revived as a living and current tradition. More and more farmers in the Maasheggen area are integrating the specific characteristics of the landscape into their farming practices. New cycling routes and walking maps make it more attractive than ever for tourists and recreational visitors to explore the area. Entrepreneurs showcase their personal and business ties to De Maasheggen by developing and jointly marketing regional products, earning the title of certified Maasheggen Ambassador. The Maasheggen Friends Club is a thriving and growing community. There is also the Maasheggenkids program for children, and students and researchers frequently visit the area to study plant and animal species, as well as historically grown cultural practices.

Dutch Jury Report:

The jury was pleasantly surprised by the quality of the submissions. It is a diverse palette of rural and urban projects, ranging from long-term initiatives to short-term projects, all aimed at improving the quality of the landscape for people. These projects fit within the criteria of the European Landscape Award, thereby fulfilling the goals of the European Landscape Convention of the Council of Europe. De Maasheggen was unanimously chosen as the winner. The jury was impressed by the wide range of initiatives being undertaken to sustainably enhance the area, benefiting nature, the landscape, heritage, and people.

De Maasheggen stands out for its strong “bottom-up” approach, deeply rooted in the area itself. A great deal of attention has been given to the restoration and strengthening of biodiversity and history. The activities cater to both young and old. The collaboration with farmers is praised, as they are supported through long-term contracts that focus on nature- and landscape-friendly agriculture, with an additional focus on health. A health program has been established, and a local doctor is part of the steering group. Through an Integral Care Agreement a cooperation with health insurers has been set up.

The landscape of De Maasheggen provides economic stimulation for entrepreneurs, not only in terms of tourism and recreation but also in the creation of various regional products. Through Maasheggen farmers and Maasheggen Ambassadors, a local and regional market has been created from which entrepreneurs can benefit.

The Maasheggen area is, as the name suggests, characterized by its Maasheggen, or traditional hedgerows. A great deal of physical effort has gone into maintaining and strengthening this unique cultural landscape in collaboration with all involved. To date, 10

kilometers of new hedgerows have been created. Combined with the establishment or restoration of ponds and the creation of herb-rich fields, biodiversity has been restored and enhanced. Additionally, the cultural-historical quality of the area has been revived.

The Maasheggen has brought the traditional craft of hedge laying back into the spotlight. The Dutch Hedge Laying Championship takes place annually, courses are offered, and other areas of the Netherlands have also caught the "hedge virus." This effort has also led to hedge laying being included in the inventory of intangible cultural heritage. To top it off, in 2018, the area received the UNESCO Man and Biosphere status.

In short, the jury believes that De Maasheggen is a unique initiative in Europe. It embodies the idea of the European Landscape Convention, which emphasizes that a landscape is shaped by people in interaction with nature. It is an area without a grand master plan, and without a single organization that drives all the goals. The strength lies in the collaboration and the shared vision. Step by step, the quality of the landscape and the connection to society are being improved. The new focus areas of the European Landscape Convention, including attention to health and the role landscapes can play in addressing various crises related to climate and biodiversity, are wonderfully embodied in this project.