

Performing failure in conservation policy. The implementation of European Union directives in the Netherlands.

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This is a revised personal version of the article published in Land Use Policy: Beunen, R., K. Van Assche, M. Duineveld, 2013. Performing failure in conservation policy. The implementation of European Union directives in the Netherlands. Land Use Policy 31 (1): 280-288: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.landusepol.2012.07.009>

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Abstract. In this article we present the results of a study towards the reality effects of discourses affecting the implementation of Natura 2000 in the Netherlands. The Dutch case shows how fast deinstitutionalization of conservation policies can take place. Traditions of conservation are disrupted as an unintended consequence of international policy. This study shows that conservationists and others involved in nature conservation should pay more attention to the ways in which conservation needs and practices are represented and institutionalized, how these representations become embedded in more general narratives and how the new institutions are bound to be gamed and re-narrated themselves.

1 Introduction

The European Union has had an increasing influence on the Member States' nature conservation policies since the nineteen seventies. The Birds Directive (79/409/EEC) and the Habitats Directive (92/43/EEC) have proved especially influential in changing many states' policies (Alphandéry and Fortier, 2001). Following these directives, Member States have to designate protected areas and adapt their legislative framework for biodiversity conservation. Together these protected sites form the Natura 2000 network, so the policy is often referred to as the Natura 2000 policy. In many Member States the implementation of the Natura 2000 policy requires additions to or adaptation of other institutions that have been developed to protect nature, like national parks and ecological corridors. The EU directives had the potential to enable both convergence and divergence of conservation policies (Beunen and Duineveld, 2010) and a wide variety of legal translations and scale-dependent

implementations have been observed (Apostolopoulou and Pantis, 2009; Ferranti et al., 2010; Elliott and Udovč, 2005; Prazan et al., 2005; Paavola, 2004).

The implementation of Natura 2000 (and therefore the underlying EU directives) has created a lot of animosity and plenty of lively, sometimes even hostile, discussions in many Member States, including the Netherlands (Rauschmayer et al., 2009; Mehtälä and Vuorisalo, 2007; Coffey and Richartz, 2003; Stoll-Kleemann, 2001; Ledoux et al., 2000). Many actors involved in the implementation process do not consider Natura 2000 to be a success (Franx and Bouwmeester, 2010). The perceived effects of Natura 2000 not only include increased procedural complexity in spatial decision making and a brake on economic development, but also include a de facto undermining of the support for nature conservation in general (Bleker, 2011a; 2011b).

Dutch nature conservation policy took a century to develop and bloom (Doevendans et al., 2007; Dekker, 2002; De Jong, 2000; Van Loon et al., 1996; Van der Windt, 1995) and, it seems now, only a decade to slip into a deep crisis (Dekker, 2011; Bredenoord et al., 2011). The aim of this article is to explain how the problematic implementation of the EU Birds and Habitats directives caused the negative attitude towards nature conservation and the crisis in Dutch nature conservation policy. We analyze the implementation of Natura 2000 as a performance of failure.

Prior to the implementation of Natura 2000, the main objective of Dutch nature conservation policy was the creation of a national ecological network (Doevendans et al., 2007; Groote et al., 2006; Van der Heijden, 2005). At the national level, the growing importance of nature conservation culminated in a 1990 policy (Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality, 1990) that provided a framework to govern the designation of protected areas. The national government was spurred into action and critically monitored by conservation organizations that, as they grew, slowly came into the orbit of the government.

Meanwhile, pragmatic adaptation marked the Dutch spatial planning system, with unified technocratic (and supposedly science-based) discourse emanating from the national and regional bureaucracies and flexible interpretation at the local level (Rientjes, 2002). The conservation goals that entered the planning system through the national bureaucracies, the private and semi-governmental conservation lobbies, and, sometimes, local politics became part of a system of deliberate land use that was not determined by plans, but by a selective and often creative use, recombination and adaptation of them (Beunen and Hagens, 2009; Van Assche et al., 2012). A wide variety of actors could be involved in negotiations and deliberations at the local level, producing a semblance of conformity with higher level policies and a dose of local adaptation (Groote et al., 2006). This allowed for different plans and

rules to prevail in different cases and it allowed for an institutionalized reflection on the relationship between protected areas and their environment.

Despite praise from many sides, there were also some problems. The perceived top-down approach, persistent conflicts with agricultural actors and problematic communication with other stakeholders were criticized (Doevendans et al., 2007; Notenboom et al., 2006; Van der Heijden, 2005; Aarts, 1998). With the implementation of the Birds and Habitats directives, the character and impact of this criticism changed dramatically. The directives, which governed the designation and delineation of Natura 2000 sites, seemingly forced a deliberation of land use at the national level, since the process forced early study and early decisions on the relationship between a protected site and its environment.

In the following section, we describe the method we applied. Then we introduce the theoretical framework that guided our analysis, a series of concepts derived from discourse theory, cultural studies and narrative theory. This is followed by a discussion of the most important findings and some concluding remarks.

2 Method

We drew upon a thorough reconstruction of the evolution of communication about and practical implementation of Natura 2000 in the Netherlands, combining an analysis of the discussion about its integration into national policies with a study of the designation of particular Natura 2000 sites. We reconstructed local debates about consequences for economic development and analyzed policy documents, proceedings of formal hearings, reports and scientific articles about Natura 2000. Furthermore, we analyzed the ways in which Natura 2000 was covered in various media, including national and regional newspapers, journals and internet sites. This material was combined with interviews and conversations with representatives of governmental organizations, NGOs, stakeholders' representatives, land owners, farmers and entrepreneurs that took place between 2003 and 2011.

The research was conducted in three campaigns. The first campaign ran from 2003 to 2005 (45 interviews) and focused on problems with the Birds and Habitats directives that were experienced during the planning and decision making processes (Beunen, 2006). The second campaign, from 2007 to 2008, paid more attention to debates about the selection of Natura 2000 sites and the ways in which Natura 2000 was integrated in other policies and plans. This included participating in debates about Natura 2000, visiting a public hearing about the designation of Natura 2000 sites (Table 1) and studying the formal complaints that were addressed to the designation of sites (Veerman, 2003).

A third campaign began in 2009; we hoped to gain more insights into the formulation of management plans for the Natura 2000 sites. We conducted a case study (Beunen and De Vries, 2010) and enriched our understanding of the formulation processes by interviewing 15 government representatives who were responsible for the formulation of management plans (Table 1). Most of the interviews were semi-structured using a list of topics which included their general perspectives on the evolution of nature conservation policies and their experiences with the designation of specific sites in particular.

We also attended five public meetings (Table 1) that were organized by the responsible authorities (the Ministry and the provinces) as part of the designation process to explain the policy process, offer people the opportunity to ask questions and address concerns about Natura 2000. During these meetings, we made observations and sound recordings and we analyzed how specific issues were framed and which roles different actors played in the discussion.

This material was used to reconstruct the evolution of Dutch nature conservation practices as influenced by the implementation of the Birds and Habitats directives. The materials were coded for emerging narratives of failure and success, ascription criteria, problem topics and motivations. We mapped the evolution of the different discourses and their interactions over time and paid particular attention to the ways in which the different discourses were reflected in the debates at the different planning and decision making sites, and were in return affected by these debates.

3 Theoretical framework: performance and performativity of success and failure

Our theoretical perspective on success and failure in policy derives from narrative theory, discourse theory, rhetoric and cultural studies. Our basic assumption is that ascriptions of success or failure not only describe a certain state of affairs but are integral parts of performances that contribute to the construction of that state of affairs (cf. MacKenzie et al., 2007; Rap, 2006; Van Raaij, 2006; Mosse, 2004).

Our basic concept is *discourse* as a structured understanding of a part or aspect of reality, necessarily normative in nature (Foucault, 1982; Bal and Bryson, 1991). In the tradition of Michel Foucault, we understand discourses as networked concepts; one type of conceptual structure that has been particularly successful throughout history is *narrative*. Narrative structures are formal structures that can render discursive materials more real and more compelling by introducing temporal, spatial and emotional order (Bal, 1993; 2002). This is a generic semiotic understanding of narrative, inspired by Mieke Bal and Umberto Eco (Bal and Bryson, 1991; Bal, 1993; 2002; Eco, 1984; Tomaščíková, 2009).

By shaping our understanding of things and events, narratives can have reality effects. They contribute to the social construction of reality; in other words, they are *performative* (Bialasiewicz et al., 2007; MacKenzie et al., 2007). A certain narrative becomes performative when it is widespread in society, especially among elites (Foucault, 1994), and when it becomes institutionalized in administration and education (Ball, 2003). Performativity is an essential feature of the discursive construction of social worlds: things appear true because of prior discourse (Butler, 1997; MacKenzie et al., 2007). While the term *performativity* is often associated with the linguistic philosopher Austin and his theory of speech acts, it led its own life in the post-structuralist traditions inspired by Foucault, Lacan and Deleuze. We line up with the Foucaultian interpretation: our realities are continuously “blackboxed” in the sense that we forget, hide or mask their constructed, contingent and temporal nature (Foucault, 1982; Law, 2004; Fuchs, 2001; Latour and Woolgar, 1986). Yet, just as with a musical score or a film script, the power of narrative to alter our understanding of things crucially depends on the quality of *performance*.

Performance can be characterized as people bringing narrative to life and it can be described as a process of interpretation and embodiment of narrative (Nash, 2000). This is necessarily a process of selection among alternatives and, possibly, the creation of a new interpretation (Bal, 2002; 1993). As in a post-structuralist understanding of the world everything is discursively constructed, *everything is subjected to performance* (Brewer, 1985; Langellier, 1999). The truth effects of everything in society hinge on its performance. In the literature on performance, a wide range of social practices have been deconstructed as performance: looking and remembering (Bagnall, 2003), identity (Butler, 1997; Saloul, 2008) or critique and theory (Brewer, 1985). Closer to policy studies, steering (Lloyd, 1999; Czarniawska, 2008), control (Munro, 1999), leadership (Hodgson, 2005; Spicer et al., 2009) and governance (Mercer, 2003) are demonstrated performance sites.

In modern society, the truth effects of performance are likely to be catalyzed by subsumption in a structure of roles. The pose of sincerity as a performance of authenticity (Van Alphen et al., 2009) can be made superfluous once truth is associated with routinized roles (cf. Foucault, 1984; Scott, 1985; Czarniawska, 2008). The importance of performance in truth construction brings the *rhetorical context* to the foreground. It forces a reflection on the *positionality* of the performance: time, location, occasion, audience, genre and role must be interpreted correctly in order to persuade. Uniquely embodied performances can have unique performative effects, something that might have been forgotten in early, linguistically inspired versions of semiotics and post-structuralism (Nash, 2000; Bal, 2002; Butler, 1997). We are always part of an audience, absorbing some form of staged and ritualized behavior, but that does not make it entirely reducible to the pattern of ritual (Barad, 2003; Jackson, 2004).

Narratives of policy success and failure include recurring structural features: heroes and villains, dramatic episodes, driving forces and obstacles, a climax, spurring to further action (failure) or maintaining the balance (success) (Rap, 2006; Hajer, 2005; Mosse, 2005; Sandercock, 2003; Vaara, 2002; Abu-Lughod, 1992; Austin, 1962). Stories about success and failure are part of a continually shifting *discursive environment* where the narrative can or cannot be linked to criteria, characters, story lines and events in other discourses (Van Raaij, 2006; Van Assche et al., 2012). This discursive environment must be understood as the broader rhetorical context.

In policy narratives, the discursive environment is almost certain to include institutionalized roles and discourses and it co-determines the potential success of a certain perspective on success and failure (Munro, 1999; Latour, 2004). New or decaying discourses in the environment and new discursive coalitions can contribute to the persuasiveness of a particular success or failure narrative (Sumares and Fidélis, 2011). The more dominant a certain interpretation of success becomes, the harder it becomes to take alternative positions and the more likely it is to be institutionalized. Conversely, the more dominant a certain institution becomes, the more likely it is that the associated narratives will be performative (Foucault, 1984; Scott, 1985; Butler, 1997).

Ascriptions of success and failure should be considered to be mechanisms that *reinforce path dependencies in policy implementation* (Van Assche et al., 2012; 2011a). Once success ascriptions are considered true, and especially when these ascriptions and the underlying discursive structures and criteria are anchored in institutions, they tend to keep governance evolving on the same track (see already Pressman and Wildavsky, 1979). Yet in the case of policy success and failure, performance and performativity do not presuppose each other (Bal, 2002). Performances of success or failure can render a certain understanding of policy results real and they can render the narrative widely acceptable, but this does not happen automatically (Throgmorton, 1996; Sandercock, 2003). The effects of performance cannot entirely be determined by a mere use of the formulaic narratives, routines, roles and rituals that seem to guarantee truth effects on a certain occasion (Wagner and Wodak, 2006; Jackson, 2004).

Much work has been done on the performativity of policy discourses (Turnhout et al., 2010; Waage and Benediktsson, 2009; Hajer and Uitermark, 2008; MacKenzie et al., 2007; Bialasiewicz et al., 2007; Hajer, 2005). However, the relationship between performance and performativity has been investigated in a policy context much less frequently (Van Assche et al., 2012). We investigate this relationship in the study of the performance of failure in the Dutch implementation of Natura 2000, and its remarkable performativity.

4. Results

4.1 The implementation of Natura 2000 in the Netherlands: destabilizing discussions

For a detailed overview of Dutch Natura 2000 implementation history, we refer to the series of scientific papers, reports and policy documents that appeared in the last decade (Beunen and Van Ark, 2007; Algemene Rekenkamer, 2007; Bastmeijer and Verschuuren, 2003; Van der Zouwen and Van Tatenhove, 2002). In this section, we present our analysis of that history in terms of the performance of failure and based on the materials we gathered. We identify the destabilizing effects of this particular implementation path, investigate how different players came to embrace an interpretation as failure, show how a combination of strategy, miscalculation and coincidence strengthened the performativity of the failure narrative, and demonstrate how alternative understandings were marginalized once the interpretation as failure was entrenched.

The EU Habitats and Birds directives led to the conception of the Natura 2000 network of protected areas. The Habitats Directive stipulates a procedure for balancing species and habitat protection on one hand and potentially harmful human activities on the other (EC, 1992). The directive does not address how nature and human activities have to be balanced, where the deliberation should take place, whether it should be embedded in spatial planning or not, or which kind of rules and policies should be employed in the implementation (EEC, 1992; 1979; CEC, 2000; cf. Barroso, 2009). It only stipulates that valuable habitats require delineation and protection, and that this protection needs to have consequences for human use (i.e., it ought to provoke an informed discussion whenever human use threatens to alter these high-quality habitats).

4.1.1 Court cases

Initially, the Ministry of Agriculture and Nature (LNV, presently merged into the Ministry of Economic Affairs, Agriculture and Innovation) was the leading actor in the selection and delineation of Natura 2000 sites. Most of the other actors involved in the process, as well as other governmental actors and nature conservation organizations, were positive. Indeed, implementation of Natura 2000 was often deemed a formality because the Dutch conservation model was considered to be the model for the European directives (Van der Zouwen and Van Tatenhove, 2002).

This perception changed after a small environmental NGO, Das en Boom, successfully used the Habitats Directive to challenge the development of a new business park in Heerlen in court. Their legal victory stirred a lot of media attention (Van der Zouwen and Van Tatenhove, 2002; Verschuuren and Van Wijmen, 2002). According to Das en Boom, the permitting process was incomplete since the impact studies required by the Habitats Directive were not conducted. The judges agreed (Raad van State, 1999; 2000; 2003).

After a string of court cases, many actors became aware of the potential impact of the Birds and Habitats directives. In the following years, more developments and activities were challenged in court based on these directives. Important cases include the extension of the A73 highway, the fishing rights for cockles in the Wadden Sea (Swart and Van Andel, 2008), and the enlargement of the Port of Rotterdam (Palerm, 2006). A strong rhetorical impact of these cases could be observed: more and more actors were inspired to refer to the EU directives in court, in order to stop developments they deemed undesirable. The number of court cases where EU conservation directives played a role increased quite dramatically (Figure 1).

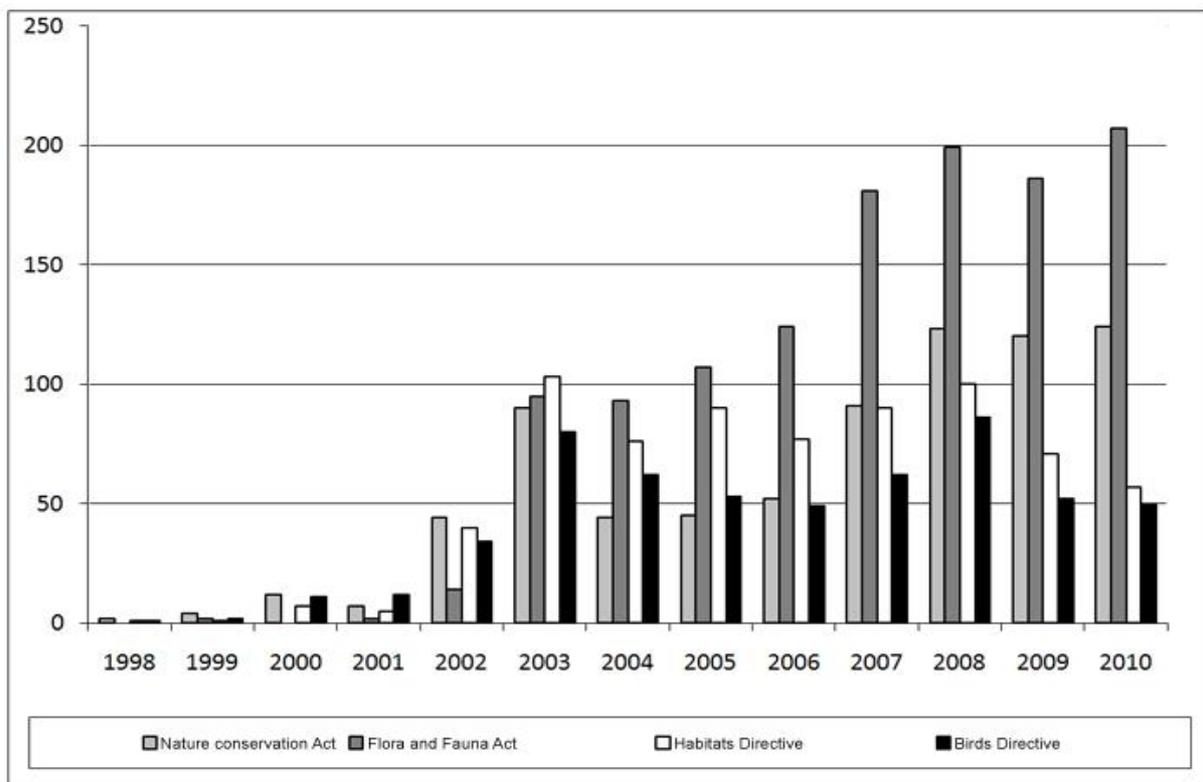


Figure 1. Number of lawsuits related to conservation laws.

The nature of the court cases varied significantly. Nature conservation and the EU directives sometimes played a pivotal role, while their role was peripheral in other cases. Figure 1 also does not show the verdicts in these cases. Often, the plaintiff lost the case or a project that was initially blocked by the courts finally went forward after extra studies were carried out (Beunen, 2006). As a consequence of the court cases and the media attention, the legal aspects of conservation policy became more and more central in the deliberations of the actors involved. Both governmental and private parties became sharply aware of these EU directives' procedural requirements and their transposition into Dutch nature conservation legislation.

In the first years after 2000, most actors were surprised that the presence of small creatures (e.g., the hamster, *Cricetus cricetus*, the Natterjack toad, *Epidalea calamita*, or the sand lizard, *Lacerta agilis*) was sufficient reason to stop large developments. Surprise quickly turned into irritation and frustration because developers, entrepreneurs and involved governments perceived that the legal requirements caused costly delays, expensive lawsuits and lingering uncertainty.

Uncertainty and frustration were vented in many ways, through many channels. Informational gatherings, media, local political councils and planning commissions all provided fora to express dissatisfaction. Media coverage of the EU directives turned more and more negative, with headlines like “Nature rules block economy”, “Protected species threat to policy makers”, “Natura 2000 paralyses the economy”, “Nature conservation leads to loss of jobs” and “Farmers locked up by Natura 2000”. Very few journalists distinguished between the EU directives as such and their Dutch implementation or between implementation of the EU directives and nature conservation in general. Nature conservation became increasingly viewed as a brake on economic development. Natura 2000 was also presented as a policy that was imposed by something extraneous, a European Union that had already been used as a scapegoat by politicians in previous years (Koopmans, 2007; Harmsen, 2004).

4.1.2 Management plans

A special commission was established to address the problems attributed to Natura 2000 and an investigation was carried out (Werkgroep Vogel- en Habitatrichtlijnen, 2003). Following this study, the national government decided to require a management plan for each Natura 2000 site. The expectation was that a detailed local management plan could provide sufficient clarity about the local implications of Natura 2000 designation for the site itself and its environment. It was also expected that production of the management plan would provide a time and place for local interests to meet and to balance conservation and development in a manner more informed by local politics and local knowledge.

The new tool did not perform as expected, however. In subsequent years, the frustrations around Natura 2000 grew steadily and resistance increased accordingly (Beunen and De Vries, 2010). A new round of information evenings was organized, this time focusing on the production and role of management plans. We visited five of these events and all of them were marked by a negative, confrontational atmosphere where people expressed their disappointment and anxiety about Natura 2000 and associated tools. It was also clear that representatives of diverse economic interests and sectors used this round of meetings as a forum to publicly attack nature conservation. “All is locked” became a catchphrase, echoed at many occasions and in the media. Moderators, governmental actors and conservation organizations had a mostly subdued response and usually did not even dispel misinterpretations of Dutch and EU rules and plans.

By presenting the formulation of the management plan as an interactive process, the government gave other actors the impression that the space for negotiation about the conservation objectives was much bigger than it actually was (Schotsman, 2010). Real deliberation options were rarely observed because of the conceptual separation of the Natura 2000 discussion from the existing planning forums, a separation that was strengthened by the legalist interpretation of Natura 2000.

The EU directive could have been embedded in existing traditions of spatial planning, where most of the Natura 2000 sites de facto already had a form of protection. These areas had usually been studied extensively already and a balancing of conservation and development interests had already taken place in various councils and departments. By separating a legal framing of nature conservation from existing political deliberations on spatial planning and nature conservation, and by subsequently bungling the implementation process of the new conservation style, few deliberation options were seen to be left between interest groups. Old decision-making sites lost their importance and legitimacy in the eyes of stakeholders who suddenly placed the final decisions with the courts (Beunen and De Vries, 2010; cf. interviews).

4.1.3 Media

By reading newspaper articles about Natura 2000, one can discern many of the same topics and discourses we observed at the public meetings and distilled from stakeholder interviews. One can also observe that some interest groups seized upon the public dissatisfaction to push their agendas. The farmers unions especially have to be mentioned here, as well as their traditional political party (the Christian Democratic Party) and the neo-liberals (VVD) who were both fighting for the farmers' votes. Prior to the introduction of Natura 2000, farmers unions and the associated industrial interests were more in agreement with conservation policies, but the responses to Natura 2000, including the media strategies of the main players in the agricultural sector, reveal that the consensus fell apart quite easily once they spotted new opportunities to undermine the regulatory framework.

Repetition of the "all is locked" mantra was a central element in these media strategies. The rhetoric was particularly powerful since virtually none of the other players articulated strong counterarguments. Alternative perspectives on Natura 2000 became marginalized and that program (and nature conservation in general) became synonymous with slow decision making and restrictions on socio-economic development. The public demanded absolute clarity about the economic implications of Natura 2000 designations, even though these implications were bound to differ over time and place.

4.2 *Success and failure in communication about Natura 2000*

The imposition of a legalist interpretation of the EU directives engendered a dominant economic perspective on spatial organization, whereby nature conservation and planning are seen as obstacles to economic development. This discursive shift was also observed in relation to the implementation of other European environmental policies in the Netherlands (Behagel and Turnhout, 2011). This shift is significant since many of the actors who started sharing this critical discourse were previously part of forums where conservation and development were balanced in deliberation. Whereas the agricultural organizations were critical about Natura 2000 early on, over time local governments, entrepreneurs, sectoral lobbies and even conservation organizations came to subscribe to this critical discourse. By looking closely at the rationale for criticizing Natura 2000, one can observe strong differences among stakeholders.

4.2.1 Conservationists

For conservation organizations, success of a policy is measured by successful species or habitat protection. They consider the EU directives to be additional legal guarantees of protection. *In conservation circles*, this idea changed after it became clear that the initial successes in court proved short-lived: the other parties became more successful in court after they learned that more substantial impact studies could be used to win a case and that in local coalitions, strong arguments could be formed to present a proposed project as an overriding public benefit. In other words, it slowly dawned on both conservationists and economic actors that the procedural side of the legal argument was much more important than the substantial side, and that both substantial and procedural sides could be manipulated to a certain extent (Beunen, 2006). Furthermore, the conservation organizations realized that procedural battles over small sites and animals were eroding long-standing public support for nature conservation. They noticed that their role in policy making and planning was less and less accepted by other actors and by the general public, and that even their right to exist was questioned regularly. In 2010, they organized a debate to discuss these concerns about possibilities for changing the dominant narrative (Neefjes, 2010).

4.2.2 Entrepreneurs

For *entrepreneurs* and developers in agriculture and recreation, what mattered was the manner in which conservation and development are balanced, the criteria and timing. In their opinion, Natura 2000 seemed to dramatically increase transaction costs and uncertainty. These concerns were addressed via the media, during the public hearing and information evenings, and in the interviews. They were critical to start with and became more critical over the years, sometimes in response to real delays and court costs and sometimes with their eye on a longer-term deregulation agenda (Bleker, 2011b). It became clear to many private sector actors that not all activities around Natura 2000 sites could continue without modification. This was also the case under older conservation and planning laws, but

while give and take was often possible in the old local and regional arenas, the new dominance of a legal perspective did not seem to offer room for negotiation (Beunen, 2006).

4.2.3 Governmental actors

Most *governmental actors* started to focus on making the process procedurally watertight. In practice, this meant slowing down the procedure because higher level bureaucrats and politicians are cautious about making decisions and because governments tend to err on the side of caution when producing reports. During the public meetings and interviews, governmental actors described the difficulties they faced in dealing with rigid interpretations of conservation laws and the problems this caused for deliberations with other stakeholders (cf. Beunen and De Vries, 2010; Schotsman, 2010). Frequently, new studies are called for when there are already more than enough materials to establish the case for or against a permit that may affect natural values. In cases where local governments, often teamed up with private actors, need a permit themselves, Natura 2000 is directly experienced as a stumbling block for projects deemed to be in the general interest. Before a plan reaches the implementation stage, there has usually been an extensive consultation process; the new permitting process not only slows things down, but also threatens to undermine the value of the planning processes and of local politics as a site of adaptation.

4.2.4 Politicians

Discussions about Natura 2000 are challenging for *politicians* because they further undermine a consensus about social democracy that has already become tenuous in the last decade. The current government presents “nature conservation” as a leftish hobby that costs too much, a position that increases their popularity among farmers and entrepreneurs. Another association is the link with the EU, which is also increasingly unpopular in the Netherlands, partly because of perceived threats to national identity and independence and partly as a result of earlier strategies used by Dutch politicians to push through unpopular decisions by referring to EU requirements (Koopmans, 2007).

Once nature was enshrined as an impediment to economic development in the dominant discourse and procedural speed was understood to be essential for economic development, new issues were framed in the same terms and the discursive path became more rigidly codified. Prior negative assessments of policy formed a basis for new negative assessments.

4.3 Strategy, coincidence and combined effects

The persistently and increasingly negative characterization of Natura 2000 has had clear effects. Support for nature conservation has eroded (Franx and Bouwmeester, 2010) and much of that can be ascribed to the dominance of negative articulations of the Natura 2000 story. Performances of failure,

some of them intentional and strategic and others expressions of a felt conviction, did produce real effects and become performative. The goals of Natura 2000 are hard to achieve and a strong backlash against the policy and its broader discursive embeddings (nature conservation) can be observed. The negative narrations of Natura 2000 did partly cause this failure as actors who were traditionally willing to cooperate in planning processes sensitive to nature started to reorient themselves. Some actors then deployed rhetorical strategies emphasizing failure, to further their own goals. Negative stories engendered strategies deploying more negative stories and the policy outcomes became negative.

On the other hand, one cannot fully ascribe the failure of Natura 2000 to performances of failure. The legalist interpretation of the EU directives at the national level undermined possibilities for local deliberation and adaptation, and this can be presented as a strategic miscalculation in national politics rather than a performance of failure. The undue formalization of conservation objectives at the national level and purely in legal terms set the stage for further performances of failure and increased their performativity. In the following paragraphs, we further investigate the relationship between performance and performativity in the implementation of Natura 2000.

Since the beginning of its implementation, Natura 2000's criteria for success have been shifting. In the beginning, success was to be measured in terms of the policy's substantial goals (i.e., in terms of species and habitat protection). Later, failure was "exposed" by referring to the increased transaction costs of projects. The emphasis moved from substance to process and from the stated goals of the policy itself (nature conservation) to the apparently overriding goal of rapid economic development (Bleker, 2011b). More and more actors could only recognize the success of Natura 2000 in an efficient handling of project proposals for areas around the Natura 2000 sites (Beunen, 2006; Beunen and Duineveld, 2010). In practice, handling and permitting were rarely smooth because of the required studies and the court cases referred to earlier. Thus, policy goals and a redefined broader societal goal were mixed up, just as implementation speed and economic development results were confounded.

The content of Natura 2000 (and nature conservation) and its specific path of legal codification and bureaucratic implementation were also confused. *This pervasive blurring of conceptual boundaries enabled successful performances of failure later.* The blurring itself, the glossing over of these conceptual differences, the unobserved changes in criteria and the persuasiveness of the failure story are clearly related to broader discursive shifts in Dutch society where neoliberal discourses have gained prominence in the analyses of societal problems and solutions (Van Ark, 2005). Some private actors involved in Natura 2000 implementation noticed the problems already there, were aware of the broader shifts and manufactured a failure story that seamlessly fit the discursive environment, thus enhancing its reality effects.

From the beginning, most communication about Natura 2000 implementation emphasized the things that “did not work”. At first, the narrations seemed to be driven by surprise and were not eminently strategic in nature. Later on, the performances of failure became more and more strategic, in conjunction with the shift in success criteria discussed above. What “did not work” was first the uncertainty, later the court cases and finally the slowing down of development.

The failure of projects gained more and more attention in the media and it was rare that the media revisited a story when a project was finally approved after adding more studies. Rarely did the media pay attention to a judge’s reasoning and the largely procedural arguments that prevailed (Beunen, 2006; Kistenkas and Kuindersma, 2004; 2005). The media also failed to report on projects that would have been rejected before the introduction of Natura 2000 but were now approved because procedural aspects were taking precedence over the substantial ones. It was rarely mentioned that many of the cases referring to the Habitats Directive were, in the end, decided on the basis of different laws. The negative impacts on economic development were thus systematically overstated, helping to make nature conservation a scapegoat and contributing to the performativity of the failure of Natura 2000.

4.4 Marginalizing alternatives

Dominance of a discourse requires more than the force of positive repetition and wide distribution of a certain version of reality. It also embodies a negative force or resistance to change that is a formidable obstacle for other discourses (Foucault, 1982; 1984). If performances become performative, if they become reality for a wide variety of actors, then it becomes increasingly hard to present alternative versions of reality and it becomes hard to distribute these realities to different networks of actors. This is especially true when the underlying truth criteria (e.g., criteria of success) are also constructed in the dominant discourse (Latour, 2004).

In the case of Natura 2000 in the Netherlands, the dominance of failure stories at the national level (including the discussion in the national media) and the local level (where less power and less flexibility were now located) created interlocking realities that could not be easily challenged (Van Assche et al., 2012). Things that could be counted as successes, either according to the old definition of habitat protection or according to the more recent definition of procedural smoothness, disappeared swiftly into the background. Not only did it become very difficult to find channels to present positive stories, it also became very hard to find an audience that was willing to recognize them. If we compare the last decade’s media landscape to the observations we made at public meetings and the insights we gained from interviews, we can say that the narratives on Natura 2000 gradually started to resemble each other and that their diversity gradually declined.

Performativity thus had a multifaceted character; performances of failure became reality because:

- the criteria for failure shifted in the environment,
- certain private sector players made strategic calculations,
- failure was also induced by other factors (disrupting the dominance of legal decision making), and
- they were observed from other perspectives (even without performance of failure, the stated goals were hard to reach).

Thus, there was a combined failure caused by other factors, redescription and direct persuasion. Because these different species of failure were not distinguished from one another, the history of implementation started to look like a negative track record that cannot be ignored; it started to look like proof of failure. The multitude of rhetorical strategies that emphasized failure in conjunction with actions that had different goals and intentions (such as the court cases that intended to preserve habitat and the legal codification of Natura 2000) combined to render the failure narrative performative.

5 Discussion

Towards a new pragmatism?

The Dutch discussions in and around the implementation of Natura 2000 proved highly performative. Few actors embraced a positive narrative on Natura 2000 and its implementation and few channels are left open to promote such a positive narrative.

A growing antipathy towards Natura 2000 policies and allegations of rigid enforcement of conservation rules have been reported from several Member States (Grodzinska-Jurczak and Cent, 2011; Morris, 2011; Coffey and Richartz, 2003; Stoll-Kleemann, 2001). A careful assessment of the effects of these narratives can fuel debates about the implementation of Natura 2000 and help actors to deal with challenges faced along the way.

The legalist interpretation of Natura 2000 that became dominant represents a further obstacle for a reinvention of a more pragmatic and deliberative approach to nature conservation. This is true not only because jurisprudence has been formed and organizational forms have been created, but also because the informal institutions that supported the older ways of doing business are being hampered in the process. One can also say that public trust in political deliberations, informed by science and partly guided by political and economic interests, has waned and that engagement in deliberations outside the court system is more often considered to be a waste of time.

This study shows that spatial planning (a coordination of policies and practices regarding spatial organization) gradually became a less likely place to work on nature conservation due to the increased emphasis on legal procedures (cf. Ledoux et al., 2000). Planning is a political activity, linked in many ways to the legal system, but in essence it is political (i.e., a deliberation of interests leading to collectively binding decisions) (Fidelis and Sumares, 2008; Van Assche and Verschraegen, 2008).

Imposition of legal perspectives on spatial decision making, such as in the case of the Dutch interpretation of Natura 2000, is bound to reduce the quality of the deliberation of interests and to produce a backlash in the political system. That is precisely what happened. Politics can only work when it can follow its own logic in determining a balance of power and when it is embedded in informal institutions. When actors do not recognize each other as actors, when they do not recognize each other's interests and do not grasp the possibility of a political deliberation to come to a binding decision, then formal arrangements are not likely to be enforceable (cf. Van Assche et al., 2011b).

In the Dutch case, the growing dominance of the legal system in spatial decision making has not only undermined local sites of political deliberation; it also has rendered a return to such forms of deliberation more difficult because the strict legal focus undermines the substructure of informal institutions. That, in turn, is very unfortunate because a renewed focus on local political deliberation, as well as a renewed openness to local knowledge and local interests, is in all likelihood the only way to regain a broader acceptance of conservation goals, as various studies in different contexts have shown (e.g., Christensen and Kørnø, 2011; Zanon and Geneletti, 2011).

Because of the specifically Dutch legalist interpretation of Natura 2000, an interpretation that is a combination of early codification and legalist political responses to the first court cases, and because of the performativity of failure narratives afterwards, it has become virtually impossible to interpret and implement EU directives in a different manner. The current discursive, and thus political, climate offers little space for local deliberations that give due space to conservation issues and recent jurisprudence has rendered old planning practices illegal. Ironically, the same political climate favors strong local governments and pragmatic spatial planning with a dominance of the local level. Simultaneously, the rising preeminence of national law threatens the independence and deliberative effectiveness of local planning. A local compromise can only hold if it is recognized as such locally and if the guiding framework of national laws is not perceived to structurally distort local power relationships.

6. Concluding remarks

This study shows that conservationists and others involved in nature conservation should pay more attention to the ways in which conservation needs and practices are represented and institutionalized, how these representations become embedded in more general narratives and how the new institutions are bound to be gamed and re-narrated themselves. Where earlier conservationists seem to have been very aware of these things and combined direct conservation efforts with popular writing and storytelling, the importance of narrative appears to have been lost with the further institutionalization of nature conservation. Once we recognize that formal rules can never be sustained without public

support and we understand that public narrative determines their success, we can no longer ignore this dimension of nature conservation in research and practice.

What should be done? In our view, the only way forwards is to re-embed nature conservation in spatial planning at all levels of government. Spatial planning as a political activity assisted by science (e.g., ecological science) is still possible, we argue, if national-level politicians reevaluate the relationship between politics and law and place spatial decision making within the domain of politics. The combined alienating forces of European power, whether real or perceived, with national power and legal power turned nature into an enemy of democracy, planning, economic development and local autonomy. A re-politicization of planning is thus needed, followed by a reinstatement of local planning as a space for adaptation and integration of policies, interests and narratives. Experiences from different places, often in the form of more participatory approaches, have shown that linking or even integrating conservation objectives in local narratives and place identities can be a successful strategy for sustaining support for conservation policies (Beunen and De Vries, 2011; Sumaris and Fidelis, 2011; Zanon and Geneletti, 2011). With regards to sustainability, the larger issue looming in the background, one can reason along similar lines.

While the story of the Dutch implementation of Natura 2000 is surely a depressing one that reveals how fast de-institutionalization can take place even in a much admired model state, we believe that this analysis of performance and performativity also shows that positive spirals are possible, new appreciations of nature can emerge and those can be championed in entwined performances at different sites of discursive formation. New formal institutions can be enacted in law and in politics and new informal institutions can grow.

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Table 1. Visited consultation meetings and public hearings

- Public Hearing Designation Natura 2000 Sites**, Apeldoorn, 10 September 2008. This was a general hearing about the designation of the Natura 2000 sites in the Netherlands. A brief introduction to the policy was given, after which people could ask questions or state their comments.
- Consultation Meeting Natura 2000 Site Wooldse Veen**: 3 February 2009. This meeting was organized to inform people about the designation of the Wooldse Veen as Natura 2000 site and about the process in which the management plan for this site would be formulated. People could ask questions and inform the authorities about social and economic activities that should be taken into account in the management plan.
- Presentation First Draft Management Plan Wooldse Veen**: 2 December 2009. This meeting was a follow up of the meeting of 3 February 2009, aimed to present the draft of the management plan. People could ask questions and gave comments.
- Consultation Meeting Natura 2000 Site Rijntakken**: Rhenen, 9 December 2009. This meeting was organized to inform people about the designation of the Rijntakken as Natura 2000 site and about the process in which the management plan for this site would be formulated. People could ask questions and inform the authorities about social and economic activities that should be taken into account in the management plan.
- Consultation Meeting Natura 2000 Site Veluwe**: Nunspeet, 31 March 2010. This meeting was organized to inform people about the designation of the Veluwe as Natura 2000 site and about the process in which the management plan for this site would be formulated. People could ask questions and inform the authorities about social and economic activities that should be taken into account in the management plan. Particular attention was given to the relation between Natura 2000 and tourism and recreation activities.