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To cite this article: Peter Jansen, Jan van der Stoep, Jozef Keulartz & Henk Jochemsen (2017) Wistful wilderness: communication about 'new' nature in the Netherlands, Journal of Environmental Policy & Planning, 19:2, 197-213, DOI: [10.1080/1523908X.2016.1198254](https://doi.org/10.1080/1523908X.2016.1198254)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1523908X.2016.1198254>



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Published online: 21 Jun 2016.



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Wistful wilderness: communication about ‘new’ nature in the Netherlands

Peter Jansen^{a,b}, Jan van der Stoep^a, Jozef Keulartz^c and Henk Jochemsen^b

^aAcademy for Journalism and Communication Studies, Ede Christian University of Applied Sciences, Ede, The Netherlands; ^bSocial Science Group, Sub-Department Communication, Philosophy and Technology, Wageningen University, Wageningen, The Netherlands; ^cFaculty of Science, Institute for Science, Innovation and Society, Radboud University, Nijmegen, The Netherlands

ABSTRACT

Based on in-depth interviews, this article presents findings of a study centred on public communication regarding *Tiengemetten*, a Dutch island previously occupied by farmers. An answer is sought to the question of how visitors to *Tiengemetten* evaluate, according to their own experiences, the discourse of people involved in *Tiengemetten* from a policy and communication perspective. This study showed that visitors' experiences do not always match the emotions appealed to in public communication materials. It is also suggested that people involved from a policy and communication perspective should refrain from using ‘heavily value-laden’ phraseology. For reasons of trust, this article suggests aligning public communication with genuine experiences of visitors. This is also necessary for avoiding scepticism of visitors as policy makers and communication professionals run a risk that public communication regarding nature becomes counterproductive.

KEYWORDS

Nature development; nature policy; communication; qualitative research; *Tiengemetten*

Introduction

In the Netherlands until the 1980s and 1990s, the nineteenth-century agrarian landscape was popular. However, the Dutch government concluded that Dutch nature had limited ecological sustainability as a result of substantial habitat fragmentation. Hence, the Dutch nature policy plan of 1990 intended to compensate for the inadequate connectivity by creating a coherent network of nature reserves throughout the Netherlands. In this nature policy plan, *Tiengemetten*, the subject of this article, was referred to as one of these (new) nature reserves which implied a transformation from agricultural land into a nature island (Figures 1 and 2).¹

Tiengemetten is a small island in the south-western part of the Netherlands. It was formed as a consequence of the sedimentation of a sandbar in the *Haringvliet* between 1750 and 1804. The area was diked in 1750 and became the domain of farmers, fishermen, reed cutters, and hunters. After the Second World War, Rotterdam began its restoration and claimed *Tiengemetten* as a perfect destination for industrial expansion or a suitable location for a marina, an airport, or a sludge depot. In 1967, AMEV, an investment company, purchased the island as an investment project. Since then, other designations for *Tiengemetten* ranging from an airport to a waste depot battled for priority. However, in 1994, the Provincial Authority of South-Holland designated *Tiengemetten* as a nature development area with the intention of creating a nature island. After functioning as an agricultural area for a few hundred years, the island would be made a part of the network of existing and future nature reserves throughout the Netherlands. In 1997, one of the Dutch nature conservation organizations, *Natuurmonumenten*, became the owner of *Tiengemetten*. Following a comprehensive study and plan development that was completed in 2000, the transformation of *Tiengemetten* into a nature island began in September 2005. The dikes around *Tiengemetten* were destroyed in order to allow the sea complete freedom and allow nature to

CONTACT Peter Jansen,  pjansen@che.nl  Academy for Journalism and Communication Studies, Ede Christian University of Applied Sciences, Oude Kerkweg 100, 6717 JS Ede, The Netherlands

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Figure 1. Aerial photograph: the island before transformation. (Source: <https://beeldbank.rws.nl>, Rijkswaterstaat / Joop van Houdt).



Figure 2. Wistful wilderness: the nature takes over the farmhouse. (Source: Peter Jansen).



Figure 3. Wealth-part: an abundance of birds. (Source: Peter Jansen).

take its course. In 2006, the last of seven farmers left the island and the transformation was completed in 2007 (Figures 3 and 4).

When developing *Tiengemetten*, the planners decided to divide the island into three zones with various names. On the eastern side of the island there is a relatively small area called *weemoed* (wistfulness). Here, the starting point is the memory of the (cultural) landscape of the past. In the area designated as *weelde* (wealth), human influence is only minimally visible; it is an open marsh with an abundance of (water) plants and birds (e.g. *Anas crecca*, *Tadorna*, *Recurvirostra avosetta*, *Numenius arquata*, and different geese). The third and largest section of the island is referred to as *wildernis* (wilderness). In this area, the influence of the tides of the *Haringvliet* is dominant. This area is not being managed and is characterized by ‘disorder, wild, exciting, expansive, special types of physical exertion’ and ‘especially for naturalists, rest and tranquility seekers and “nature wanderers” this type of nature is most meaningful’ (Posthoorn, 2000, p. 61). In order to further clarify the three distinct areas, they are characterized by sets of qualifying words as exhibited in Table 1.

This article intends to provide insight into the public communication regarding transformation projects such as *Tiengemetten*.² Interestingly, Wolf (2012) contends that *Tiengemetten* is one of the few nature reserves where the term wilderness is explicitly expressed. It is obvious that, in public communication, *Tiengemetten* is considered as being representative of a ‘new way of thinking’ and that ‘heavily value-laden language’ is utilized.³ The following quote concisely illustrates this:

Tiengemetten: new nature, breaking ground like the water of its creeks. The symbol of new thinking, of trust in the shaping capacity of nature. Primeval nature, nature that seems to have been ever-present. (quote in leaflet *Natuurmonumenten*, s.a.)



Figure 4. Wilderness-part: influence of the tides is dominant, place for rest and tranquility. *Seekers* (Source: Peter Jansen).

Table 1. Characterizing three parts of *Tiengemeten*.

Part		
Wistfulness	Wealth	Wilderness
Description		
Cultural landscape	Semi-natural landscape	Natural landscape
Qualifying words		
Memory	Wealth	Tension
Security	Harmony	Fear
Human	Beautiful	Authenticity
Designed	Calm	Wild
Readable	Understandable	Autonomous
Stable	Tranquility	Disorder/Chaos
Trust	Colorful	Dynamic
Contrast		Blurred boundaries
Hospitable		Inhospitable

Source: Posthoorn (2000), translation by authors.

Based on qualitative research, this article addresses the question to what extent the discourse of key actors corresponds to visitors' descriptions of their experiences of *Tiengemeten*. In order to answer this question, the discourse of people who were either involved from a policy perspective in the transformation of *Tiengemeten* or played an appropriate and influential role in the public communication, so-called key actors, must first be examined. Secondly, how visitors evaluate the discourse about *Tiengemeten*, in regard to their own experience of nature on the island, must be investigated. The final section of this

article will compare both and discuss the implications of the findings for (communication) policy and strategy.

Theoretical framework

Having briefly sketched the outline of the case, the position of the study in the broader field of nature policy and nature conservation will be described by reflecting on other studies in this field addressing actual debates about perceptions of naturalness and/or new ecosystem concepts.

Nature development

One of the key principles of the Dutch nature policy plan of 1990 is the concept of nature development (Jansen, van der Stoep, Keulartz, & Jochemsen, 2016). This refers to the creation of ‘new’ nature through human intervention or, as stated by Hajer (2003):

It has resulted in a slow-motion *ballet mécanique* (sic) of draglines and bulldozers, excavators and trucks. Under the direction of engineers and geomorphologists fertile topsoil is dug away to make way for wetlands or drifting sand, dikes are breached to create new lakes or ‘living rivers’ and at carefully chosen places dunes are opened up to allow the sea, the ‘water wolf’ that haunted the Dutch for centuries, back in. (p. 90, emphasis in the original)

The creation of ‘wild’ nature is a concept that Schouten (2002) considered to be a novelty in Dutch history. Some authors refer to a radical shift in attitudes: one that respects ‘exalted primeval nature’ and criticizes the ‘view of nature of the [Dutch] Golden Age (17th century) and that of modern engineers’ (Zwart, 2002, p. 46). In the past, the idea of ‘unspoiled wilderness’ was recognized in existing nature reserves that were protected from human influence; however, the current desire for wilderness serves as justification for human interventions in the context of the creation of ‘new’ nature (Drenthen, 2003) of which *Tiengemeten* is a good illustration. In general, nature development facilitated a new way of thinking about nature as well as a change in the mentality regarding spatial planning and zoning in the Netherlands (Jansen et al., 2016). The Netherlands is considered to be a man-made country, and the repurposing of land for nature development is consequently met with resistance. In March 1993, The New York Times published an article with the significant title ‘Dutch Do the Unthinkable’. This article states:

In a nation where historically nothing could stand in the way of creating more arable land, the Dutch turnabout strikes many experts as remarkable. The plan has wide support in the cities, but stirs concern across the countryside where farming families have worked the land for generations.

The concept of ‘nature development’ is generally associated with ‘restoration ecology’ (Jansen et al., 2016). According to Jackson and Hobbs (2009), this type of ecology refers to ‘ecological history as a means of identifying appropriate restoration targets – the state of the ecosystem before disruption – and assessing sources of damage’ (p. 567).⁴ However, it is contended that restoration to a historic standard is anachronistic: ‘undisturbed landscapes are too remote in time to provide restoration targets, which may instead comprise cultural landscapes’ and ‘environmental and ecological changes are normal’ (p. 567)⁵ or, as stated by Hobbs et al. (2010):

In the realm of park and wilderness stewardship, the natural world has been contrasted with the human-dominated world. In this sense, two related characteristics of naturalness are a lack of human effects on ecosystems and an absence of intentional human control of ecosystems. Interwoven with this has been the notion that natural ecosystems are stable, self-regulating, and in equilibrium. A fourth commonly perceived characteristic of naturalness has been a high degree of historical fidelity; natural ecosystems should appear and function much as they did in the past. This had led park and wilderness-area managers to use past conditions as benchmarks for the future. (p. 485)

They conclude that naturalness has too many meanings which increasingly conflict with each other and ‘fall short of capturing the expanding range of park values’ (Hobbs et al., 2010, p. 485). Therefore, they prefer the term intervention ‘to include any prescribed course of action that intentionally alters ecosystem trajectories, and to avoid the connotation of a return to past conditions’ (p. 484). Jackson and Hobbs (2009) note that

‘restored ecosystems may have combinations of species that have never co-occurred’ (p. 568). They maintain that such ecosystems must be embraced as ‘an unstated aim in restoration is to avoid creating bigger problems than we seek to solve’ (p. 568). We are now in an era of transformation, Holling (2001) argues, and ecosystem management must build and maintain ecological resilience as well as possess the social flexibility required to cope, innovate, and adapt. Hobbs, Higgs, and Harris (2009) conclude that many ecosystems are currently being rapidly transformed into what is referred to as ‘new non-historical configurations’ as a result of several local and global changes. Hence, ‘novel ecosystems’ are defined as ecosystems ‘in which the species composition and/or function have been completely transformed from the historic system’ (601).⁶ In another article, Hobbs et al. (2006) note that novel ecosystems can be considered as somewhere ‘in the middle of the gradient between “natural”: or “wild” ecosystems, on one hand, and intensively (agriculture) managed systems on the other hand’ (p. 2). In their vision, there is a need to move away from what they term ‘the one-dimensional dichotomy between natural and human dominated’ (p. 5) ecosystems ‘towards a more effective depiction of how humans interact with nature’ (p. 5). This challenges policy makers on how to develop management schemes that simultaneously maximize beneficial changes and reduce the less beneficial aspects (Hobbs et al., 2006), viz. ‘a combination of traditional and emerging frameworks’ (Hobbs et al., 2014, p. 557). According to Hobbs et al. (2014), novel ecosystems provide opportunities ‘to connect with nature for a wide cross-section of society’ (p. 561); therefore, it is time to stop thinking in terms of ‘second-class nature’ in regard to these types of ecosystems.

Classic-modernist practice

It is interesting that Hobbs et al. (2014) reason that ‘novelty itself demands broad public dialogue’ and ‘careful discussion is required on appropriate goals for such systems’ (p. 561).

At the same time, they also note that describing novel systems with ‘heavily value-laden language’ will ‘increasingly marginalize conservation and restoration in the public realm’ (p. 562). In this context, it is striking that Hajer (2003) discusses that the issue of nature development in the Netherlands illustrates ‘the limited effectiveness of classical-modernist political practices’ (p. 89). Based on the case of *Gaasterland* where, in the early 1990s, farmers erected a metal frame in the field as a protest, he concludes⁷:

The policy conflict [...] was not merely based on different notions of beauty of the Dutch rural landscape. In actual fact it brought out into the open the limits of the classic-modernist practices of politics and policymaking, more in particular the institutionalised format in which social interests get represented [...] The frame in the fields first of all confronted the government with the limited effectiveness of its traditional strategies of ‘conceive-decide-implement’ in a network society. [...] The protests were not anticipated in the predominant neo-corporatist practices of consultation at the national level [...] It did not merely concern the content of policymaking but the practices of policymaking as well”. (Hajer, 2003, pp. 91, 92+95)

This is in accordance with authors such as Swart, van der Windt, and Keulartz (2001) and Keulartz (2009). They argue that the Netherlands continues to struggle with the implementation of ‘new’ nature because citizens do not determine the direction of nature policy but, rather, this is delegated to researchers and professionals. There is a discrepancy between the professional-based (ecological) knowledge upon which nature policy has heavily relied and local, experience-based knowledge, that is, local perceptions and opinions. Otherwise stated, the resistance against the repurposing of land for nature development is first concerned with the practice of policy-making, or more precisely, the difficult implementation, that is, realization of a national ecological network throughout the Netherlands foremost appears to be a communication issue.

Methodological approach

As mentioned in the introduction, central to this article is the question to what extent the discourse of key actors corresponds to visitors’ descriptions of their experiences of *Tiengemetten*. However, the term discourse is used ‘in a range of meanings’ (Hajer & Versteeg, 2005). Hence, it is necessary to clarify what is understood by ‘discourse’.

Defining discourse

As Tannen, Hamilton, and Schiffrin (2015) note, because of its disciplinary diversity, 'it is no surprise that the terms "discourse" and "discourse analysis" have different meanings to scholars in different fields' (p. 1). This article has adopted Hajer's (1995) description of discourse in terms of Keil and Debanné (2005) 'a more or less non-controversial definition' (p. 258). Hajer (1995) defines discourse as an ensemble of ideas and concepts that are 'produced, reproduced and transformed in a particular set of practices' (p. 44). Interestingly, Hajer and Versteeg (2005) conclude that, in everyday life, the terms discourse and discussion are often interchangeably used. However, they argue that both should be analytically distinguished, 'the "discussion" [...] is the object of analysis; discourse analysis sets out to trace a particular linguistic regularity that can be found in discussions or debates' (p. 175). According to them, discourse analysis 'illuminates a particular discursive structure that might not be immediately obvious to the people that contribute the debate' (p. 176). They consider discourse analysis as 'the study of language-in-use' (Hajer & Versteeg, 2005, p. 176). Or in terms of Feindt and Oels (2005):

Discourse analysis problematizes what conventional policy analysts take for granted: the linguistic, identity and knowledge base of policy making. This includes a special awareness of the processes by and through which policy problems and even policy arenas are constructed. A discourse analysis of policy making shows how environmental problems and a related set of subjects and objects are discursively produced and rendered governable. (p. 163)⁸

Interestingly, Feindt and Oels (2005) argue that, in the environmental policy area – and in our view there is no reason why this should not apply similarly to the field of nature policy⁹ – 'problems are typically not defined in common sense language, but in expert terms of reference' (p. 162).¹⁰ It is also argued that the articulation of a problem 'shapes if and how the problem is dealt with' (p. 162). This accords with Svarstad, Petersen, Rothman, Siepel, and Wätzold (2008) who contend that statements, for example, about nature, should be considered as 'articulations and reproductions of discursive orders' (p. 119).¹¹ He also argues that communication regarding these issues does not emerge from scratch or by a single communication actor. 'Actors involved in a discourse participate – in varying degrees – in its production, reproduction and transformation through written or oral statements' (p. 119). More precisely, according to Feindt and Oels (2005), concepts that are part of a discourse are intertwined with or are a part of practices, institutional capacities, and technologies. As they note:

They have material and institutional bias. They have also a history. They are rooted in specific cultural and political formation. They enable people to see and articulate certain features of the world but not others. They help to legitimate certain practices but not others. They are an element of power formations. (Feindt & Oels, 2005, p. 163)

To conclude, inspired by Hajer and Versteeg (2005) and applied to this topic, investigating particular discourses could be advantageous for tracing how a concept such as nature development (i.e. the wilderness ideal) first emerged as a key principle of the Dutch nature policy and how its meaning subsequently evolved as it was molded by institutional settings and through the application on particular cases.

Data collection and analysis

This article does not intend to search for a particular linguistic regularity or discursive structure. Consequently, in the narrowest sense of the word, no discourse analysis is performed. Instead, a specific situation is examined in regard to how ideas and concepts are employed and, hence, the term discourse is justifiable in this context. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews are chosen as the primary instrument of data collection for reasons of triangulation (cf. Du Plooy, 2001) supplemented by quotes from public communication (see Table 2, $n = 15$). The selection of respondents ($n = 25$) resulted from 'criterion-based sampling', that is, the selection of respondents was based on predetermined 'criteria': (i) visitor to the island, whether or not regular and (ii) people involved from a policy perspective in the transformation of *Tiengemetten* into a nature island or an appropriate and influential party in the communication, so-called key actors.

In this study, visitors were personally recruited on the island. During the recruitment process, discussion occurred with the potential respondents regarding the topic of the focus of the research. This afforded the

Table 2. Public communication.

Type	Quantity	Source
Leaflet	9	Natuurmonumenten
Member magazine	1	Natuurmonumenten
Billboard visitor centre	1	Natuurmonumenten
Booklet	1	Ministerie van LNV
Booklet	3	VVV Zuid Holland Zuid

opportunity for each respondent to think more deeply about the topic and accurately recall memories. Within 2–4 weeks after consenting to an interview, an appointment of approximately one hour was made to be held at the visitor's home or at a pre-selected location (for instance a restaurant or local bar). In total, 15 visitors were interviewed.

Textbox 1: Visitors of *Tiengemeten*

Since the quality of nature and the quality of enjoying nature are foremost, *Tiengemeten* has become an island that attracts a wide range of people. The planning process took into account three types of visitors: curious people [*nieuwsgierigen*], nature lovers [*natuurliefhebbers*], and naturalists [*natuurvorsers*]. The curious people arrive on the island, have something to eat, walk to the *Vliedberg*, take in the area, and return home. They spend no more than two hours on the island. The second category, nature lovers, mostly travel east on rambling trails. The third category, naturalists, is relatively small. These are people who actually go into the wilderness area primarily to experience nature. Research by de Boer and de Vries (2009) indicates the numbers of visitors range from 30,000 to 40,000 per year. According to them, on average, visitors to the island are 52 years old and are mainly from a radius of 30 km around the area. The average group size is five individuals, although half of the visitors travel in pairs. The majority visit to either relax or walk. Since the realization of a so called 'nature playground', many children are also currently visiting the island. *Natuurmonumenten* also mentioned on their website that there has been an increase of visitors between 10 and 29 years old. The island has increasingly become a destination for a family to have a day out. General speaking, *Tiengemeten*, focuses on two (main) target groups: active seniors and families with young children (between 4–12 years of age).

Key actors were recruited by so called 'snowball sampling' which offers a method for identifying and contacting hidden research subjects: one subject provides the researcher with the name of another subject who subsequently provides the name of a third, and so on (Vogt, 1999). In total, 10 key actors were interviewed. A whole overview of the discourse was pursued, hence, the composition of the group key actors is multifarious.¹² Most of them are employees of *Natuurmonumenten* – a Dutch NGO for nature conservation and owner of the island *Tiengemeten* that is responsible for most of the public communication.

Contrary to quantitative research, the goal of qualitative research is not to maximize external validity, and it does not provide insight into the relative number, that is, percentage of people in the group that represent a certain conception.¹³ However, with qualitative research, the sample size is a point of attention and, according to Mason (2010), the guiding principle by interviewing is data saturation. Although the concept of data saturation is not new and is generally accepted, Mason (2010) mentions a continuing debate while Fusch and Ness (2015) argue that 'the field of data saturation is a neglected one' (p. 1408). The reason is that this concept is difficult to define. They note that what one individual considers as data saturation is not nearly enough for another. For that reason, they contend that 'it may be best to think of data in terms of rich and thick rather than the size of the sample' (p. 1409). As they explain:

Thick data is a lot of data; rich data is many-layered, intricate, detailed, nuanced, and more. One can have a lot of thick data that is not rich; conversely, one can have rich data but not a lot of it. The trick, if you will, is to have both. (p. 1409)

Therefore, Fusch and Ness (2015) come to the conclusion that data saturation is not foremost about numbers but about the depth of the data. Interestingly, Mason (2010) argues that there is no logical (or theory driven) reason why samples ending in any one integer would be any more prevalent than any other. He notes that, if saturation is the guiding principle of qualitative studies, it is likely to be achieved at any point, and most authors agree that saturation could be achieved at a comparatively low level.¹⁴ In our case, saturation was achieved with approximately 12–15 (visitors) and 8–10 (key actors), that is, 20–25 interviewees.

Table 3. Core labels and key categories.

#	Core labels	Key Categories
I	Project	Project, Policy-making, Transition, Impact of decision, Activities and Facilities.
II	Experiences	Appealing aspects of <i>Tiengemetten</i> , Effect of island on people, Recreative content of island.
III	Perceptions of nature	Nature development in the Netherlands, Views about Agriculture, Views about Nature, Experiences with nature, Transcendent aspects, Immanent aspects.
IV	Communication	Communication strategy, Parties involved in communication, Process of communication, Promotion of island, Communication materials, Words and Images, Evocative aspects.
V	Notions of meaning	Sense-making, Spirituality, Religious elements, 'Zeitgeist'.

The interviews were recorded in order to obtain a detailed analysis of the text. Interviews were analyzed according to standard text analysis. Prior to examination of the interviews, an analysis level needed to be selected, therefore, a combination of sentences and fragments were chosen (Baarda, de Goede, & Teunissen, 2009). Consequently, the stripped or summarized texts were divided into small fragments expressing a similar theme or content and labelled with a code, that is, keyword (open coding, 259 pcs). In the next phase, the coded or labelled sections were compared for similarities and differences and grouped around key categories or sublabels (25 pcs). In the synthesis and abstracting (axial coding) phase, overarching core labels (5 pcs) were defined; see Table 3 – for reasons of intersubjectivity and peer consultation the entire process of coding is discussed with other scholars in several (international) meetings. Finally the results were analyzed and linked to the research questions (selective coding); this article presents the results of this phase.

Since our primary focus was on public communication, extensive discussion on the core label 'experiences' were not addressed in this paper. The input with respect to this core label is partially utilized in Section 2.3; most of the other input was used for another, article (cf. Jansen, van der Stoep, Keulartz, & Jochemsen, *in press*).

Results discourse of key actors

Perceptions of nature

In the beginning of the transformation process, Respondents 16 and 17 indicated that communication was generally simplistic: 'ask farmers to leave the island, demolish all houses, put a hole in the dyke, and nature will be there soon'. As illustrated by the quotation below:

Tiengemetten is an island in the *Haringvliet*, where agriculture have to make room for nature [...]. The island *Tiengemetten* will change significantly: from a polder (a piece of low-lying land reclaimed from the sea and protected by dikes, PJ) with agriculture into a nature area with swamp and forest. (quote in the booklet *Ministerie van LNV*, 1994)

Respondent 24 noted that, in his opinion, a number of errors were made at the beginning. The concept of 'allowing water on the island' in the public communication was interpreted as 'submerge the island'. He feels that this instance of poor communication, to this day, determines the image of the place. This makes the question regarding the perception of nature of the key actors crucial. According to Respondent 22:

In the beginning the values of nature dominated [communication materials] [...] the nature paradise on earth. 'Come and see this' but not really because it's a gem we have to protect.

When asked about their personal perception of nature, most of the key actors associated nature with something that involves a minimal amount of human interference. According to Respondent 23:

I'm the kind of guy who likes to look for that one tiny blade of grass in between the tiles of the sidewalk. That's nature. I mean, that's also the essence of nature: the fact that it occurs where you'd think it would be impossible. It's the enigmatic dynamic of life, of always growing and being there no matter the odds [...]. To me that's nature: it always brings something new. It's that endless and inexhaustible cycle.

At the same time, all key actors realized that much of nature in the Netherlands has been influenced by humans or consciously conserved or developed. Consequently, Respondent 16 regards *Tiengemetten* as a 'significant

cultivation act', as landscape that was designed and made by people rather than by 'original' nature, and a place where the influences of mankind can still be detected but where nature has gradually begun to take over. The best thing, according to Respondent 16, is when people no longer have the idea that their surroundings are contrived or overly humanly designed.

Communication

As mentioned in the methods section of this article, when developing *Tiengemetten*, the planners decided to divide the island into three zones and give the various areas some type of iconic title, that is, the triple-W concept. According to Respondents 16, 17, and 24, this was a conscious decision as it sounds much better than technical jargon such as 'rainwater-driven area', 'cultural-historical area', or 'tidal area', Respondent 17 said. While Respondent 16 enjoys the alliteration, Key Actor 22 would not mind if the three Ws were discarded:

I just think: well, wilderness is clear-cut. But what exactly is wistfulness and wealth? So, yeah, as concepts they don't do very much for me [...] It's terminology you also see at the visitor centre, but it doesn't really work. It doesn't match the experience.

Most of the key actors argue that words such as wealth, wistfulness, and wilderness will, by definition, evoke a certain sentiment; the concepts appeal to certain emotions and, according to Respondent 16, consider them as powerful labels that have had more effect than originally intended.

Several key actors note that having a meaningful or appealing topic, such as 'new nature', that is, *Tiengemetten*, is crucial in public communication. Speaking in regard to a core message in public communication, several key actors discuss the soul of *Tiengemetten* – 'a little rough and raw' as well as 'clouds, wind, and water' being an element. Respondent 21 believes that 'rough and raw' encompasses 'the exciting aspects' such as the ferry, the ruins, and what happens on the island. Public communication should foreshadow how visitors will feel once they are there.

I mean, you want something spectacular. So that's what you look for. A white-tailed eagle, size of an aircraft, two-metre wingspan – it's big. [...] So this attracts you, like, on a different level. [...] It's something that transcends, that's bigger. [...] In the communication already they suggest how you might feel without ever even having been there. So reading the texts, about a 'majestic eagle', it almost transports you to that world and you think 'wow, so that's what I'd feel!'. (Respondent 21)

The majority of key actors feel that the promotional material should generally, first and foremost, evoke the feeling of 'that's where I need to be; that's what I want to experience'. They believe that, in terms of Respondent 21, public communication should affect people and 'move them' and 'generate buzz'. The language should not be too superficial or polished but should offer some type of 'seductive' prospect – an 'interesting' proposition, stated Respondent 21. Respondent 19 also stated:

I think we're all convinced that they (terms such ecological infrastructure, connection zones, etc., PJ) don't resonate with Joe Six Pack. So we have to use other words, other concepts. But what interests me is that often these terms are very existential. 'I roam around nature [...] the term 'primordial' already says a lot, I think. [...]
For example, there's that huge roll-up in the visitor centre, with 'longhaired beasts' and the 'savage' creatures pictured on it – I mean, 'savage', they're very friendly and that is subsequently what you try and explain: they're very sweet animals, they [only] look savage.

Respondent 16 does not believe that 'cold' information exists, stressing that the request for information is always emotionally driven. However, he notes that there is continuous tension to ensure that things do not become 'too kitsch'.

When asked about current public communication materials on *Tiengemetten*, a number of key actors indicate that they find it fairly down-to-earth when compared to other public communication materials about nature that are issued by the same association. Respondent 16 noted that there is a significant amount of public communication and material on what he refers to as 'the outside', that which we are physically able to see, that is, the various plants and animals, etc. However, for instance, Respondents 19 and 21 stated that, in recent years, the

public communication material regarding *Natuurmonumenten* has become increasingly focused on experience and attracting visitors. In the past, *Natuurmonumenten* was quite factual and cerebral; however, according to the respondents, in recent years, there has been a move towards experience. According to Respondent 19, communication concerning *Tiengemeten* is also more about ‘come and see’ or ‘experience the island’; there is a primary focus on the fun aspects of rambling and enjoying oneself on *Tiengemeten* as illustrated by the quotation below:

Human-sized brush and grassland, dissected by a dozen streams. Highland cattle with their legs in the water and a gap in the dike. Thousands of birds of all kinds and sizes. Chaos and silence. This is the kind of wilderness we have missed. This is *Tiengemeten* the primeval delta now! [...] It’s quiet in the Wilderness. Quiet and yet bustling with life [...] The hill is the best vantage point to catch a panoramic view of the Wilderness, the *Haringvliet* with its locks and fixed embankment on either side. A safe place ‘separated from the world’. (quote in leaflet *Natuurmonumenten*, s.a.)

However, the quote above also emphasizes another aspect, specifically, that *Tiengemeten* represents ‘the wilderness we have missed’ and that the island is ‘separated’ from daily life. In this respect, Respondent 16’s comment is intriguing:

A lot of people don’t come to *Tiengemeten* to think about things, but rather to let go of their thoughts.

According to Respondent 17, this is reflected in (public) communication:

What one sees in the means of communication is the contrast between the fast-track life of the *Randstad* and the tremendous bustle of *Pernis* and the Port and the vast tranquil open spaces not even twenty kilometres away.

This brings us to the use of notions of meaning in the discourse about *Tiengemeten*.

Notions of meaning

In this article, ‘notions of meaning’ are utilized as an overarching term for aspects of sense-making as well as spiritual elements in general – in literature the term ‘religious subtexts’ is also used in this context (cf. Jansen et al., 2016). The quotes below demonstrate that there is a strong appeal to ‘an escape from daily life’ in the current public communication about *Tiengemeten* where it is referred to as being ‘the better world’ with silence presented as an instrument for spiritual experience.¹⁵

Everyone needs to get away from the grind of everyday life, don’t they? So why not take a trip and discover an island of tranquillity, space, and distant horizons. (quote in leaflet *Natuurmonumenten*, 2012)

Looking to enjoy the tranquillity of the starry night sky? Then the island of *Tiengemeten* is the perfect place for you. Nature has been allowed to run its free course over the last few years. Tranquillity and open spaces characterise the island, leaving the bustle of the *Randstad* far away. *Tiengemeten* is a popular location for day trippers looking for a relaxing day out. But you can only really unwind once on a lengthier stay [...] Leave behind the fast-track life of the city and come to rest. Spend the night on an uninhabited island, watch the sun rise over the *Haringvliet*, take a twilight walk while the birds float down to search for a nesting place. Take in the night sky as you’ve seldom seen it. (quote in booklet *VVV Zuid Holland Zuid*, 2012)

Where in today’s world is there a place where the horizon stretches further than the eye, where there are no footpaths, and visitors can ponder amidst the birds? Where silence is audible, open space is tangible and you can come to rest? Where the waters are wild and untamed [...] feeding and drowning? [...] The world is miles away, worries melt and a smile breaks through’. (quote on billboard at *Tiengemeten* visitor centre, *Natuurmonumenten*)

Often, some type of promise is made: recharge, find yourself, purify, a new world, etc. One of the key actors discussed nature as a place from which to return reborn.

The nature island in the *Haringvliet* is the place to recharge. [...] The ferry voyage already gives you a sense of shedding the pressure of everyday life. And once you disembark on *Tiengemeten*, you’re setting foot on a new world. (quote in *Member Magazine*, *Natuurmonumenten*, 2011, p. 20)

In this case, it is interesting that, in these types of projects, Respondent 17 suggested that the decision-makers often prefer to use someone who, although not specially trained in communication and who perhaps may be awkward or less refined than an educated communication professional, does have some affinity with nature. In this context, the following quotation is intriguing:

If you ask them (people working at *Natuurmonumenten*, PJ) about their earliest experience of memory related to nature from their childhood, they often come out with very existential and emotional stuff. (Respondent 16)¹⁶

With that in mind, it is unsurprising that a number of key actors note that their individual experiences with nature define the way in which they communicate about nature. 'I really do believe in what I write every time,' Respondent 21 said. 'They're all little bits of myself.'

Results of visitors' opinions

Perceptions of nature

When asked about their perception of nature, several visitors felt that nature is typified by self-construction and freedom. Some visitors cite the importance of creating conditions for natural processes to thrive and expand. In this context, some visitors argue for an absence of or minimum human interference. Other visitors feel untouched nature or wilderness are synonymous with 'true' nature; 'true' nature actually refers to 'pure' with the meaning of 'spontaneous' and 'autonomous' rather than 'original'. The pureness for some visitors, in regard to projects such as *Tiengemetten*, is due to the fact that, although the site is the result of 'landscaping' work, it is subsequently left to develop naturally. In this case, certain visitors also mentioned the dynamics of the tides at *Tiengemetten*.

Communication

It is striking that certain visitors (for example, Respondents 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 11) did not do much research on *Tiengemetten* prior to their visit. Some came for the nature experience and were not initially really interested in communication. However, when delving deeper, the public communication about *Tiengemetten*, for most of them, unconsciously stimulated them to visit the island. When asked about the striking aspects, the visitors mentioned the experiential aspect of the public communication. Interestingly, Respondent 8 noted that this aspect is closely associated with the current *zeitgeist* (spirit of the age).

We live in the fast lane, everything needs to be a quick, all-inclusive experience.
So you need to have multiple stimuli.

Some visitors, for instance Respondents 11 and 14, emphasized wilderness, especially at the beginning of the transformation process, and the relinquishing of the island to nature. However, it is notable that, in order to promote *Tiengemetten* and show that there are still pieces of 'primeval' nature in the Netherlands, Respondent 8 feels that it must be advertised much like Disneyland is advertised. Stated differently, according to some visitors, the communication is sometimes a bit 'over the top'. Some respondents (4, 8, and 15) feel that current communication about nature is a little too jovial considering that nature itself is not 'polished and nice' but also involves threat and struggle. For instance, Respondents 8 and 15 question whether people are employing terms that are inappropriate. The addition of 'true' to 'nature' in public communication is perceived by some visitors, for instance Respondents 5 and 15, as being pointless and misleading and as being related to the level of aspiration: people wish it were so (Respondent 15).

In contrast to the key actors, visitors are more critical about the triple-W concept. Some visitors are wonder-struck (Respondent 8) or argue that the words do not resonate appropriately (Respondents 2 and 5). At the same time, other visitors note that they consider the three Ws to be a positive choice as 'they stick with you' (Respondent 10). Respondent 11 feels that such labels incite individuals' curiosity. One visitor (Respondent 8) felt they acted as a filter for the general public about what to expect, feeling it was an attempt to associate the desires of the average tourist to an emotional experience.

From this perspective, it is interesting that Respondent 3 believes it is important to have communication that matched visitors' actual experiences on the island. Whether communication materials appeal to something specific for the visitors depends on the visitors' actual experiences which must correspond to the emotions that are evoked. However, for instance, Respondents 1, 3, 5, and 8 note that the words and images used in public communication do not always resonate: there is a tension between the words used and the actual experiences on

Tiengemetten. In other words, emotions that may be evoked or appeal do not always correspond to actual experiences on the island.

Notions of meaning

With regards to the attractive characteristics of *Tiengemetten*, the island's spacious character – the empty and expansive countryside that is enhanced through seeing clouds and feeling the wind in combination with a sense of freedom – is mentioned by most of the visitors. Interestingly, for Respondent 1, the old landscape of *Tiengemetten* appears to be crucial to his experience; he perceives the *Tiengemetten* of the past reflected in the *Tiengemetten* of now. Respondent 1 as well as Respondent 15 yearned for the previous rural life of *Tiengemetten*:

Tiengemetten was the ultimate polder feeling. I love the polder whether it's winter or summer or autumn; this polder is always beautiful. (Respondent 1).

Traditional countryside, agrarian countryside, in the end is simplicity [...] Exceptionally beautiful farmland. (Respondent 15).

Several visitors (Respondents 8, 11, and 15) cited that the experience of the place was determined by *Tiengemetten* being an island; the ferry trip was regarded as a unique experience as it fostered feelings of being 'on your way to another place'.

When asked about their personal experiences with nature, a number of visitors referred to nature as helping them to obtain a balance in life; nature seems to be a place to mentally recuperate (Respondents 3 and 11). Nature is considered as an ideal setting to vent frustration and to help an individual achieve inner peace (Respondents 2 and 4) or, according to Respondents 4, 10, and 15, nature is 'the other side of the coin':

For people nature is the other side of the coin. The opposite of the urban jungle, of busy, stress, work, misery, mortgage, the whole shebang [...] nature means tranquillity. (Respondent 4)

Respondent 4 cites the ruggedness of nature and its changes as the source of the insight that things are relative, transient, and never inert. Some visitors also believe that nature has the power to take you back to your roots; it is a source of inspiration and can touch your very core (Respondent 4). It is interesting that most of the visitors are cautious about discussing these types of experiences with regard to *Tiengemetten*. However, Respondent 11 talks about a ritualistic dimension, that is, ritualistic in the context that it is a regularly recurring action to break free from the burdens of everyday life.

For a moment you're taken out of that little world. You get on the boat and travel towards the next step. [...] Then you're aware that 'on this island it's all about nature – that's priority number one'. [...] It becomes a kind of sacred space. Nature becomes something holy and clearly demarcated and protected. That space, that is. There's not very much to say: the island is just there.

Discussion

In regard to perceptions of nature, our study indicates that there are no significant substantial differences between the visitors and the key actors; the majority of both groups refer to nature as something that develops autonomously and preferably without (much) human interference. Stated differently, according to our respondents, 'real' nature is 'untouched nature', that is, wilderness. Our findings are in accordance with other empirical studies. For instance, Buijs, Elands, and Langers (2009) note that Dutch people, in general, are strong supporters of wilderness nature. A study conducted by Van den Born (2008) ascertained that, where Dutch individuals' opinions on (real) nature are concerned: 'people are very clear about this: the extent to which nature is cultivated' (p. 92). According to her research, people are a part of nature but have their specific place and responsibilities within it. 'It is a paradox, but not an opposition. [...] responsibility means to give space to flourish and respect nature's autonomy' (Van den Born, 2008, pp. 103+104). de Groot and van den Born (2003) also note that most respondents in the Netherlands take a non-anthropocentric attitude to nature; they conclude that responsibility for nature is clearly part of the current Dutch mainstream culture. Despite the

consensus among respondents that wilderness is the most ‘real’ form of nature, it appeared that the majority of the visitors were cautious about exploiting the terms ‘true’ or ‘real’ nature in relationship to *Tiengemetten*. The outcome of the transformation process of *Tiengemetten* is primarily considered as ‘a cultivation act’, and it is difficult to determine a clear distinction: ‘if you use the phrase true nature, then that implies there’s also such a thing as fake nature. And I don’t feel that that exists’ (Respondent 5). If it is possible to refer to something as ‘real’ nature, then the only the area of the island that can be labelled as ‘wilderness’ is where the tides freely affect the island because nature has begun ‘to take over’ in that location. Drenthen (2003), however, notes that, when we ourselves create ‘wildernesses’, ‘wildness’ can no longer be considered as a standard of the ‘realness’ of nature. Our study demonstrates that ‘realness’ refers to ‘spontaneous’ and ‘autonomous’ rather than ‘true’ or ‘original’. This finding has implications for (communication) policy and strategy because the use of the term ‘real’ nature to mean ‘true’ or ‘original’ dominates the discourse in the Netherlands. Our study shows that the wilderness ideal is prominent in the discourse of key actors in regard to *Tiengemetten* and concepts of meaning are significantly evident in the booklets, leaflets, etc. However, it appears that current public communication about nature intends to overly promote ‘wild’ and ‘untouched nature’ as ‘true’ or ‘original’. This study suggests that it is better to avoid such words with a ‘heavily value-laden language’ as these do not necessarily match the experiences of visitors.

A number of key figures argue that public communication should suggest in advance how visitors will feel once they are on *Tiengemetten*; public communication should evoke the feeling of ‘that’s where I need to be; that’s what I want to experience’. However, this study indicates that experiences on the island do not always correspond with the emotions evoked and appealed to in communication materials, that is, words and images that are used in the public communication about the island. More precisely, our study shows a discrepancy between the discourse of the key actors’ and visitors’ descriptions of their experiences of *Tiengemetten*. Instead of wandering through the wilderness with a sea eagle circling overhead, they experience a savanna-like landscape with excessive wind and children playing around them. The question then arises as to whether the key actors in their discourse have taken into account the experiences of visitors and/or the actual situation of the island which is a (nature) development project subject to continuous change. As a result, the preferences of visitors are also constantly changing. Our study shows the urgency for (communication) policy and strategy to consistently align their public communication on the actual state of the development of the nature projects. This is important for reasons of trust which is, in our opinion, a mixture between truth (is what I say correct) and sincerity (are my intentions right, am I honest). However, it is also necessary for avoiding scepticism of the visitors as you may run to risk that public communication becomes counterproductive.

Hence, in general, it can be concluded that visitors evaluate the discourse of key actors as not being adequate. This results in the following key insights, in this case, implications of our findings for (nature) policy and (communication) strategy:

- Be careful using words such as ‘wild’ and ‘untouched nature’ in the sense of ‘true’ or ‘original’. Avoid ‘heavily value-laden language’ in public communication about nature.
- Evoked emotions in public communication do not automatically correspond with the actual situation and experiences of visitors. For that reason, avoid pious words and false promises; however, tell visitors what the nature reserve actually brings.
- Change is inherent to projects of nature development and hence all public communication is tentative. Each stage requires various words, images, etc. This leads to the recommendation that visitors’ actual experiences of the nature reserve should be incorporated more into the communication about ‘new’ nature projects. As a result, public communication would be perceived by visitors as less ‘pompous’, and the discourse of the key actors would then be more in accordance with the descriptions used by visitors when expressing their experiences of ‘new’ nature.
- Despite the points above, words and images in the discourse of the key actors could function as a framework for visitors’ experiences; these words and images could be used by visitors to express their

experiences as one of the findings was that visitors struggle with the articulation of their experiences (cf. Jansen et al., 2016).

Addressing the points above is an attempt to make a contribution to the research of public communication regarding nature development projects. This article hopefully elucidates the understanding of visitors' communication needs in relationship to their individual experiences. This article is a first attempt, hence the character of this study is explorative; further in-depth and additional quantitative research is required.

Notes

1. Cf. Deacon, Pickering, Golding, and Murdock (2010). In this article, we use purposive sampling, also known as typical-case sampling. This means that the main topic is leading by selecting the area of study. The goal of this type of sampling is not to maximize external validity by means of a random sampling, as in quantitative research, but to interpret a theme by utilizing a selected example.
2. In this article, we mean all types of communication dedicated to inform people about a certain nature development project by public communication, for example, leaflets, information booklets, billboards, etc. See Table 2 and the methods section of this article for further information.
3. We borrow the term 'heavily value-laden language' from Hobbs et al. (2014).
4. Hobbs et al. (2010) argues that

people have increasingly questioned the naturalness and feasibility of maintaining natural conditions in park and wilderness areas. [...] With increasing recognition of the potential effects has come awareness that it may not even be desirable to maintain the historical conditions we often associate with naturalness. (p. 483)

5. They note that historical studies remain valuable in determining ecosystems' structure and function before disruption.
6. According to them, novel ecosystems are closely related to hybrid ecosystems, but

the hybrid ecosystems state could be considered the state in which most of the measurable traits of the ecosystem (i.e. nutrient load, hydrology, species diversity, etc.) are the same but most of the species have changes. The novel state would then be defined as when measurable traits are altered from historical ranges. (Hobbs et al., 2009, p. 601)

7. He elucidates this as follows:

The frame, a robust 30-foot-wide picture frame made of scaffolding poles and painted beams, stood at the edge of the fields framing the view of passers-by. Thanks to the astute sense for symbolic politics on the part of the farmers the point was hard to miss: many people in the local community actually felt attached to the landscape as it was. (Hajer, 2003, p. 91)

8. According to them, there are two primary approaches of discourses. 'The main cleavage runs,' according to Feindt and Oels (2005), 'between Foucaultian and non-Foucaultian concepts of discourse' (p. 163). And 'most non-Foucaultians follow approaches that can be linked theoretically to symbolic interactionism' which means that it 'focusses on the linguistic and pragmatic production of meaning' (p. 163). In contrast, the Foucaultian perspective on discourse 'is more interested in knowledge than in language' (p. 164). It is more about power construction because 'language is not a neutral messenger of given interests and preferences, but it influences their very formation' (p. 166). Cooren (2014) also distinguishes two types of discourses: with an uppercase 'D' (see Footnote 10) and with a lower case 'd'. The latter regards 'what people are up to when they communicate which each other (what they do and how they do what they do) as well as how the conversation itself functions and organized' (p. 7).
9. Feindt and Oels (2005) note that the concept of environment relates humans and society 'to the "natural" systems with which they interact and to the "natural" sources they use', including 'nature protection' (p. 164).
10. This is what Cooren (2014) identifies as the Discourse with an uppercase 'D', 'It means that you are able to recognize its typical form or content, as well as its typical context of production' (p. 5). According to him, it is also noteworthy that 'people who are reproducing specific Discourses can literally be seen as their *carriers*, which means that we could almost say that not only are these persons expressing themselves when they are talking, but also the (typical) Discourses they represent' (p. 5).
11. Cf. Dingler (2005) contends that it is impossible to make a statement about nature 'without a reference to the discourse in which the statement is made' (p. 214). Interestingly, Cronon (1995) notes that this does not mean that nature is unreal or 'a mere figment of our imaginations – far from it'; however, the manner in which we describe and understand nature 'is so entangled with our own values and assumptions that the two can never fully separated' (p. 25).

12. The key actors include the developer of the Tiengemeten vision, the project leader of the transition, a film and documentary maker who filmed the transition of the island for over thirteen years, a general communications employee for Tiengemeten, the Tiengemeten visitor manager, the employee who is ultimate responsible for the communication about Tiengemeten, the mayor of Korendijk (the municipality in which Tiengemeten is located), the designer and developer of the 'nature playground' on Tiengemeten, the Tiengemeten nature conservation officer, and the last farmer to leave the island. The film maker and the last farmer have been excluded from our analysis as they are not directly associated with Tiengemeten from a policy or communication perspective. They were only a relevant party to speak with for obtaining a complete picture of the discourse. Nevertheless, the title of this article is derived from a documentary made by the film maker in 2010.
13. With qualitative research, it is difficult to ensure that the same results can be replicated. Baarda et al. (2009) argue that it is problematic to repeat qualitative research under the same conditions because the many factors that play a role on location cannot be controlled. They argue that 'validity and reliability of data and decisions based upon these aspects are typical quality criteria for quantitative research' (p. 7). They indicate that qualitative research is more about terms such as credibility, transparency, and adequacy.
14. He concludes that the most common sample sizes in research papers were 20 and 30 (followed by 40, 10, and 25). Based on literature reviews, Mason (2010) derives the following numbers: ethnography 30–50 interviews, grounded theory methodology 20–30 interviews, and phenomenology 5–25.
15. In 2009, the government asked for a vacancy to be filled with a communication professional who is able to bring the experience of silence to the attention of the public - one of the ideas is to promote *Tiengemeten* as an icon of silence.
16. This is in accordance with Taylor's (2001) observation which is that most members of the American environmental movement 'have had some kind of mystical experience in nature' (p. 179).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

This work was supported by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO) under [grant number 023.001.002].

Notes on contributors

Peter Jansen is Senior Lecturer at Ede Christian University of Applied Sciences, the Netherlands and PhD candidate at Wageningen University, the Netherlands.

Jan van der Stoep is Associate Professor at Ede Christian University of Applied Sciences.

Jozef Keulartz is Emeritus Professor Environmental Philosophy at Radboud University Nijmegen, the Netherlands.

Henk Jochemsen is Special Professor Christian Philosophy at Wageningen University, the Netherlands.

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