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NOTIONS OF THE SUBLIME

A Case Study into Layers of Depth in Experiences of Nature*

SUMMARY – A re-experiencing of the wilderness ideal is taking place in the Netherlands. This is expressed in the attention that is being devoted to projects in which agricultural land is transformed into nature. One of these projects is central to this article: the island *Tiengemetten*. We aim to study the experiences of visitors to this project in order to gain insight into the extent to which there are layers of depth visible in these experiences. For a lot of respondents going into nature in general and making a visit to an island such as *Tiengemetten* in particular are ways of escaping from their day-to-day existence. It is noticeable that the words and images that the visitors use to describe their experiences fit in mainly with the wilderness view of nature. The wilderness view of nature is connected with experiences of the sublime; so in this article we also ask the question as to what the shift to the wilderness view of nature means for the religious landscape of the Netherlands.

INTRODUCTION

For many years nature organisations in the Netherlands maintained an Arcadian view of nature.¹ This view of nature focuses on rural nature, on nature that is characterised by a man-made landscape where patterns from the past are observed.² However since the eighties, the wilderness view of nature has become popular in the Netherlands.³ According to this view, nature as such has an

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¹ Henny van der Windt, Sjaak Swart & Jozef Keulartz, 'Nature and landscape planning: Exploring the dynamics of valuation, the case of the Netherlands', in: *Landscape and Urban Planning* 79 (2007) nos 3-4, 218-228.

² Jozef Keulartz, 'Naar een "beschaafde" strijd om de natuur', in: Idem (Ed.), *Rustig, ruig en rationeel: Filosofische debatten over de verhouding cultuur-natuur*, Baarn: Kasteel Groeneveld, 2000, 75-96; Chris van Koppen, *Echte natuur: Een sociaal theoretisch onderzoek naar natuurwaardering en natuurbescherming in de moderne samenleving*, Wageningen: Wageningen University, 2002.

³ Arjan Buijs, *Public nature: Social representations of nature and local practices*, Wageningen: Wageningen University, 2009.

untamed and pristine character and is considered to be valuable because of being something primordial. Wilderness refers to uninhabited and uncultivated spaces, to an 'environmental system where natural processes occur with little or no significant influence by human beings'.⁴

Ferguson & Tamburello argue that what they called natural amenities is 'a resource that meets the spiritual needs of human'.⁵ According to them the natural environment is 'a resource that could be used for facilitating spiritual 'feelings, acts, and experiences'.⁶ Champ also concludes that nature is a source of 'deeply meaningful experiences one might call 'religious' or 'spiritual'.⁷

Nature has the ability to be imbued with spiritual power and significance. Forests, lakes, and mountains often invoke a feeling of the divine or inspire a sense of awe. They are a resource that people may use to connect to the sacred and to generate spiritual feelings.⁸

The aim of this article is to use a case study to gain greater insight into the significance of nature experiences and views of nature in the life of nature conservancy area visitors. Hence the central question of this explorative article is: what layers of depth can be identified in the description of the experiences of visitors to *Tiengemetten*?

⁴ Bron Taylor, 'Wilderness, spirituality and biodiversity in North America: Tracing an environmental history from Occidental roots to Earth Day', in: Laura Felt (Ed.), *Wilderness mythologies: Wilderness in the history of religion*, Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012, 293.

⁵ Todd Ferguson & Jeffrey A. Tamburello, 'The natural environment as a spiritual resource: A theory of regional variation in religious adherence', in: *Sociology of Religion* 76 (2015) no.3, 2. They follow William Sewall ('A theory of structure: Duality, agency, and transformation', in: *American Journal of Sociology* 98 (1992) no.1, 1-29) in his description that 'objects, animate or inanimate, naturally occurring or manufactured, (...) can be used to enhance or maintain power' (9). This power is according to them 'spiritual power and energy' (3).

⁶ Ferguson & Tamburello, 'The natural environment as a spiritual resource', 3; They follow William James in his definition of religion and argue that James' definition reflects the current popular understanding of spirituality. James defines religion as 'the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine' (William James, *The varieties of religious experience*, New York: The Modern Library, 1999, 36).

⁷ Joseph Champ, 'Mediated spectacular nature: "God-centered" and "Nature-centered" consumption of a genre', in: *Journal of Media and Religion* 8 (2009) no.4, 226. Ferguson & Tamburello note that the terms 'religion' and 'spirituality' are not mutually exclusive. However they argue that 'religion' 'may be thought of as institutional, mediated, and communal' and 'spirituality' 'points to the personal, subjective, non-institutionalized, and unmediated experience with the sacred' ('The natural environment', 3).

⁸ Ferguson & Tamburello, 'The natural environment as a spiritual resource', 3-4. Droogers defines the sacred as anything related to a separate, exceptional, different, directive reality that is experienced as above and beyond people; see André Droogers, *Zingeving als spel: Over religie, macht en speelse spiritualiteit*, Almere: Parthenon, 2010.

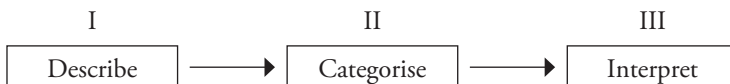
Text box 1: Scope of study and methods

Tiengemetten is an island in the south-west of the Netherlands that was recently transformed from an agricultural island into a nature island. The island is divided into three spheres or zones. On the eastern side of the island there is a relatively small area called 'wistfulness' [Weemoed]. Here, the starting point is the memory of the (cultural) landscape of the past. In the area called 'wealth' [Weelde] human influence should be barely visible. This part of the island is characterised by a limited control of natural processes and the main aim is to maintain the different types of nature. The last and largest part of the island is referred to as 'wilderness' [Wildernis]. This area is not managed at all and the influence of the tides is dominant.

This article presents data from a qualitative case study conducted in 2012. In total 25 people were interviewed. For the selection of respondents we used 'criterion-based sampling', i.e. the selection of respondents was based on predetermined 'criteria': (i) visitor to the island, whether or not regular and/or (ii) people involved from a policy perspective in the transformation of *Tiengemetten* into a nature island and/or an appropriate and influential party in the communication, so-called key actors. In this article we focus primarily on visitors. Interviews were analysed according to standard text analysis. Consequently coded or labelled sections (259 pcs) were compared for similarities and differences and grouped around key categories, in this case sublabels (25 pcs). At the end we defined overarching core labels (5 pcs). In this article we focus on only one of the categories, i.e. 'experiences'.

In order to answer the central research question we look, in the first part (I) of this article, at how visitors experience *Tiengemetten*. This part has a descriptive character. In the second part (II) we look at what types of experiences can be identified in this description. This part has a categorising/analytical character. Finally in the third part (III) of this article we look to which extent layers of depth can be distinguished in the experiences described. This part has an interpretative character.

Figure 1
Three-part structure of article



At the end of this article the various findings are linked and are discussed in light of the central question. This leads us to briefly deal with the question what the results of our study imply for the religious landscape of the Netherlands.

However, we will start off with a short theoretical sketch regarding views of nature and the layers of depth to be distinguished within it.

Theoretical framework

The Dutch discourse on nature is a mixture of romantic understandings of Arcadian nature and technical understandings of wilderness nature. The Arcadian view of nature is based on weak anthropocentric values, i.e. the stewardship worldview, as opposed to the wilderness view of nature, which is based on strong biocentric values, i.e. an ecocentric worldview. Based on Keulartz et al. and Buijs, we define the following characteristics for both views of nature (see table 1).⁹ We will use this table in the last part in this article in the interpretation of the empirical data.

Table 1
Comparison of views of nature

Arcadian nature	Wilderness nature
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Man in harmony with nature (weak-anthropocentric)• Experiencing the beauty of nature• Sympathy for historical elements• Nature is fragile (community ecology)• Emphasising conservation• Modelled upon stereotypes of nature, i.e. picturesque, Romantic, pastoral, rural idyll, etc.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Nature in contrast with man (eco-/biocentric)• Experiencing unpredictable nature• Sympathy for sublime elements• Nature is an ecosystem (system ecology)• Emphasising nature's own course• Modelled upon stereotypes of nature, i.e. primeval, spontaneous/autonomous, true nature, etc.

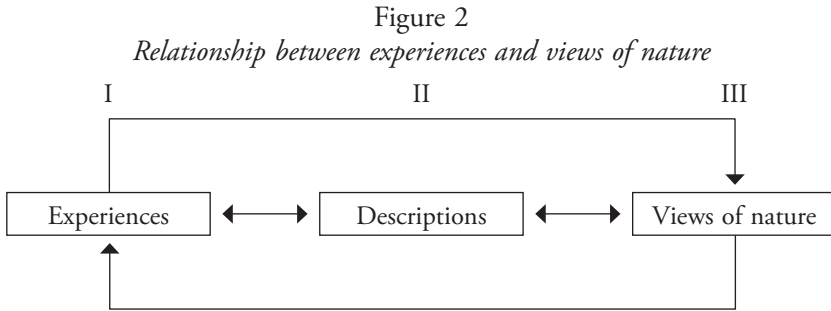
Buijs et al. refer to views of nature as ‘cognitive reflections of prior experiences with and discourses about nature’.¹⁰ Drenthen too makes a link between views of nature and experiences. He states that various interpretations are preceded by ‘the appealing experience of nature’ and that our various interpretations are an answer to this appealing experience.¹¹ In other words, experiences gained in

⁹ Jozef Keulartz, Henny van der Windt & Sjaak Swart, ‘Concepts of nature as communicative devices: The case of Dutch nature policy’, in: *Environmental Values* 13 (2004) no.1, 81-99; Buijs, *Public nature*.

¹⁰ Arjen Buijs, Birgit Elands & Fransje Langers, ‘No wilderness for immigrants: Cultural differences in images of nature and landscape preferences’, in: *Landscape and Urban Planning* 91 (2009) no.3, 114.

¹¹ Martin Drenthen, ‘De wilde natuur en verlangen naar andersheid’, in: Bart Voorstuijs (Ed.), *Zwijgende natuur: Natuurervaring tussen betovering en onttovering*, Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2002, 78.

nature influence a person's view of nature, which implies that views of nature can be identified in what people say about nature. But the opposite also applies: a person's views of nature influence their experience(s) of nature. Figure 2 shows this diagrammatically.



By describing our experiences we become aware of these experiences : when the experience is expressed in language, a reflection is implicitly carried out. Describing experiences creates a certain distance with regard to the concrete experience.¹² This is to say that articulating experiences is a form of objectification. Or, to put it another way, language has an objectivising effect with regard to our experiences. But expressing experiences in language makes it possible to share them with other people. By making *our* experiences shareable we attach personal, subjective meaning and sense to them. Meanings occur not in a person alone but between people.¹³ Talking about experiences and/or sharing images defines and deepens experiences. Other people can also recognise themselves in these shared experience(s). Which means that communication about nature can also evoke experiences.

Expressing experiences in words means that what has been experienced can (in a distilled form) be included in future experiences, by other people, in other places. In this way personal experiences can be picked up by other people whom I do not know, for reasons that I do not know or share.¹⁴

In short, by communicating about our experiences of nature things are not only described and imagined (articulated); they are also defined and given meaning (categorised and interpreted).

¹² Angela Roothaan, *Terugkeer van de natuur: De betekenis van natuurervaring voor een nieuwe ethiek*, Kampen: Klement, 2005.

¹³ Per Linell, *Approaching dialogue: Talk, interaction and contexts in dialogical perspectives*, Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1998.

¹⁴ Roothaan, *Terugkeer van de natuur*, 54-55.

With regard to disclosing meaning, ‘language constructs’ such as frames play a role. Frames navigate our thoughts, they structure our process of perceiving, i.e. our experiences. To understand how frames are related to depth dimensions in communication the distinction between surface frames and deep frames is helpful.¹⁵ Surface frames function at the level of our daily language. They make clear what the communication is about and provide us with a point of view. However, surface frames appeal to underlying values and convictions that can be communicated in deep frames. Deep frames connect our daily language with our normative convictions regarding the world and our lives. In the context of this study we understand the Arcadian view of nature and the Wilderness view of nature as deep frames.

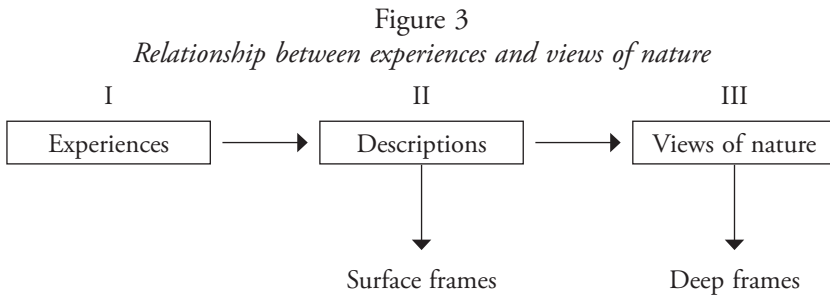


Figure 3 summarises the theoretical framework in diagrammatic form and this figure serves as a ‘backbone’ for this article.

1. EXPERIENCES

In this first part we look at how visitors experience *Tiengemetten*. In other words, why do people go to *Tiengemetten*, what do they actually experience and gain from it? Several visitors primarily expect people with a love of nature and the countryside to visit *Tiengemetten*. Nevertheless several respondents assert that a varied audience, from all over the Netherlands, visit *Tiengemetten*, with a number of respondents referring mainly to ‘curious people’ as visiting the island.¹⁶

¹⁵ George Lakoff, *Thinking points: Communicating our American values and vision*, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2006.

¹⁶ 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, eat something, walk to the *Vliedberg*, take in the area and go home. They spend no more than two hours on the island. The second category, nature lovers, mostly go east on rambling trails. The third category, naturalists, is relatively small. These are people who actually go into the wilderness area and primarily come to experience nature.



Key attractive characteristics: seeing clouds and dynamics of the tide

Regarding the key attractive characteristics of *Tiengemetten*, the island's spacious character – the empty and expansive countryside enhanced through seeing clouds and feeling the wind in combination with a sense of freedom – and relative tranquillity are cited frequently by a lot of the respondents. Mass tourism, overscheduling of activities and 'overly well-kept' sites tended to diminish the experience for some visitors in general and the experience of nature specifically. For some visitors a distinct recognition of the old landscape of *Tiengemetten* seems crucial to their experience. They see the '*Tiengemetten* of yore' reflected in the *Tiengemetten* of now; the former expression crops up regularly during the interviews. It refers primarily to the more or less isolated character of the island, described by some as a 'free state' and as a place where the environment of modern life is far less present than in the rest of the Netherlands. One or two

individuals found the *Tiengemetten* of yore to be more beautiful than that of the present. '*Tiengemetten* was the ultimate experience of the polders' (respondent 1). The old *Tiengemetten* exuded the nostalgia of rural life. As respondent 15 puts in:

Traditional countryside, agrarian countryside, in the end is simplicity. Narrow roads just wide enough to fit a tractor. No highways, no road demarcations, no street names. I enjoyed that. There was something about it. And the cars that were around, well, they were ancient. I liked that. Exceptionally beautiful farmland (respondent 15).

Several visitors cited the aspect of 'being on an island' as a particularly attractive factor. For a large number of respondents the experience of the place was determined by *Tiengemetten* being an island. Such experiences, however, are nothing new. Even in the past when *Tiengemetten* was just an island used for farming, the ferry trip itself was regarded by several key actors as a unique experience. However, some key actors feel that the ferry is now used more strategically, as a means to give a visit to *Tiengemetten* a specific flavour.

It is also striking that various respondents mention the dynamics of the tide; but ruggedness and unspoilt nature are also mentioned in relation to *Tiengemetten*. Most visitors associate nature with 'letting it happen' and 'letting things take their course', such as 'nature takes its course, that's what I call wilderness' (respondent 7). The fact that it was people who started the process, as far as *Tiengemetten* is concerned, did not meet with many objections.¹⁷ It was created but for respondent 10 there is nothing wrong with that as there is now 'movement'. There were conditions set out so that the 'natural process is given space' (respondent 4) and nature can 'establish itself' (respondent 12). According to respondent 13 you now get an idea of 'how it once was'. For several visitors this was the reason for visiting *Tiengemetten*, as here nature had been returned to 'how nature could be' (respondent 7). This also applied to respondents 8 and 11, who wanted to visit *Tiengemetten* as here 'nature had been returned to true nature' (respondent 8) and 'true wild nature with a direct influence exerted by river and sea' (respondent 11). Respondent 13 commented that 'wildness [was] as expected'. One respondent was sceptical: 'they would like it to be like that', 'there are too many traces of human intervention' and he therefore finds the term 'true nature' 'misleading' (respondent 15). For him nature is only true nature if it has always been nature. 'If cultural landscape becomes nature, it remains cultural landscape. It is just a different type of cultural landscape' (respondent 15).

¹⁷ Several respondents refer to 'park management' (respondent 8) or 'a bit of a fun park': 'I felt it was a bit of a fun park. *Natuurmonumenten* [Dutch Conservation Society] often has really beautiful parks, very natural, but they are also a bit polished. Such a building is always natural anyway in which everything is on display (...) but you also get all these Scottish Highlanders (...), it is simply a bit like a business card for *Natuurmonumenten* (respondent 11).

2. SURFACE FRAMES

The experiences that can be identified in the visitors' descriptions of *Tiengemetten* can be classified into four types of experiences: (1) experiences of loss, (2) island feel, (3) experiences of escape and (4) experiences of grandeur. We will discuss each of the four categories below using the associated surface frames. We want to stress that this categorisation was done on the basis of the analysis of the texts of the interviews before we had a relationship in mind relating to a view of nature.

Experiences of Loss

Research shows that residents and tourists find the new landscape that was created by nature development attractive but at the same time feel less attached to it.¹⁸ If a place changes, the attachment decreases, especially if the landscape is to be used differently: it is suitable for other activities and experiences than previously and logically it attracts different people.¹⁹ This is in keeping with a comment by one of our respondents. One of the key actors noted namely that he expected increasing numbers of visitors from the whole of the Netherlands to come to *Tiengemetten* and that they would not have a lot of affinity (any more) with the past – 'they will see *Tiengemetten* as it is now and compare it with other areas of *Natuurmonumenten* [Dutch Conservation Society]' (respondent 19).

Opposition to the development of nature arises above all from the loss of identity of the area and from a loss of the visibility of the history of the (agricultural) origins.²⁰ In the case of several respondents memories were reinforced at the sight of several former farms that remained. Some visitors still knew the names and functions of the various farms. The identity or individuality of the area along with the interweaving with personal life histories evoke feelings of familiarity with the landscape.²¹ At the same time dehistoricising the landscape results in a loss of identity.²² This also emerged in our study: visitors who 'have

¹⁸ Arjan Buijs, Birgit Elands & Fransje Langers, 'No wilderness for immigrants: Cultural differences in images of nature and landscape preferences', in: *Landscape and Urban Planning* 91 (2009) no.3, 113-123.

¹⁹ Riyan van den Born & Mirjam de Groot, 'Favoriete plekken en binnendoorpaadjes: Op zoek naar de betekenis van landschap en verbondenheid met plaats', in: Riyan van den Born, Martin Drenthen, Pieter Lemmens & Thomas van Slobbe (Eds.), *Plaats: Beschouwingen over verbondenheid met natuur en landschap*, Zeist: KNNV, 2011, 10-26.

²⁰ Jozef Keulartz, 'Plaats tussen Utopia en Nostalgie', in: van den Born et al., *Plaats*, 164-178.

²¹ van den Born & de Groot, 'Favoriete plekken en binnendoorpaadjes'.

²² Keulartz, 'Plaats tussen Utopia en Nostalgie'. Lemaire refers to inspired places if places are given a special meaning because we get attached to them. These places become a part of us over time. If they change, something in us is affected. See Ton Lemaire, 'Bezielde plekken en onplaatsen', in: van den Born et al., *Plaats*, 27-28.



Before and after transformation: loss of visibility historical origin?

an affinity' with rural life or the island from the past were particularly sensitive to this topic. For some visitors it was important for the experience that the design of the old landscape could still be seen. 'You lose the design a bit of what it used to be,' said respondent 1. And respondent 8 commented: 'there are elements that are a part of our history, there's no way of escaping that'. So some respondents see the old *Tiengemetten* in the new *Tiengemetten*. Although this is often to do with the relatively unique character of the island in the past – described by some as a 'free state' and as a place where there were fewer regulations than in the rest of the Netherlands. Follow-up questions showed that one person found the old *Tiengemetten* of the past more beautiful; see quote below by respondent 1. The old *Tiengemetten* radiated the nostalgic rural life. In other words, for some respondents the past plays an important role in their experience of today's *Tiengemetten*.

Tiengemetten was the ultimate polder feeling. I love the polder; whether it's winter or summer or autumn, this polder is always beautiful. In winter it is neatly ploughed, or in autumn, and it is covered with snow, and in spring the new greenery sprouts and in summer there are the cornfields and the potatoes, a polder is always beautiful (respondent 1).

Attachment to a place is not just a result of one's own experience but also a result of stories heard or read.²³ We also found this in our study. Some respondents, who did not themselves have a direct historical link with the island, have trouble, for instance, with the farms being left to fall into disrepair. Not just from the point of view of 'the capital destruction' but also because of history, particularly because many generations had been born there and had grown up there.

You're born there and you want to live there for the rest of your life. Then because of something like this you have to move away. (respondent 2)

They're now renovating a building. (...). The kids' drawings were still hanging in the attic! (respondent 10)

Although the focus of this article is on the visitors, it is interesting in this respect to see that the key actors (see text box 1) are properly aware of these experiences. Respondent 16, for example, refers to a great sacrifice that had to be made.²⁴ Respondent 19 comments that the emotions concerning the transformation are still felt: 'what happened still sticks to *Tiengemetten*' (respondent 19).²⁵ According to respondent 21 the pain of the past – what we have called the experience of loss as a general term – is 'the island's soul' (respondent 21).²⁶ In the classification of the island and official communications this can also be seen in the word 'wistful' [*weemoed*].²⁷

²³ Robert Thayer, *LifePlace*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003.

²⁴ According to several key actors, when the island was transformed, buildings were left standing as a reminder of the fact that the transformation did not just happen by itself. According to several key actors, they really looked for a landscape that retained the story of people. 'In particular that ruin of the big farm, where the last farmer lived. I thought something along the lines of 'everybody who visits it will feel a little uncomfortable. It has become a sort of mysterious, special place on that island' (respondent 16).

²⁵ Respondent 21 comments that he is tired of being confronted with the 'farmer story' every time, 'it would be better to get rid of that now, it's over'. At the same time he recognises that this story exists and he struggles with how to ensure that it does not become too kitschy.

²⁶ Respondent 22 comments that there are two sides to the island. 'On the one hand I see the beauty, on the other hand I see the pain there still is in the area. (...) When you realise that a transformation process was initiated by the government that was not really supported by a lot of the population, you become aware that a lot of the people are still suffering when it comes to *Tiengemetten*. (...) I can't look at *Tiengemetten* in an unbiased way because I'm aware of the pain still felt by many people'.

²⁷ In this sense, the title of an award winning documentary (SNG Film, 2010) about *Tiengemetten* is well chosen: wistful wilderness. Seeing this documentary was one of the reasons to conduct this study.

Island Feel

As mentioned in part 1 of this article, the experiences of *Tiengemeten* are also influenced by the fact that it is an island. As a result of this some visitors experience *Tiengemeten* as a completely different world or as a completely different dimension of existence. The sight of it and the contrast with 'normal life' on the mainland reinforces this experience.

Life carries on there and I'm here and here life stands still for a while (respondent 8).

Several visitors refer to a travel experience, which is reinforced by the crossing by ferry. Experiences of *Tiengemeten* are strongly influenced anyway by the (necessary) crossing by ferry, as illustrated by the both quotations below.

What is normal [daily life, PJ] is on the mainland, but if you go by boat then it's suddenly very different (...) It lets you escape from the hectic of life for a moment. (...) It's more like real life (respondent 15).

One of the visitors refers, in this context, to *Tiengemeten* as a 'sort of sacred space'.

You step out of your own world for a moment, you get on a boat and then you move on to the next step. (...) You know that on this island it's all about nature, nature is the highest priority. (...) It is a sort of sacred space. Nature is there, it's sacred and it is very clearly embraced: this space, that's what it is. There isn't that much to show: this island is just there (respondent 11).

This quotation brings us by our third type of experiences.

Experiences of Escape

Whereas the first two categories were linked closely to the place, to the island of *Tiengemeten* itself, the next two categories of experiences about which the respondents talk are experiences that have to do with what nature does to the respondents. The aspect of escape/release is something we heard regularly.²⁸ According to some visitors nature helps us to obtain balance in life.

I work in a knowledge-intensive organisation. And this is simply a completely different dimension; this helps me to achieve balance in my life, and that's what I use it for (respondent 3).

Nature is regarded as an ideal outlet that ensures that you can unwind.

²⁸ The comment by one of the key actors is intriguing in this respect. 'A lot of people come to *Tiengemeten* not to think about something but precisely in order to let go of their thoughts' (respondent 16).

For people nature is the other side of the urban environment, of bustle, stress, work, misery, mortgage, the whole shebang. (...) nature means tranquillity (respondent 4).

Several respondents mention the ruggedness of nature and the changes to nature as the reason for the notion that things are relative. The emptiness and vastness of *Tiengemetten* have a positive effect.

You don't get that in many places in the Netherlands. There are places [on *Tiengemetten*, PJ] where, if you choose carefully, you see nothing at all of the real world. I really like that (respondent 5).²⁹

Tiengemetten 'lets you escape from the hectic of life for a moment' and according to respondent 15 is therefore 'more like real life'.

Experiences of Grandeur

Empirical research shows that most of the respondents (51%) prefer nature where you can experience 'the greatness and forces of nature'.³⁰ In some experiences of nature the experience of one's own smallness compared with the grandeur of nature was regularly mentioned. One visitor refers to feelings of humility; one of the other respondents concisely describes similar feelings as follows:

I love it when we're sometimes reined in by a huge storm or a big thunderstorm. So that we realise that we're not as powerful as we think (respondent 23).

According to some visitors nature can take people back to their roots.

Nature is something primal, you go back to your roots in nature and then you relax, that's a great feeling (respondent 4).

According to several visitors you can get close to yourself in nature – you can lose yourself in nature and feel at one with nature. According to some visitors nature can stir you deeply and be a source of inspiration.

Whether you're religious or not, [in nature, PJ] there is always something that inspires you (respondent 4).

Some respondents state in general that people need spirituality and they find this in nature.³¹ One visitor sees 'God at work' on *Tiengemetten*.

²⁹ The respondent refers with 'nothing' to an unobstructed and endless view.

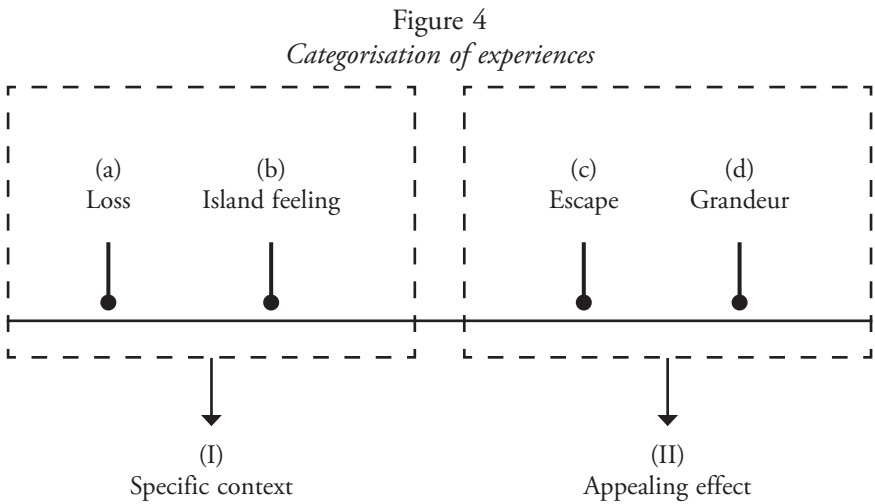
³⁰ Wouter de Groot & Riyan van den Born, 'Visions of nature and landscape type preferences: an exploration in The Netherlands', in: *Landscape and Urban Planning* 63 (2003) no.3, 134.

³¹ One of the respondents comments that nature can be an important (new) source of spirituality in a secularised society such as the Netherlands.

I believe in God. And if you look at all that nature, we have nothing to do with it, but you see that Somebody was at work. And you also see, if you want to believe that, that a piece of nature is a bit of a ‘paradise on earth’ (respondent 10).

Preliminary Conclusion

In this second part of the article we look at what kind of experiences can be identified in the experiences described by the respondents. To summarise, there is a dichotomy, see figure 4.



First of all (I) there are experiences that are strongly connected with the specific context. With regard to *Tiengemetten* these are (a) feelings of loss as well as (b) experiences to do with the fact that *Tiengemetten* is an island. Secondly (II) there are experiences that express the appealing effect of nature. These are experiences that have to do with (c) feelings of release and (d) experiences to do with grandeur. Interviews have shown that respondents who stressed the experience of loss were in general less positive with regard to wilderness. And respondents who made positive comments about wilderness had less trouble with the old farms on *Tiengemetten* falling into a state of disrepair. Using table 1 from the theoretical framework we want to look in the next section at what kind of layers of depth can be identified in the types of experiences referred to. In other words, in the third and last part of this article we make the transition from surface frames to deep frames and how these are connected to the two views of nature referred to above.

3. DEEP FRAMES

As mentioned in the theoretical part of this article, we understand the Arcadian view of nature and the Wilderness view of nature as deep frames. In the case of 'experiences of loss' experiences are described that fit with the Arcadian view of nature. Some respondents mention the loss of 'the design of the landscape'. The agricultural history is no longer (explicitly) visible. One could also say that this type of experience appeals to the Arcadian view of nature with its nostalgic feelings with regard to the rural life of the past, i.e. sympathy for historical elements and appreciation of the rural idyll. In the case of nostalgia the present day is compared with the past, feelings of loss or decline manifesting themselves in combination with a nostalgia for the past – in a sense it is a search for the safety of the past.³² In the introduction to this article we stated that within the Arcadian view of nature 'weak-anthropocentric values' play a role. Anthropocentric values 'concentrated not only on the economic functions of the area, but also on the aesthetic functions of beautiful natural landscapes'.³³ Arcadian thought is based on certain stereotypes, such as 'the picturesque and Romantic landscapes', and it refers to a 'peaceful rural landscape'.³⁴ The quotation of respondent 15 mentioned in section 1 illustrates this in a certain way.

In the case of 'island feeling' the respondents mention vastness, a feeling of space, emptiness and transparency combined with a feeling of freedom and relative peace. But for this experience a counterpoint is always necessary: the mainland. Those experiences are reinforced by the required crossing by ferry. Words with a certain religious connotation, such as 'travel experience', 'other dimension of existence', 'reborn' and 'sort of sacred space' were used during the interviews.³⁵ If we look at table 1 in the introduction it is difficult to classify the category 'island feeling'. This category has elements of the Arcadian view of nature – 'experiencing the beauty of nature' and 'modelled upon stereotypes of

³² Michael Pickering & Emily Keightley, 'The modalities of nostalgia', in: *Current Sociology* 54 (2006) no.6, 919-941.

³³ Buijs, *Public nature*, 105. We use the term weak-anthropocentric values not just where attention is devoted to functional, i.e. economic function, but also where attention is devoted to aesthetic functions.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 53.

³⁵ We are talking here about comments that Voyé defines as implicit religion: 'implicit religion refers to those aspects of ordinary life which seem to contain an inherently religious element within them - whether or not they are expressed in ways that are traditionally described as religious': Liliane Voyé, 'A survey of advances of in the sociology of religion (1980-2000)', in: Peter Antes, A.W. Geertz & R.R. Warne (Eds.), *New approaches to the study of religion*. Vol 2: *Textual, comparative, sociological and cognitive approaches*, Berlin: De Gruyter, 2004, 202.



Experiences are reinforced by the required crossing by ferry

nature’ – as well as elements of the wilderness view of nature, where ecocentric values – ‘nature in contrast with man’ – prevail.

People often go to certain places as they believe that they can find something there.³⁶ This is manifest, for example, in the experience of ‘escape’: most visitors experience nature as a place where they can ‘escape from the worries of day-to-day existence’. Nature contrasts with an environment controlled by people, which fits in with the wilderness view of nature. This is illustrated by the comment made by respondent 11, who believes that going into nature is something of a ritual. Ritual in the sense of a repeated meaningful action, in this case to escape from the worries of day-to-day existence. Escape experiences make the third category different from the second category. ‘Island feeling vs mainland’,

³⁶ van den Born & de Groot, ‘Favoriete plekken en binnendoorpadjes’.

the second category, illustrates the touristic element of a visit of *Tiengemeten*. The word pair 'escape vs daily life' of the third category emphasizes more the aspect of peregrinatio. Interesting in this respect is the quotation below:

Pilgrimage and tourism are permeable experiences. Pilgrimage has always included 'seeing the sights' as well as worrying about finding the next bed and breakfast. And tourism frequently involves a search for personal transformation through the experiencing with others of a special site that represents central values and beliefs of the group. In both cases, the focus is on travel away from home to a special place that is set apart from daily life. (...) the expectation is that there will be some kind of transformation or re-creation as result of the visit.³⁷

She makes the important comment that pilgrimage and tourism are about what she calls 'transformation through experiencing', which is possible as the particular place, e.g. *Tiengemeten*, represents certain values and beliefs.³⁸ Some authors note that the wilderness approach builds on the idea 'that wild, uncultivated nature represents an important value that has to be protected from cultivation and appropriation by man'.³⁹ Ecocentric values are central to the wilderness view of nature.

The second part of this article shows that the respondents have 'feelings of being overwhelmed' in relation to nature. These experiences fit in with the wilderness view of nature. As can be seen from table 1, wilderness has a sympathy for sublime elements.⁴⁰ Grand and wild nature invite unique experiences to a greater extent, as a result of which it is easier to go into raptures and to feel a moment of belonging to nature.⁴¹ The appealing effect of nature, about which we wrote in the introduction, is mainly visible here. The 'completely different' appeals to us in some way or other and evokes feelings of attachment and alienation at the same time. Sublime experiences are about the experience that we are part of a reality that is larger than us; we feel a distance and at the same time we feel connection. Experiences of the sublime, it could be argued, are defined as being a

³⁷ Lynn Ross-Bryant, *Pilgrimage to the National Parks: Religion and nature in the United States*, New York: Routledge, 2013, 6-7.

³⁸ Ibidem. Pilgrimages places are storage places for collective, i.e. cultural, ideas; she talks in this respect of 'ideals'. According to her, you can also apply this to national parks. 'A shrine, then, including a national park, provides a physical location that embodies the values that orient the culture; and travel to the location both literally and symbolically orients the pilgrim' (ibid., 7). She also talks about nature as one of the symbolic centres that have oriented people.

³⁹ Martin Drenthen, *Grenzen aan wildheid: Wildernisverlangen en de betekenis van Nietzsches moraalkritiek voor de actuele milieu-ethiek*, Budel: Damon, 2003, 200.

⁴⁰ Willis too notes that wilderness was rediscovered as the place of the sublime: see Alette Willis, 'Re-storying wilderness and adventure therapies: Healing places and selves in an era of environmental crises', in: *Journal of Adventure Education & Outdoor Learning* 11 (2011) no.2, 91-108.

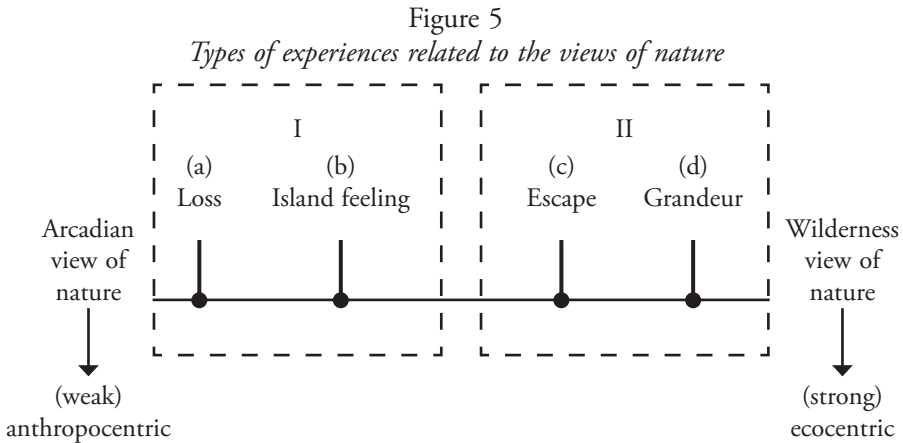
⁴¹ van den Born & de Groot, 'Favoriete plekken en binnendoorpadjes'.

situation in which a person feels the tension between on the one hand being part of nature and on the other hand being outside, i.e. opposite nature.

Preliminary Conclusion

In this third part we looked at the layers of depth, i.e. deep frames, for the four types of experience found in section 2. In other words, we noted that the various experiences can be roughly linked to the two central views of nature within the Dutch discourse: the Arcadian view of nature and the wilderness view of nature.

If we place the categorisation from the second part of this article next to the characteristics of the Arcadian and wilderness view of nature, we can see that there are experiences that fit more with the Arcadian view of nature and experiences that fit more with the wilderness view of nature. This is summarised in figure 5.



DISCUSSION

In this article we have tried to gain an insight in an explorative manner into what layers of depth, i.e. views of nature can be identified in the descriptions of the experience of visitors. It is important to note that somebody can have several types of experiences with regard to *Tiengemeten* that do not always fit with one specific view of nature. To a certain extent the respondents have a hybrid view of nature. This poses the question as to whether views of nature are manifest only on a person level or whether these views are embedded in culture. What is interesting in this respect is that ‘frames seem to be everywhere, but no one knows where exactly they begin and where they end’.⁴² Frames exist more or less

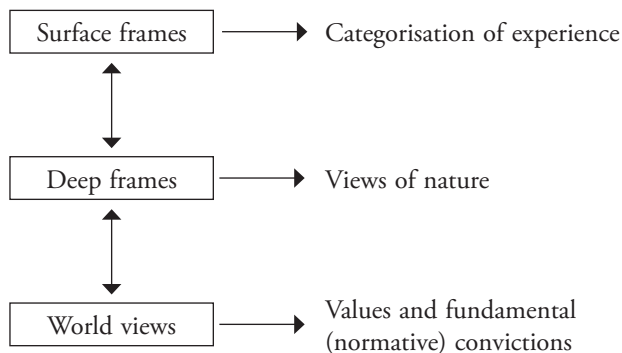
⁴² Baldwin van Gorp, ‘The constructionist approach to framing: Bringing culture back in’, in: *Journal of Communication* 57 (2007), 62.

independently of the individual and are part of a culture.⁴³ Frames, i.e. views of nature, are 'in stock' in a culture and we use them consciously or unconsciously as we communicate about our experiences of nature. Views of nature can be regarded as stylised depictions of deep frames, which however in the case of individuals often do not occur in 'prototypical' form.

World Views

In this article we have adopted the distinction of layers of depth in communication. Layers of depth in communication on nature show that descriptions of experiences of nature (level of surface frames) are linked to certain views of nature (level of deep frames) that in turn embody values and convictions. This is not a static process; we should think in terms of interaction, see figure 6.

Figure 6
Layers of depth in communication



Values function as the 'guiding principles 'of what is moral, desirable or just'.⁴⁴ Beliefs on the other hand are related with our views about and our attitudes to an object or situation, i.e. a value perspective. This is often translated into a certain fundamental attitude.⁴⁵ In other words, behind views of nature world views once again appear. World views are contextual phenomena that allow people to see things in a certain way and enable people to make connections

⁴³ Ibidem.

⁴⁴ Willett Kempton, James Boster & Jennifer Hartley, *Environmental values in American culture*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995, 12.

⁴⁵ Various classifications have been developed, but that of Zweers is the best-known within the the Dutch discourse. He distinguishes six fundamental attitudes to nature, positioned on the line anthropocentric – ecocentric: despot, enlightened ruler, steward, partner, participant and 'unio mystica'. See Wim Zweers, 'Grondhoudingen ten opzichte van natuur', in: *Heidemij Tijdschrift* 6 (1989), 74-80.

between things. They define a person and provide people with 'fundamental assumptions upon which a life is based'.⁴⁶

Notions of the Sublime

It can be stated in general that in the experience described by visitors the wilderness view of nature is particularly evident. The description includes sympathy for sublime elements: wind, clouds, etc. Especially the unpredictable character of nature and nature's own course are stressed. The descriptions also include certain stereotypes of 'real' nature. For example that 'real' nature develops autonomously without (too much) involvement by people. It is interesting that some authors argue that sublimity implies a connection between God and the wilderness.⁴⁷ Or that by a sublime experience 'certain landscapes came to be valued as holding the promise of revealing the face of God'.⁴⁸ The way in which some authors write about sublime experiences is in line with the words of Otto about experiences of the numinous – a mood that overcomes a human being when an object is regarded as being numinous.⁴⁹

Text box 2: Numinous experiences

We use 'holy' generally as the absolutely moral predicate, as 'completely good'.⁵⁰ But as our feeling for language 'undoubtedly always feel the morally good to be implied in holy' it is recommended, according to him, to find a special term 'to stand for the holy minus its moral factor (...) minus its rational aspect altogether'.⁵¹ Otto continues: '(...) I adopt a word coined from the Latin *numen*. *Omen* has given us *ominous*, and there is no reason why from *numen* we should not similarly form a word "*numinous*". I shall speak then of a unique numinous category of value and of a definitely numinous state of mind, which is always found wherever the category is applied'.⁵² It is a category that, according to him, is individual and, just like any other original fact, cannot be accurately defined – the numinous is only demonstrable.⁵³

⁴⁶ David Naugle, *Worldview: The history of a concept*, Grand Rapids-Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2002, 291.

⁴⁷ Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American mind*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001.

⁴⁸ Willis, 'Re-storying wilderness and adventure therapies', 95.

⁴⁹ Rudolf Otto, *The idea of the holy: An inquiry into the non-rational factor in the idea of the divine and its relation to the rational*, London: Oxford University Press, 1923 (orig. publ. 1917).

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 7.

⁵³ He therefore argues that you can only generate understanding with the listener by trying to help them using a detailed discussion so that the category comes to life in their own inner lives, escapes and they become aware through it. You can support this method by pointing out the opposite that is similar or also characteristic, which occurs in other already known, familiar atmospheres, and then adding: 'this X of ours is not precisely this experience, but akin to this one and the opposite of that other. Cannot you now realize for yourself what it is?'

However, it is striking that the visitors in general talk about their experiences with nature in a fairly 'flat' or superficial way. Is it diffidence or is an interview setting 'too threatening' to be more personal? Are we lacking, in the Dutch 'neutralised public discourse', language that is connected to meaningful sources that offer us possibilities for describing and defining spiritual experiences? In other words, is there no (longer any) cultural substrate for talking about such experiences? However, it may also be that this 'flat' way of speaking is not uncommon for human experiences of the numinous. After all, these are experiences that are demonstrable but difficult to articulate.

Although the focus of this article is on visitors, it is interesting to note that the key actors talk more easily about this category. Or put another way: key actors seem to more easily interpret their experiences of nature as spiritual or religious. Several key actors talk, for example, about a meeting with the Greater Whole in nature or about nature as a source of meaning.⁵⁴ One key figure even said that nature is a place to return to be reborn.

Green Religion

Table 2 seem to indicate that the difference between visitors and key actors, as described in the previous section, can be partly explained by the fact that 80% of the key actors are to a greater or lesser extent 'involved with religion' compared with approximately 47% of the visitors.

Table 2
Religious background respondents

Type of religion	Visitors	Key actors	Total
	15	10	25
Christian	33,33%	20,00%	26,67%
Previously Christian	0,00%	50,00%	25,00%
Spiritual, never involved in an institutional form of religion, believes in a Higher Power, regardless of what it is	13,33%	10,00%	11,67%
Not religious or (consciously) spiritual	53,33%	20,00%	36,67%

(ibid., 7). That means: strictly speaking you cannot state what our x consists of, you can only incite and encourage another person to discover it themselves – 'as everything that comes of the spirit must be awakened' (ibidem).

⁵⁴ Respondent 16 states, for example: 'for me nature is an important source of meaning, but only by being able to bond with nature, by being able to be a part of it'.

The results of a study done in the US by Ferguson & Tamburello, and a statement of Taylor are interesting.⁵⁵ Ferguson & Tamburello conclude that the natural environment offers a spiritual substitute for traditional religious groups, but also that the natural environment 'may be a supplier of spiritual goods to the religious unaffiliated, or 'nones'.'⁵⁶ Taylor observes that the efforts to establish and protect wilderness areas can be understood 'to be a way of establishing such places as sacred places, as temples for those who have left behind conventional religions'.⁵⁷ In an earlier publication he reported an increasing interest in what he calls 'nature-based spiritualities', i.e. 'green religion'.⁵⁸

Environmental degradation has become increasingly obvious and alarming, and this is increasingly grafted into existing religions (green religion type 1), and mixed in with revitalized and new forms of nature-as-sacred religions (green religion type 2). This represents a significant innovation in the history of religions, where apocalyptic expectation arises not from the fear of angry divinities or incomprehensible natural disasters but from environmental science. (...) It may be that the third type, now only nascent and growing within small enclaves of devotees around the world, will inherit much of the religious future; a religion in which people feel awe and reverence toward the earth's living systems and even feel themselves as connected and belonging to these systems.⁵⁹

It is (green) religion of the third type that is particularly interesting within the framework of this article. In another study, Taylor talks of 'earth-based spirituality'.⁶⁰

Earth-based spiritualities are based on personal experiences that foster a bonding with nature. These experiences are diverse, take place in different venues and are expressed in plural ways that are sometimes contested.⁶¹

⁵⁵ Ferguson & Tamburello, 'The natural environment as a spiritual resource'; Taylor, 'Wilderness, spirituality and biodiversity in North America'.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 5. They define religious 'nones' as 'people who do not identify with any religious tradition', but 'this does not mean that this group is irreligious'.

⁵⁷ Taylor, 'Wilderness, spirituality and biodiversity in North America', 310.

⁵⁸ Bron Taylor, 'A green future for religion?', in: *Futures* 36 (2004) no.9, 991-1008. He notes that it is a matter of perception and definition whether some of these nature-based spiritualities count as religion. However, he does not discern any reason to assume that 'without supernatural beings there is no religion, for there are many examples around the world where people feel and speak of a "spiritual connection" to nature, or of "belonging to" the earth (mother earth, or even mother ocean), or speak of the earth as "sacred" without any concomitant confession of supernatural beings' (1000).

⁵⁹ Ibid., 1001-1002.

⁶⁰ Bron Taylor, 'Earth and nature-based spirituality (part II): From Earth First! and bioregionalism to scientific Paganism and the New Age', in: *Religion* 31 (2001) no.3, 225-245.

⁶¹ Ibid., 226. He continues by stating that 'these feelings may be intentionally precipitated through a variety of practices that are themselves a creative bricolage assembled from older

Despite the differences there is a common 'faith'.

It can be stated succinctly: the earth and all its life forms and processes are sacred. We belong to them and they to us – we are kin. We should, therefore, act lovingly, reverently, and respectfully toward them. We must not unnecessarily injure these beings and processes when we take from them what we need to live.⁶²

How does this connect to the themes of this article? If in the Netherlands the reclamation of land is linked with Christianisation, it could be argued that conversely there is a link between depoldering and secularisation.⁶³ However, secularisation does not by definition mean a reduction in individual religiosity.⁶⁴ Authors such as Stolow note, for example, that there is a religious revival going on in what he calls secular modernity.⁶⁵ Religion did not disappear, but took a different shape and form. We no longer have secularisation as the standard intrinsic to modernity, but we are more 'alert instead to the specific ways in which the concept, role and place of religion have been redefined with the rise of secularity'.⁶⁶ Or more specifically with regard to this article: is there a link between the rise of the wilderness view of nature and the increase in 'nature-based spiritualities', and can *Tiengemetten* be seen as an example of the transition of religiosity presently taking place in our Western society?

religious traditions, especially Eastern and indigenous religions, combined with new inventions, such as neo-paganism, all stirred into an eclectic spiritual stew' (226).

⁶² Ibid., 238. But regardless of this convergence according him tensions will still remain. 'Devotees of the more mystical and super naturalistic forms of nature-based spirituality, those with a more cosmological or astrological referent, or those that tend to personify Gaia as goddess more than as an ecological process are more likely to be optimistic about humans and their ability to manipulate nature's energies, mentally or technologically, in a beneficent manner (...) Those engaged in the most naturalistic forms of nature-based spirituality tend to take the earth and its biological processes as the axis of their worldview of nature. They are likely to discuss Gaia more as a living, biological system than as a goddess. (...) But the key is a felt sense of "connection", kinship and loyalty to earth and all her life forms and living systems' (238, 241).

⁶³ Hub Zwart, 'De tuin als landschapsarchief, laboratorium en dialoog, in: van den Born et al., *Plaats*, 72-85. In the past the Dutch have wrested land from the sea, i.e. turned the swampy and unstable river delta into a country with a strong agricultural identity. This process is known as inpoldering. Nowadays, for nature development reasons a lot of farmland is to be flooded again - this process is called depoldering, so it means 'giving land back to the water'.

⁶⁴ According to Casanova in general secularisation has three different connotations: (1) secularisation as the decline of religious beliefs and practices in modern societies, (2) secularisation as the privatisation of religion and (3) secularisation as the differentiation of the secular spheres, i.e. emancipation from religious institutions and norms. See, José Casanova, 'Rethinking secularization: A global comparative perspective', in: *Hedgehog Review* 8 (2006) nos.1-2, 7-22.

⁶⁵ Jeremy Stolow, 'Religion and/as media', in: *Theory, Culture & Society* 22 (2005) no.4, 199-145.

⁶⁶ Birgit Meyer, *Mediation and the genesis of presence: Towards a material approach to religion*, Utrecht: Utrecht University, 2002, 6.

Our study shows so called 'notions of the sublime' in the experiences of visitors. It turns out that 'when a person hikes in a forest to connect with the sacred, she or he may not feel the need to affiliate with a religious organization because her or his spiritual demands are met'.⁶⁷ Ferguson & Tamburello further argue that 'scholars have noted that nature-based spirituality may be drawing unaffiliated individuals away from traditional institutions'.⁶⁸ Although not all nature experiences are competitive with religious adherence, we can conclude that there is a certain relation between both, as the quote below also shows.

If the natural environment were a spiritual resource, it would necessarily compete within the religio-spiritual marketplace with other, more traditional religious resources. (...) Many people [in the United States, PJ] meet their spiritual needs through their local religious congregation, and so nature amenities may be competing with congregations as a supplier for spirituality.⁶⁹

With this in mind, it is not too far-fetched to postulate that the rise of the wilderness view of nature results in an increase of 'nature-based spirituality' and decrease of religious adherence. This conclusion opens up possibilities for future studies. It would be interesting to explore in greater detail the relationship between the rise of a wilderness view of nature and religious adherence in the Netherlands.

To conclude, our study extends research on nature experiences. Our findings help to get more insight into visitors' experiences of nature development projects like *Tiengemetten*. Our study also gives insight into the role of 'place' in nature experiences, especially regarding experiences of loss and island feelings. Finally our study expands understandings of religion and spirituality. It may be contribute to a better understanding of the field of nature experiences in relation to religion and spirituality.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Ferguson & Tamburello, 'The natural environment as a spiritual resource', 5. They note that the natural environment differs from other traditional suppliers of spirituality, because it 'do not have the ability to place constraints on individuals to prevent them from frequenting other suppliers, as religious organizations are often able to do through their cultures' (...) 'many religious congregations also meet during specific hours each week, particularly during the weekend. Natural resources, however, do not have these time restrictions, and individuals may use them whenever they please. Therefore, natural amenities are not really competitors with traditional religious organizations for the population's time. Instead, because they have the ability to satisfy a portion of the population's desire for spiritual fulfilment, they compete for allegiance' (5). Or as they note later on in their article: 'the evidence supports our hypothesis that beautiful regions have lower rates of membership and affiliation, not just lower rates of religious behavior' (15).

⁶⁸ Ibid., 5.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 4-5.

⁷⁰ Taylor notes that a flexible definition of religion provides a good starting point for the present endeavour to understand earth-based religion and spirituality: Bron Taylor, 'Earth and nature-

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