



From heather and woods to mangrove and coral

A mangrove forest is not the first thing that comes to mind when you think of Dutch nature reserves. And yet, Dutch conservation organizations will soon be concerned with exotic landscapes and ecosystems. What role do they see for themselves on the islands?

BY MAARTJE SMEETS

Mangrove forest
PHOTO HENKJAN KIEVIT

Underwater environment, Saba
PHOTO HANS LEIJNSE





Nature conservation groups in the Netherlands, such as the World Wildlife Fund, *Staatsbosbeheer* (commissioned by the state to manage nature reserves) and the Netherlands Society for the Protection of Birds are closely involved in nature conservation projects in the Dutch Caribbean. Of the approximately 50,000 species of birds in the Kingdom, one quarter (10,000-15,000) can be found on Saba, St Eustatius and Bonaire. Some special ecosystems are endangered, such as the mangrove forests. The Ministry of Economic Affairs, Agriculture and Innovation has made renewal of these forests a priority. Wageningen University and Research centre was commissioned together with the Bonairean nature foundation STINAPA to conduct a study on this topic. This led to the replanting of mangrove forests on two test sites.

Bert Denneman of the Netherlands Society for the Protection of Birds calls the islands the “biodiversity treasury in the Kingdom of the Netherlands”. “Especially for this reason, Dutch organizations have a responsibility to help nature survive there. Birds are an important indicator of how well the natural environment is doing. So we support local environmentalists through courses in bird monitoring and other educational programmes.” Thanks to the efforts of the Society in cooperation with its international umbrella organization Birdlife, six areas in Bonaire have been labelled “Important Bird Areas”, where building is restricted. The Society has donated 200,000 euros in the past for

programmes on the islands and asked its members in anticipation of 10-10-2010 to donate once again. As a lobbying organization, it goes directly to the islands’ administrations to address certain issues, such as planned construction on brooding areas. But more often it remains in the background, lobbying in Dutch boardrooms on behalf of the Dutch Caribbean and supporting local environmentalists. “We don’t want to direct things from the Netherlands that local people can organize much better themselves.”

Nature as a source of income

Staatsbosbeheer works according to this same principle. “It would not do justice to the development of nature conservation on the islands if we sent someone over there to start running things”, says Jan Blok of *Staatsbosbeheer*. “Despite a shortage of funds, local conservationists have made enormous strides in the past years with respect to knowledge and expertise with the help of Dutch and international research institutes.” For example, *Staatsbosbeheer* lends support in the establishment of management plans or exploitation of nature reserves. Blok: “We don’t know everything about the ecosystems over there, but we do know how to integrate nature and recreation and how to generate income. The latter is especially important for preserving nature on the islands.”

With this dire need for income in mind, a plan was developed on Bonaire to charge a fee not only to divers but to all recreational

users of the water in nature reserves. Raising awareness to generate support is therefore important for both tourists and local residents. The WWF has been working for years to advance information dissemination and education on Bonaire, for example by training rangers and continually reminding the island government of the importance of communicating the message of nature conservation to residents and tourists.

Preventing unbalanced development

Willem Ferwerda from the Dutch branch of the IUCN (International Union for the Conservation of Nature) is pleased with all the attention being directed to the BES islands. At the same time, he warns against unbalanced development in relation to Curacao, Aruba and St Maarten. “The DCNA (Dutch Caribbean Nature Alliance (DCNA) and IUCN NL recommended that the Netherlands enter into a binding agreement with these three islands regarding nature conservation, partly because of its huge economic importance. We have to ensure that attention to these other three islands does not slip away because they have a different status on paper.” Even though all of the islands remain equally important to IUCN NL after 10-10-10, Ferwerda does expect the BES islands to profit from their new status. Thanks in part to European regulations, the Netherlands is farther along than the former Antilles when it comes to regulations for nature conservation. The lines between policy makers here in the Netherlands and there

Conservation is no longer enough: the environment now needs sustainable policy on all fronts



on the BES islands will become shorter and the islands will have access to more pots of money.” IUCN NL, which helped establish DCNA, has served as a link between the various local and Dutch conservationists since 2004. “A good framework is now in place that facilitates better cooperation. If there’s anything I would like to pass on to the Dutch conservationists it is that we have to listen to and learn from local expertise. Nature will be best served if we work together on the basis of mutual understanding.”

Sewer as the lifeline for nature

Whereas nature conservation is well known on the islands, environmental management is unheard of, such as separate waste collection and sewage. Wastewater is still discharged untreated into cesspools and runs straight into the sea via the groundwater. In this way many nutrients enter the water, negatively impacting the coral, which is so valuable for the tourism industry. According to Peter Montanus, policy advisor for the Environment and Nature Policy department of the Island Territory of Bonaire, studies have shown that a critical point has been reached for the coral around Bonaire. “There are fewer large fish and the coral is becoming bleached. If the level of nutrients in the water continues to rise through wastewater discharge, the coral will begin to die off.” Although this problem has been known for some time, the decision-making process regarding sewer systems has been slow.

Emergency plan

For this reason, an emergency plan has been written by Bonaire’s Environment and Nature Policy department together with the manager of the Bonaire National Marine Park (STINAPA). This plan entails implementation of a temporary wastewater treatment facility, pending completion of a larger sewer project. The Dutch government has made funds available for the temporary installation. As part of the plan, septic tanks and cesspools along the coast will be pumped dry by trucks that will bring the contaminated water to the temporary installation. The costs, over a half million dollars, will be covered according to “the polluter pays” principle. Pioneer Jozef Van Brussel, of the Dutch Ministry of Infrastructure and the Environment in Bonaire, believes resistance to paying for sustainable wastewater purification will subside once the additional benefits become clear to entrepreneurs and residents: the treatment plant will not only prevent contaminated water from entering the sea, but it will make purified water available that can be used for the production of animal feed. The Ministry of Economic Affairs, Agriculture and Innovation is working with the island on this project. The production of animal feed will make it possible to create fenced areas where goats can be fed, so that they no longer need to roam freely, eating away vegetation and thereby contributing to erosion. The clean water that remains after purification is also suitable for horticulture.

Model municipalities

Peter Montanus is especially optimistic about the new status of the islands and the opportunities this offers. “These can become sustainable model municipalities of the Netherlands. With the investment of a few hundred thousand euros, miracles can be achieved. The island residents have been living in harmony with nature for centuries. They will certainly welcome efforts to preserve this harmony and where necessary restore it.” ■

www.staatsbosbeheer.nl
www.wnf.nl
www.iucn.nl
www.dcnanature.org
www.vogelbescherming.nl



Montanus (left) and Van Brussel

Management and control

A general outline for spatial planning in Bonaire has been established. This includes construction of 3600 homes for 25,000 residents. Thanks to the new environmental regulations, parks on the island have also been given protected status, something which until now had only been granted to the marine sanctuaries. From now on, not only divers but all recreational users of the water will help pay for nature conservation. Hotels along the coast will in large part pay for the sewer costs. With respect to energy, Bonaire hopes to satisfy 40 to 50 percent of its needs through the generation of wind energy. Windmills have therefore been installed next to the power plant, which now operates mostly on heating oil. Communication, information dissemination and education are essential to create widespread support for these environmental measures amongst residents, entrepreneurs and tourists.

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