



Hoge Kempen National Park - From NIMBY to PIMBY!

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Short title: Developing the first national park in Belgium together with stakeholders

Key Message: Cooperation between politicians, NGOs and local communities were the key to create the first national park in Belgium.

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What was the problem?

The region “Kempen and Maasland” is located in the Province of Limburg in the North-East of Belgium (Flanders). It covers 12 municipalities and is a rather densely populated region, with 300.000 inhabitants in an area of 75.000 ha¹. Nevertheless, about 30% is officially designated as natural area, with high biodiversity values. After the closing of the coalmines at the end of the 20th century, local economic activity plummeted and unemployment rates increased dramatically. Policy makers came up with a large reconversion plan, emphasising on conventional economic activities. However, a local NGO “Regionaal Landschap Kempen en Maasland” (RLKM) was convinced that the available nature and biodiversity was an important asset for the region, and that it could provide an important opportunity for sustainable regional economic development. Eventually, policy makers decided to give the NGO-proposed plan the benefit of the doubt, and seed money was provided by the Government. However, the NGO was challenged to prove that conserving nature would improve the situation of the local communities.

What was done to solve it?

- *Networking:* The NGO RLKM is a coalition of local governments (municipalities and Provincial government), nature conservation organisations, and all the local stakeholders of the open space (tourism organisations, farmers, hunters, etc.). The NGO is working on the intersection of biodiversity and nature conservation, landscaping and sustainable tourism.
- *Cycling network:* The first activity was the invention, development and implementation of an attractive cycling network. The aim was to reconnect people to nature and to increase awareness for biodiversity, while generating economic benefits to the region. Based on the permanent electronic counting systems and questionnaires about the spending behaviour of cyclists, an annual economic benefit of 16.5 million euro was calculated. This proves that the cycling-network is certainly a sustainable asset for the local economic development.
- *Establishment of a National Park:* In March 2006, a next milestone was achieved by the creation of Belgium’s first National Park, the “Hoge Kempen” National Park. This was only possible thanks to a

¹ <http://statbel.fgov.be/nl/statistieken/cijfers/index.jsp> - Municipalities (12): As, Bree, Dilsen-Stokkem, Genk, Kinrooi, Lanaken, Maaseik, Maasmechelen, Meeuwen-Gruidrode, Opglabbeek, Peer, Zutendaal

successful bottom-up engagement of the local communities and the support of all the stakeholders. Suddenly, the protection of biodiversity got a new facelift, and nature protection was uplifted to a higher (inter)national standard. In order to improve the ecological integrity and landscape quality, a number of activities were undertaken, such as: implementation of recreation infrastructure which was sensitive to biodiversity values, establishment of new attractive gateways around the national park, establishment of nature-education centres, closing of roads, building of 3 eco-ducts, and nature improvement.

- *A smart zoning plan and the (re)connection Model:* There is a big difference between the national park as such (6.000 ha) and the “project national park” (25.000 ha). A smart zoning plan maximises the biodiversity values inside the national park, while all visitor facilities are organised outside the park (see figure 1). Over the years, the “(Re)connection Model” was implemented via a number of projects which are contributing to (re)connecting nature to nature, (re)connecting people to nature, (re)connecting business to biodiversity, and (re)connecting policy to practice. The outputs of the (Re)connection Model are: more responsible regions, more and better nature and biodiversity, more support and awareness for biodiversity and ecosystems, more economic benefits derived from nature, increased awareness for corporate social responsibility, and more and better sustainable policies.

What is the result in terms of ecosystem services provision?

In the first year of the park establishment, approximately 700.000 people² came to visit the Hoge Kempen National Park. The number of overnight stays increased due to the development of the National Park. But what is even more important is that the Hoge Kempen National Park proves that conservation of biodiversity can be achieved together with communities and that it can lead to sustainable tourism and recreation. The employment derived from the national park – directly and indirectly – is estimated at 400 jobs. The total investment was about 120 million euro³, while the direct annual economic benefits (revenues from Hotels, B&B, restaurants, local shops, etc) are approximately 20 million euro⁴. This does not yet include other benefits from recreation, such as contribution to better health, social cohesion, inspiration and spiritual well-being. However, the balance between touristic development and ecological integrity will require attention in the future.

The national park also led to improved opportunities for environmental education, development of local products (e.g. limestone necklaces, national park sweets), and to the strengthening of local identity ('sense of place'). Sustainable wood harvesting is still taking place in the park, and some non-timber forest products (e.g. mushrooms, berries, wild honey) are being collected. Finally, the forest and heath vegetation also contribute to regulating ecosystem services, such as carbon sequestration, water and air quality improvement, and groundwater recharge.

What was necessary for the project to be successful?

Several factors were critical for the success of the national park: First of all, municipalities were closely involved from the beginning. The close cooperation with local and national politicians and with civil society organisations made the political decision to establish the Park easier. Secondly, the project not only led to nature improvement, but also to the provision of multiple ecosystem services which are useful for several stakeholder groups. This increased the public support for the project. Thirdly, coordination was made easier by the fact that one organization (RLKM) was responsible for the overall management, authorization and quality control. The members of the coordinating team were very responsible, and also had a lot of fun together. Fourthly, the quality of the process

² Survey on the economic impact of Hikers in the Hoge Kempen National Park. [Marktonderzoek over de economische impact van de wandelaars in het Nationaal Park Hoge Kempen] – 2009 – Market Analysis & Synthesis – M.A.S. 48 pages

³ Internal Report RLKM - 2007-2008 // based on electronic calculations & questionnaires

⁴ Internal Report RLKM // Toerisme Limburg, based on electronic calculations & questionnaires

facilitation and trust building was crucial for this project to succeed. Fifthly, sufficient budgets were available, but also the return to investment could be proven. Finally, the results were measured and disseminated.

Did the approach influence public management or result in policy uptake?

A major achievement was the increase of awareness of policy makers, which resulted in a shift from “NIMBY to PIMBY” (or from “Not in my backyard!” to “Please in my backyard!”). This means that politicians, business leaders and other stakeholders became convinced that the (re)connection model works and several of them are now asking to cooperate (and – importantly – in most of the cases from an ethical point of view). There is also a global interest to get more information of the used model. There is collaboration with several other parks and projects, and the cycling network model is currently copied successfully in several parts of Europe

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