Wild at heart?

Exploring wilderness, death and activism

in the Oostvaardersplassen

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1. Introduction

“*I’m approaching the Oostvaardersplassen from the Almere side, over the cycle overpass. I enter the forest and feel somewhat struck by the sight: chopped trees, planted saplings fenced in with supporting poles, black straps of rubber and sheep fence and snippets of wood gather on a field to my left. I get off my bike to take a picture and realise that I am standing in the midst of what I think is the first big swarm of bugs I’ve seen in the Oostvaardersplassen so far. When I look towards where the core area lies, ahead along the cycling lane, it reminds me of going to the seaside: I know what lies ahead, but I can only see the metre-high reeds in front of me like a line of dunes, and the absence of anything after that.*” (field notes, 21-3-2019)

March 2018, a nature reserve called the Oostvaardersplassen is all over the national news. Images of dead horses and rotting cadavers are spread in papers and online. That winter, thousands of animals starved to death. Public indignation led to protests, which turned into mass feeding actions when people decided to feed the animals
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themselves (Barkham, 2018). The ‘new wilderness’, where humans are excluded from
the core of the reserve to let animals live wild, gained national and international
recognition with the documentary ‘De Nieuwe Wildernis’ (Verkerk & Smit, 2013).
Suddenly it was no longer a ‘rewilding’ success story, but a political headache. What
prompted this reaction, what questions does it raise about how we interact with
nature, and what does it say about our relationship with animals?

The public debate is what prompted me to research the nature reserve. In that
respect, as well as a few others, this is not a typical masters’ research project. It did
not start with theoretical concepts applied to this specific field, but with a field and
the questions that arose directly from it. Another atypical aspect is that I include
animals as participants in my research. In studying a nature reserve it seems
impossible not to include its inhabitants, and in the spirit of a few pioneering
researchers (Bekoff, 2013; Ehrenreich, 2018; Haraway, 2008; Kirksey & Helmreich,
2010; Wels, 2015) it feels only right that non-human animals should find their place
in social science. This statement is not without controversy and comes with a
methodological challenge (further addressed in chapter 2) to try to understand some
of what goes on in the mind of an animal.

As I am yet to find myself capable of talking with animals, observation has
been essential in my fieldwork, possibly more so than it would have been for a study
limited to humans. Speaking with and interviewing visitors, activists and
policymakers have all been a part of this research, but observation should not be
mistaken for a supplementary method; it has been the key to getting to know the
Oostvaardersplassen itself, the basis for any further conversations and thoughts. This
study is too explorative to come to any definitive conclusions, so instead I vow to stay
close to the field and describe it as best I can using the ethnographic methods of thick
description; following Bruno Latour (2005, p.146), “[...] we are in the business of
descriptions”.

What, then, should be described? Prior to fieldwork three themes were
chosen; organised wilderness, death (of animals), and activism. These elements
seemed to feature in every part of the debate that was fought out online and in the
media, and the goal was to see what would be visible of this in the place itself. The
main research question that guides this study is the following: How do death,
exclusion, and activism interact in the organised wilderness of the Oostvaardersplassen?
Three subquestions help to specify and provide structure. *How does organised wilderness relate to understandings of nature and animals? How are exclusion and death present in the Oostvaardersplassen? What implications for activism arise in response to organised wilderness?* Three themes (organised wilderness, death, and activism) were part of the research questions I set out with, while the theme of exclusion forced itself into a prominent role through the data that was gathered.

In staying close to the field, it would feel odd to split up theory, methods and empirical work into separate chapters and wait until the conclusion to link them. Theory requires a connection to the field to be meaningful, and separating methodology from theory seems arbitrary, especially in the field of ethnography which is not merely a methodology but a way of thinking and writing that is an integral part of the work (Humphreys & Watson, 2009 p.40; Watson, 2011). Therefore I have decided to devise a somewhat unconventional structure for this study of a nature reserve and the complexities within it.

What follows this introductory chapter is a chapter of methodology in which I discuss how I went about my research and the opportunities and limitations this has procured, as well as some of the choices and challenges that I faced. Chapters 3 to 6 each centre around a prominent theme from the Oostvaardersplassen, intertwined with data and theoretical considerations. The themes that will be discussed are Organised wilderness, Exclusion, Death, and Activism. Finally in chapter 7 I will reflect on my research process and connect the four themes to answer the main question of this study.

*The Oostvaardersplassen in eight pictures*

Before anything else, allow me to introduce the Oostvaardersplassen. Eight photographs\(^1\) with a short description each will show moments in the history of this nature reserve that I consider important to understanding what defines the Oostvaardersplassen.

Image 2 shows the construction of dikes in the Zuiderzee. After the Flevopolder was drained in 1968 to create space for the metropolitan region of Amsterdam, an area of about 6000 hectares remained relatively wet and was not used for the intended farming and industry (Rijksdienst voor de IJsselmeerpolders, 1982).

\(^{1}\) The numbering of images will be continued throughout the document.
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The Oostvaardersplassen remained unused, and an area with open water, reeds and marsh areas emerged.


*Image 3.* “Reed marshes kept open by feeding grey geese; in the background a fenced in experiment area that has not been grazed” Oostvaardersplassen, Vera (1979) photo by Ernst Poorter.
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In image 3 it is visible how geese grazing has kept the marshes open. Early reports of the Oostvaardersplassen call for protection of the area, which until 1980 had been mostly ignored. The settling in of grey geese was unique in Europe, as the bird looses all of its primary feathers at once and at that time cannot fly for some time (Rijksdienst voor de IJsselmeerpolders, 1982). While the birds are now so common that they are considered a nuisance, at that time there were barely any left in western Europe (Vera, 1979). Grey geese shape their environment: by eating reeds and cattail, the moulting geese prevent overgrowing of marshes and even open up marshes that have already overgrown. This landscaping behaviour is also beneficial for other bird species who need open waters to fish (Poorter, 1979; Vera, 1979). It was grey geese, a non-human species, that first ‘rewilded’ the Oostvaardersplassen.

Early reports of the Oostvaardersplassen call for protection of the area, which until 1980 had been mostly ignored. In order to provide more grazing ground for the geese, grazing animals were introduced, some of which can be seen in image 4. In 1983 34 heck cattle were released into the area, followed in 1984 by 18 konik horses and in 1992 by 40 red deer (‘Feiten en cijfers over het beheer van de Oostvaardersplassen’, n.d.; Vera, 1988). In order to keep the Oostvaardersplassen as ‘wild’ as they had been found in 1979, animals were left to live wild, with little human intervention and the natural resources in control of how many animals the area would be able to feed.

Image 5 shows what a forest area looked like around 1999. Since then the two forest parts have died and disappeared almost completely (see a picture of the same area on p.34, image 20). Most of the forest areas in the Oostvaardersplassen were eaten away by tree bark eating red deer.

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2 Grazing megafauna shapes the natural environment, for example by eating saplings and thereby preventing forestation. More on vegetational structures can be found in (Cornelissen & Vulink, 1996; Rijksdienst voor de IJsselmeerpolders, 1982; Vera, 1988)
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Several harsh winters passed, as seen on image 6, and citizens voiced their concerns about animals suffering in cold weather and dying from hunger and even national politics involved themselves in the debate (ANP, 1997; Lubach, 2016; Rozendaal, 2005).

Image 7 shows the swollen bodies of dead konik horses. By 2017 the number of animals had grown to around 5230 animals in total (staatsbosbeheer.nl, 2019). Instead of the Rijksdienst IJsselmeerpolders it was now the State Forestry Service (Staatsbosbeheer) that was managing the reserve, being led in policy by the local government of Province Flevoland. The winter of 2017-2018 that followed was not particularly cold, but nonetheless 3226 horses, deer and hecks died, approximately 62% of all megafauna, of which 89% was shot before they died of hunger (Cornelissen, Beemster, & Kuypers, 2018).
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Image 8 shows that the public debate roared up and more and more people grouped together on social media, formed foundations and activist groups, and started organising illegal feeding actions and demonstrations (Mattijssen, Breman, & Stevens, 2019; Sondermeijer, 2019; van der Linde & Tielbeke, 2018; A. Vos, 2018). After several months, in response to death threats towards State Forestry Service rangers, the Commissioner of the King in Flevoland decided to start feeding the megafauna in the Oostvaardersplassen (M. Vos, 2018). Public opinion became more negative towards activists.

On image 9, changes are visible in the form of fences and a large mound of hay. A commission wrote an advice for a new policy in the report that has become known as the ‘Van Geel Report’ (van Geel, Poelmann, & van der Vlist, 2018). As of 2019, the State Forestry Service is working on bringing back the number of animals to 1100 by outplacement of 180 horses plus the number of foals born in the meantime and shooting 1830 red deer (van der Linde & Tielbeke, 2018; van Geel, Poelmann, & van der Vlist, 2018). At the same time, a new policy is being developed and a new way of managing the Oostvaardersplassen is being shaped. In this changing setting, worried citizens are still fighting to be heard and talking to their Province in order to influence this new policy. This is the starting point of my own research.

Image 9. Konik horses in the catching area are fed by the State Forestry Service until they are moved to Belarus. Oostvaardersplassen, 3-6-2019, Staatsbosbeheer, https://www.boswachtersblog.nl/oostvaardersplassen/2019/06/03/update-over-de-vangweide.
2. Messy methods

“If I have never seen a good description in need of an explanation” (Latour, 2005 p. 147)

If this methodology chapter seems somewhat messy, that is because the research itself is somewhat messy too. Not because I failed to set up a decent study, but because a messy field requires messy methods (as wonderfully described by John Law, 2003). Any description of the Oostvaardersplassen that provides an easy and understandable explanation should be taken with a pinch of salt: the only way to describe it in a simple way is to cut away at the complexity until a digestible, stylised rendering of reality emerges. My own descriptions will be messy, they will still be incomplete and already outdated in a moving and heterogenous reality. I can only hope that they will still hold some conviction in them and promise that what is outdated need not be worthless.
At its core this study is an ethnography, to which the adjectives ‘multispecies’ and ‘organisational’ could be added. Since ethnography is more a kind of research than a method to be used (Humphreys & Watson, 2009), a range of methods has been considered to shape this ethnography. To that extent I will discuss how I used observation, interviewing, conversing and ‘wandering around’ to gather what may be called ‘data’. Then there is something to note about the way this study is positioned (the ‘describing’ I keep referring to) and what that means in terms of what can and cannot be claimed based on this research. One might find that little can be claimed and methodology is largely based on practical concerns.

On descriptions

The quote from Bruno Latour that opens this chapter is more than a way of justifying the choice to leave out a theoretical chapter. Two weeks into fieldwork, I felt uncertain. Not about gathering meaningful data, but about how it could possibly be brought together with some kind of theory (thesis diary, 20-2-2019). I was having trouble fitting my research in a box; what is it that I am studying exactly and how am I going to bring it together? That is when I encountered Latour’s (2005) work on Actor Network Theory, specifically the chapter ‘On the Difficulty of Being an ANT: An Interlude in the Form of a Dialogue’. Instead of using theoretical frameworks to simplify and dress up data from the field and transform it into something more ‘scientific’, Latour argues the value in describing. Not ‘simply describing’ the field, but thoroughly describing it so that actors may speak for themselves and their actions are not explained by the researcher. The actors themselves are intelligible and explain their own motivation and reasoning, there is no need to do it for them.

This provided a way to work with the uncertainty and multiplicity that I felt regarding my own research. Allowing the multiplicity of the field to be there and research participants to speak their own truths (Bate, 1997) fits with the position of the ethnographer within the field: I am not the expert here. Certainly, I read a lot about the Oostvaardersplassen and at some point during fieldwork I knew the area quite well. But I do not presume to know the Oostvaardersplassen better than the animals who live there, the visitors who have been walking there for decades, or the activists who have been monitoring the place intensively in the past year. Actor-Network Theory also allows for a flexibility of subjects and of agency (Law, 1999),
which helps to see the agency present in unusual subjects such as animals, objects, or plants — I consider plants to be alive but would not know where to begin incorporating them into social research. The *otherness* (Janssens & Steyaert, 2001; Prasad & Prasad, 2002) is not fixed to humans anymore, so that when looking from the perspective of a horse, the human may be *other* instead of the horse. On a quiet Friday morning the lone human researcher is *other* and not the spiders stringing their threads over the paths, or so is my interpretation of the concept (field notes, 29-3-2019).

*Multispecies ethnography*

The reasons for ‘accepting’ animals as participants in this study have been mentioned. It is not a case of taking ‘the animal world’ and inserting it into ethnography, but a case of accepting non-human animals as already present and to some extents conscious and sensemaking individuals (Low, 2012). The Cambridge Declaration on Consciousness states that other animals have consciousness similar to that present in humans (Low, 2012) and I am convinced that this counts for all animals, from elephants to ants, even when it is difficult for humans to study. For this research it suffices to accept that horses, heck cattle and red deer are capable of consciousness. As the only three species that were introduced to the Oostvaardersplassen by humans, they are the main non-human subjects of this study. They will often be referred to as megafauna, although roe deer could be included in that term.

A multispecies ethnography (Kirksey & Helmreich, 2010) comes with several challenges, most notably the methodological challenge to try to come as close as possible to understanding the animals’ perspective and lifeworld. Then there are practical challenges, mainly the difficulty in getting close enough to the megafauna to observe their behaviour. In the Oostvaardersplassen the core area is closed off and inaccessible to human visitors, while some areas on the edge are open. Since all of the heck cattle, almost all red deer and most of the konik horses are in the core area, these could only be observed at a distance through binoculars. In the outer region Oostvaardersveld, two groups of konik horses could be observed at a closer distance.

In an effort to face these challenges I read Charles Foster’s ‘Being a beast’ (2016) and started to use my imagination. Keeping in mind the ‘alterity politics’ of becoming other by Janssens and Steyaert (2001) but a little more close to home, I
tried to ‘be’ a konik horse in the Oostvaardersplassen. Move like them, at the same pace, watch what happens around me and imagine what a horse might see. Much like Foster, but with less worm eating and sleeping in the mud, I did not become a konik horse. However, I will claim the modest success of having tried to get closer to their lifeworld through experience. In the attempt of following a group of horses from a distance, imagining being one of them, I found visitors of the Oostvaardersplassen taking pictures of me from a distance and calling to me while I had no clue what they were saying.

Imagination seems perhaps a rather unscientific method. This was certainly my thought when I found myself using it. I vowed to stop it immediately, before realising that if you refuse to imagine the lifeworld of another animal you might as well leave them out of the study. Maybe it is in doing unscientific things in the name of science that science can be expanded to fit a new diversity of subjects. Most of this research still centres around humans and is based on solid fieldwork and thoroughly kept field notes. In places where imagination is at work, this will be made explicit in text and carry the same thoroughness as any other ethnographic research.

In trying to understand animals around the Oostvaardersplassen I drew on my youth spent on a farm on the edge of a forest. Having spent much time with horses, sheep, chickens and dogs helped me, even if at the time I never thought much about the consequence of them being conscious actors. If you would have asked twelve year-old me if my horse had a personality I would have answered a resounding ‘yes’. This is also a tricky point; having had the opportunity to interact with an animal so much makes it easier to interpret behaviour, but comes with the risk of leaning on assumptions in lieu of observations. It also means that I might be inclined towards horses instead of heck cattle or red deer in my research.

While smaller animals such as birds, spiders, earth worms and snails are not the main subjects of this study, they showed up a lot during fieldwork. Certainly in greater numbers than megafauna did. I had thought that these ‘critters’ (a term used similarly by Haraway, 2008) would not be as visible, but was often confronted with their presence:

“I’m constantly being climbed by many small spiders, less than a centimetre big. They get blown around by the wind or climb up via the bench I’m sitting on. I keep blowing them off.” (field notes, 14-2-2019)
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“As I push my bike up the lightly sloping hill I suddenly notice a snail close to my feet. Crouching to get a closer look, I realise that it is half on top (and possibly eating) another snail, this one crushed. Looking about the path I now see many more crushed snails (about 15) and only 4 live ones. I carefully steer around all of them as I make my way up.” (field notes, 21-3-2019)

It seems impossible to get into their minds, but I started seeing them, observing them, and became more aware of their existence. It dawned on me how strange it was that I had assumed to not see them much even though I was fully aware that there were many of them living in the Oostvaardersplassen. I was setting myself up to ignore them, but found that I could not. Once I made it a point not to ignore them, I saw them everywhere. Still it turned out to be quite difficult to place them methodologically; I suppose it takes creating space to incorporate them further into research.


I ended up not ‘creating space’ for insects and critters in this study as it would become too broad a spectrum to work through within the time limit of this project. However, this realisation has influenced how I see the other elements and subjects of my research. It seems a thought-provoking opportunity for another time.
**Observation and access**

Observation is a deceptive method in that no one sees exactly what another sees. Quite literally in the workings of the eye and the function of the brain filling in most of the details, and again when the visual is translated into words carrying all sorts of meanings and connotations. This is not to say that observation is not a good research method. In this study observation has been a key source, a way of understanding the Oostvaardersplassen. Not just the human and nonhuman research subjects but also the plants, the small lifeforms, the birds, everything that comes together to be the Oostvaardersplassen.

In my first weeks I did mostly ethnographic observation in the Oostvaardersplassen, participating as a visitor. This meant walking around, observing on hilltops or in birdwatching cabins, and joining excursions (Pink, 2008). In many ways, I was focused on getting to know the field and flexing my ‘sense-muscles’: finding out what to pay attention to and trying to observe everything not only with sight but also smell, sense (tactile sense and thermoception) and sound. Sight was the most prominent, and it concerned not only seeing what is there but occasionally seeing an absence, noticing something not being visible. I enjoyed my time in the field so much that I often felt like I was on holiday, which occasionally caused feelings of guilt. I didn’t always feel like I was doing ‘real work’, because sometimes this ‘real work’ consisted of following trails and taking pictures of plants and animal faeces.

I’ve noticed that due to the somewhat adventurous nature of my research, it is important to be rigorous in sticking to methods when I can, since I also have to be very flexible at other times. So each week before I started my fieldwork, I took my notebook and wrote down a short mission statement for myself about where I would be going, what I would be doing, and what methods I wanted to use (inspired by Nippert-Eng, 2015 pp. 27-36). When I returned, I wrote down what places I’d been, what I’d done, how this related to the goal I’d set and what questions I had. This was kept completely separate from the write-up of my field notes, which I did on my laptop and contains a short summary of basic information, the complete and expanded field notes, and photographs.

In ethnography the presence of the ethnographer in the field means that one is hardly ever ‘only observing’. Participating is often a way to ‘get in’, to get to know the field through a specific position (Bryman, 2016 pp. 433-440; Moeran, 2009). In
the Oostvaardersplassen the boundary between a researching observer and a nature enthusiast watching birds was often a blurry one, with the main difference being the motivation behind the visit. Participating as a bird watcher, hiker, or cyclist came naturally and helped to connect with research subjects. Throughout fieldwork I joined several group excursions into the field, walked around, and talked to visitors I encountered.

Most people were interested in the study and happy to participate, making access easy in some regards. Conversations started over identifying the species of a duck in the distance and some interviews took place in birdwatching huts. My objectives as a researcher were always mentioned and never hidden, although not everyone in the field will have known. When they were approached to be more central to this study, the State Forestry Service and Province of Flevoland were not interested. I continued with my research independently, and towards the end of fieldwork members of both organisations were willing to cooperate by being interviewed. Perhaps I had talked to the wrong people at first, or it might be that as I continued my research anyway, they’d rather know what I was working on.

Much writing on ethnographic access (for example van der Waal, 2009) is about gaining access not just in organisations, but with the people in them. In my own research I found that while I gained access to groups, there were few people whom I saw more than once and the people within those groups were not always in contact with each other. I have spoken to birdwatchers and it became easier to talk to them and participate as a birdwatcher myself. However, the birdwatchers I’ve talked to probably have not talked to each other and I did not see them again during fieldwork. In the activist groups this is different, as they are more united and sometimes talked to each other about me.

On another level this search for access also goes for the nature reserve itself. It took a few weeks to feel comfortable with my role as a multispecies organisational ethnographer and with being in the natural environment, undisturbed by cold hands or a heavy backpack, sometimes several hours without food, drink or a visit to a lavatory. Just as it is with people, with the animals and natural environment too it takes time and effort to understand them, to see where they come from and to feel like you can get a glimpse of how they work and what goes on inside.
Interviews

After spending the first weeks getting to know the Oostvaardersplassen, I started interviewing people. The interviews had a semi-structured character, all were conducted in different settings and the main goal was to find out how people view and make sense of the Oostvaardersplassen. Some interviews were spontaneous conversations, while others were planned in advance with interviewees contacted through Facebook or e-mail. I devised topic guides based on Arthur and Nazroo's (2003) advice and considered texts by Hermanowicz (2002) and Legard, Keegan, and Ward (2003) as inspiration for my interview style.

After careful consideration, recording was deemed optional for all interviews. Some were recorded, some were not, and during some interviews I was asked to switch off the recording. Around the Oostvaardersplassen there is a lot of distrust, so people are cautious —as am I— and recording can stand in the way of creating rapport. When interviews were not recorded, notes were taken during the interview and written out in full afterwards in an effort to stay true to the wording used by interviewees. When interviews were recorded, the recordings were transcribed later in such a way that the interview data was of similar consistency.

The first rule of ethical social research — on human subjects — is not to cause harm to participants (Bryman, 2016 p. 125). With humans I found this rather easy, but with the smaller non-human subjects it was more difficult. I did hear a snail shell crush under my tires once and cycled over a road full of earth worms in the rain, so I cannot claim to have caused no harm at all during my research. I found it most important to treat all participants with respect (Hermanowicz, 2002, p. 492) and remain modest about my own role and knowledge. This counts especially for the activists that I interviewed, as they are often called ‘unintelligent’ or ‘dumb housewives’ by others (for example in interview notes 7-3-2019, 11-3-2019, 10-4-2019, and 25-4-2019).

A researcher should not place themselves above participants in their study, but should assume that subjects are intelligible and can explain their own motivations and interpretations. This is part of the ethnographic idea of multivocality as described by Paul Bate in his description of the core qualities of organisational ethnography (1997, p.1166), but also has a place within actor-network theory, where Latour
emphasises that one should describe the motivations and actions of actors instead of trying to explain them (Latour, 2015 p.150).

In an effort to move with interviewees I often gave them a lot of control during interviews. People told me what mattered to them, some took me into the field and walked with me and others moved from place to place before settling on a spot where they felt comfortable enough to talk. For my own safety and to keep some control to myself, I set ground rules: never go to anyone’s home; always pay for the coffee; don’t step into a car. Even this was difficult sometimes. I felt that my being a young woman both helped and hindered research. Older, mostly male interviewees often tried to pay for drinks and expressed concerns about me wandering around alone, some offered me rides. While they meant well, it felt disparaging sometimes.

At other times, my gender and age have been a part in convincing people to agree to an interview. ‘Playing innocent’, making use of the fact that young women are rarely seen in birdwatching huts in the Oostvaardersplassen. Some might have been surprised by my thorough and serious approach during interviews. Sometimes I struggled with this point, how others perceived me, but I came to the conclusion that I was okay with it as long as I was honest about my research and my intentions.

**Practicalities**

The Oostvaardersplassen lies in the middle of Flevoland and is not accessible by public transport. Since I don’t live near Flevoland, I traveled 2,5 hours to the Oostvaardersplassen to do fieldwork and stayed in a hotel on the edge of the Oostvaardersplassen for one night a week. I took an old bike to Flevoland in order to get from the train station in Lelystad or Almere to the Oostvaardersplassen and get around the reserve. Being present in the field is one of the key characteristics of ethnography, and staying in the field without going home after a couple of hours made a significant difference in the sense of ‘being in the field’. This study is an independent undertaking and as such all costs were borne by myself. While I would have liked to spend more time in the Oostvaardersplassen, it was financially unrealistic to do so. Nevertheless I have been in the field on most days of the week (never on a Sunday) and at times varying from 7 a.m. (the earliest I could check out of the hotel) to 6 p.m.
Each week I decided what days I would be going to the Oostvaardersplassen the next week and I would book the hotel room. A few times I did not go to the nature reserve but went elsewhere, for example if I had an interview scheduled at a different location or if because of other plans. In total I did 25 days of work in the field, on two of those I did not see the Oostvaardersplassen. In picking days I would take into account what I was planning on doing (observations in a certain part of the reserve, interviews), at which train station my bike was parked and what the weather forecast looked like (to avoid storms, mostly). I also avoided the weekends most of the time because with my public transport subscription I get to travel for free on weekdays.

Quotes will be used extensively throughout the next couple of chapters. The Dutch language has been the working language for this research, but for the sake of this text all quotes have been translated by myself with an effort to keep as close as possible to the original meaning of the quote. For the first three translated quotations, I will provide the original text in a footnote to give a sense of my translation. All original data and transcriptions are available upon request.
To share some of my observations in a more direct way and add a new dimension to textual descriptions, photographs are part of every chapter. Occasionally they are referenced within the text, most are placed where they fit in the story without specific reference, to convey their own message. All photographs that I took myself have a short title or description including the place and date on which they were taken. In the few cases where I have used images that are not my own, the reference is provided in the description. I try to give pictures the quality and space they deserve in order to let them speak for themselves as much as possible. However, in some cases the story is in the lack of quality of a picture, when it can take so much zooming to get a recognisable image that the quality becomes grainy. The fact that pictures were taken with an outdated iPhone and none were edited is part of the accessibility; anyone could have taken these images.
3. Organised wilderness

“*I think it’s beautiful here. We’re not allowed to say it, but it’s just like [safari park, AM] Beekse Bergen around here. It’s all made by humans. And that’s a good thing, because otherwise we wouldn’t be enjoying this. And it’s not just here. I’ve been to South-Africa and other countries too, and there it’s exactly the same. Kruger also just has a really large fence around it.*” (field notes, 15-2-2019)⁴

The phrase ‘organised wilderness’ is, as far as I am aware, not a defined concept, though the application of the word ‘organised’ to situations of wild or nature is not new⁵. This phrase was chosen to embody the Oostvaardersplassen for several reasons. ‘Organised’ represents the characteristic of an area of nature that is not just managed

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⁴ Original text in Dutch: “Ik vind het prachtig hier. We mogen het dan wel niet zeggen, maar het is eigenlijk net de Beekse Bergen dit. Het is allemaal door de mens zo gemaakt. En dat moet ook, wan anders konden we hier nu niet van genieten. Maar dat is niet alleen hier hoor. Ik ben in Zuid-Afrika geweest en ook andere landen, daar is het precies hetzelfde. Kruger daar staat ook gewoon een groot hek omheen.”

⁵ For example ‘organised hypocrisy’ in African game farms by Brooks, Spierenburg, and Wels (2012).
or protected by humans, but was built by humans before any of the now existing nature settled in. ‘Wilderness’ originally referred to “land inhabited only by wild animals” according to the Oxford English Dictionary, but can also be used in a symbolic nature. It has a sense of wildness and often includes an absence of human lifeforms, or a sense of disorder. The term wilderness was also part of the title of a documentary about the Oostvaardersplassen that played an instrumental role in the fame that came to the nature reserve, ‘The New Wilderness’ (Verkerk & Smit, 2013). The combination of the two words offers a paradox that exemplifies the Oostvaardersplassen.

The theme ‘organised wilderness’ includes questions about what is and isn’t nature and how humans relate to that, as well as what about the Oostvaardersplassen speaks to these ideas and how the place ‘acts’. I will explore the apparent duality of nature and culture and discuss why it might be helpful to discard this idea, in line with suggestions by Latour (2005).

**Human nature**

Humans have always had a varying relationship with their natural environment. In ‘Natuur in mensenland’ (Nature in human land) nature philosopher Martin Drenthen (2018, ch. 1) outlines a story of human understanding of nature developing through time, with alternating episodes of ‘nature as chaos’ and ‘nature as the connection between everything’. The book has a focus on European and Dutch cultural understandings of nature. The christian idea of ‘stewardship’ has had a heavy influence in these regions, stating that God created the earth for humans to live on and take care of. This values nature as something like a diamond in the rough: it’s nice, but you need to work at it. Consider this quote from a Gedeputeerde, member of a christian political party in the Province of Flevoland:

“I do believe that as a human, where you have the ability to care for animals and wherever you can intervene, you should do so. I don’t think you should let animals suffer needlessly.”

(interview notes, 25-4-2019)

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* Original text in Dutch: “Ik heb wel de overtuiging dat je ook als mens zijnde daar waar je de mogelijkheid hebt om zorg te dragen voor dieren en daar waar je kunt ingrijpen, dat ook wel te doen. Ik vind niet dat je dieren onnodig moet laten lijden.”
Here, humans are placed hierarchically above animals (and possibly nature as a whole), with the consequence that humans are responsible to care for and control other animals.

Two main lines of thinking develop: first the Enlightenment and then Romanticism in response to that (Drenthen, 2018 ch.1). Enlightenment thinking about nature is instrumental, nature is not seen as a moral quality but as an object which can be studied and manipulated, used. Romantic thinking about nature takes inspiration from ancient ideas of nature as what brings everything together. While enlightenment knowledge is not ignored, romanticism is about reconnecting with nature and making space for nature. At this point individual enjoyment of nature, experiencing nature, starts to become a common activity. The way Drenthen describes it, there is a dichotomy between enlightenment thinking and romantic thinking about nature, with the connotation of the former being ‘against nature’ and the latter ‘caring for nature’.

According to Drenthen both of these lines of thought are still present today, as well as others (Drenthen, 2018 p.31). Still, we often think of nature in scientific terms like biology and medicine and less in ‘romantic’ terms of seeing beauty and peace in nature and feeling part of a bigger whole. This ‘healing’ experience of nature is illustrated with this statement from a regular visitor who enjoys birdwatching in the Oostvaardersplassen:

“[…] since I’ve stopped working a couple of years ago I have been going into nature much more and it helps enormously to … process things from the past, you know. To bring peace. I meditate, I do a lot of yoga, and nature fits in with that very well.” (interview notes, 11-3-2019)

The romantic notions of nature have evolved into something more subjective, a human evaluation of what valuable about nature. It centres more about the experience of nature, as the quote illustrates, and thus becomes more individual.

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7 Original text in Dutch: “Maar sinds ik nu een aantal jaren niet meer werk ben ik veel nadrukkelijker de natuur in gegaan en dat helpt ook enorm om dingen uit het verleden gewoon nog eens even… te verwerken zeg maar. Om rust te brengen, ik mediteer veel, ik doe veel yoga, en de natuur hoort daar heel goed bij.” This is the last quote for which the original is given. All original documents are available upon request to the author.
In nature management policies, Drenthen (2018, ch.1) also sees this duality: on one hand the Netherlands protect areas of nature for biodiversity and ecological functions such as CO2 storage, while on the other hand the experiential and subjective values of nature are ensured with recreational facilities. In other terms these two visions are called ‘biocentrism’ and ‘ecocentrism’ (interview notes, 9-4-2019; Pigeon & Létourneau, 2014); either the animals in it or the ecosystem as a whole, the survival of the individual animal versus the health of the entire herd. However, this dichotomous thinking also has a downside. Neatly separating the two lines of thought prohibits them from speaking to one another and ignores more complex ideas about human relations with nature.

I asked many people what they thought about ‘wild’ and ‘wilderness’ in the Oostvaardersplassen, what makes it wild or what makes it not wild. Before I started talking to other people I wandered around myself and pondered what it is to me. Much of the elements that I thought about also came up in the words of others. Can it be wild if there is a fence around it? When looking at a fence with animals behind it, it doesn’t look wild, but when you go in and the fence is out of view, the feeling can
suddenly be very different. Even in the biggest national parks on the African or American continents there are fences to determine boundaries and control who gets access. Is it about the size of the area? The Oostvaardersplassen is considered a large nature reserve here (Vera, 2009), so could we then not have any wild in the Netherlands?

“The first time I was there I really did have that ‘wild’ feeling, yeah. I came mostly in De Driehoek for the red deer, and also around the Aalscholver hut. […] But back then it did look different. The concrete path wasn't there yet and there was much less organised. That was all before the film came out.” (interview notes, 7-3-2019)

“It comes down to the point that there is a fence around it. Though it is a large area, animals can't leave when they want to. There are too many protocols to call it wilderness. Wilderness, I think, is free from paths, fences, signs, and has animals dying a natural death.” (interview notes, 6-3-2019)

What surprised me most was how much my perception could shift from one day to another. Weather had much to do with it, in terms of sensory experience and view. Standing in the pouring rain looking at a group of horses on the other side of a fence (image 15) felt nothing like wilderness to me. Walking through the Oostvaardersveld on a sunny day in spring, seeing horses in the distance (image 16), I felt like I was on holiday and it seemed much wilder. On a clear day on top of the Kotterbosbult, I looked out over a large field caged in with trains in the front and cars gleaming on the dike on the other side, even some sails from boats on the Markermeer, and on my other side a forest planted in straight lines and a suburb under construction.

**Rewilding**

‘Rewilding’ can be viewed as combining enlightenment and romantic thinking, offering a new option: organising an ecosystem and then letting nature ‘take back control’ (Root-Bernstein, Gooden, & Boyes, 2018). Rewilding was developed from around the 1980s and the Oostvaardersplassen is considered one of the first examples of the practice, at least in Europe (Jørgensen, 2015; Lorimer & Driessen, 2014; Pereira, 2015). The exact meaning of the word ‘rewilding’ is not entirely clear; it is
used to describe ecological intervention to create an environment like it was in the
pleistocene (before human domination) or efforts to create ecosystems that can
sustain themselves without much human intervention® (Jørgensen, 2015). Often this
consists of farmland abandonment or reintroducing species of megafauna or
predators. Rewilding usually comes with a non-anthropogenic understanding of
nature: humans are not part of the nature and their presence is limited.

This concept implies an inherent value in nature and animal life, as it is set up
to live without (much) human intervention and to ‘take back space’ from humans. At
the same time, a manufacturability of nature is implied; nature can be built by
humans on abandoned farmlands or enhanced in existing nature reserves. Humans
place animal species in these areas and decide how and where they will live. Not to
mention the recreational factor that is usually a part of rewilding plans.

Rewilding also does away with another common dichotomy in nature
thinking: the nature/culture duality. In rewilding, land is not definitively either

® The concept of ‘rewilding’ is also used in relation to humans (Bekoff, 2014; Monbiot, 2013).
nature or culture, but can move from one to another and between the two (for example Knepp Estate in the UK, Rewilding Britain, n.d.). Instead of nature being cultivated into a now forever ‘cultural’ landscape, the status is flexible. This opens up a lot of possibilities for nature in the Netherlands, often considered a ‘cultivated land’ (Drenthen, 2018; interview notes, 28-3-2019). Allowing the binary distinction between nature and culture to soften doesn’t just allow for new nature. It also changes the value of the natural landscapes we already have, since most of them stem from human-made orders in the landscape such as planted forests. Some consider this a difficulty: should we not put that effort into protecting the nature that is still there and that is not (yet) transformed by humans? And are other nature reserves still valuable if less wild?

“The idea that it’s ‘natural processes’ is completely obsolete. When you see what kind of groundwork they did there, raising dikes, I mean the whole area was drained: what do you mean natural processes?!

Can it not be nature then?
Well, created nature. And then you have to maintain it, because if you don't raise the dikes it will flood soon enough. In fact the whole of the Netherlands was shaped by farmers, by humans. The Netherlands is a cultivated landscape, and that means it was made with human hands and humans have to maintain it.” (interview notes, 28-3-2019)

There is another difficult question to ask, a question of applied ethics: to what extent are we responsible for death and suffering in this new, ‘rewilded’ nature? Is it human responsibility because humans ‘organised’ the ecosystem, and does that mean suffering should be prevented? Perhaps we accept that death is a part of life, but what if many die at once or they suffer for a long time before succumbing to starvation?

Oostvaardersplassen-founder Frans Vera (1988) aimed for a ‘highest amount of self-regulation possible’ with the note that it cannot be completely self-regulatory since ‘purely natural is not possible in the Oostvaardersplassen’. It remains a question where the boundary should lie and who’s voices count in determining it.

“It’s an optimum, a utopia, that you would be able to completely let go of it. The term wild is not applicable to the Oostvaardersplassen. In Africa or something you have much bigger parks, they are much more complete. But here it just isn't 100% complete and so you will have to keep helping.” (interview notes, 6-4-2019)

In the Oostvaardersplassen, rewilding received many negative responses. This started only years after the first animals were set loose in the core area in 1983 (Vera, 1988) and recurred in many cold winters. Several policy changes and changes in management happened, most notably the responsibility for decision-making was transferred from the State Forestry Service to the Province of Flevoland in 2016 (interview notes 25-4-2019, Gedeputeerde of the Provincial Council). Regulations for reactive management of megafauna were put in place around 2010, where animals would be shot when a vet or ranger determined that it was in a condition that would cause it to die soon. This rule was part of a set of rules designed to make the ‘natural processes approach’ more acceptable. Nevertheless, in 2018 the Commission Van Geel was asked to come up with a new plan for the Oostvaardersplassen referred to as the
‘Van Geel report’ (van Geel, Poelmann, & van der Vlist, 2018) effectively realising the end of rewilding in the Oostvaardersplassen⁹.

People who are against rewilding are not always against nature, but against managing by natural processes or the results of it. Take the following statement:

“And then when you stop as a farmer, then the rewilders come and make it into so-called ‘wild nature’, preferably without humans in it. And then I think, well, what do we have the Netherlands for then? The Kennemerduinen used to be a beautiful area, I often went there with my mother, hiking. But if you go there now, everything is completely eaten away, there isn’t a beast left. Foxes and fallow deer, that’s it. Even rabbits you barely see. Well, what do you want then?” (interview notes, 28-3-2019)

This has nothing to do with animals suffering, but with the human perception and enjoyment of nature as well as a perceived negative influence on biodiversity. This

⁹ The word ‘rewilding’ is not named in most official reports about the Oostvaardersplassen and was never an official policy, although the founder of the nature reserve is also a key person in the rewilding-movement.
statement is not an odd one out, it refers to a common thread in many interviews: humans have to do *something* to prevent negative consequences in the form of mass deaths, loss of biodiversity or loss of landscape diversity. All of these have happened in the Oostvaardersplassen: a whole forest disappeared (image 17), in one year over 3000 megafauna died (Cornelissen, Beemster, & Kuypers, 2018) and the biodiversity in the core area has suffered. In chapter 5 I will go further into the matter of suffering and death.

**Species**

Another part of the rewilding thought and interesting aspect of the Oostvaardersplassen is the choice of species present and brought into the nature reserve. Grey geese (image 18) were the key species in making the Oostvaardersplassen a nature reserve and their grazing, landscaping behaviour set Vera to think about what the area needed to continue and grow as a unique location for bird species (Vera, 1979, 1980). You might even argue that it were the grey geese who ‘rewilded’ the Oostvaardersplassen, in an exercise of animal agency (McFarland

& Hediger, 2009). Vera came to the conclusion that more grassland was needed and that in lieu of spending resources on mowing and maintaining the area with human hands, it could be done better by bringing in more ‘landscaping’ animals. To fulfil a combination of grazing needs, Vera brought in heck cattle, konik horses and red deer.

First heck cattle (image 19) were brought in: a species that was created by brothers Henry and Lutz Heck around the 1920s to resemble the aurochs that modern cow species descent from (van Vuure, 2005). The Heck brothers, supported by the Third Reich in line with their ‘ecomythography’, thought that by ‘breeding back’ several cow species, they would end up with an animal that not only resembled an aurochs, but an animal that was an aurochs (Swart, 2014). The Heck project received much criticism even at the time, on the execution of the experiment they set up and on their idea of what an aurochs looked like, which van Vuure considers “a mixture of truth and (mainly) fantasy” (van Vuure, 2005 p. 358).

“The heck cattle mostly lie on the grass, though some are grazing. Most of the animals are dark brown with red-brown highlights around the head, tail or legs. A few are reddish brown or beige coloured like a konik. They have long, scruffy
-looking fur pointing in all directions and short, but menacing horns pointing slightly forward and up into the sky.” (field notes, 23-2-2019)

While van Vuure (2005, chapter 11) notes that it is likely that domesticated animals that are returned to a ‘wild’ life will eventually start to resemble their wild ancestors in some way, he also writes that this would take an extremely long time. In that sense, 60-100 years is probably not enough. Domesticated species also have reduced sensory abilities. These differences that have established themselves over thousands of years of domestication will probably not return to a previous state by human-controlled breeding experiments or natural processes. The idea of ‘breeding back’ has been continued with other animals, such as the quagga, a subspecies of zebra (https://quaggaproject.org). However, the Quagga Project aims not to ‘de-extinct’ the quagga, but to return the phenotype of the subspecies to its original environment in South Africa.

According to Sandra Swart (2014), ideas of back-breeding and de-extinction can be modelled on stories: they are creation stories, and creation stories are about power. Swart writes about how myths of ‘bad knowledge’ or ‘too much knowledge’, represented in modern culture as Frankenstein's monster and Jurassic Park, influence the public opinion on science and science itself, as ‘science imitates art’. The idea that only bad will come of it — such as damage to existing species or ecosystems — is stubborn. This comes back in my own observations as well. One of the visitors I interviewed said:

“[…] history teaches us that interventions we did to animals haven’t always gone too well. Importing animals, you name it. We think we have to do it to put the chain in order, but most of the time it pans out all wrong.” (interview notes, 11-3-2019).

Despite the common stories about how intervention in the ‘natural order’ goes wrong, there is a fanatic group of people — mostly scientists — who are trying to bring back extinct species. Many of them consider de-extinction to be ‘righting a wrong’: humans caused the extinction of the passenger pigeon, so then we should undo it if we can (Brand, 2013). The difference between de-extinction and back-breeding is that de-extinction is more focused on using DNA technology to edit genes of related animals or clone preserved DNA, while back-breeding doesn't edit in the
animals themselves, but predicts outcomes of breeding combinations of animals with different characteristics until the ‘right’ combination of features is born. Both are long and tedious processes, and both have the same aim to bring back a lost species.

Critiques on these projects often names their “dubious conservation value” (letter from the Quagga Project Archive cited by Swart, 2014 p. 55), since it could be argued that this reparatory justice is immoral when there are still many wrongs happening right now. Another argument is that the de-extincted species will compete with not yet extinct species in terms of food and habitat. Swart argues that the power, risk and ‘dangerous knowledge’ involved with de-extinction make conservation work look dull and unexciting, coming to the conclusion that: “The only thing actually brought back from the dead has been late-nineteenth-century high-modernist scientific arrogance” (Swart, 2014 p. 59).

Frans Vera, ‘founding father’ of the Oostvaardersplassen, is named as part of the group promoting rewilding and back-breeding, but he is not alone; there is another Dutch team working on back-breeding the aurochs better than the Heck brothers did (http://stichtingtaurus.nl), in partnership with the State Forestry Service.
and Wageningen University & Research among others. The argument that the back-bred species like heck cattle can return to their role in shaping the landscape like it used to be (Brand, 2013) has already been refuted, as van Vuure (2005) concluded after extensive research on the aurochs that it did not do much in its environment at all, and it is its relationship with humans that stands out most in the animal’s history.

“…foals are kind of cute, but other than that I don’t really care. With the heck cattle too, they’re just cows. They don’t do anything interesting or whatever.” (interview notes, 7-3-2019)

The story about de-extinction and back-breeding is relevant to another species of megafauna in the Oostvaardersplassen: the konik horse. The small and sturdy horses are domestic animals that were bred to look like the extinct tarpan horse that once lived in Western Europe. While there is no proof that tarpan horses ever lived in the Netherlands, there is a possibility that they did (Vera, 1988). Frans Vera chose to believe that tarpans lived here, together with humans, even during the same time as...
the aurochs. According to Vera’s book (1988 p. 118) konik horses are a cross between the last domesticated tarpans and other horse breeds.

Cis van Vuure, who has researched both heck cattle and konik horses, writes that it was an unrelated species in a back-breeding project that was ceased in 1970, when the konik horse remained a ‘primitive horse breed’ instead of a reincarnation of the Tarpan (van Vuure, 2014 p. 111). While van Vuure recognises the role konik horses play in the Oostvaardersplassen, he considers them replaceable and not more similar to the tarpan than other horse breeds. Moreover, he voices his opinion on the Oostvaardersplassen as an ‘incomplete and artificial ecosystem’.

“… for me the breed doesn’t really matter. If I would leave my own horse here she would start to do the same thing eventually. She’d manage, I think so. […] We’re not used to the fattening up and thinning, we know a constant feeding policy, but that doesn’t matter so much for the animals. There were 3000 horses here, you can’t say they were doing that bad.” (interview notes, 10-4-2019)

In my observations I’ve experienced the konik horses as calm and steady animals. In the morning, especially when it’s cold, they stand in groups and rest, and later in the day I see them grazing most of the time, walking in a slow pace while grazing along the edges of a path. They don’t often hold their head up high; most of the time they keep their neck horizontal or walk with their nose close to the ground to sniff out grass and herbs to eat. During the winter they also eat the roots of reeds, digging them out with their hooves and teeth. The koniks live in family groups of approximately 15 animals. Sometimes two animals quarrel, biting or rearing to tell another animal off or to confirm their position in the hierarchy.

“I found more konik horses on an outer corner of the southern Oostvaardersveld. Here was a small bit of forest, and though the trees were all bare, as they are in winter, the koniks came here to seek some shelter from the rain and wind. By now it’s pouring down quite heavily and the horses (six full-grown horses and a foal, one mare possibly pregnant) turn their butts into the wind and keep their heads low, so that their backside shelters their head. The horses all look quite healthy, be it messy (they are ‘wild’ you know) and the foal looks like it has built up some strength already. I stay here for about 45 minutes, and all this time the
horses stay in this same spot, loosely huddling together around some trees. They do not move, save a few steps now and then.” (field notes, 4-2-2019)

The last of the three species actually concerns a reintroduction and has a less complicated story. Red deer have been widespread throughout Europe for a very long time and were already living in several other nature reserves before a group was released into the Oostvaardersplassen (Geist, 1998). Red deer are ruminating herbivores with a diet consisting of mostly herbs and grasses, as well as roots, bark and leaves of trees and hedges (Geist, 1998; Vera, 1988). This means that they are responsible for eating away a large part of the forests and bushes that used to grow in the Oostvaardersplassen (field notes, 23-2-2019). Deer also attract a lot of visitors: during the rut season in autumn many visitors book excursions into the Oostvaardersplassen to see the spectacle of roaring and antler fighting among male deer trying to impress females.

In the field red deer mainly showed up in the far distance in the core area. Often I would first spot a smaller group of 4-15 animals, to see bigger herds later on.

The smaller groups would come together to form a bigger group and also fall apart into smaller groups again. They were usually too far away to spot antlers or really observe smaller movements, but I did notice that they would often lie down or stand grazing and then suddenly run in short bursts. Suddenly an animal would start running and cross another herd or move to a different spot before coming to a halt again. I never saw other megafauna do this. Two times I saw a red deer more close to me (about 20 metres), both times around the Oostvaardersveld and with a single animal that didn’t run away immediately.

**When species meet**

What do I meet when I meet a konik horse in the Oostvaardersplassen? What does a konik horse meet when it meets me? Following Donna Haraway’s (2008) classic work on interaction between humans and animals and ‘becoming with’, where she asks the question: ‘what do I touch when I touch my dog?’ (2008, p.3), these questions are central to understanding the interaction between human and non-human animals in the Oostvaardersplassen. For Haraway it isn’t about the physical aspect of the animal,
but the figurative interpretation of which understandings make a dog a dog and how both the dog and the human contribute to that. One could ask the same questions about any of the other animals present, though I have noticed that for many people the konik horses are the most inviting and confusing to interact with. What does the interaction mean and what does it say about the wildness of animals?

“When I approached the gates, my eye was caught by a conglomeration of people, all standing on the Praamweg side of the fence of the southern Oostvaardersveld. On the other side of the fence, a group of about 10 konik horses was standing. Some where coming close to the fence and allowed people to stroke them. They seemed to seek contact and expect it, be it stroking or feeding. But they looked little like domestic horses with their scruffy looks, long and messed up manes and spots, scars and dirt in their fur. They had thistles clogged in their manes and tails, so entangled they almost looked like felt. Some people did touch them, most took pictures, but few people went into the field. It felt like a strange tension, this gathering of humans and horses in the late afternoon sun. Nobody spoke much. Nobody seemed to feel certain what exactly this situation was.” (field notes, 27-2-2019)

Starting with the ‘wildness’, I have found that many people consider humans and animals not just to be fundamentally different, but also place humans outside of any kind of ‘wildness’ or ‘wilderness’. This goes back to the non-anthropogenic understanding of nature mentioned earlier. In other words, when we can come close to a konik horse in the Oostvaardersveld without feeling scared, we don’t see it as a wild horse. In the use of the word, ‘wild’ can refer to unsocial, uncivilised behaviour of humans or animals. In the core area of the Oostvaardersplassen we see this as well: it is closed for human visitors so that nature can live more wildly and undisturbed. The spaces where humans do visit are full of gates, signs, and concrete paths.

“Let’s be honest, this isn’t a wild horse, is it? — strokes a horse that stands next to us — this is just a cuddle-bear who wants some attention.” (interview notes, 22-3-2019)

However, we also know that horses, deer and heck cattle live in social family groups in the Oostvaardersplassen and are capable of social behaviour. If social
behaviour would make an animal ‘not wild’, then social animals would not be wild in any circumstance. Social behaviour across species isn’t just found in horses either, but has already been established in elephants, crows and many other species. Indeed, what I realised is that it is not social behaviour in general, but social interaction with humans that is what makes an animal less wild or possibly domestic in that perspective.

“those breeds, heck cattle and konik horses, they have been bred by humans. That is just the way it is. But they can never become wild again.” (interview notes, 29-3-2019)

This leads me to wonder if this stems from a worldview where humans always hold a dominant position over animals. Perhaps when we feel safe in interacting with a horse, that is because we feel like we have control over it. Or is it because we are communicating with the horse and we trust that it isn’t going to hurt us? Maybe it is the idea that when we communicate with animals it means they are domesticated or ‘tame’ in some way. This brings risks too: the animals may get ‘tame’ or used to interaction with humans, but that doesn’t mean they are trained to behave how we might like them to:

“Yes those in the Oostvaardersveld are tame. Imagine walking around there with your children now, they’ll walk straight at you. […] By taming them [by feeding and touching, AM] they come much closer to humans and that is a danger. And if we don’t want that, then they suddenly need to be slaughtered. But we are the ones making them dangerous.” (interview notes, 10-4-2019)

Once we see animals as dangerous to humans, the conversation changes. As referenced in the quote above, suddenly slaughtering animals becomes a viable option, because we are protecting humans from harm. The term ‘necropolitics’ (Margulies, 2019; Mbembe, 2003) can be used to see patterns of power and politics in the portrayal of dangerous animals. The animal can be ‘made killable’ (Haraway, 2008 p. 80) and the human will not be. Heck cattle are certainly being ‘made killable’ by referring to them as ‘murderous nazi cows’ (Golby, 2015). Red deer are ‘made killable’ by formulating their being culled as part of a “reset” (van Geel, Poelmann, & van der Vlist, 2018). In the case of konik horses, is it
possible that humans would make them killable because they get close to humans and could bite or kick them? And if so, does that make people who sought contact with them complicit?

What about the animals themselves? I have no proof of deer or heck cattle seeking contact, but I have seen konik horses approach humans multiple times. This can be confusing as a visitor: I didn’t want to get too close since it isn’t allowed, but sometimes horses suddenly appear in front of you or approach. How should one respond to that? And why is it that horses approach humans? I have heard that animals have been receiving food from human visitors for a long time (interview notes, 6-3-2019, 22-3-2019, 10-4-2019). Sometimes hay, but I’ve also heard about feeding bix and saw bits of carrot lying in the grass once. A konik horse might see repetitive feeding as a good reason to approach a visitor and see if there’s anything to snack.

Could it be that an animal seeks contact for a different reason? Are they used to being stroked now and enjoy it or do they wish for a human to help them get rid of a knot in their manes? I do not know. Based on my observations, I do think that at times the horses initiate interaction. In the excerpt at the beginning of this section, I saw horses approaching a cluster of humans on the other side of the fence. On a different day, I noticed their comfort in being around people:

“The horses are not shy, they eat calmly while people walk in between them. Two even start heartily rolling around in the sand.” (field notes, 22-2-2019)

Most of the time when horses were interacting with visitors, the weather was sunny and it was around midday. On rainier days I would often barely see the horses, even in the fairly small northern Oostvaardersveld. They would stand together in the middle of the field, beween the high growing reeds and as far away as possible from the paths. On sunny days there would be more visitors, many coming specifically to see the horses. It made me question their sense of privacy as well:

“I notice that the horses have humans around them all the time, almost continuously until around 4:30 pm. The sign indicates that, for your own safety, you are not allowed to get closer than 25 metres to the horses, but most people seem to ignore this. They might feel safe enough, but I wonder if they consider
what is good or enjoyable for the horses. Do they have a right to privacy? Do they mind?” (field notes, 22-2-2019)

Of course the animals can walk away when they are not interested in human interaction or they can show their displeasure in other ways (making sounds, kicking and biting) but they can ultimately not leave. Any interaction is therefore not entirely optional: megafauna have had no choice in living in the Oostvaardersplassen, even if those who live there now were born there. This also means that their way of living, the ‘natural processes’ or ‘rewilding’ approach, was not their choice to make.

Humans decided that they should be wild, that they possess the right characteristics and don’t look too domestic, so they can live in the wild (Vera, 1988). I’m not sure if that is problematic, but it certainly makes it more difficult to convincingly call them wild animals. Even if the rangers and herd managers (indeed, that is a human job) try not to interfere and watch from a distance, that can still be a social interaction and visitors certainly don’t shy away from interaction with these animals. This brings me back to the question: can the megafauna be wild if they interact with human beings? Perhaps it’s not the interaction itself that is problematic, but the power relations around the interaction. If an animal is controlled by humans, be it in a natural process approach, it isn’t truly ‘wild and free’. The Oostvaardersplassen is neither uncultivated nor domestic.

“But what you said, it does touch me, to what extent should you want that manufacturability? With animals, that is. That you build the Efteling [a theme park, AM] you do that for fun, but if you include animals… Then you do have a certain ethical responsibility. […] If you look back at what birds do, they just look for a place where they can eat, where there aren’t too many predators, where they can stay on the water at night so they won’t get eaten by a fox or something […] And if the food runs out there, well then they go a little further.” (interview notes, 11-3-2019)
4. Exclusion

“The view from here is monotonous. Stretched fields as far as the eye can see, looking a dull green as a result of short grass, alternated with patches of brown mud and beige sand and reeds. I can see two or three lakes in the middle of my view, small and probably shallow pools lined with reeds and sand. Towards the front left of my view of the fields, near the train tracks, a dark brown patch of mud has formed. A thin ditch runs vertically through the field and the ground looks somewhat like a patchwork where strips of field are connected with shallow ditches, sometimes dried up, other times filled with water. I don't see any forests here, just a few trees sticking crooked out of the field, most of them dead. A ridge in the land is lined with a few trees or bushes, but none of the plants and trees stick out more than a metre or two above ground. I see a few silver herons, geese, and a flock of starlings, but other than that I don't spot any megafauna. When I look through my binoculars I do see a group of heck cattle. I can't see them well, but they appear to be grazing.” (View from the Grote Praambult lookout point, field notes, 5-2-2019)
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The second day of fieldwork started out every week on the Grote Praambult. An elevated hill with benches and parking spots, a German sausage stand on weekends and a sign of which the print has been pulled off. It was the first point from which I could view the Oostvaardersplassen when I cycled from the hotel to wherever I was off to that day. Not once did I pass this spot without stopping to see what the view was like, what animals could be seen. Every 5 to 10 minutes a train passes right in front of the view. As an enthusiastic train traveller, I never minded this much. But after a few weeks it became somewhat frustrating that for all of my effort in researching the Oostvaardersplassen, I could still not get close to most of it. I could not reach the ‘wild’ at the heart of the Oostvaardersplassen.

It turns out that this feeling is more abundantly present than I had realised. Looking over my data, from observations to interviews, almost everywhere this feeling of exclusion was present in some way. Exclusion in the form of being unable to get into the Oostvaardersplassen, by always having a fence or a train track in view, or by not being allowed to join organised trips into the core area or having to pay for them. There is also exclusion of animals who are never actively included in decision

making about their life and the exclusion of activists who are considered not intelligent enough to listen to. In this chapter, I will explore some of these types of exclusion.

**Exclusion of people from wilderness**

The Oostvaardersplassen is built up with a core area in the centre, visiting areas on the east and west edges of the reserve and a ‘showcase’ area called the Oostvaardersveld in the southeast. In the winter, large parts of the visiting areas are closed off. When I started fieldwork this was also the case. On the 1st of April the visiting areas opened again, so I was able to go there in the last month. When you look at the map of the Oostvaardersplassen (image 26), you see that the mass of it is unreachable. Along the edges are places where one can experience the Oostvaardersplassen. The only way to view the middle edges\(^\text{10}\) is by taking the train from Almere to Lelystad, but then you can’t determine the speed and there is a dirty train window hindering sight.

The one way to get into the core area is by joining an organised excursion. These are usually only organised in spring and summer and take you into the field in small electric buses with open sides called ‘eco cars’. An excursion costs anywhere between €19.50 and €80,-, which could in itself be considered economic exclusion. With the more expensive ones it is possible to get out of the vehicle to take photographs. This system can be considered a form of economic exclusion since it makes access for visitors a monetary issue. Other than that only State Forestry Service employees get to enter the area by car. This winter there were several *schaursessies* (barn meetups) organised by the State Forestry Service to invite people with an interest in the Oostvaardersplassen to join an eco car ride, receive information and have a discussion. This was a cheaper way (only €5,-) to see the core area and a one off chance.

Things are different when you are friends with a State Forestry Service employee. One of the people I interviewed was a ‘pro-OVP’ activist, meaning she advocated the natural processes approach that characterised the ‘old’ policy. She was

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\(^{10}\) This is also where the catching area of the horses is placed in preparation for their move to Belarus. From the Grote Praambult only a glimpse of it can be seen, so the only way to get nearer is by taking the train.
friends with one of the officers employed by the State Forestry Service and she was regularly taken into the core area by car to experience the Oostvaardersplassen and look at the megafauna. While she realises that her connections help, she doesn't speak about how this might give her an advantage over others who are worried but cannot legally go into the area to observe the animals:

“But I will miss it. Especially because we often come in the closed off area with the rangers, you have experienced special moments there. During the rut season of the red deer we just stood in the middle of that herd. Well, you never experience that again. Those are very special things. […]

Well, you might also have had the luck that you had access to the closed of area? Yes that is true, we have the connections, it helps. —changes topic —” (interview notes, 10-4-2019)

Precisely because it is so difficult to get into the Oostvaardersplassen, several activists have taken it upon themselves to monitor the animals. There are multiple activist groups, but most present are Stichting Cynthia & Annemieke\textsuperscript{11} in terms of

\textsuperscript{11} Stichting Cynthia & Annemieke was renamed Stichting Annemieke in May 2019 after Cynthia left the organisation in February 2019. Cynthia started a new Facebook group and also started associating with members of Code Rood.
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monitoring, the collective *Code Rood* in terms of monitoring and feeding, and *ActieVOERgroep* in terms of feeding. Based on interviews and social media messages I know that members from all of these groups regularly go into the Oostvaardersplassen, both the core area and the Oostvaardersveld. Whenever they leave the paths or go into the core area, they are doing so illegally and risk a fine. Over the past year many obstacles have been placed to prevent activists from entering the Oostvaardersplassen, such as extra fences and security cameras and bridges that have been (re)moved. They keep risking it because they see it as the only way to get information on how the megafauna are doing.

While the State Forestry Service and Province of Flevoland regularly share information about the nature reserve, many activists do not trust that all of this information is complete or correct. Furthermore, the aforementioned *schuursessies*, that are partly meant to accommodate activists, seem to have more rules than are mentioned on the website: there is ID control, you can only join once, and anyone who has ever received a fine from the State Forestry Service is not allowed to come. Some of these rules I experienced when I joined (field notes day 16, 6-4-2019) and multiple people I spoke with had been denied access to a meetup because of a fine:

![Image 27](image_url) The core area of the Oostvaardersplassen, viewed from the eco car. Core area, 6-4-2019.
“But it’s escalating completely, right? People who had a fine are not allowed to come to the schuursessies, while I did work on finding a solution as well.” (interview notes, 28-3-2019)

The quoted person could also no longer be in contact with the Gedeputeerde from the Province of Flevoland after being convicted, even though he has been acquitted on several charges.

These decisions made by the Province and State Forestry Service exclude people from the conversation. This is especially difficult because for many people the conversation with the Province is where they think the change should really take place and any other form of activism is mainly seen as spreading the message and supporting their position in negotiations. While the idea might be understandable from the position of the Province, I think that the conditional character of conversations with activists feeds feelings of exclusion and makes the effort seem phony.

*Image 28. The entire view of the Oostvaardersplassen is hidden by the topmost board of the fence. Above is air, below is water. Oostvaardersplassen Almere, 21-3-2019.*
For visitors the Oostvaardersplassen is, especially in winter, somewhat like the window of a closed shop: you can look at what is put in the spotlight, but you can’t see what else they have and you can’t get in to discover. It causes one to wonder what might happen in the mysterious middle of the core area. For some this is an enthusiastic imagination of wildlife living uninterrupted, for another it is a suspicious place where humans are doing who-knows-what with the animals they placed there. It’s a treacherous view as well: standing on the Grote Praambult it feels like you see everything, because of your elevated point of view and the fact that you can see all the way to the cars driving on the dike on the other side. In reality the two metre high growing reeds obstruct so much that there might be 300 deer in your view and you still might not see any of them. There’s a ‘politics of sight’ (Pachirat, 2012; further addressed in chapter 5) here, where what one sees is determined by the political power spectrum of what one is allowed to see.

Exclusion of animals

Just as it was difficult to get into the Oostvaardersplassen, it was also very difficult to get close to megafauna. Close enough to observe their behaviour from a distance was what I aimed for most of the time when I sought to observe megafauna, but I soon realised that when it came to heck cattle and red deer, I would have to make do with observing them from hundreds of metres away. With the use of binoculars I was only

just able to spot them and see if they were lying down or standing up. With konik horses it was easier in the small Oostvaardersveld, but even there the animals sometimes decided not to come close to the paths or stayed in places where it was difficult to spot and observe them. These moments reminded me that I was, despite my many visits, still not more than a visitor to the Oostvaardersplassen and its inhabitants.

“I’m looking at one of the snails for a little while [later identified as Cepaea nemoralis or grove snail]. It is about 4 centimetres long with a circular shell of about 3 cm in diameter. The shell is black striped with light yellow. The snail has a dark charcoal coloured body that looks soft and amphibian-like, with a tail that is somewhat lighter in colour (grey-greenish) and a back that is more structured than other parts of its body. It has four tentacles, two small ones pointed forwards very close to the ground and two long ones pointing upright, which hold its eyes on top. The small tentacles move around to touch and feel about the ground, while the large tentacles move from side to side. The snail moves like a muscle, but in a graceful manner, gliding across the rough path as if it is a smooth and soft. The animal strikes me as being intensely organic, as if my own movements are reduced to uncoordinated flailing of lanky limbs.” (field notes, 21-3-2019)

Even the inhabitants of the Oostvaardersplassen may be excluded from some elements of the nature reserve. In the day-to-day management of the Oostvaardersplassen and the long term policy decisions, it seems like the animals themselves are involved only through the use of human experts on animals and ecology. I do not wish to discredit these professionals. However, I think the situation of animals’ livelihood has proven to be a complicated topic, and in decisions that have been made the lives of animals have perhaps been an afterthought a little too often, taking the goals of nature managers a starting point and working to how plans could be made to fit animals. Perhaps in some processes the animals that already inhabit the place could instead be taken as a starting point to see how their lifeworld could work out for humans instead.

12 Examples for such thinking can be found in the work of Donaldson and Kymlicka (2011) and Eva Meijer (2017).
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When in March 2018 the Commissioner of the King in Flevoland decided to start feeding the megafauna in the Oostvaardersplassen, this was motivated by the public unrest and specifically threats that were made to employees of the State Forestry Service (van de Reijt & Overgaauw, 2018). This satisfied no one, as the State Forestry Service kept to its view that feeding was bad for the animals’ health and social structure and activists felt that it was the wrong motivation and too little, too late. What megafauna received was a large variety of hay, humans regularly entering the core area on foot and even more trucks and traffic in and around the Oostvaardersplassen.

A month later, in April 2018, The Van Geel Report that was presented, advising what is euphemistically called a ‘population reset’ of the megafauna in the Oostvaardersplassen, meaning that they advise to kill large numbers of animals to reduce the population to 1100 individuals (van Geel, Poelmann, & van der Vlist, 2018 p.4). This choice of words is an example of making animals ‘killable’ (Haraway, 2008) by steering the discourse. While they describe that the reset should happen carefully and conform all national and international standards and procedures around animal welfare, the overall tone is that there is a surplus of animals and that it is necessary to get rid of them. While it must be recognised that the report is functional and policy-oriented and not a full discussion of thought processes, if this is the basis for all future organising in the Oostvaardersplassen (as confirmed in interviews; interview notes, 6-4-2019 and 25-4-2019) it could have given some direction in how to think about the animals in the reserve.

Instead, the report mentions that suffering of animals is unacceptable because it is not widely supported in Dutch society. This way of thinking restates that animals can be used by humans for whatever purpose they see fit, and can be disposed of once the purpose is fulfilled, a process during which humans need only consider the opinions and feelings of other humans. It is a missed opportunity to unravel why there is objection from society and how that might inform future decisions. Perhaps there is a possibility of taking animals into account — and not just the megafauna — in these decision-making processes in a way that considers the specific animals of the area instead of a general knowledge on the species.
5. Death

“There are so many protocols and rules here. One is allowed to die, the other has to be shot so-and-so much in advance, most of the time they are taken away anyway although sometimes they lay them in front of a fox den so the people can see how the foxes eat at it.” (interview notes, 6-3-2019)

Based on the news and everything I’d read about the Oostvaardersplazen, I had expected to be confronted with death often during fieldwork. I was, a little bit, but on a scale and in ways I had not expected. I saw remains of birds a few times, I have

seen dead beetles, frogs, and a dead mole (image 30). A hundred dead snails crushed on cycling and walking paths and thousands of dead earth worms. Not once did I see a dead deer, horse or cow.

This is not to say that no megafauna died during the three months of my fieldwork or even while I was in the Oostvaardersplassen. From December 2018 until 31 March 2019 hunters were working almost every day to shoot red deer. After the Van Geel report was accepted by the province, it was decided that 1830 red deer must be shot to ‘reset’ the population to around 490 animals (van Geel, Poelmann, & van der Vlist, 2018 p.42). On the first day of my fieldwork alone, 50 deer were killed according to the overviews that were shared by Stichting Cynthia & Annemieke and the local branch of Partij voor de Dieren, a political party known for advocating animal rights (van Straaten, 2019a).

In this chapter I will discuss how death was present in observations and what I found, but I will also get into related themes of suffering and dying. I found that many activists said that death itself wasn’t the problem for them, but the needless suffering they saw animals go through before dying. Then I will discuss how dying animals seem to be omnipresent in the Oostvaardersplassen for people who have never been there (like me, 5 months ago). The ‘needless’ part of ‘needless suffering’ will be examined as well, and related to the chapter on organised wilderness in order to figure out what makes it seem so needless.

Politics of seeing the dead

Death was most visible in the trees in the Oostvaardersplassen. Dead trees characterise the view of the plains, especially in the Driehoek area on the east side of the reserve. On 6 April I was finally able to go into the until then closed off part of the Oostvaardersplassen hiking trails. Over wooden walkways I crossed a river and was able to see what lay behind the high reeds I had been looking at for the past two months: the remains of a forest (image 31).

In the Driehoek is also the most luxurious birdwatching hut of the entire Oostvaardersplassen: De Zeearend (image 32). This hut has two levels. On the ground floor a number of signs mention a forest around this part of the Oostvaardersplassen, but that forest is not alive anymore as a result of eating behaviour of red deer and konik horses. The sign also says the landscape develops completely without human
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intervention, which is surprising giving the area is loaded with newly planted trees and circles of wood walls and fences to protect the young trees (image 32). When I looked at the year on the signs, I realised that these texts were speaking of an entirely different Oostvaardersplassen: the one that was here in 2005.

Taking the stairs to the first floor, a circular room with windows on all sides gives a wide view of the core area of the Oostvaardersplassen. On the one side there are the outstretched wetlands with large, shallow pools. On the other side are fields of grass and reeds with dead, crooked and jagged looking trees, their harshness accentuated by the bright blue sky. There are a few living trees that stand out with their green foliage and there is a whole army of young new saplings, cradled by human hands in their cages and fenced-off circles.

Dead animals occurred less often, and I only started seeing them more when I started paying attention to smaller lifeforms. When it comes to megafauna, it is surprising how little signs of death I could find. Over a period of three months, not once did I see a dead horse, cow or deer. I did not smell them, I didn't find bones or other remains, nothing suggested that hundreds of deer were dying in the area. I was ‘seeing absence’ (p.16). This can only mean that the State Forestry Service put effort

\[\text{Image 31. Remains of a forest. De Driehoek, 10-4-2019.}\]
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into making sure nothing of these deaths was visible to visitors. This is perhaps not a strange decision considering the public outrage that occurred last winter when many animals died, and the groups of people monitoring the Oostvaardersplassen.

An ethnography that studies dead animals as well is Timothy Pachirat's (2012) study of industrialised slaughter. In this work, the slaughterhouse is divided in many sections from kill floor to office. With each step up in the hierarchical ladder, less is visible of the animals that are dying. This ‘politics of sight’ dictates exactly who is allowed to see what. It is widely argued that humans try to ignore, repress or hide things that point towards mortality, death or the dead themselves (Bauman, 1992; Becker, 1973; Walter, 2014). In line with that thought it would make sense to get rid of the dead in the Oostvaardersplassen as well, or at least make sure no one sees them, so that no one has to be confronted with this kind of mortality.

However, the word ‘politics’ hints at a kind of political power in use here. It is a political act to hide the dead deer from view, to say little about who does the killing and how this happens. This political power display may also be part of the motivation for activist groups to try and find out as much as possible about the killing that goes
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on. During the extensive monitoring of the Oostvaardersplassen, videos were made of deer getting shot, of hunters moving around the reserve and of running deer herds. From this footage, though it is very difficult to see what happens in the zoomed-in videos, claims were made about how hunters were using prohibited methods of hunting (Omroep Flevoland, 2019). This filming shows that this political kind of hiding was interpreted by activists as well. While many of them were not explicitly against shooting deer, they were still putting effort into studying the activities.

In analysing this process of killing it is easy to forget the practical details, but they might inform most of the (political) decisions. While the act of taking away all dead bodies immediately after hunting and leaving no traces can be seen as an act of hiding, a politics of sight, it can also be argued that it is simply doing what was ordered without making a mess of it. It was never an option to leave all carcasses lying around the reserve, scavengers could never eat all of them. Furthermore it takes a very long time for the remains of a large animal to perish completely — see Middendorp (2019) for a photographic timeline of a dead deer in the Oostvaardersplassen.

Other than deer it seems like this winter one heck cow was shot on recommendation of a vet and one konik horse was found dead after it had died a natural death (Staatsbosbeheer, 2019). The cow was already in a bad condition and was shot to prevent it from dying from natural causes, which might be longer and more painful than ‘death by a preventive shot’. The heck cattle were generally in a worse condition than the other animals and were eventually fed by the State Forestry Service based on the new policy about additional feeding when the average body condition score (BCS, a scoring system to estimate the fat reserves of an animal) gets too low. The average BCS of the konik horses was very high throughout this winter indicating that they had more than enough fat reserves to last until spring.

Smaller animals, then, were the way to seeing the dead in the Oostvaardersplassen this winter and spring. On a rainy day the worms were a massacre: possibly thousands were gathered on the asphalt roads, almost all of them dead. Sometimes one would get picked up by the tires of my bike and stick to my gears. It’s more difficult to politicise these deaths, because they were unintentional and not considered by anyone to be a problem. At the same time, this is exactly where the power lies: most of the time we don’t see these as dead bodies, even when we’re
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staring right at them. I thought about whether the life of an earth worm was just as valuable and worthy of a fight as the life of a horse, but I have come up empty.

Many theories that challenge a human-animal dichotomy, such as Donaldson and Kymlicka’s *zoopolis* (2011), argue for a distinction not in kind but in degree, based on the level of consciousness that a species has been established to possess. This is a difficult barometer in my opinion due to the constant development in research of this kind and the measurements of consciousness that are based on how this concept functions in humans. In such a hierarchy, animals that we as humans understand better (i.e. a chimpanzee) will be considered more valuable than animals we are still puzzled by (i.e. ants or turtles). At the same time I have no idea if an earth worm feels pain when I ride over it with my bike or if a snail feels sad at the sight of its fellow snail, or if it is actually indifferent and eating its relative (image 33).

*Image 33.* A mourning mother or a hungry body? Snail on top of a crushed snail on a path. Oostvaardersplassen Almere, 21-3-2019.
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So what is the problem with dead animals?

Well, we know that some animals can suffer pain or feel sad, and the megafauna in the Oostvaardersplassen will most certainly be no exception to that, while nothing much can be said about snails — depending on one’s presumptions (p.13). This is where the public discussion and societal unrest at the mass deaths of 2018 comes from:

“I am convinced that animals have emotions, just like humans, and that means that the animals there suffer an awful lot. You cannot knowingly to that to an animal.” (interview notes, 29-3-2019)

When I asked people about the death of animals many replied that it was not the death of an animal in itself that they had a problem with. Instead, the problem was in 1) the number of animals dying, 2) the long process of suffering that happens before death, and 3) the needlessness of these deaths.

After the release of 92 animals between 1983 and 1992, by 2017 the population had grown to around 5230 animals in total (staatsbosbeheer.nl, 2019). The winter of 2017-2018 that followed was not particularly cold, but nonetheless 3226 horses, deer and hecks found their death, approximately 62% of all megafauna (Cornelissen, Beemster, & Kuypers, 2018). In 89% of deaths, the animal was shot by a ranger, according to the ‘preventive management’ policy. This means that an animal that is suffering and is unlikely to survive is shot to prevent a long period of suffering. No measures were ever taken to prevent breeding in the megafauna populations, so the number of animals grew rapidly. This causes the risk of a ‘population crash’, where a large part of the animals dies in one season, to rise.

“We were sitting here in the hut and it stank very badly. He said ‘there are deer rotting here’, so we climbed over the fence and a little farther we saw a whole load of deer. Those beasts were just lying there, rotting.” (interview notes, 6-3-2019)

Although an ICMO2 report from 2014 (Beheeradviescommissie Oostvaardersplassen, 2014) states that a population crash must be prevented, it happened anyway. While the number of deaths is not necessarily more than in other nature reserves, the visibility and animal species are. Most comparable in this case is
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the Veluwe, which is also a big nature reserve in the Netherlands; here the population of animals is managed by deciding how many animals the reserve and organisations in and around it can handle, and killing the rest. Sometimes this means 60 to 90% of a population is shot (NOS, 2018). However, these are mostly red deer and wild boars. This raises much less outrage than the big herds of horses in the Oostvaardersplassen. While opponents speak up for heck cattle and red deer too, it is likely that the konik horse gathers more attention since they are more familiar to many people: horses are kept as domestic animals and you might have stroked one in a petting zoo once, while you’re unlikely to have cuddled a boar or deer.

Despite the policy that megafauna should be shot once they are unlikely to survive their condition or injuries, many people report that they still saw animals suffer. This is difficult to judge, because it partly comes down to how much weight loss is acceptable. In a normal seasonal cycle herbivores eat more during spring and summer to build up fat reserves for autumn and winter. Then they will lose a lot of that fat during autumn and winter as they will find less nutritious food. It is difficult to say when an animal becomes hungry in a way that it suffers and feels pain, and then determine what extent of suffering is acceptable as part of life for humans and non-human animals. However, it does seem unlikely that all suffering can be solved by shooting the animals that will die.

“That you see hundreds of thousands of beasts perish. 3500 Beasts, you should line them up. That all of them have to consciously die of hunger, that I cannot get into my head. I thought, I have to do something about that, because I can’t sleep because of it. Yes, it was that bad. And I know that if more people had taken the effort to go and look, it would have finished much sooner and many more people would have put up a defence. All bones with a skin on, only just able to stand on their legs, up to their knees in mud. Without anything, anything to eat, without a dry spot to lie. Close to despair.” (interview notes, 28-3-2019, emphasis in original)

The last point that came up is the needlessness of the animal deaths. This comes down to the fact that the animals did not die of predation, natural disaster, or illness, but as a result of a lack of food compared to the amount of animals in the reserve. Meanwhile, the management of the reserve knew what was happening and
did not do anything to stop animals from dying. According to the philosophy of Frans Vera (1988) behind the Oostvaardersplassen, the amount of food available in the reserve will determine how large the population can grow and will naturally force the amount of animals to accommodate. For a long time the richness of the Oostvaardersplassen allowed the population to grow rapidly, but eventually the population crashed.

The needlessness also comes back to the term ‘necropolitics’, introduced in chapter 3. It was a choice to put heck cattle, konik horses and red deer in an enclosed reserve and not feed them while not interfering with reproduction either. No matter that humans did not choose for the animals to die, the managing organisations created the circumstances in which animals died and made the conscious choice not to interfere. That means that they chose the death of these animals.

**Perception, images and framing**

Why did I expect to see dead megafauna? Before I came to the Oostvaardersplassen for the first time, I read up via newspaper articles, facebook pages and policy documents. In most, dead animals took the central role. Pictures and stories of the winter of 2018 were alternated with news about the culling of deer that was started in December 2018. Compared to what I experienced in the field later, it seems to be an overrepresentation, although it is understandable where it comes from. While there was a summer in between the two winters during which activists were also active in the Oostvaardersplassen, I rarely saw pictures of that.

In a study of the online debate around the Oostvaardersplassen, Mattijssen, Breman, and Stevens (2019) also noticed the important role of images and representation. They write that images play a key role in the imaging of the nature reserve and they were shared often on social media. Emotionally charged messages are more likely to be disseminated (Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013) and thus the tragic pictures of suffering and dead horses and cattle get a wider distribution than more neutral images. Mattijssen, Breman and Stevens (2019) also found that at a certain point social media responses to the Oostvaardersplassen became part of the news story, as opposed to messages about the news.

The interaction between traditional news media, social media and managing organisations became a circle feeding back on itself, where the reality depicted in the
messages and news items and the reality of the physical Oostvaardersplassen became difficult to distinguish. While both realities are informative and real, overly focussing on one over the other can lead to an unbalanced image. From what I've seen online, I would have thought that the Oostvaardersplassen were full of dead animals, a smelly and dystopian place. If I had not seen any of that and had just visited the Oostvaardersplassen however, I would have seen no dead animals and other than that a nature reserve that is quite nice, though very closed off and with a lot of dead trees. The history and images are important in understanding the nature reserve, but they tell limited stories without the physical place itself.

The online part of the debate has also experienced quite a few false claims. While many of the people active in the online discussion say they work hard to counteract such false stories, they inevitably gain some traction in a heated debate among many people, of whom only a fraction regularly visit the nature reserve. Many photographs and claims are shared without naming sources, so it is sometimes impossible to check what something is based on. I came across an image on Facebook of two deer foetuses lying on the forest floor (Schulting, 16-2-2019). A distressing image that evoked emotional responses, but I have no way of telling if it was made in the Oostvaardersplassen or not.

Death of animals was mainly problematised when the animals were suffering for a long time, when it was needless and in large numbers. In the present time the culling of deer only meets one of those criteria cogently; with the goal of shooting 1830 deer to leave a population of 490, around 78% of deer will be shot (‘Update afschot edelherten’, 2019). The animals can be argued to suffer for a short time as according to one interviewee (interview notes, 28-3-2019) most shots don’t kill instantly — it is too easy to miss when aiming to kill them immediately, but certainly they don’t suffer for weeks or months. The necessity of the killing of deer is a point of discussion, but many people felt that something had to happen to lessen the number of animals (Runhaar, 2018, as well as interviews). Since the Van Geel Report stated that shooting was the most animal friendly for deer, the remaining dissatisfaction mostly centres around the way animals are being shot and not the measure itself.

What is often named as a downside of the shooting of deer is that less animals are seen by visitors. The deer in the Oostvaardersplassen are sometimes described as
DEATH

being surprisingly visible compared to other nature reserves. However, since the shooting started people report seeing less of them:

“Now not a deer can be seen. I do think it is because of the hunting. And it’s not that I am against the policy or that I don’t agree or anything, but there’s not so much to see now. There’s no point in it. And I do think that something had to happen, but they communicated so little, so vague every time about what was going to happen. Between themselves…” (interview notes, 6-3-2019)

“I always thought the large animals were nice to see. But now you don’t see them much anymore. They took out a lot of horses and the deer too, they won’t show themselves anymore because they are afraid to be shot. The cows never came very close, sometimes, but not usually.” (interview notes, 26-4-2019)

For others, the idea that weak or hurt animals are shot feels complicated. Of course it is the opposite of how humans deal with sick or wounded of their own species; they are nurtured and treated to stay alive as long and comfortable as possible.

“I was lucky that a big deer was limping, so it couldn’t run away fast. I could take a nice picture of him. After that I told the guide and he said ‘I’ll pass it on to the ranger’. That idea is quite strange, that he would be shot right after. Perhaps you’d better not say anything… There was a heap of dead deer lying on one side as well, but the guide tried to talk around it a little and point the other way.” (interview notes, 7-3-2019)

Perhaps it is this awkwardness that characterises thinking and talking about dead animals in general for many people. The arbitrary boundaries between domestic and wild animals and how we treat them become painfully obvious. It causes disruption and discussion, but at the same time everyone agrees: death is part of life, but we don’t want thousands of animals to die if we can help it; we’d rather prevent it or kill them ourselves.
6. Activism

“I saw the most expensive Mercedes convertibles passing with ladies with, stigmatising for a second, with pearl necklaces, dressed in riding breeches, taking a hay bale out of the trunk of their car. That isn’t the type you —laughs— expect at a demonstration from the perspective of nature, and that has everything to do with the fact that, well, they see those horses as a kind of riding horse.” (Gedeputeerde Province of Flevoland, interview notes, 25-4-2019)

Activism in the Oostvaardersplassen has been going on for about 30 years (NRC, 1990), but in the winter of 2017/2018 it became much bigger than before. In this chapter I will examine why it suddenly picked up so much attention and what motivates people to put time and effort into speaking up about the Oostvaardersplassen. Most of the activists I spoke with did not get involved until 2018, but many of them have a prominent role in organising activism. Activism is both very splintered and united at the same time: everyone has different ideas, a
different ideal picture in mind, but nonetheless people try to come together and organise their dissatisfaction to create changes.

This chapter will start with a discussion of some of the implications for activism in the Oostvaardersplassen. Then I will show what shapes activism takes for different people, and get into the portrayals of activists by others. While I knew there was a stigma on the activists in the Oostvaardersplassen, I was shocked by how deep these preconceptions are ingrained in so many people. Then again I also heard stories from people who had negative and even traumatising experiences with activists. Lastly, the responses to activism and the population crash in the Oostvaardersplassen from the Province and State Forestry Service will be explored.

Implications for activism

In the last chapter I mentioned that the sight of suffering and dying animals was the main issue that motivated people to take a stand against the Oostvaardersplassen. The large number of animals that died, but especially the sight of suffering or dead animals in pictures caused people to wonder what was going on there, search for more information and visit to see for themselves. I talked to two people who know each other from dog training and Facebook groups about dog behaviour:

“In the winter of 2017/2018 [person A] started posting more and more about the Oostvaardersplassen, also in those Facebook groups, and [person B] started to notice. He thought it was a strange story and saw the images, it shocked him to think that something like this could happen in the Netherlands. He wanted to contribute to the goal of changing this.” (interview notes, 29-3-2019)

This is a typical example of how people get involved with activism in the Oostvaardersplassen. People who live close to the nature reserve, perhaps see it from the train on their way to work or visit regularly, start to share images and stories with people they know and groups with similar interests. On Facebook and twitter there are many ‘communities’ around common interests, and by tapping into those communities a large following can be formed relatively quickly. Posting messages online and sharing images has been perhaps the key strategy of activism, driven by the thought that ‘people need to see what is happening here’. Back to the interview
quoted above, both Person A and Person B find that spreading information is very important. Person B says:

“Regularly stories go around that are false or based on assumptions that are quite richly interpreted, all based on the idea that the State Forestry Service and Province are no good. It’s important that people have the right information and that it is actively spread. That’s why I made the website, oostvaardersplassen.org, where I share all kinds of information about the Oostvaardersplassen and not just what the State Forestry Service says about it.” (interview notes, 29-3-2019)

On the website he also shares documents obtained via the Government Information (Public Access) Act. This act allows Dutch citizens to request information from public organisations. A lot of activist groups work to request as much information as possible, and this information is also used to file complaints or discuss discrepancies in the management of the Oostvaardersplassen.

While there are exceptions, the majority of activists do not have a history of activism for animal rights or other causes. Quite a number of them were somewhat reluctant to accept the label of ‘activist’ and feel that it sounds negative. Some even stress that they eat meat and are not a ‘bunch of hippies’ (Veer, 2019; A. Vos, 2018). When the Gedeputeerde notes that it’s not the crow he’d expect in nature protests, referring to the quote at the start of this chapter, he is not alone in that response. None of the anti-Oostvaardersplassen activists I spoke to were ‘traditional animal activists’ in the sense that they were part of existing groups or speak of ‘speciesism’ (Singer, 1975) and most aim to influence local policy instead of (inter)national goals.

However, there are also similarities between activists in the Oostvaardersplassen and other causes. Important is the difference between animal rights activism and animal welfare activism. Animal rights activists tend to see humans and other animals as equal beings that deserve similar rights, meaning humans cannot legitimately use animals for their own good (Greenebaum, 2009). This is more in line with Singer (1975) and Haraway’s (2008) thoughts. Animal welfare activism doesn’t go this far, but instead focuses on the current situation and fights for ‘humane’ treatment of animals (Greenebaum, 2009). Here the human
domination over other species is not questioned, but faced with a responsibility of treating them well.

As well as the ideas of animal welfare activism, the fact that opinions are splintered and people come together in groups that are constantly reshaped actually fits in with activism. Several people have tried to get everyone together and form a united front, but because ideas about what the future of the Oostvaardersplassen should look like differ, most attempts eventually failed.

“I have tried three times to get all of those groups together. Each time it didn't work, or they didn't show up, or there were a few detractors. Then with [Person C] finally, after many setbacks, we managed to round up a fair number of people. That was actually requested by the Province.” (interview notes, 28-3-2019)

In the organisation ‘Code Rood’ a fairly supported partnership has been established on the request of the Province of Flevoland, which asked for a group to be able to talk to representatives of a larger group instead of every smaller group. Code Rood has three goals for the Oostvaardersplassen: taking action to make the population smaller; feeding the animals when they need it and start with it on time; create sufficient shelter for the animals so they can seek cover from sunshine or rain. Other groups, such as Stichting Cynthia & Annemieke, are in favour of getting all megafauna out of the Oostvaardersplassen and even offered to buy them from the State Forestry Service.

The online part of activism in the Oostvaardersplassen attracts a wide variety of people and since political change is the goal, it didn't take long before politics and political parties started taking part in the discussion. While it seems like left-wing parties such as the animal rights party ‘Partij voor de Dieren’ and parties with nature and environment at the core of their platform would be the most logical match, these parties in fact did not line up with many of the ideas of anti-Oostvaardersplassen activists, as they often put the ecosystem as a whole above the wellbeing of individual

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13 They prefer doing this by moving all heck cattle and part of the red deer and konik horse population to other reserves and starting an experiment with hormonal birth control (interview notes, 22-3-2019 and 29-3-2019).
animals\textsuperscript{14}. Far right-wing parties stepped in to claim the space: members of the local parties of the PVV and FvD have provided access and means to activist groups and welcomed their ideas. As a result, these parties are often mentioned and much supported on activist social media groups. Anti-politics sentiments are also common (van Straaten, 2019b).

In the online debate several blogs and platforms of far-right supporters have taken a stand against the Oostvaardersplassen (Vine, 2018; Zeilmaker, 2018). Some circle in on the negativity towards activists and introduce themselves as defenders of the worried citizen (Vine, 2018). Others are disbelievers of climate change and science and use their platform to write positively about the motivations and intentions of activists and connect this to their own agenda (Zeilmaker, 2018). As these blogs are generally mistrusting of government and public organisations it is not a far stretch for them to call out conspiracy theories around the Oostvaardersplassen (Zeilmaker, 2019). Alongside the experienced exclusion discussed in chapter 4, this fuels existing mistrust towards the Province, State Forestry Service and government in general.

\textit{Forms of activism}

Aside from the aforementioned spreading of information and policy documents via social media, there are several other ways in which activism takes shape in the Oostvaardersplassen. At first it started with calling in complaints about the state of the animals to the State Forestry Service. When it became clear that this didn't spark any change, several activists started to rally like-minded people online to join in group protests. There were several demonstrations meant to show that people care about the animals that suffer in the Oostvaardersplassen, such as a memorial service for the animals that died held by 20 farmer's wives (Omroep Flevoland, 2010) and a candle protest (Omroep Flevoland, 2018). Then there are the bigger protests with

\textsuperscript{14} This goes back to the theories of 'ecocentrism' versus 'biocentrism' (interview notes, 9-4-2019; Pigeon & Létourneau, 2014): ecocentrism considers the health of the entire ecosystem as a whole as most important while biocentrism considers the needs of animals in the ecosystem above the ecosystem itself. In the case of the Oostvaardersplassen, this is seen clearly in discussing supplementary feeding. The State Forestry Service is not in favour of extra feeding, as it would not combine well with the landscaping function the megafauna have in the nature reserve. Some consider this irrelevant, because if putting the ecosystem first means that a large number of animals have to suffer, they see it as a failed system.
ACTIVISM

What is quite unique about the Oostvaardersplassen compared to other nature activism is how big the online attention became. Some groups gained almost 100,000 followers (Stichting Cynthia & Annemieke) thousands of people donated money to help pay for advertisements in newspapers and on television and to pay for hay bales to feed. One researcher I spoke to studied this online activism:

“The connection between offline and online action is an interesting point in the Oostvaardersplassen. You can see that the online part is very large, the largest protest for nature, in 2012, never had so much online attention. Barely anyone posted about that and everyone has forgotten it now. But for the Oostvaardersplassen it seems like the mass has moved to online, while looking at the demonstrations at the State Forestry Service and in Lelystad, there are far less people there.” (interview notes, 9-4-2019)

While the protests were meant to be without violence, it didn’t always turn out that way. During one protest in particular the atmosphere shifted:

“At one point it got out of hand. Not that severe, they were almost all people of 50 or over and on top of that 99% women. So what are you afraid of? […] When the police told us to get back some people started pushing and throwing hay bales. At one point he [a police chef] took me with a hand on my back and led me through the police barrier, he said ‘well let’s talk then’. I wasn’t a metre or two behind the police barrier when they handcuffed me with 5 men.” (interview notes, 28-3-2019)

While I am not going to dive deep into legal matters here, I think the story and the emotions it incites are telling. I have heard dozens of stories of police and special investigating officers behaving disrespectfully, intimidating activists, and acting too quickly without considering the motivation behind the behaviour they are renouncing. Whether the officers were acting out of disdain, mistrust or just doing their job, it often comes across as another example of activists being dismissed as criminals and not taken seriously in their concerns. On top of that, from what I have heard many fines and claims have eventually been acquitted in court due to errors in reporting or wrongful claims. This supports the image of the State Forestry Service as ‘unable to do anything right’, which is a frame that is used often by activists to support their claim that animals are not safe in the hands of the State Forestry Service.

The form of activism that has caused the most publicity is feeding the megafauna in the Oostvaardersplassen (image 36). For years people have visited the Oostvaardersplassen with carrots or apples for the horses, and although it was never allowed to feed them it was rarely fined. Along with banners, activists started to bring hay when they came to the Oostvaardersplassen. At first people brought their own hay and all fed individually, but when more and more activists started to organise themselves in groups, they started to organise their feeding activities as well. Now they could buy large amounts of high-quality hay and get a group of people together for feeding actions. Sometimes it was risky because they went over train tracks, other times they used a different route. The many cameras around the area keep an eye out for illegal activities:

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15 *Bijzonder Opsporingsambtenaar* (BOA) is a supervising official somewhat like a police officer with a more specialised task. In nature reserves they are tasked with supervising and can impose fines on visitors who do not obey the regulations in the reserve, as well as enforce environmental laws.
“Under the eye of the camera’s we managed to feed 40 bales of hay. We had two trailers full, but we couldn’t feed the other one. They didn’t manage to catch the people they saw from the helicopter, and to great frustration of the State Forestry Service and the police they decided not to turn themselves in. They fled via a little detour and eventually, let’s say, ‘disappeared in the woods’. That happens more often with these illegal actions. You only have a very short time to deliver the hay and then you have to make sure to get out of there quickly. There have been a number of these kinds of actions, on the one side to help the cattle, and on the other side to make a statement. The tension between the activist groups, the State Forestry Service and politics continues to exist.” (interview notes, 22-3-2019)

Feeding is done as much as the groups consider necessary. During summer they don’t usually feed, but in winter they do. This winter hay was often spotted in the Oosvaardersveld, but also on several locations in the core area. While the State Forestry Service only fed heck cattle and didn’t report other animals seeking out the feeding spots, activists continued to feed as well since they thought the hecks weren’t
getting enough. They also fed in the beginning of spring when the ‘official’ feeding was stopped, as they thought the grass was still too short for heck cattle, who need a longer length of grass in order to be able to wrap their tongue around it and pull it off.

The final method used by activists is conversation. Several representatives of activist groups are in contact with the Province and have had meetings with the Provincial Council and Gedeputeerde to discuss new policies and what they would like to see. While several activists cannot get meetings — because they have been convicted or fined for misbehaviour in the Oostvaardersplassen — a number of representatives from Code Rood does have meetings. However, they feel that they have been talking for a long time now and still they get little in return:

“We do get the idea that little is being done with the suggestions we have offered. So we do think that politics, well, I don’t want to say they’re making a game out of it, but if we have everyone together, we get a good overview and… then we can get things to calm down. All major actors are in Code Rood. And we are able to keep things calm, but we want something in return. We hope to get more insight via this idea of a consultative group.” (interview notes, 22-3-2019)

All activists I spoke to agree that eventually this conversation is where the change needs to happen. None of them see illegal feeding actions as a good solution, but instead they are a way to show their intentions and put pressure on the authorities to start listening.

“I prefer talking with each other above protesting, I think it accomplishes more in the end. But still all of those different actions together make that we’re well on our way to change things. Even though everyone has a different vision, we all want the same, I’m sure of it.” (interview notes, 29-3-2019)

Views of activists

Not everyone is happy with the activist groups in the Oostvaardersplassen, even if they may have good intentions. Many times I’ve heard stigmatising talk about how activists are unintelligent women or farmers. This sort of talk comes with the implications that their ideas must be stupid as well and need not be taken seriously.
“No, I've never seen them. I think they're mostly ignorant housewives. All the feeding and stuff.” (interview notes, 7-3-2019)

“I've seen ladies with sports cars coming in with a single bale of hay, throwing it over the fence and driving off. Well, those bales were lying there still three weeks later. What is the point? Is it for your own sense or for the animals? And sometimes they would look around if there was an RTL4 camera around so they could have their say.” (interview notes, 11-3-2019)

What surprised me was that from my first impressions, I had considered most of the people who said these things to be kind and intelligent individuals. Perhaps that says more about my own naivety than about these people, but I had somehow expected these statements to be more latent, that I'd have to work to get them out. Shockingly, many people seemed to be completely at ease with these statements and not at all worried about sharing them. Even the Gedeputeerde himself, responsible for the Oostvaardersplassen and conversing with activists as a politician, let in with disdaining comments about activists, as shown by the quote at the beginning of this chapter. In that particular case I had expected that at least political caution would cause him to speak carefully.

Perhaps this frame is used (either consciously or unconsciously) to dissociate with activism and in that way also not need to listen to them. If they are stupid then it makes sense to not listen to them and do whatever you think is best, right? Or perhaps it is the difficulty of social involvement: nature management policies have been all about getting citizens more engaged with nature for a long time. Now they're getting involved, but it turns out they're quite critical.

“Look, you can frame activists as people who know nothing about it, but you can't frame it as a lack of involvement.” (interview notes, 9-4-2019)

Media framing also tends to be very negative towards activists in the Oostvaardersplassen (for examples see Janssen & van Raaij, 2010; Oomen, 2018; Ververs, 2019). Some activists are angry about how they have cooperated with reporters only to be disappointed by their portrayal in the final edit. Bad experiences have caused some to be cautious about agreeing to interviews, although it has motivated others to be very open to chances to share their views. I found that for my
own research many people were glad to be asked and taken seriously during interviews. Nuance becomes important, because no one wants to be the subject of the next ‘hamburger story’:

“The problem is that there is the role of the media. You see for example the ‘hamburger story’, where some journalists hang around McDonald’s joints in the neighbourhood on protest days, to capture a shot of activists eating a hamburger after protesting for animals. We saw that happen at the climate march as well. Quotes and images are used very selectively, which easily creates a distorted image. That truly makes a difference with a debate where most people never visited the area themselves.” (interview notes, 9-4-2019)

A paper on female animal activists by Gaarder (2008) dives deeper into the positive and negative consequences of activism for women. While the women presented in the paper are mostly animal rights activists — the vegans and vegetarians many anti-Oostvaardersplassen activists dissociate with — I think that the findings still provide insights. Gaarder describes how the ‘risks’ of activism are varied: emotional labour, trying to decide how much commitment to the cause is ‘enough’, struggling relationships with family and friends, and the feeling that the issue is not going to be solved. Still for most women the rewards are more important: their activism made them more self-confident, brought them new and strong friendship bonds and changed how they saw the world. This newfound consciousness about the world and their place in it created a sense that the struggle was worth it to be contributing to something meaningful.

There are signs that these sentiments and motivations are also present in activists in the Oostvaardersplassen. Looking at the Facebook group of Stichting Cynthia & Annemieke, there are not just messages about the Oostvaardersplassen and negative texts about the State Forestry Service and Province, but also many positive encouragements. When the group leader posts about difficulties or threats she is faced with, many members respond with encouraging and kind messages. Regularly images are shared of horses or other animals in the Oostvaardersplassen or elsewhere that look well and are enthusiastically discussed by group members.

Activists invest a lot in their activities, whether it concerns people who live far away and invest time in online activism and money in supporting feeding actions, or
people who visit almost everyday to take pictures and join meetings with the Province. They are motivated by their goal, but also by the group that comes together around it; it creates the sense that they are not alone and they can come together and challenge what they see as a lack of moral responsibility.

“
My husband sometimes said, ‘can't you tone it down a little?’ because at one point I was spending 20 hours a week delving deep into the Oostvaardersplassen. Then I decided to take it slower, and I’m sticking with that. But I'll certainly stay involved. Once you see what is going around, you can't just ignore it. Now luckily there are positive developments, so I want to keep in touch to see if it continues to get better and if promises are kept.” (interview notes, 29-3-2019)

Besides negative talk about the intelligence, gender or income of activists, I also found that quite a few of the regular visitors I spoke to had negative experiences with activists. These differed enormously in degree, but still all gave a different view of activist behaviour:

“Well, yes, that was pretty extreme. I have been part of one of those groups for a while, but in the end… I think you would do better to try going further upstream. But they keep on going, so extreme, so negative, it will never produce anything good. […] I was followed and awaited when I came here. At one point I changed my visiting times so I could avoid them, but they always had people around and it would go so fast. Because they didn't really know which side I was on, some people thought I was from the State Forestry Service. So I would arrive by car and by the time I arrived I was closed in on all sides. Sometimes they were waiting by my car until I came back. I don't let it bother me, I'm very goal oriented. But for other people… and yes, at some point there's no fun in it anymore when it keeps going on like this.” (interview notes, 6-3-2019)

“The graffiti, vandalising of signs, I don't know who is doing that and maybe the real activists say they have nothing to do with that, but it does happen.” (interview notes, 12-3-2019)
It may very well be that the activists who do these things are only a small number in a large group, but it’s the excessive acts that are remembered more so than the nuanced statements.

Perhaps cultural ideas about activism in general are a factor in these responses as well. The national motto is something along the lines of ‘act normal, that’s crazy enough’, which shows how standing out is not always expected and appreciated. While talking to your local politicians when you’re not satisfied is widely accepted, protests and demonstrations may be considered a bit too loud. However, national statistics indicate that support for the protest of others is quite high at about 69%16 (Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, 2019 p.24) and 54% of respondents would probably join a protest themselves if an unjust law is adopted by the government. This suggests that it isn’t a cultural rejection of protests that informs the negative image of activists in the Oostvaardersplassen.

It could be questioned whether the negative image of activism is entirely elicited by the way media such as television channels and newspapers have reported the discussion, or indeed if it is even true that this is the general image of activists. Certainly negativity about activists was widespread among interviewees, but maybe the rest of the country really doesn’t mind them.

When I talked to activists they all denounced damaging and disrespectful kinds of action and that it only worked to confirm the image of activists as stupid troublemakers. Others say that activism always attracts some people who have different intentions and just want to cause trouble. What’s difficult is that to the outside world, these ‘troublemakers’ are communicated as ‘activists’, and so they become one and the same group. In reality the ‘activists’ themselves are not even all in one group. Several of the activist interviewees actively try to prevent rogue activism and try to keep the conversation respectful:

“People are quick to resort to swearing and shouting, sometimes even threatening or cutting fences. I think with that kind of behaviour you won’t be taken seriously anymore. You can see that we as activists are often portrayed as a bunch of fools, and that’s because of these actions. Sometimes the demonstrations and feeding actions are necessary, so I don’t think it’s all wrong. You need different kinds of

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16 This concerns protests in the form of demonstrations in the form of sit-ins, meetings and marches. There is significantly less support for acts like occupying an official building or interrupting a meeting.
activism to achieve something. But there are limits. On my own Facebook page I try to do something about that. I set rules on my page and if people don’t abide by them I address them and sometimes block them. What those rangers receive is quite frightening. I occasionally get those emails when people don’t realise my website isn’t official and I’m in fact anti Oostvaardersplassen.” (interview notes, 29-3-2019)

Another interviewee also noted that the more severe kind of actions are a consequence of activists feeling like they’re not listened to by officials:

“[Things getting out of hand, AM] Yes, well I think that is a consequence of not being heard. I’m not going to block the motorway when the Gedeputeerde of the Provincial Council says he’ll get on the phone and talk to me about it. I’m not someone who threatens people, I never threaten anyone, but I do make a promise and stick to it. And I really do get the impression that the Gedeputeerde has to get down from his ivory tower and have a conversation with us.” (interview notes, 28-3-2019)

I realise that sometimes activists have used very strong language and I can see how this could be hurtful to people who are just trying to visit a nature reserve. Talk about dying animals and policies is not everyone’s interest and visitors can feel ambushed and attacked for not engaging at that very moment.

“One time I sat with my telescope on the Kotterbosbult and there were some activists there too. They asked me if I could see if that brown blob they saw was a deer and if it was shot. They also asked me if I could see how the deer were shot. But that is not what I come here for! —he is visibly shocked that people would ask such questions to a stranger without hesitation—” (interview notes, 18-4-2019)

Considering the ideas about nature discussed in chapter 3 and how many people visit the Oostvaardersplassen to enjoy nature and find peace and inspiration, it seems understandable that this man feels ambushed by such a request. Many of the regular visitors are elderly men and I’ve heard more than once that these visits help them to cope with struggles in their past or the death of their life partner. When
visiting nature is used as a form of healing, confrontations with complex discussions and nature management policies don’t fit in. It is the question whether it is a luxury or a right to stay out of such a debate, and to what extent that should prevent the debate from taking place. At the same time I realise that many of the objectives that activists name are the same ones that are being tackled in new policy discussions on the political level. In that sense it is understandable that people feel like the activism should be done by now so new policies can proceed:

“But I have the feeling the discussion doesn't achieve anything. We're not going to fix that with one another. There's a policy now, follow it, be done with it and that is that. With a hundred of these types — gestures to the man who just interrupted our conversation — around it isn't going any faster.” (interview notes, 12-3-2019)

Mistrust

As a response to the experienced exclusion, many activists reported feelings of mistrust towards politics and science and specifically towards the Province of Flevoland, State Forestry Service and Wageningen University & Research (WUR). The WUR is a university that has done many research projects in the Oostvaardersplassen and started a new experiment with transmitter collars on Heck cattle in February 2019. Several professors of the WUR spoke out against the Van Geel report and the new policies; they consider it a great loss that the Oostvaardersplassen will change as a result of this (interview notes, 9-4-2019). All of this activity is difficult to get an overview of and understand from the outside:

“We [in Dutch society, AM] base much on science, that’s what we base policies on. But the experiments that take place here, and we do not know exactly what they are, that we have a problem with. Also because this is forbidden terrain, well then in our opinion you have something to hide. The Oostvaardersveld you can enter, but not the big plains: why? We come there, be it illegally, and yes there are cattle with transmitter collars on them now. And it is said it’s because of research in Africa, poaching, bla bla bla… While there are very different claims about virtual fencing, animals receiving electrical shocks when
they cross a virtual line. Well if you say ‘we want to be transparent’, then be transparent.” (interview notes, 22-3-2019, emphasis in original)

It’s good to realise that as far as I can assume the Province and State Forestry Service aren’t consciously obstructing communication and understanding; in fact I think they make an effort by sharing information about changes in the Oostvaardersplassen on a blog kept by the rangers of the reserve and organising meet-ups with an independent moderator to guide the discussion. However, these efforts don’t come across to many people and it is difficult to tell if they make a selection in what they share. In the schuursessie I attended, the moderator became a point of discussion himself because attendees couldn’t figure out if he was or wasn’t an employee of the State Forestry Service. Once someone approaches such a meeting from a place of mistrust, anything that is not certain can become proof of unreliability.

Mistrust is easily mistaken to be a lack of trust, but Florian Mühlfried argues it is much more than that. In his edited book Mistrust: Ethnographic Approximations (Mühlfried, 2018) he argues that mistrust has much in common with trust: both are ways of dealing with uncertainty and of relating to the world and they are not mutually exclusive (Mühlfried, 2018, pp. 10-11). In fact, they might be mutually constitutive. Another point about mistrust is that it is a form of engagement: it is an active approach in engaging with a situation. That means that the people who are sharing mistrust and concern about the Oostvaardersplassen on social media are not just sharing negativity, but are actually in the process of dealing with their uncertainty and disagreement with what goes on. If their distrust is not accepted, that strengthens the position of distrust: in order to engage in entrustment (Schiocchet, 2018) there needs to be room for choice.

Interestingly, Mühlfried writes that “The ruthless distruster acts in the world just as we social and cultural anthropologists act in the ‘field’” (Mühlfried, 2018, p. 13). This behaviour of mistrust is present in the Oostvaardersplassen as well. Volunteer reporters from Stichting Cynthia & Annemieke are present in the Oostvaardersplassen almost every day, taking many photographs to share on the foundation’s Facebook page. Other activist groups also have people going into the field, such as one of the leaders of Code Rood:
“I’m here multiple times every week, often I go live on Facebook. I’ve been doing that for a year, not to cause a scene but to show the facts. I show what my eyes see and what my phone shows.” (interview notes, 22-3-2019)

After supposed death threats towards rangers of the State Forestry Service, the Commissary of the King in Flevoland, the highest authority of the Province, decided to start feeding animals. At the same time, plans for a new policy were already being made. The Gedeputeerde said when I interviewed him that he had never been a fan of the ‘old’ policy in the Oostvaardersplassen and that one of the objectives when he took his position in March 2018 was to change things so that animals wouldn’t suffer in such great numbers and the reserve would have more ecological benefits as a bird reserve as well.

“If I’m being cynical, I think they were already working on changing policy. They wanted to get rid of the old policy, and now they can use the responses as a reason to turn it all around. But you can also see it as a situation in which politicians perhaps listened too much to what the mob wanted, even if it isn’t equal to the sentiment of the entire society.” (interview notes, 9-4-2019)
7. Concluding thoughts

“I will stay vigilant. But I will definitely keep walking around there.” (interview notes, 11-3-2019)

Over the past four chapters the themes of this study have been explored, following from insights of the field to theoretical considerations. In this final chapter, I want to bring these themes back together and link them to answer the main question of this study: how do death, exclusion, and activism interact in the organised wilderness of the Oostvaardersplassen? There will be some room for a critical reflection of the research process and a notion of what the study might contribute to science and to society.

Adventures of a novice researcher

The idea of this research was quite ambitious from the beginning. I had never been to the Oostvaardersplassen and had very little knowledge about the world of nature management and nature philosophy. For some reason I decided to go for it and dive in. Having no prior knowledge caused me to feel like I was running after the facts and
CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

trying to catch up sometimes, but also meant that I came into the study with an open mind and willingness to listen to every story I came across. The honesty and enthusiasm gained positive responses and helped to make this process a serious attempt of developing new lines of thinking.

At the same time, I do feel like many ideas that I describe were mentioned by other people already, people who are specialists in their respective fields, be it social science, philosophy, ecology or biology. While I had found no publications during my preliminary research, it was naive to think that no social research was being done in the Oostvaardersplassen. Many of these studies are limited to their own field, and this is what I thought about when I first read an old ecological report on the Oostvaardersplassen (Rijksdienst voor de IJsselmeerpolders, 1982); societal issues or public responses are not mentioned anywhere. In that regard, perhaps an explorative study done by an inexperienced researcher is helpful in considering how different ideas might relate to each other.

In some respects the work that I have done is all over the place — the place being the Oostvaardersplassen — and it wasn’t until the last couple of weeks that I truly figured out who to talk to, how to get access and what I should have started with. I suppose that happens every time. The good part is that what makes the study is talking to the people who aren’t key actors, not getting in and studying things that others might not have considered relevant at all. This journey also feels fitting to the Oostvaardersplassen, where people have been trying to find out what is happening for decades and are now starting new conversations about nature.

Based on the research I did I think it would be very useful to conduct similar, though perhaps more focused studies of other situations where visions of nature conflict. I found that the inclusion of animals within the study gave the ethnography a different dimension and came more naturally as time progressed. Insights such as the lack of privacy for konik horses in the Oostvaardersveld, and both the powerful human control over the nature reserve and the agency in the behaviour of non-human animals, wouldn't have come to me if I had taken a different starting point.

**Back to the four themes**

The concept ‘organised wilderness’ was explored through human understandings of nature, wilderness, and species. Its paradoxical name suits the complexity of the
CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Oostvaardersplassen: part man-made creation, part spontaneous animal habitat. Of all of the ways to define nature, there is not a single one most fitting to the Oostvaardersplassen, as proven by the conflicts that arose. Based on the work of nature philosopher Drenthen (2018) I distinguished different ways of seeing: nature as an object to use, or nature as a source of life or inspiration. Then there is ecocentrism, which seeks for holistic and sustainable ecosystems, versus biocentrism, which favours the living, the animal, over its surroundings (interview notes, 9-4-2019; Pigeon & Létourneau, 2014). However, all of these apparent dichotomies are actually present at the same time, to different extents for each person or project.

Secondly, there is the question of wild, wilderness and wild animals. I needn’t explain that, once again, there are multiple views on this: what is interesting is where the views overlap. In coding data from all interviews and conversations, I found that it was unanimously agreed upon that human dominance over animal life is — to some extent — acceptable and human intervention is ultimately unavoidable:

“Humankind has a certain influence here, starting at the origination. We try to arrange it so that natural processes can largely go their own way, but there will always be human intervention.” (interview notes, 6-4-2019)

Nevertheless, animals that interact with humans are considered ‘tame’, ‘domestic’ or at least ‘not wild’. This idea still leaves room for interpretation: if one doesn’t know — as is the case in the Oostvaardersplassen — to what extent animals have interaction with humans, it’s difficult to place them in these conceptual boxes. I suppose this is the answer to the subquestion ‘how does organised wilderness relate to understandings of nature and animals?’: situations of ‘organised wilderness’ complicate thinking about nature and animals within the existing dichotomous patterns of thinking.

Refraining from using labels such as wild or tame is an option, but while the distinction is unhelpful in some respects I would argue that it is essential in others; if nature management is to be widely supported among citizens, it is necessary to be able to explain it. Furthermore, legal classification is necessary to uphold the lawful

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17 I realise that this statement does not generalise well: there are certainly humans who envision a different kind of relationship with other animal species. Unanimous in this case means that the sentiment was present in every interview and conversation that was part of fieldwork.
CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

standards of animal welfare. Perhaps we could instead work on better classification. In their work on ‘zoopolis’, Donaldson and Kymlicka (2011) used the term ‘liminal animals’ for those that were neither domestic nor wild. Such a word could be easier to grasp than the Dutch contractions that speak of ‘wild domestic’ or ‘kept wild’ animals and the like.

Exclusion occurs in several different ways and on various levels in the Oostvaardersplassen: visitors are excluded from the core area, activists are excluded from conversations and animals are excluded from decision-making on their habitat. Fences, train tracks, roads and waterbodies separate the Oostvaardersplassen from the world outside, but also from visitors. Standing on one of several lookout hills one always looks at the reserve from above and from a distance, and the only ways of getting into the core are inaccessible during the winter. The combination of simultaneously overseeing the entire area and not seeing what goes on in the centre causes minds to wonder.

The not-knowing creates need for ways to fill in the gaps, and where some trust what the State Forestry Service rangers share on their blog, others take positions of mistrust based on their own observations or warnings from others. It can be difficult to find out what it is one is observing:

“A blue tractor drives fast in a straight horizontal line. A small group of deer starts to run and shuffle in different directions. They sprint through the reeds and regroup. The small front group consists of about 15 deer. Further back a large herd of at least 60-100 deer is collected to the left. Straight in the back are about 56 hecks and right back some 10-30 koniks.” (field notes, 14-2-2019)

In total 12 trucks and cars are mentioned driving through the core area within three hours of observation on the Kotterbosbult that day. That seems like a lot and I can only guess what it means.

Feelings of mistrust are enhanced by responses that portray worried citizens as dumb activists who don’t understand nature and responses that try to combat mistrust by denouncing mistrust or providing reasons to trust. In fact, it is more helpful to see mistrust as a form of interaction that is not necessarily all bad and comes not from a lack of trust, but from a place of uncertainty (Mühlfried, 2018). Interestingly enough from what I’ve heard the main points of discussion are not
CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

contested but actually agreed upon by anti activists, pro activists, Province, and public. Based on these agreements a wholly different conversation could be possible, where suddenly there is a whole new group of citizens actively engaging with nature management and politics.

As for the exclusion of animals, this is a more contested point when it comes to how humans and non-human animal should coexist. However, the question of how to coexist in the Oostvaardersplassen is one I can say something about. As I mentioned in chapter 4, while the discussion that arose around the Oostvaardersplassen is all about how humans should treat animals, this is not fully represented in the political debate that grew out of it. The Oostvaardersplassen is not the only place where these issues come up, consider the fallow deer in the Waterleidingduinen (Het Parool, 2013), those on the island Haringvreter (Giele, 2019), and the grey geese gasified around Schiphol Airport (van Dijk, 2015). People advocating a different way of coexisting with animals seem to be getting a bigger audience as of late, so perhaps this conversation is getting started.

Death is present in the Oostvaardersplassen in the dead forest that marks the landscape, dead critters in great numbers who are still hardly noticed, and dead megafauna that are more present in the images about the Oostvaardersplassen than in the nature reserve itself. The newly instated ‘politics of sight’ (Pachirat, 2011) makes sure that the dead are no longer seen, despite great numbers of red deer dying this winter. This connects to the notion of exclusion and activism in the Oostvaardersplassen, as it seems to be a form of hiding in this context. Even if the motivation is purely practical or stems from the idea that people don't want to see animals being killed, within a context of debate and mistrust politics of sight cause unrest.

The problem with death is threefold: the large number of animals dying, the long process of suffering that happens before death, and the needlessness of these deaths. The large numbers were mostly seen in the winter of 2018, but are not forgotten by the people who saw them in person, through the train window or in pictures. The fact that animals can experience emotions is widely accepted, especially for pets and familiar animals such as horses. For cows and deer this is also accepted, but many people know them mainly as a food, so they might provide less motivations
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for activism. When these animals are seen emaciated, wounded and dying, it causes feelings of disgust, sadness and anger:

“I showed pictures and videos to show them how it was, well the tears just streamed down my face. It’s not something you’ll easily forget, it leaves a mark. I can’t imagine anyone could watch that with dry eyes. In a civilised country you shouldn’t want this. Those cadaver images won’t disappear anytime soon.” (interview notes, 22-3-2019)

The idea that animals were left in their bad condition for a long time, until it was certain that they were going to die and were thus shot, frustrated many people who saw this. It is by many considered ‘inhumane’ to let them suffer so long. Disgust and moral disapproval could be implications for activism, as suggested by Herzog and Golden (2009). As for the needlessness, the fact that humans put the megafauna in the reserve but then didn’t intervene when it became clear that a population crash was going to happen leads many people to consider it the responsibility of the State Forestry Service and Province that so many died. Activists sometimes contrast this with regulations for farm animals and what happens if a farmer is responsible for the death of animals. That can lead to revoking of licenses of closing of a business, while the management of the Oostvaardersplassen continues to lie in the hands of the same organisations, though quite a number of faces have left and been replaced.

Finally, we come to the question what implications for activism arise in response to organised wilderness. I mentioned the three elements of the death of megafauna that are most commonly named in this context, as well as moral grounds. The way activists are disrespected and not taken seriously by many politicians and media also provides motivation: people who disagree with the treatment of activists want to show their support or prove that it’s not just ‘unintelligent troublemakers’ who are against the Oostvaardersplassen. Activist groups also gain a following on social media by sharing information and calling out discrepancies; while there are false stories as well, they do contribute positively at times and they are not the only ones upset with the unclear communication around the Oostvaardersplassen. The

18 The human and animal words used for suffering are a study of their own. Jepson (2008) did a linguistic analysis of some of the English words for human death or animal death and crossover uses.
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information sharing follows from the exclusion and related mistrust: everything the Province and State Forestry Service do is put under a microscope.

I found that while the two managing organisations are trying to improve their ways and calm down the debate around the nature reserve, they make mistakes, sometimes small ones, that completely frustrate their efforts. In many cases this comes down to communicating with messages devised for the activist audience: the snippets of insights directed at the general public don’t cut it for a highly invested and engaged crowd. This might be the only reason why activist groups are still so active this winter even if there is little that truly fits with the motives that they started with. If activists were treated differently, they might get on board with at least a part of the changes that are being implemented. However, this means that the mistrusting behaviour must be accepted for what it is; if it isn’t, there is no basis for trust or cooperation (Mühlfried, 2018; Pelkmans, 2018).

The way activists protest against the Oostvaardersplassen is, contrary to popular belief, quite in line with other animal welfare activism. Feeding actions are a unique element, but sharing information, protesting, online activism and peaceful demonstrations are all common in activism. As is the issue of a group taking actions too far and thereby negatively influencing the image of the entire cause. The bad experiences of visitors in the Oostvaardersplassen are also not unimportant. I cannot say if the activists who bother visitors are supported or denounced by activist organisations, but for regular visitors it can feel like the activists have ‘won’ despite representing only a small but loud community.

Conclusion

Finally I wish to get back to the main question of the study: how do death, exclusion, and activism interact in the organised wilderness of the Oostvaardersplassen? I conclude that from what I’ve seen and heard, death was the start of it; problematised by numbers, suffering, and needlessness. This motivated a number of people to start protesting the treatment of animals in the Oostvaardersplassen, to be joined by many more in the winter of 2018. The visibility of the area meant that people who might not usually visit the reserve saw emaciated animals, and the media response and online visibility grew the protesting groups enormously.
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Physical exclusion is an essential part of the Oostvaardersplassen as I experienced them. However, this doesn't necessarily mean that the feeling of being excluded must be so present among people who regularly visit, as a visitor or as an activist. The exclusion that is part of the ‘organised wilderness’ of the Oostvaardersplassen denies the point that humans are a part of nature and that we must find a place for that knowledge amidst the evidence that humans are also a very dominant species that has impacted the rest of nature tremendously. Politicising the dead or dismissing questioning thoughts doesn't avoid conflict and is essentially avoiding the undeniable and probably unsolvable paradox of ‘organised wilderness’; maybe we need to find a way to accommodate to the paradox rather than solve it.

For activists it is certain that being excluded and dismissed is a motivation to fight: apparently it is necessary to get louder. This results in a situation where politics and activists are fighting for the same thing, but arguing over the attitude of the other. The Oostvaardersplassen started out as an experiment, and even though that had ceased by the time the Province of Flevoland took charge, an experiment comes with the responsibility to be honest and reflexive. In this respect I see there is space to improve in both the Province and the State Forestry Service. They have started being more open and creating space for conversation, but to make these efforts succeed they might need to take it several steps further and truly create room for a debate and embody the values of openness and reflexivity themselves. As the Provincial Council is an elected governmental body, it makes no sense to have them debate against citizens; facilitate conversation between visitors, activists, and specialists of different disciplines instead. The Oostvaardersplassen is a deeply interesting composition of complex and paradoxical themes, let us not try to simplify it.
References


REFERENCES


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Data overview

Short report noting mission statement and aims followed by a recap of where I spent the day, what happened and what questions I have. The short reports are collected in a paper notebook.

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Field notes start with a short overview containing information about: the weather; my mood; what I did in terms of fieldwork; what I want to do next time; what I learned; what my impression is based on that day's work. This overview is followed by the notes containing dates, times and locations as well as many pictures. The field notes are all collected in a structured markdown file based on the jottings written by hand or in the 'notes' application on my phone.

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Interview notes are written out based on recordings or handwritten notes. Each interview is saved in a separate markdown file.

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