



## Empty Land?

### The Social and Environmental Impact of the Holterberg Plantations<sup>1</sup>



#### 1. Introduction: Plantations in Brazil and in the Netherlands

The idea to write a paper on the social and environmental impact of the Holterberg plantations, an old monoculture tree plantation in the Netherlands, surged at a strategy meeting organized by the World Rainforest Movement in Espiritu Santo, Brazil, in November 2005. The meeting took place near one of the largest and most devastating monoculture tree plantations in the world, the Aracruz Eucalyptus plantations, which cover almost 80% of the arable land of the entire State of Espiritu Santo. A large number of representatives of the Indigenous Peoples and local communities that were affected by these plantations and other plantations in Latin America, Asia and Africa participated in the meeting. They shared impressive and sometimes dramatic stories about how large-scale tree monocultures had destroyed their lands and livelihoods.

In the strategy discussion that followed, it was noted that the case studies and other stories presented were all from the global South, although there are many monoculture tree plantations in Europe and North

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America too. In fact, in a country like the Netherlands the overwhelming majority of what is officially classified as "forests" consists of old monoculture tree plantations.

There is little public awareness of the social and environmental impacts of these plantations. One of the saddest features of Dutch forest policy is that many generations of Dutch citizens have been educated with the illusion that a monoculture pine plantation is a "nice dark forest" (*een gezellig donker bos*). It is estimated that the last large track of primary forest in the Netherlands was cleared just before 1900, and many Dutch citizens do not have the faintest idea what a real forest looks like. Yet, that does not refrain the country from playing a very active role in international forest policy. The Netherlands is one of the largest donors to tropical forest conservation, and it has always played a key role in international negotiations related to forest. This is laudable, but it is remarkable that in a country where there is a lively ongoing debate about deforestation in other countries, there is hardly any public debate about Dutch forest policy and the lack of biodiversity in Dutch "forests".

European and North American donors and consultancy firms play a major role in promoting forestry models that advocate tree monocultures in other countries<sup>2</sup>. The support of European governments to monoculture tree plantations is unquestionably related to the fact that these plantations in Europe itself seem to be relatively uncontroversial. While most forestry agencies in Europe will nowadays acknowledge that monocultures are undesirable from a biodiversity perspective, the majority still uses the term "forests" when they refer to monoculture tree plantations.

There is even less awareness of the social impacts of monoculture tree plantations. Dutch and other European tree plantations are met with little resistance from local communities, whereas Brazilian and other plantations in the South are still causing, often violent, social conflicts.<sup>3</sup> However, the fact that there is no opposition to the existing monoculture tree plantations in a country like the Netherlands does not mean that these plantations have not had any negative social impacts at the time of their establishment, which is often more than 100 years ago. In most public outreach materials, official state agencies claim that plantation areas like the Holterberg used to be "empty lands", heavily degraded lands that were deserted at the time the monocultures were planted. Yet, as will be described below, this is not the complete story. Although the lands were definitely of poor agricultural quality, they were of economic importance to the poorest groups within local communities, as these were the only lands they could resort to. So the socio-economic importance of these lands was relatively large.

The lack of social resistance nowadays might be a logical result from the fact that in many of these plantation areas there are hardly any local communities left. The large-scale tree monocultures in Europe are amongst the most depopulated areas in this heavily populated continent. Depopulation is a common feature in large-scale monoculture tree plantation areas. This depopulation is a consequence of the fact that large-scale tree monocultures are an extremely labor-extensive form of land use: in Brazil, it has been calculated that they provide 800 times less employment per hectare than traditional agriculture<sup>4</sup>. Rural unemployment and depopulation, and subsequent social disintegration, is one of the most dramatic effects of the expansion of large-scale monocultures like eucalypt plantations in Latin America and other continents.

The aim of this paper is to document some of the existing and historical environmental and social impacts of a typical European plantation, the Holterberg pine plantations, so as to increase awareness of the negative impacts of tree monocultures in general, and the need to distinguish between tree plantations and forests.

## 2. The Holterberg: a Mountain in a Flat Country

In any other country in Europe, the Holterberg would probably not be a very remarkable feature, and it would certainly not be called a "berg", which means mountain. Yet, in a country as flat as the Netherlands, this hill, 87 meters at its highest point, is a remarkable feature. The hill, located 120 kilometers east of Amsterdam, is a leftover of the retracting glaciers in the last ice age, although local legends claim that it was formed by a giant who lost half a bag of sand when he wanted to carry it to the sea. The part about the sand is correct: most of the hill itself consists of sand. However, a thick layer of clay covers the entire base of the hill. As a result, water drains down quickly on the top of the hill, making it an exceptionally dry area to Dutch standards. The water cannot permeate the clay though, so it bubbles up (*kwel*) at the edges

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<sup>2</sup> See also Carrere, R., and Lohmann, L., "Pulping the South, industrial tree plantations and the world paper economy", WRM 1996, <http://www.wrm.org.uy/plantations/material/pulping.html>

<sup>3</sup> see also <http://www.wrm.org.uy>

<sup>4</sup> See: <http://www.mst.org.br/mst/pagina.php?cd=2544>

of the hill, causing large areas of wetland. Nowadays many of these wetlands have been drained<sup>5</sup> but some peatland, a biodiversity-rich and nowadays seriously threatened ecosystem in the Netherlands, can be found at the sides of the hill, too.

The combination of land too dry at the top and too wet on the edges made most of the area unsuitable for intensive agriculture. That does not mean that there was no economic activity. As early as medieval times, communities started to use the area for sheep herding and cattle ranching. There were also some small farms on the hill; as in many European countries, the poorest arable lands ended up in hands of the poorest farmers, whereas more prosperous areas were taken over by more powerful landowners. As is clear from the name (“holt” is old-Dutch for timber) the Holterberg used to be covered with primary forests, consisting of broadleaved trees. The sheep ate away the young shoots, though, gradually changing the ecosystem into heath. The local communities adapted their land management system to the heath and developed a special system called “plaggen”: pieces of soil with heather (cankers) were taken away and put in the sheds before the sheep were stabled for the winter time. In the springtime, the subsequent mix of heather and manure was used to fertilize the relatively poor soils of the farmland on the edges of the hill. This process led to further de-fertilization of the soil on the top of the hill.

It is often stated that the land on the hill was degraded, which is undoubtedly true from an agricultural perspective. In some areas, the soil lost so much of its fertility that it became pure sand, causing sand atomisings. From a perspective of biological diversity the plaggen-system created an ecosystem that was very different than most ecosystems in the Netherlands, with distinct fauna and flora. As most Dutch ecosystems have become over-fertilized<sup>6</sup>, this fauna and flora is locally unique nowadays, and heath conservation has become an important objective of Dutch nature policy. Whether this priority is scientifically correct from a global point of view can be debated, as heath is a man-made ecosystem that is quite abundantly found in neighboring Germany, but it is difficult to judge biodiversity policy in a dramatically altered country like the Netherlands from a purely scientific point of view. What is clear, though, is that the term “degraded land” is very subjective. What is described in the history books of the Holterberg as a “waste land” (woeste grond), home to witches and other “bad” people, is nowadays seen



by the State forestry agency and local nature conservation NGOs as a precious ecosystem, which is particularly attractive for tourists because of its “quietness”. In any case it is clear from maps of the area previous to the establishment of the plantations that the landscape was actually quite diverse, with many bushes and small plots of forests. The area was undoubtedly marked by a biological diversity that was much richer than the biodiversity that remains nowadays.

### **3. The Mark as a Community Management System**

The Mark-system was developed by the Germanic peoples who invaded

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<sup>5</sup> Please note that, historically, the Dutch are experts in wetland destruction: three of the main cultural symbols of the Netherlands, windmills, dikes and polders, were all tools of the massive wetland destruction that has taken place from medieval times until very recently.

<sup>6</sup> This over-fertilization is partly due to the net import of nutrients from developing countries in the form of soy for livestock fodder and subsequent overdisposition of manure

the Netherlands during the great migration around 500 AD. During this era, most of the original inhabitants of the Holterberg area were either chased away, or killed. However, some succeeded to survive and later on mixed with the invaders. They were originally excluded from the community system that was set up, but in the course of time some of them succeeded to conquer a title to their land and thus a vote in the Mark system. From the perspective of the invaders the Mark system was remarkably democratic: all the agricultural land available was divided up more or less equally amongst the members of the invading community. The remaining forest, heath and pasture lands were administered by the community as a whole. These remaining lands included most of the Holterberg, which was, as stated before, not very suitable for agricultural activities.

The “Mark”, the community council, gathered a few times a year to decide democratically on all important matters including education, religious affairs, and the management of the common lands. They also arranged the proper demarcation of both private and community lands. Meetings could be quite joyful, at least in Holten. The reports of Mark-meetings, which were archived between 1500 and 1853, show that a substantial part of the annual budget of the Mark was spent on drinks and food during the meetings.<sup>7</sup>

The original inhabitants that had remained in the area, and newcomers, were formally not entitled to any land. However, they were occasionally allowed to settle on limited areas of the common lands, being nearly always small plots of relatively infertile land on the hill itself. Most of them were tenants, but some succeeded to gain title to the land after a few generations. It was a poor existence, but like many small farmers in developing countries today, they had little alternative, and they did succeed to produce enough food to satisfy their basic needs. The cadastral map of Holten of 1832 shows quite some small plots of arable land on the hill itself.<sup>8</sup>

The meeting reports of the Holten Mark demonstrate on several occasions how the community took joint measures to safeguard the sustainable management of the community lands: there were strict prohibitions on overgrazing and overexploitation of timber, and occasionally trees and woodlands were planted to combat desertification of overgrazed lands and to halt salt dunes from spreading. Money and animals that were collected as fines were often divided amongst the poor.

#### **4. Privatization of the Communal Lands**

The privatization of the Marks in the Netherlands was the outcome of a policy-decision taken by the central government, under influence of the liberal economic theories of the late 18th and early 19th centuries. It is clear from the minutes of the Mark meetings that the community itself was anything but enthusiastic about the forced privatization of their communal lands. In 1779, 1810 and 1839 they ignored or otherwise resisted the pressure of the Dutch central government and a subsequent Law of 1810 that obliged them to split up the Mark. This resistance was quite common, Even in 1875 there were still municipalities that opposed to the privatization of the marks. However, in Holten they gave up the struggle in 1843, and the communal lands were divided amongst the members of the Mark.<sup>9</sup> As a result the large grazing areas on the Holterberg were suddenly split-up into small private properties of heath and other poor land that had little economic value by themselves, and were quite a burden in terms of the need to protect them from desertification and the expansion of sand dunes.

It is generally known that the Holterberg was facing serious problems with desertification by the time the first large monoculture pine plantations were established, in the late 19th century. It is remarkable that the minutes of the Mark meetings show that the most serious desertification problems arose a few decades after the lands of the Mark had been privatized. The minutes of meetings in the 17th and 18th centuries seldom refer to the expansion of sand dunes and other forms of desertification.<sup>10</sup>

Although more research would be needed to confirm this, it could be that the desertification process was actually worsened by the privatization of the Mark. After the Mark was split up and the communal lands were divided, the individual owners of the land on the Holterberg were no longer able to take or ensure the enforcement of the measures needed to halt desertification. As a community, the Mark had quite some means at its disposal to ensure enforcement of measures like grazing bans, but for individual owners it was undoubtedly much more difficult to protect their small plots of relatively poor land against desertification. There are no comparative studies of the level of desertification on the Holterberg in 1800 and 1900, though.

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<sup>7</sup> See De Graaf, J., 1918

<sup>8</sup> See Bordewijk, H., et.al., 1999

<sup>9</sup> See De Graaf, J., 1918

<sup>10</sup> See De Graaf, J. 1918



Meanwhile, in the late nineteenth century, the textile industry in the nearby east of the Netherlands experienced a rapid boom, creating a large great demand for cheap labor. The little economic opportunity that was offered by the privatized plots and the labor opportunities in the factories made it attractive for many of the small farmers to give up their lands and move to the rapidly growing urban centers in Twente and other areas in the east of the country. Their lands were bought up by the so-called textile barons, a handful of families that had made their fortune in the textile industry. It was these textile barons that started the development of monoculture pine plantations, inspired by the rapidly

rising demand for pine timber.

## 5. The Social Impacts of Plantation Development

The establishment of monoculture pine plantations on the Holterberg took place between 1853 and 1950. It clearly followed the disruption of the community land management system by the land privatization the central Government enforced upon the local community of Holten in 1853. The individual pieces of privatized land did not have enough fertility to sustain the owners, who were economically forced to sell them to large landowners. These large landowners, industrialists from the nearby cities (textile barons) subsequently planted large areas of monoculture pine plantations, which was a profitable business due to the demand for pine for the coal-mines in the south of the Netherlands.

From 1899 onwards, the official State Forestry Agency, Staatsbosbeheer, continued this practice on the lands that had been sold or otherwise handed over to the state. The main objective of the forest management by Staatsbosbeheer was economic; for the Government, this public agency was an institution that was supposed to make economic gains for the benefit of the government. Environmental objectives did not play a role in the formal strategies of Staatsbosbeheer until the late 20th century, although it should be noted that the Government became aware of the recreational values of "forests" around the 1920's. Large areas of plantations were established by the Government in the thirties for two reasons: the provision of labor during the massive unemployment era of the economic crisis of the nineteen thirties, and the creation of recreation areas. The poor soil and straight lines of trees were seen as an advantage, as the sandy soils dried quickly after the rains, so they were very suitable for picnics by visitors.

There is no evidence of forced displacement on the Holterberg, but there is evidence of depopulation: the cadastral atlas of 1832 shows quite a number of small farms in the area that is nowadays covered by pine plantation.<sup>11</sup> This is confirmed by long-term residents in the Holterberg area, who point out that the area was more populated before the pine plantations were established. As stated in the introduction, the lack of employment provided by monoculture tree plantations, especially if measured as the number of permanent jobs per hectare of land, is an important factor in the depopulation of plantation areas. The planting of the pine monocultures itself required quite some labor, and during the nineteen thirties there were even some labor camps established as the Government saw plantation establishment as a cheap form of employment provision. The labor camps on the Holterberg were notorious for their horrendous living conditions. Some other large plantations in the Netherlands, like the Amsterdamse Bos (the "forest" of Amsterdam) were planted as a labor program for the unemployed in the thirties too. Here too, the labor conditions were known to be very harsh.

Once the trees were planted the pine plantations provided very little employment to the local population, leading to a gradual process of depopulation of the area. With the people, the economic viability of small

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<sup>11</sup> See Bordewijk, H., et.al., 1999

shops and other activities in the area disappeared too. Nowadays, there are only a few dozen of villas on the hill, inhabited partly by retired people, partly by commuters. Although the gradual removal of old pine from the area provides some economic returns to the two managing institutions of the National Park that has been established on the Holterberg, it involves very little labor. The economic activity is all concentrated in the nearby village of Holten itself, in the farms on the edges of the hill, outside the plantation area, and in the tourism sector, which has boomed since the establishment of the National Park in 2004.

## 6. The Environmental Impact of the Holterberg Plantations



A substantial part of the Holterberg plantations is nowadays included in a National Park, the Sallandse Heuvelrug, which was established in 2004. The establishment of the park was probably more inspired by the "quietness" of the area than by its biological richness. The Park includes heath zones, which are a threatened ecosystem in the Netherlands. The main flagship species, the Black Grouse, which has no other habitat in the Netherlands even though it is quite numerous in neighboring Germany, lives on the heath zones that have been kept free from the pine plantations. One of the policy aims of the park management is to cut more pine, so as to enlarge the

habitat of the black grouse and other heath species. Aside from removing part of the plantation, increasing biodiversity in the pine plantations themselves through selective cutting is one of the other main goals of the official management plan of the park.

National Park the Sallandse Heuvelrug is jointly managed by Staatsbosbeheer (the now privatized Dutch state forestry agency) and Natuurmonumenten (Nature monuments, Netherlands largest environmental NGO which owns around 8% of Dutch forests/plantations). SBB owns 42% of the Holterberg, a total of 1,637 hectares, Natuurmonumenten owes 23% of the Holterberg (898 hectares). Some 5% is private property, mainly gardens and small properties owned by some 100 individual land-holders. Some 30% of the hill is excluded from the National Park. This area includes two large estates, the Noetselerberg and Holterberg Estates, owned by rich families of former textile barons. The De Jong- Schouwenburg family, who owns the Noetselerberg plantations, is still using the area for timber production. The owners of the Holterberg Estate, the Vening-Mijns family, do not seem to have any kind of management plan for their plantation. The families owning these estates have declined the invitation to join the park, although they are part of the consultative board ("het overleg-orgaan") of the park.

The tourism that is triggered by the establishment of the National Park provides quite some economic opportunities, although it has also brought negative environmental impacts: The first major project implemented after the establishment of the National Park was the building of a large parking lot on the edge of the Park so that it would be more easily reachable by car. This parking lot was heavily opposed by the local inhabitants, represented by the



Bewonersvereniging Holterberg (inhabitants union Holterberg), who had not been overly happy with the establishment of the Park in the first place as they rightfully feared it would mainly lead to increased pressure from visitors. These visitors tend to visit the area by car, despite the fact that there is a train station on walking distance from the area.

As the management strategies on the Holterberg vary from hectare to hectare,

one can actually very well see the environmental impacts of monoculture tree plantations. Some areas, especially in the private properties of the Noetselerberg and Holterberg estates that are formally no part of the park, are desolate monocultures where few birds and other species are found. The soil in these areas is the same sand that was there 150 years ago, which is clear evidence to the fact that monocultures do not restore soil, but rather degrade it.

Some other areas inside the park, especially those managed by Staatsbosbeheer, are a mix of two species with some undergrowth. Where pine is one of the dominant species, the undergrowth tends to be poor, and the soil is practically sand. In those areas where broadleaved species like oak and birch dominate, more fauna and undergrowth can be found, and the sandy soils are covered with a thin layer of humus. The formal management target for most of the tree-dominated area managed by Staatsbosbeheer is to create a mix of 50% Scotch Pine, 30% Indigenous Oak and 20% Birch.

The areas managed by Natuurmonumenten, which has a more radical policy as far as removing pine and allowing broadleaved species and heather to grow back is concerned, contain even more biodiversity and humus.



In the gardens of some dozen villas that are found on the south side of the hill, the difference between the fertile soil where all the pine has been removed and the sandy soils where the pine has been allowed to grow, is even more remarkable. But one of the most fertile areas in the park is actually a small former waste belt, a small hectare that is neither heath nor pine plantation. This small area shows a remarkably abundant diversity of fauna and flora on a soil that has obviously been able to recover much better than the soil under the surrounding pine plantations.

Likewise, birds and other animals are obviously drawn to the gardens and the edges of the plantation. The "deep dark forests" as the Dutch call the intensively managed pine plantations, are also very silent "forests", where seldom a bird is heard. This effect has been noted in a country like New Zealand too, where plantations activists point out that one seldom or never hears any birds sing in the large-scale plantation zones. In a country like Cameroon, villagers actually complain about the fact that the surrounding plantations cause a lot of damage to their crops because they provide a habitat for birds and other animals, but offer no food sources, forcing the wildlife to ravage the neighboring farmers' fields.<sup>12</sup>

## 7. Restoring Biodiversity by Cutting Trees

Although they seldom openly acknowledge that most of the Holterberg is a biologically poor monoculture, the two institutions that manage the main part of the park are aware of the need for more "nature values" in their "forests". This is a result of a gradual change in national forestry policy by these and other forest management institutions since the 1980's.

Clear-cutting and the establishment of monoculture tree plantations of exotic species were the standard forestry practice in the Netherlands and other European countries until the early nineteen seventies. The main objective of forestry policy was an economic one, although it must be stated that monoculture plantations on sandy soils make very little sense from an economic point of view as they produce only 3 to 5 cube of timber per hectare per year, while plantations on the fertile clay soils in the west of the Netherlands produce around 10 to 15 cubes of timber per hectare per year. Staatsbosbeheer is still striving to a timber production target by cutting 60% of the annual growth. Natuurmonumenten only cuts trees for nature restoration purposes, yet provided that the trees are old enough it is an economically beneficial business.

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<sup>12</sup> See also: <http://www.foei.org/en/publications/forests/treetrouble.html>

A heavy storm that raged over Europe in 1972 created awareness about the ecological vulnerability of monocultures. In countries like France and the Netherlands, entire plantations were blown down, whereas nearby mixed "forests" were only slightly damaged by the same storm. The collapse of many of the old exotic trees also created an opportunity for young indigenous tree species to grow, which actually contributed to the biological diversity in these plantations. During the same decade, increased environmental awareness contributed to a change in policy objectives of many forest management institutions. Forestry agencies and NGOs like Staatsbosbeheer and Natuurmonumenten formally adopted new policy objectives that prioritized the so-called "nature values" of "forests" and set so-called "nature targets"(natuurdoeltypen) for the different areas.



It should be noted that the biodiversity value of these targets is questionable. The official management plan of the Holterberg of Staatsbosbeheer strives to "nature targets" like "mixed Scotch pine, oak and birch", a target that aims at a plantation of only three tree species. Of those three species, only one is truly indigenous to the area concerned; Indigenous Oak was introduced by the Romans 20 centuries ago and has since then colonized the Netherlands, the Scotch pine is indigenous to the coastal dunes, but not to inland areas like the Holterberg. Moreover, both Scotch pine and Birch are invasive species when planted near to heath areas. One of the main challenges of

the park management agencies is to keep the heath free of these invasive species. Meanwhile, a recent internal evaluation of Natuurmonumenten clearly mentions that one of the challenges is to increase "nature values" in the "older forests", which are classified as "general forests" or "dry, species-poor forests".

## 8. The need for Proper Nature Education: Plantations are Not Forests

Whereas there has been a silent acceptance by the main forestry agencies that monoculture tree plantations are far from ideal because of their lack of "nature values", the general public in the Netherlands seems hardly aware of these negative aspects of plantations. Only one Dutch NGO has been prioritizing this issue in terms of actively and publicly criticizing tree monocultures during the past decades, Stichting Kritisch Bosbeheer (Foundation Critical Forest Management). This foundation was established in 1982 by the Landelijke Werkgroep Kritisch Bosbeheer (national working group of critical forest management). The campaigns and workshops organized by the working group and foundation Kritisch Bosbeheer during the nineteen-seventies and eighties played a key role in changing the attitude of formal forestry institutions and the larger NGOs regarding plantations management.<sup>13</sup> But the campaigns were too small to reach a broad public. Now that the incorporation of "nature values" in forest policy has become standard amongst nearly all forestry institutions, even this NGO seems to have shifted its main focus to other aspects of nature management. Although many other Dutch NGOs are active in international forest policy debates, most advocacy work tends to focus on tropical forests and other forests in developing countries. Very few NGOs are involved in advocacy work regarding the environmental and social aspects of Dutch "forests" and monocultures.

Although clearly aware of the lack of biodiversity in "Dutch general forests", Natuurmonumenten does not focus on advocacy campaigns, and it does not have a clear program to communicate its new insights in biodiversity-friendly forest management to a wider Dutch public. The above-mentioned evaluation of its own forest management policy does not even mention the word "plantation" or "monoculture", it simply defines all tree-covered area as "forest". Staatsbosbeheer is not involved in advocacy work about converting tree monocultures into biologically diverse areas either.

<sup>13</sup> See: <http://www.nieuwe-wildernis.nl>

There is little public awareness about the impact of invasive and invasive exotic species either. Forestry agencies are fighting a desperate battle against invasive species like the wild cherry which is causing a tremendous negative impact on Dutch ecosystems. But general public is hardly aware of negative impact of exotic species the importance of indigenous species for biodiversity. It is generally recognized by nature conservation agencies that the reintroduction of indigenous species is essential for a proper restoration of ecosystems. Yet, despite all formal targets of restoring nature in tree-dominated



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ecosystems, the removal of exotic species that compete with indigenous species has no real priority until today, including in the park management budget. The forest management institutions themselves are concerned about the fact that removing pine will create opposition amongst the public, but paradoxically, they are not making any effort to inform the public about the ecological problems that are caused by pine plantations.

Educational efforts are limited to optimistic stories telling that some more diversity in the "forest" is a good thing. But none of the forestry institutions has ever publicly acknowledged that drastically cutting all pine in places it is not supposed to grow in the Netherlands, would be a great blessing for Dutch nature.

Visitor's guides and other public materials about the Sallandse Heuvelrug park do not give any explanation why a biodiversity-poor area like the Holterberg plantations has been demarcated as a national park. Even nowadays, large groups of schoolchildren and other visitors are led through the area on "nature walks" that try to demonstrate the "richness of the forest", whereas the most of the tree-covered area is an extremely unnatural and biodiversity-poor monoculture.

## 9. Conclusion: Forests versus Tree Plantations

The official story of the Holterberg plantations is one of an empty, useless waste land that was enriched by "reforestation". Visitors, who are coming in streams now that the area has been declared a national park in 2004, still hear the story that the Holterberg was a degraded land inhabited by nobody, before the plantations companies came. However, the area was unquestionably more valuable from a biodiversity perspective before it was "forested". While moderated through centuries of sheep farming, the resulting ecosystem, heath, contains a large number of very specific species that cannot be found in other ecosystems. For that reason, heath conservation is the number one biodiversity policy objective for the area nowadays. Transforming the pine monocultures into more diverse ecosystems like secondary forests and heath is one of the main objectives for biodiversity management in the park. However, there is still little public acknowledgement that the plantations companies and the State forestry agency destroyed most of this precious landscape with their monocultures during the last century.

There is even less public acknowledgement that the Holterberg was a relatively infertile socially valuable community land the plantations were developed, as it provided essential grazing land and heather for the "plaggen" system. bears similarity to the actual situation countries like Brazil, Paraguay, India Uganda, where plantations companies claim that they only plant empty, deserted and/or degraded lands. This practice disregards the numerous economic, social and



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environmental values of ecosystems like savannahs and cerrados, especially for pastoralist peoples and economically marginalized farming communities.

As a result of this failure to educate park visitors and the public in general about the distinction between a real forest and a monoculture tree plantation, the Dutch public tends to be totally unaware of what a forest is like. The average Dutch citizen tends to see the monoculture tree plantations that can be found all over the Netherlands as normal forests.

It could be argued that the lack of awareness about these negative impacts is one of the main reasons why Dutch Foundations like the FACE foundation (Forests Absorbing Carbon Emissions), and even the Dutch government through its support to institutions like the World Bank, regional development banks and the Food and Agricultural Organization of the UN, are still supporting plantation establishment under the disguise of "reforestation" in other countries.<sup>14</sup> In the Netherlands, investments in monoculture tree plantations in Costa Rica or Brazil are seen by many as "green investments", and timber from large-scale monocultures is sold as "sustainable" timber, certified by the Forest Stewardship Council.<sup>15</sup> The inclusion of "reforestation" and "afforestation" projects in the carbon trade schemes of the Kyoto Protocol of the Framework Convention on Climate Change has provided one more financial incentive for monoculture tree plantations, as "reforestation" and "afforestation" is defined as any kind of tree planting. Even the UN Environment Program does not bother to distinguish between native forest restoration and the planting of exotic tree plantations in its campaign to plant one billion trees.<sup>16</sup> It is remarkable how little knowledge there is amongst the general public in Northern countries about the fact that trees that are planted to compensate for carbon emissions or other purposes can actually have serious negative impacts in the areas where they are planted if they are the wrong trees and/or planted in large monocultures.

As there is no lack of concern about the impacts of deforestation and forest degradation amongst the Dutch public, it would be highly recommendable if the Government, Staatsbosbeheer and other park managers would make a clear effort to educate the public about the different values of forests and tree monocultures. This will hopefully also create the public and political support for a far more pro-active policy to restore biodiversity values in areas demarcated as national parks and help to convert them from the green deserts they are now to genuine forests and other valuable ecosystems like heath.

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<sup>14</sup> See also Lang, C. and Byakola, T., WRM, 2006 and Accion Ecologica and WRM, 2005

<sup>15</sup> See also WRM, 2003

<sup>16</sup> See: <http://www.unep.org/billiontreecampaign/>

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