

There is more and more to discover and experience in the Dutch visitors' centres

'The public has higher demands'

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Visitors' centres are weird things. Everybody knows them, but there is no single, completely describing definition for them. Therefore, nobody has a total general overview of the whole country. Many visitors of large nature areas, or visitors of large technical works, however arrive at the accompanying visitors' centre. Various organisations actually want an own visitors' centre. Visitors' centres are "in" and their number soars. The building of a well equipped, manned visitors' centre costs at least a few million guilders nowadays. Above that figure comes the exploitation costs of around 400 thousand Euros and some extra costs. Then there is something beautiful, but after that?

A visitors' centre is meant for reception of the public, for the people who visit your nature area or technical attraction. Visiting a visitors' centre is usually combined with a visit to the surroundings. In principle, it does not matter what the reason was to erect a visitors' centre. An extensive heathland, a wonderful peat moor, an amazing dam or an innovative oil refinery – as long as there are enough people who want to know more come, or those who want to experience something "exciting". Concerning those visitors, National Parks and wonderful dams could be siblings. All over the world you can find visitors' centres at those locations.

But there is one difference: at National Parks you can go in for free. The Dutch State Forestry Commission was in 1968 the first to issue an account on visitors' centres. A plan by the former Dutch Ministry of Culture, Recreation and Social Works (CRM) pointed out where those visitors' centres should be built (Policy Vision 1981) and that policy is still recognisable. The setting of tasks for the visitors' centres has changed in the meantime.

Making people aware

In the beginning, people had a high opinion on the working of the "network of visitors' centres". The aim was to create a greater awareness to the area for the (nature)visitors and also give them more awareness to "other issues". For this second aim, only ten lines of text were necessary. This meant (with some exaggeration), that you could increase standards and values among the visitors through a realisation process, which was benefited by nature and environment in the whole world. Later research revealed that this was a too big aim. This was also so because visitors stayed in a visitors' centre for only 45 minutes in those days. Nowadays, the aim is to keep the visitors for at least half a day in a visitors' centre.

During an evaluation of the visitors' centre in Dwingelerveld National Park, near Ruinen, in 1998, the research bureau advised to create an "attraction" by improving the offered products in and around the centre. Nowadays, everywhere the design and the surroundings have attractive accessories and quarters (with catering) which are aimed more and more at this goal. The walkers from outside "drop in for a cup of coffee to recover" – which is a reason why the visitors' centre Veluwezoom has enlarged its coffee corner. During the past decades, the aim of the Dutch visitors' centres has shifted from (mainly) giving knowledge (and creating "a better attitude and behaviour") to "learning to discover and experience" the surroundings and the characteristics of nature, landscape and cultural history. The nearby surroundings with the extra "curiosities" like beehives, botanical gardens, butterfly gardens or educational gardens fulfil an enlarging role.

New functions

Nowadays, visitors' centres do more than only receiving the public. They are "the entrance" to the concerned nature area. They are also the business card of the maintaining organisation. The Dutch Society for the Preservation of Nature gives its visitors' centres a clear role in the policy plan "Dutch Society for Preservation of Nature as a host". This is also true for the smaller local centres, in which some IVN-branches put in a lot of energy.

All visitors' centres have a service function. There exist manned and not-manned centres, which in any case offer practical information: Where can I find? And How do I get there?. In general, visitors' centres are free and easily accessible.

"Peripheral phenomenon"

Visitors' centres have always been viewed as a way to give shape to a zone. The major pressure has to stay outside the nature area. However, some centres are located at a place where this goal is missed. In some places, visitors' centres are located at a bit "clumsy" location. This is often caused in the past.

Base of operations

In the visitors' centre at the Sallandse Heuvelrug you can see new views being implemented. It is located next to a hotel-restaurant, with which co-operation is being sought. The existing parking area has been enlarged, creating a kind of Park & Ride. A small train of the Dutch State Forestry Commission brings visitors a bit further on the trail during peak season. The choice of the location of the new visitors' centre of Drents-Fries Wold National Park, at NAC near Terwisscha/Appelscha, is partially based on traffic possibilities. If you expect more than 100.000 visitors a year, you can't have just a dirt road and a field for parking. In preparing for such an expensive millions of guilders costing project, the province, municipality, local businesses, Tourist Information Offices and local inhabitants should be included from the start.

An "awkwardly situated" visitors' centre can complicate matters. Older visitors' centres which have a front door "at the back" should consider changing their interior to improve the entry for the public. In the memorandum on recreation policy, the Dutch Society for the Preservation of Nature, views its visitors' centres as a "base of operations" for recreational activities.

Growing sector

Visitors' centres do not disappear. However, newly built centres do appear: modern visitors' centres and infocentres with often curious architecture. Private businesses rename their nature museum a visitors' centre.

In three National Parks in North-eastern Netherlands, professional meetings have been held since 1996 which have been organised for managers and co-ordinators of nature visitors' centres and infocentres, large and small, manned or not manned. Before those meetings, a small research was held among 17 centres. This research showed that there is an increase in the number of visitors everywhere.

The largest centres (manned, open all year, many activities) attract about 100.000 visitors, and the public record until now is 120.000 visitors at the visitors' centre of Dwingelderveld. The middle group (not open all year) varies between 20000 and 60000 visitors, and the unmanned, smaller visitors' centres get around 6000 to 10000 visitors each year. These figures should be taken under reservation. These figures contain corrected counts at the larger centres and rough estimates at unmanned centres by counting people at the door.

The expected growth is based on those local factors, in which the risen attraction value of the centres score high, e.g. due to better access to the area. The average national visit to large nature areas (in percentages of the population), has been stable the last years and actually does not show this remarkable growth.

Public with high demands

A visitors' centre has to have something to offer if it wants to fulfil the current demands. This is because the demands by the public are growing.

Small things which were accepted in the past, are not accepted anymore. An old calendar, a badly marked route, illumination which does not work, presentations or projections with faults, press buttons which are stuck and runaway interactive computers cause the visitors to be cross, bad-tempered and unsatisfied. "You then get a lot of moaning at the desk", said an insider behind such a desk. It also has to be clean. Surveys showed that the public observes the bathrooms and the coffee corner critically. Outside, the surrounding area, including the parking lot are assessed on garbage. Although unwanted, once in a while something breaks, according to a survey among the north-eastern centres. Remarkable was the agreement under the managers on the faulty lighting. Within two or three months, dozens of halogen spotlights and other lamps go out, which cost quite some money. Press buttons, games on CD-ROM, "everything with tapes", head phones and projectors breakdown most often. Although vandalism and destruction is not a major problem in north-eastern Netherlands (except for one infocentre, near a lot of catering establishments) everything must be arranged so it is protected from bad-mannered people.

Activities

Near the larger centres, a whole package of educational activities are offered. For both large organised group (e.g. schools) and for families with (grand)parents and children, there are things to offer. A number of centres get requests for birthday parties, but they don't advertise this. Research has shown that all activities are appreciated, followed by "do-things" in and around the visitors' centres. Game forests and boating excursions are among them. A good (short) audio-visual show is still appreciated, as well as the possible cultural historic elements. The peat cutters home, the duck decoy house, and for example, the water- or windmill, and the building itself (if it is exceptional) are all well praised by the public. Employees notice an increasing demand for cultural historic elements which refer to the taking shape and former use of the area.

More beautiful and quick service

In the 21st century a visitors' centre near a nature area also does not escape from the demand for more, nicer and quicker. In the guest books, remarks from vacationers like "Nothing new this year" and "I already knew that route" can be found. In the past, a fixed exposition in a centre would stay there for ten years.

This period has been brought back to about seven years. It seems that a fixed exposition can not stay longer than five years in future, and above that has to take up less space than in the past. Changing expositions and up to date information are of greater demand. To fulfil the demand for more, nicer and quicker, more screens and computers must be placed in the centres. In that way it is better and quicker to give up to date and complete information and thereby meeting the demands of the more and more demanding public. With those screens and computers it is also possible to have an on-line connection to a main centre which sends information to branches or connection points, wherever they may be in the surrounding area, e.g. infocentres, Tourist Information Offices, city halls, libraries, hotels, campgrounds – everything is possible. An arising development is the use of the Internet as a source of information. Within a number of years, a lot of paper information will be replaced by electronic information. These are accessible at home or can be printed at the desk. At this moment some people, which have already gathered information at home, come to the desk. Their questions are "to the point" and the visitors' centre is supplementary, both concerning the experience and the service. This experience, as a taste of what's in store, and as a preparation to the visit to the nature outside, a modern visitors' centre is becoming very important. In shaping new centres which are being built, communication specialists and scenario writers are being involved quite often.

This question in the beginning was: "What do you want to do with visitors' centres?" The many functions, the possibilities and the developments have been viewed. The last part of the answer has to be added. We want the visitors' centres to be up to date.