

## Verifier's Report to the Evaluation Committee

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**Name of protected area:** Nationaal Park De Biesbosch

**Name of verifier:** Marja van Loef

**Date of submission of application by protected area:** 07/12/2011

**Date of verification visit:** 13-14 March 2012

**Date of completion of this report:** 20/04/2012

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### NOTES FOR THE VERIFIER

Where  is shown, verifiers are asked to indicate a score, using the following system:

- X Not relevant
- 0 Not happening
- 1 Weak – little action
- 2 Moderate – action happening in this area, sufficient at present
- 3 Good – significant action, totally satisfactory

A star \* may be added to a “3” score to indicate an excellent example of best practice (3\*).

Verifiers are asked to comment on individual questions to provide further information or explanation, keeping their answers concise. In particular, the reasons for any score under 2 should be briefly explained, highlighting any particular causes for concern.

The reasons for any score of \* awarded should also be explained: what makes this an example of best practice? The star should be used sparingly, and only for outstanding initiatives or actions which can serve as models at the European level.

The format for this verifier's report is linked closely to that of the Application Report completed by the protected area. You should have received the Application Report in electronic format. You may copy information from the Application Report into this report to support particular answers where this is helpful.

**If you do this, we would ask you to indicate very clearly (e.g. by use of a different typeface, highlighting, etc.) the text which has been copied from the Application Report.**

Your own observations relating to the information provided by the protected area and gained on site are, of course, particularly important – the Committee will have the full Application Report available to refer to as necessary.

Please attach a list of any documents received from the protected area or presented during the visit which were not included in the original application.

## Programme of visit, key sites and partners visited:

### List of Acronyms

SBB = Staatsbosbeheer (Dutch Forestry Commission)

IVN = Instituut voor Natuur en Milieu Educatie (Institute for Nature and Environmental Education)

VVV = Vereniging voor Vreemdelingen Verkeer (Tourist Board)

SAP = Strategy and Action Plan

### Tuesday 13th March 2012

08:30 – Pick up from Hotel De Watertoren by Dick Verheijen

**Morning:** Location: Biesboschcentrum Dordrecht

09:00. Meeting Dick Verheijen, Director Parkschap National Park de Biesbosch en Mascha Brouwer, Manager District Staatsbosbeheer Biesbosch (Forestry Commission) to discuss Charter Principles

10:45. Tour “BeverBos”, educational walk with Pieter van Rijsbergen, a Biesbosch guide, to see the beaver project

11:30. Meeting in the Biesboschcentrum “Biestro” with Daniël Kardinaal, Proprietor Restaurant De Merwelanden and Marco Verdouw, Manager Stayokay Dordrecht

12:30. Lunch ‘Biestro’ in Biesboschcentrum

**Afternoon:** Location: Drimmelen, Rondvaartbedrijf Zilvermeeuw (Boat Tour Company)

14:00. Meeting with Entrepreneurs Adriaan Schuller, Director Rondvaartbedrijf Zilvermeeuw Tijmen van der Wal, Biesbosch Natuurlijk Doen (Events Company)

Sandra Verstegen, Brabant aan de Biesbosch, (Biesbosch Business Network)

16:00. Back to Hotel. Dinner in Hotel

### Wednesday 14 March

**Morning:** Location: Biesbosch Museum Werkendam

08:30. Meeting with Proprietor Hotel de Watertoren

09:15. Pick up Hotel De Watertoren

10:00. Boat trip on the “Whisper” (covered electric boat). Talks and meeting with 15 Stakeholders (see interies list: Appendix 2).

12:00. Visit Biesbosch Museum and the Display “Ruimte voor de Rivier” (Space for the River)

**Afternoon:** Lunch en route to the Sliedrechtse Biesbosch. Location: Sliedrechtse Biesbosch

14:00. Biesboschcentrum Dordrecht by boat; meeting with Jacques van der Neut and Niek van Bedaf

14:30. Visit “Stenen Keet”, Frans Bax and Rien Stremler

15:00. Sail to Katsegat

16:00. Cycling around the lake

17:00. Met up with Director Dick Verheijen and Marianne den Braven to evaluate the visit.

## Overall Impressions

De Biesbosch is a beautiful and unique protected wetland area in the south-west of the Netherlands. The area lies on the edge of the “Randstad” (an agglomeration of cities) and is mainly a landscape shaped by humans. Central to the history of the area is the fight against, and working with, the water coming from the rivers Rhine and Meuse and the North Sea. A challenging project of global interest has recently started in the Biesbosch. The aim is to protect the heavily-populated areas around the Biesbosch by managed flooding in the area. This fascinating process can be viewed in the visitor centre.

The area is characterised by high-quality nature, a flat landscape with marshes and woodland and three freshwater reservoirs. Big and smaller water courses run through the area creating a natural zoning. The Biesbosch comprises three main parts (the Dordtse-, Sliedrechtse and Brabantse Biesbosch) and locally there are many isolated zones that sometimes are only accessible by water.

The Biesbosch was given the status of National Park in 1994 for its exceptional ecological values. Nowadays, the area serves as an important tourism and recreational hotspot, evidenced by the approx. 1.5 million visitors each year. Parkschap Nationaal Park De Biesbosch is responsible for the development of the National park De Biesbosch in the field of nature, recreation and tourism. It has good transport links to the Randstad from the north of the area however, to the east and south public transport is more difficult. To the west is mainly water but from the Biesbosch it is possible to travel to several places, including Rotterdam, by boat.

## Comments on the application from the protected area and evaluation visit:

The application report, submitted in December 2011, was comprehensive and ran to 18 pages. It was written with a strategic approach and is based on the Sustainable Tourism Strategy and Action plan (SAP) which an external consultancy, Bureau Buiten, was asked to undertake in 2010. Meetings with stakeholders were organised about the actions in the SAP and was approved by the Forum and the Park Board in May 2011. The Park Board gave permission to finalise it for the application of the Charter.

The stakeholders experience the Charter as a vehicle to create a sustainable future for the Biesbosch. They found the process towards the application very valuable, and feel it will support them in formulating aims for the future by working closer together. There is still work to be done, in particular further strengthening of the partnership within the Parkschap and finding more funding opportunities.

The verification visit was organised by Marianne den Braven, manager of the visitor centre of the Biesbosch. I would like to thank her and the team for the very interesting programme which enabled me to talk to a total of 25 key players involved in the Charter application process. “Speed dating” 15 key players on the boat trip around the Biesbosch was one of the highlights and gave valuable insights in what is happening within the tourism industry in the Biesbosch! Even the local television was interested in the verification visit and a short [video clip](#) was made.

## Verifier’s assessment

### **Overall comment on the sustainable tourism strategy and action of the protected area and how it relates to the European Charter:**

The Sustainable Tourism and Action plan (SAP) was produced by the external consultancy company Bureau Buiten, May 2011. The SAP comprises not only the National Park but also

its surrounding area which covers approx. 400 square kilometres; several smaller cities and villages. The SAP presents the main challenges and opportunities for sustainable tourism in the Biesbosch; it reflects the aims of the stakeholders and addresses the activities they are planning to implement in the next 5 years.

#### **Main strengths:**

- a unique protected wetland area in the south-west of the Netherlands combining nature and water
- zoning small and/or fast boats and zoning principles for recreational use
- facilities for electric boats and canoeing
- excellent communication and information facilities/publications
- many offers of excursions on land and water
- attractive quiet areas and sailing areas
- working on the STEP (Sustainable Tourism in Estuary Parks) project
- sustainable behaviour is encouraged
- implementation of renewables e.g. electric boats, programme flooding the area and innovative ideas

#### **Main weaknesses:**

- the Forum is still in its exploration phase and needs to be established
- mediocre offer from hospitality businesses
- limited corporate co-operation between local governments
- unclear and weak tourism image despite the many publications
- dispersed marketing and promotion, lack of joint management
- no unity in the Biesbosch region in keeping rules for misconduct in watersport and on land
- accessibility from the south; lacking ferry connections
- limited offer of luxury or nature orientated accommodation and packages (on land)

#### **Conclusions and recommendations for the protected area:**

1. Establish clarity about the Forum as the current structure is complex and not clear. It might be good to have an overview of who is who in the Forum - and what their tasks are for the coming years.
2. Although efforts are being made to strengthen the stakeholder partnership, consider ways of informal 'get togethers' (e.g. the 'speed-dating' on the boat, or a BBQ) as well as holding a yearly conference for all stakeholders involved. In that way, they will feel involved in the Charter process. Regular updates on the actions in the SAP will motivate and will show progress.
3. The collaboration project with the design students - the Eco-Boat- is very innovative. This project can create future opportunities to develop accommodation on water. Also, the Biesbosch has electric boats and is developing an even more effective electric infrastructure. This is an area which is new and very exciting, therefore attracting new and innovative and sustainable entrepreneurs could make the area an example of excellent innovation.
4. Building on this, it could then market to a luxury/nature oriented visitor market, develop joint accommodation and activity packages and develop joint sustainable tourism products. This in turn will help establishing joint marketing and PR opportunities.

5. A key part of the Charter is the training of green certified tourism businesses. The Green Key is an expensive scheme to join, and many small businesses will be left out if they can't be subsidised. Perhaps funding can be found to carry on the funding after 2013.
6. Development of accessibility from the south offers opportunity to widen the market by opening up to Brabant and Belgium. This is a vast area to be explored and to engage with.

**Recommendation on award of the Charter:**

***Please check one box***

**I recommend that the protected area receive the award of the Charter.**

**I do not recommend that the protected area receive the award of the Charter.**

*In order to put a cross in the relevant box, please double click on the box you want to mark. A dialogue box "Check Box Form Field Option" should open. Click under "Default Value" where it says "Checked", then OK, and the proper box should have a cross in it.*

## General information about the protected area – Section A of Application Report

- I. **Has full and clear factual information been supplied by the protected area in answer to sections A1 – A14 of the Application Report framework?** **2**

Yes comprehensive and informative answers.

- II. **Additional/amended information not contained in protected area’s application:**

I was provided with printed and e-versions of the Charter Application and the strategy and action plan. I collected additional tourism promotional and National Park’s project literature. One more document and a link to the video clip, was sent after the visit.

- III. **Any information not available, and reasons for this:**

None as far as I am aware.

- IV. **Are you satisfied that the information supplied is accurate?** **2**

Yes.

- V. **Are there any factual issues that might affect the eligibility of the protected area for award of the Charter?**

None as far as I am aware.

## Meeting the Charter principles - Section B of Application Report

*Note: Areas in **grey shading** indicate particularly important points which are critical for successful evaluation. They correspond to the shaded areas in the Application Report. NEVER type within the shaded area, except the score, please.*

### Principle 1 – Partnership with local tourism stakeholders

- 1.1 **Has a forum or other partnership structure been established to enable the protected-area authority to work with others on the development and management of tourism, including implementation and review of the strategy?**

**2**

Yes.

**Briefly describe this structure, including size and membership, frequency of meetings, etc.:**

There is a fairly complex Forum structure in place, operating within the Parkschap Board who meet 6 times a year to discuss tourism issues. The Parkschap also has annual meetings with the Biesbosch Network of Tourism Businesses and publishes a bimonthly newsletter. It took me a while to understand the complexity of this evolving partnership, as it involves many stakeholders and issues. For example: there are the

physical borders; 2 big rivers with lots of traffic that complicate easy and fast travel between different parts of the Biesbosch; many administrative borders - the region is situated on the domain of 7 municipalities and 2 provinces. All have their own visions, policies and stakeholder groups. During my visit I asked them to explain and clarify the organisation structure which made it easier to comprehend. The organisation structure table can be found in the SAP.

The Users' Forum and more or less also the Business Network is an advisory body to The Parkschap Authority. In the Forum 20 members represent a lot of local stakeholder groups and in the network more than 70 businesses are represented. Great efforts are made to achieve consensus with these groups although this is not always possible. But these groups are definitely good mechanisms for identifying and reducing any conflicts.

The Forum is in particular active in the winter season as this is the least busy time for tourism businesses. The Forum also comes together at conferences, recently the STEP (Sustainable Tourism in Estuary Parks) conference held in the Biesbosch and at Green Key and Guest Host training sessions. As a result of the established Forum, a good start has been made in developing the joint vision on tourism: in 2008 ("Ondergedompeld in de Biesbosch"), the merging of the two management authorities and by developing the SAP for the Charter.

## 1.2 Are local tourism enterprises involved? **2**

Yes. A business network is active in the Biesbosch area. Within this network all tourist plans of the Parkschap are discussed. The Parkschap meets this network at least twice a year. The National Park is active in rolling out the Biesbosch Host and the Green Key- programmes; 35 Tourism Businesses have become a Biesbosch Host and 7 businesses have been awarded the Green Key.

## 1.3 Is the local community involved? **2**

Yes. Local communities and companies are involved in the planning of tourism in different ways:

- The aldermen of local municipalities are members of the board of the Parkschap. These aldermen are chosen by the local inhabitants and they have to explain their decisions in the board to the local councils.
- The Parkschap has a users' Forum with participants from local organisations; this forum has to approve the tourist plans of the Parkschap. The Parkschap meets this Forum at least 2 times a year.
- When the Parkschap makes new tourist plans, draft versions are discussed with the local communities on special consultation events.
- There is a general e-mailadress, [info@biesbosch.org](mailto:info@biesbosch.org), where people can make complaints if they feel the need to. Every complaint is taken seriously and an answer on actions taken is given.

## 1.4 Are local conservation interests involved? **2**

Yes.

Two local conservation organisations are represented in the Forum which meets with the Park Board twice a year.

**1.5 Are the wider (regional) bodies responsible for tourism, conservation and regional development involved? 0**

No. No representation in working groups or Users' forum. However, there are frequent contacts in meetings and seminars, and in working together on projects those contacts are intensified. There is also frequent contact with the Regional Tourist Boards, nature conservation and nature research organisations.

**1.6 Are other partners involved, such as volunteers? 3**

Yes. Volunteers are trained by the 'Staatsbosbeheer' (SBB). Approx. 600 trips a year have been undertaken by guides who obtain the IVN diploma (Instituut voor Natuurbescherming). As a result between 12,000-30,000 school children have the opportunity to get acquainted with De Biesbosch Nationaal Park every year.

## Principle 2 – Sustainable tourism strategy and action plans

### Preparation

**2.1 Have a tourism strategy and action plan been prepared for the protected area?**

Yes, by independent consultants.

**2.2 Briefly describe the process(es) and timetable(s) for preparing both the strategy and action plan.**

The management plan (BIP) which is the basis for all actions and plans made for the Biesbosch, was made in 2004, after a long process of meetings and discussions with stakeholders, then mainly nature conservation and recreational organisations.

In 2008 a management plan for tourism and recreation in the Biesbosch was made. In this plan the Biesbosch was mentioned as a pilot area for sustainable tourism development. The plan was made by an external consultancy, based on discussions and meetings with all stakeholders in the Biesbosch. Two workshops were organised in 2008: one about land based tourism, the other about water based tourism. For these workshops a broad range of stakeholders were invited: nature and conservation organisations, boating companies and other tourist businesses, water recreationists, local inhabitants, local government and civil servants dealing with tourism. The plan contained 17 proposals for actions concerning development of sustainable tourism in the region. In 2009 all partners in the park agreed to carry out these 17 actions and the local and provincial governments involved provided the budget for the plan. Some actions important here are: to find external funding for sustainable tourism development, to establish a Park Authority to replace the existing Recreation Boards in the Biesbosch and to seek active co-operation with tourist businesses to develop sustainable tourism.

In 2009 De Biesbosch, together with an English and a Flemish partner, started the STEP project: Sustainable Tourism in Estuary Parks. This project is an Interreg IV A 2 Seas programme. In STEP further actions are taken to develop sustainable tourism. STEP will be finished in 2013.

Also in 2009 preparations started to form 1 Park Board for the whole Biesbosch. This Board was established on January 1, 2011. This Board made a future vision, a summary of which is incorporated in the Strategy and Action Plan.

In all these developments the Park Board is seeking co-operation with stakeholders in tourism and recreation.

To put all the different actions together, an external consultancy, Bureau Buiten, was asked in 2010 to make a Strategy and Action Plan (SAP) based on all plans and actions being taken as described above.

Bureau Buiten had interviews with several stakeholders (see SAP p 45-46).

Also 2 meetings were organised to discuss the SAP with tourist businesses in general. On February 24, 2011 53 businesses were present, on April 18, 2011, 23 businesses were present. The SAP was approved by the Users' Forum May 24, 2011.

Further meetings with stakeholders were organised in 2011 about concretising different actions in the SAP:

- With the businesses which are Biesbosch-hosts April 21, 2011 (15 hosts present), 2011;
- During a STEP excursion on best practices June 15 – 17, 2011 (4 Biesbosch businesses were invited to participate in this 3 days excursion);
- With Green Key candidates September 26, 2011 (6 businesses present);
- During the annual Brabant aan de Biesbosch meeting November 3, 2011;
- In a workshop about sustainable tourism in the Broads, November 8, 2011.

The Park Board approved the draft Strategy and Action Plan May 30, 2011, and gave permission to finalise it for the application of the European Charter November 11, 2011.

### **2.3 How does the tourism strategy relate to the protected-area management plan?**

See 2.2

### **2.4 Are there any apparent contradictions between tourism and protected-area management objectives and actions?**

None that I know of.

### ***Consultation process***

### **2.5 Comment on the involvement of local stakeholders in drawing up the strategy and action plan, making reference to the forum/partnership structures described under Question 1.1 as appropriate.**

The Parkschap Board meet 6 times a year to discuss tourism issues. The Parkschap has also annual meetings with the Biesbosch Network of Tourism Businesses and publishes a bimonthly newsletter.

### **2.6 Was there consultation with local tourism enterprises in preparing the strategy?**

Yes.

Two meetings were organised to discuss the SAP with tourist businesses in general. On February 24, 2011 53 businesses were present, on April 18, 2011, 23 businesses were present. The SAP was approved by the Users' Forum May 24, 2011.

Further meetings with stakeholders were organised in 2011 about concretising different actions in the SAP:

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- With Green Key candidates September 26, 2011 (6 businesses present);
- During the annual Brabant aan de Biesbosch meeting November 3, 2011;
- In a workshop about sustainable tourism in the Broads, November 8, 2011.

## **2.7 Was there consultation with the local community and other interests/ stakeholders in preparing the strategy? 2**

Yes.

In 2008 a management plan for tourism and recreation in the Biesbosch was made. In this plan the Biesbosch was mentioned as a pilot area for sustainable tourism development. The plan was made by an external consultancy, based on discussions and meetings with all stakeholders in the Biesbosch. Two workshops were organised in 2008: one about land based tourism, the other about water based tourism. For these workshops a broad range of stakeholders were invited: nature and conservation organisations, boating companies and other tourist businesses, water recreationists, local inhabitants, local government and civil servants dealing with tourism. The plan contained 17 proposals for actions concerning development of sustainable tourism in the region. In 2009 all partners in the park agreed to carry out these 17 actions and the local and provincial governments involved provided the budget for the plan.

### ***Assessment of resource needs, constraints and opportunities***

## **2.8 Was there an assessment of the natural and cultural resources, their sensitivities (capacity) and opportunities for tourism? 3**

Yes.

The Biesbosch is a wetland of national and international significance. The natural and cultural resources and the sensitivities for tourism are assessed in the report 'Beheer en Inrichtingsplan' (BIP), made in 2004. The opportunities and capacity for tourism are also described in the report 'Ondergedompeld in de Biesbosch, beleidsplan recreatie en toerisme voor de Biesbosch regio' (2008).

For example the search of an authentic experience in the area offers opportunities however, at the same time they feel the need to do this sustainably.

In both reports detailed information is given about the habitat, flora and fauna, about

the cultural heritage of the area and about opportunities for tourism in the future. These reports also form the basis for the visitor management for the Biesbosch and surrounding areas.

**2.9 Was there an assessment of needs of the local community and economy? 3**

Yes.

Both reports mentioned in 2.8 were made in close co-operation with all stakeholders in the area, like entrepreneurs, local governments, cultural organisations and local nature conservation groups. They all gave a lot of input and information for these reports and gave green light to the final versions. In addition recently a study on the economical importance of the national park was published, called 'De toeristisch-recreatieve sector in de Biesbosch-regio'. In this report the economic impact is analysed in detail by bringing together different studies in the area. In all studies mentioned here, the local communities and businesses were highly involved....

**2.10 Was there an assessment of strengths/weaknesses of tourism infrastructure/services? 3**

Yes. A SWOT-analysis of the tourism infrastructure and services was made in the report 'Ondergedompeld in de Biesbosch and led to a new vision and an action plan as described in the SAP.

*Assessment of existing visitors and their needs (B6)*

**2.11 Was there an assessment of existing visitor patterns and needs? 3**

Yes.

In the study 'Biesbosch-entrees; functies, faciliteiten & duurzaamheid' visitor behaviour and needs were further analysed in regard to recreational gateways. In addition there are up to date figures about the volume and value of tourism in the Biesbosch (in the report 'De Toeristisch-recreatieve sector in de Biesbosch'). Visitor patterns and needs are also described in the report 'Ondergedompeld in de Biesbosch'.

For example they identified what type of visitors there are and what their needs are; such as canoeing or walking. They have divided these groups of visitors into categories, location and what the leisure/recreation opportunities are for these groups.

*Identification of future visitor markets*

**2.12 Was there an assessment to identify future visitor markets offering potential? 3**

Yes. The future visitor markets are also assessed in the report "Ondergedompeld in de Biesbosch". This is integrated in the SAP.

## Implementation

### 2.13 Does the action plan include an indication of phasing/staging of action over time? **3**

Yes. A comprehensive full phasing of actions is given in both reports as described above. The actions vary from High-Medium-Low and the main actions are:

- 1.Unique Biesbosch experience
- 2.Encouraging awareness of Biesbosch qualities
- 3.Improve visitors facilities and services and stimulate new facilities and events
- 4.Encouraging to conserve and enhance the environment and engage in visitor management
- 5.Branding of the Biesbosch region

### 2.14 Does the action plan indicate which stakeholders or partners are responsible for the delivery of each action? **3**

Yes. The Parkschap will implement most actions. However, in some cases other organisations such as the Staatsbosbeheer, IVN or a municipality are directly involved. For example, the Parkschap will implement the action of interesting Entrepreneurs in becoming holders of the Green Key between 2011-2012.

We conclude that the touristic and recreational potentials of the Biesbosch are not being fully utilised at the moment. This means that there are opportunities for improvement of tourism and recreation facilities and services in the near future, of which the ecological and cultural-historic meaning will benefit. The involved organisations are aware of this and work hard to seize these chances. This is reflected by the high grades tourists have given the area and the joint development of the Biesbosch-newspaper and Biesbosch tourist guide. Organisations now want to proceed down the path they have taken so far.

### 2.15 What is the size of the budget that the protected-area authority is devoting to the implementation of the action plan per year, excluding staffing costs?

This is very difficult to estimate as in our situation there are different organisations and local authorities involved, all with their own activities, priorities and budgets. The budget of the Parkschap National Park De Biesbosch, to implement the actions, is about 500.000 Euros per year excluding staffing costs. This depends on the actions to be included, as part of the action plan, and is therefore an estimate.

In future, national parks in the Netherlands will have to be less dependent on Government subsidies and have to be innovative and creative in their way of financing projects. The Parkschap is interested in developing new ways/ideas of measuring wellbeing into the “happiness factor”.

### What is this as a percentage of its total budget?

Approx 15%.

Total Annual budget = 3,500,000 Euros (approx.)

**2.16 Have funds been provided (or are they being sought) from other sources?**

Yes. At this moment the Parkschap has extra funding from the European Interreg IV A2 Seas programme, from the municipalities around De Biesbosch and from both provinces. In addition De Parkschap is working to set up a Regional Fund to provide a source in the future as part of the action plan.

**2.17 Does the level of funding seem reasonable to deliver the proposed action plan?**

**2**

Yes. The Parkschap has enough funding to meet the actions proposed in 2012 and 2013, but not for the actions planned in the period afterwards. As mentioned in 2.16 the Parkschap is trying to set up new funds to raise extra money and remains positive in that a strong partnership will be also be successful in combining funds in the future.

**2.18 Describe the staffing that the protected-area authority is devoting to the implementation of the action plan?**

Various authorities are responsible for the implementation of the action plan, there are various people involved. On the strategy level, there are 3 persons involved within the Parkschap, but also 1 person within Staatsbosbeheer (the managing authority for nature and landscape), 1 within the Province of Noord-Brabant and 1 within IVN (the educational authority). On managing, information and education level there are 25 persons working for the Parkschap and 13 persons within Staatsbosbeheer.

**2.19 Is staffing being provided from other sources?**

No.

**2.20 Do you believe the action proposed can be implemented with this level of staffing?** **2**

Yes.

***Commitment of partners***

**2.21 Have any formal arrangements been made with partners (such as a legal agreement, a memorandum of understanding or a letter of commitment) for implementation of the strategy and action plan?** **2**

All stakeholders approved the sustainable tourism strategy consequently the Park Board approved the draft SAP May 30, 2011, and gave permission to finalise it for the application of the European Charter November 11, 2011.

**2.22 Does the protected area have any other formal arrangements with partners for implementation of the strategy and action plan or other methods for ensuring their commitment?** **2**

Yes.

With Staatsbosbeheer, local and provincial authorities formal arrangements have been made. Also with the Users' Forum appointments has been made to realise the actions in the strategy plan. In addition, a lot of local tourist entrepreneurs are

involved in different actions, e.g. Green Key, Hosts' Program, Business Network, Marketing and Promotion.

### **Monitoring results**

#### **2.23 Have sufficient indicators been identified for the monitoring of the success of the strategy/action plan and can these be practically measured? 2**

Yes. The monitoring paragraph in the SAP gives an extensive overview of Action, Outputs and Effects, p.38-43. The financial administrator will monitor the action plan.

### **Addressing key issues**

Specific action that the Charter looks for in the action plan, Principles 3 to 10  
*Indicate below the level of current activity (A) and planned activity (B).*

### **Principle 3 – Protecting natural and cultural heritage**

#### **3.1 Monitoring impact on flora and fauna and controlling tourism in sensitive locations A 2 B 3**

I was privileged to see this in action and would like to mention it here. I was taken by a Ranger to view the newly introduced beavers in a controlled and managed environment. The beavers are monitored on a daily basis and the project has been so successful that they are now introduced in other protected areas in Holland. The visitor can view the beavers in their environment (which is fenced off) but they are not allowed into the wild meadow areas adjacent to the project as this is to be left untouched.

Monitoring flora and fauna is part of the regular management and data are available since the start of the National Park in the early nineties of the last century. Every decade a renewed Beheer- en Inrichtings Plan (BIP) is made with the most recent data about flora, fauna and habitats. In 2014 a new BIP management plan will be made within the recent guidelines of a Natura 2000 management plan. Within each BIP also the effects of tourism on nature and landscape are monitored and when necessary additional measures are taken in terms of zoning.

Also in the tourism policy plan 'Ondergedompeld in de Biesbosch' the principles of zoning tourism activities are clearly explained and worked out in geographic schemes. These schemes form the basis for visitor management in the Biesbosch, the locations to attract visitors to and the areas to avoid. Also to control navigation in sensitive locations a zoning plan is made with special areas to attract yachting and areas where navigation is forbidden or only allowed for canoes or electric boats (Watersport gebruikersonderzoek, 2009, and Groen varen in de Biesbosch, BWZ Ingenieurs Dynautique, 2011).

**3.2 Encouraging activities, including tourism uses, which support the maintenance of historic heritage, culture and traditions A 2 B 3**



Marianne den Braven with two volunteers at the Griendhouse

The picture above illustrates an example of preserving heritage and passing on its traditions to the visitor. The house was once lived in by willow workers and has been kept as it was. The willow is still used for traditional willow weaving and other crafts as well being exported to countries abroad.

An extensive programme with special excursions and day-trips to historic objects is geared up to enhance interest for these issues. Also in all regular boat trips and excursions attendance is given to cultural heritage and traditions.

Conservation of cultural heritage is a regular part of the management of the National Park. In new projects like gps-trails and electronic information on location the maintenance of these objects will be an important aspect.

**3.3 Action to control development (including tourism) which would adversely affect the quality of landscapes, air and water; use non-renewable energy; and create unnecessary waste and noise A 2 B 2**

Developments which could harm the quality of the landscapes are avoided by special laws and rules in spatial planning, by implementing Natura 2000 guidelines and by the obligation to make an Environmental Effect Report for each plan or project that could have negative effects on nature and environment.

**3.4 Action to reduce tourism activities which adversely affect the quality of landscapes, air and water; use non-renewable energy; and create unnecessary waste and noise A 2 B 3**

Actions to reduce the impacts of tourism and to improve the quantity and quality of nature and environment are:

- Stimulating actions on electric navigation;
- Visitor management including zoning of tourism (special areas for canoeing and closing those waterway for motor boats);
- Expanding the area of the National Park by nature development projects of changing farmland into nature;
- Helping entrepreneurs with greening their business (Green Key project);
- Stimulating sustainable transport (public transport, the use of bicycles) by paying for car parks and closing roads for cars;
- Promoting sustainable tourist products and services;
- Use of electric and solar powered ferries;
- Re-use of waste products (willow branches).

**3.5 Encouraging visitors and the tourism industry to contribute to conservation (e.g. “visitor payback” schemes) A 0 B 1**

This concept has not been developed as such but there is great interest in the idea.

Until this year this was hardly an issue in The Netherlands, as financing nature management was a public task and entrance fees were not expected. Now times are changing and the management of national parks will become more and more a task of the NP Authority and local and provincial governments. At this moment the Parkschap is busy to create a Regional Fund in which businesses in the area around the Biesbosch can participate. Also sponsoring by big companies will become an option. A third possibility will be the creation of a visitor payback scheme. Such a scheme is not in preparation at this moment, but there are plans for it. The Parkschap started a survey of how to let visitors coming by car pay a certain fee when they park their car near the entrance of the National park ('nature contribution')

## Principle 4 – Meeting visitor needs/quality of experience

### 4.1 Surveys to measure visitor satisfaction A 2 B 2

There is a variety of surveys, see below, and the start up of monitoring system regarding number of visitors, their activities and impact. The first overall measurements will be available in 2012.

- Waterrecreatie-onderzoek, NHTV (2004/2005)
- Verslag van het recreatieonderzoek in de Biesbosch, NRIT (2009)
- Watersport gebruikersonderzoek, Projectbureau Volijks (2009)
- Monitor Toerisme Land van Heusden en Altena, Gemeente Oosterhout (2009)
- Onderzoeksrapport Biesbosch-entrees; functies, faciliteiten & duurzaamheid (2010)
- Belevingsonderzoek NHTV (yet to be finished, 2012)

### 4.2 Identification of future visitor markets and their needs A 2 B 2

There has been a thorough assessment made which is published in the report 'Ondergedompeld in de Biesbosch'(Chapter 3.4). However, for the purpose of this report a special mention goes to the following market segments:

**Children.** Various organisations in the Biesbosch region are responsible for the development of (even) more products focused on nature education and experiences for children. This is not an easy task given the competition with other leisure activities. In addition children ask for a special and contemporary approach.

**Disabled persons.** The aging of the population leads to a growing group of disabled visitors. For them spending time in nature is also a pleasant leisure activity. Extra facilities aimed at this group will be realised at various sites, such as surfaced hiking trails or a car accessible view point, birding location or fishing dock.



**Dutch visitors of foreign origin.** A high percentage of the inhabitants of Dordrecht and the southern part of the Randstad are of foreign (non western) origin and show different preferences for outdoor recreation. Their main activities correspond to the recreational motive of spending time together.

**Others.** There is a rising interest in horse riding and carriage driving. On the Island of Dordrecht the current situation is not ideal, as activities are not concentrated and there are hardly any riding routes. In the development plans of the nature and recreation are Nieuwe Dordtse Biesbosch a concentration of riding schools and an infrastructure with more riding routes are envisaged.

There is also growth of visitors via recreational gateways 20%.

#### **4.3 Specific provision of facilities and information for disabled people A 3 B 3**

All recreational gateways have standard facilities for disabled people like special parking places, toilets and a wheelchair available. Near the Biesbosch Museum a path for blind people is set out, and also a path for people in wheelchairs. Near the Dordrecht visitor centre there is a path for wheelchairs too. Also in Dordrecht people can borrow an 'off-the-road-wheelchair', for which a special route has been set out.

Most boats on which trips are organised have facilities for disabled passengers. In Dordrecht a special small, open boat which is wheelchair accessible is being built for families to go out by themselves. The driver can be someone in a wheelchair, as well as 3 other passengers on the boat (total 8). All information is available on the website.

The Park organises special courses for mentally retarded people. When they have finished the course they can become member of the 'Nature club'. They have special excursions once a month.

Maintenance in the park is done by a special workforce, which employs people who otherwise would not be able to participate in regular work.

#### **4.4 Provision of facilities for economically disadvantaged people A 2 B 2**

The park itself has free access. There are low budget and/or free facilities like hiking and bicycle routes, free facilities like visitor centres (one in Dordrecht and one in Drimmelen), bird watching hides, beaver watching, events - some guided tours are also free. Written information, panels and leaflets are also available free of charge.

#### **4.5 Action to monitor the quality of facilities and services A 2 B 2**

Checking the quality of common facilities and services (like trails, visitor centres, information desks, website etc) is part of daily routine. Facilities and services provided by companies are only checked if they are part of a specific program (like Green Key and Biesbosch hosts).

#### **4.6 Action to improve the quality of facilities and services A 2 B 3**

Planned actions: in the coming years we will improve a lot of visitor facilities and services like trails, moorings, ferries and information service by smart phones. In addition we will start with an application on the website where visitors can add complaints and suggestions to improve the quality of facilities and services.

## Principle 5 – Communication about the area

### 5.1 Sensitive promotion of the protected area as a destination using authentic images and reflecting capacity/needs of the area, including times and locations A **3** B **3**

The core values of the Biesbosch are described as a unique fresh water tidal area, manmade, rough and undisturbed, mystique and adventurous, full of history of the struggle of man against water. In 2009 residents and tourists were asked to send in pictures reflecting these core values. The winning pictures were made into stamps and postcards. A selection of the pictures was given to all Biesbosch-hosts for use in their promotion. They all see the authenticity of the Biesbosch as a core value of their business.

To manage visitor streams the 3 main gateways to the Biesbosch are always mentioned as best starting points, so most visitors are kept away from more vulnerable parts of the Biesbosch.

### 5.2 Influence on the promotional activities of others (region, enterprises, etc.) A **2** B **2**

Only as a Biesbosch-host you can use the special National Park host logo, which is a kind of quality label. The Park Board is a partner for the Tourist boards in the region who issue a common Biesbosch magazine for tourist. Sustainable tourism gets special attention in this magazine. See 5.1.

### 5.3 Provision of clear information material on where to go and what to do when in the area (guides, maps, websites – relevant languages) A **3** B **3**

Particular mention should be made here of the good job they are doing of information provision, whether this is on the websites and/or in the information/visitor centres. They are an example of good practice in providing excellent information in 4 languages.

The national park website aims at tourists who want to visit the area. It gives addresses of Biesbosch-hosts and tells you which nature activities take place on a certain date. There is a special Biesbosch-magazine with nature oriented activities to choose from.

At the 3 recreational gateways as well as the 3 tourist offices and all Biesbosch-hosts can give you information about the area. Staff can tell you in Dutch, English and German and some of them in French too where to go and what to do. There are maps with hiking and cycling routes for sale. For people who come to the Biesbosch by (their own) boat a special map with waterways is available.

### 5.4 Provision of accessible information centres/points for visitors and local people A **3** B **3**

Besides the 3 recreational gateways there are 6 unmanned information points near the road and near sluices with written information and pictures about the Biesbosch. Some more information points where you can park your car and start cycling or hiking from there are in the make. Also all hosts have the Biesbosch magazine with nature oriented activities available.

**5.5 Process for ensuring that others (especially tourism enterprises) provide good information A 2 B 3**

Tourism companies can join the training for Biesbosch-hosts. Most of the companies who organise boat trips in the Biesbosch have done this. Also written information about the Biesbosch is available for boat companies.

**5.6 Provision of guiding services and an events programme for visitors and local people, including groups and schools A 3 B 3**

Information and education is one of the key goals of every national park. In the Biesbosch more than 150 volunteers work as a guide for excursions. Excursions can be made by foot, boat (often combined with a nature trail), and canoe. There is a large amount of different excursions spread over the year, all mentioned on the website and in the Biesbosch magazine of nature oriented excursions. Annually more than 32,103 guests participate in a guided excursion.

All three recreational gates offer school programmes, subject oriented (e.g. beavers, birds, cultural history) as well as season oriented.

Also there are events to involve local people, like with the annual sheep shaving day, and the inventarisation of Biesbosch moths.

## **Principle 6 – Tourism products relating to the protected area**

**6.1 Provision/development of tourism offers (special events, holiday programmes, etc.) involving the discovery and interpretation of natural and cultural heritage A 3 B 3**

Throughout the year there are excursions and activities from the 3 recreational gateways. There are boat excursions (mainly electric), excursions by foot, and canoe excursions. In all of them experiencing Biesbosch nature is the main goal. Some of the excursions are thematic, willow workers past (aimed at cultural heritage of the Biesbosch), birds or beavers. During holidays there are special activities for families, mainly aimed at children, like grandparent-children's day and special beaver excursions and in autumn mushroom excursions. Also there are events, like 'Night of the night' (night excursions), Sheep shaving day, a visit to a Duck catching area (Special designed area to catch Ducks) and an open day around the Biesbosch Museum with crafts from the past. .

**6.2 Effective promotion of these offers A 3 B 3**

All nature oriented activities and excursions can be found on the website of the park: [www.np-debiesbosch.nl](http://www.np-debiesbosch.nl). Also there is an annual Biesbosch magazine with all these activities.

## Principle 7 – Training

### 7.1 Providing or supporting training programmes for staff of the protected area, in sustainable tourism A 2 B 2

Staff of the recreational gateways participate in the courses for Biesbosch-hosts. Also a Green Key training is provided for the staff of the recreational gateways. (50% is currently paid by the Parkschap). Furthermore the staff is regularly informed about the actions being taken in the European STEP project in which the Biesbosch is involved.

### 7.2 Providing or supporting training of other organisations and tourism enterprises in sustainable tourism A 2 B 2

Courses for Biesbosch-hosts are provided annually. For voluntary guides there is a special course for Biesbosch-guides, within which attention is paid to sustainable tourism. The National Park collectively supports tourist enterprises who want to become more sustainable by helping them to gain the Green Key. Currently there are 7 Green Key awarded businesses in the Biesbosch. There is some financial support to help businesses to take on the certification but as this is expensive special care should be taken on how to proceed with training in sustainable tourism in the future.

## Principle 8 – Community involvement and maintaining local quality of life

### 8.1 Involving local communities in the planning of tourism in the area A 2 B 2

Local communities and companies are involved in the planning of tourism in different ways:

- The aldermen of local municipalities are members of the board of the Parkschap. These aldermen are chosen by the local inhabitants and they have to explain their decisions in the board to the local councils
- The Parkschap has a Users' Forum with participants from local organisations; this forum has to approve the tourist plans of the Parkschap. The Parkschap meets this Forum at least 2 times a year.
- In the area of the Biesbosch a Business Network is active. With this Network all tourist plans of the Parkschap are discussed. The Parkschap meets this Network at least 2 times a year.
- When the Parkschap makes new touristic plans, draft versions are discussed with the local communities on special consultation events.
- There is a general e-mailaddress, [info@biesbosch.org](mailto:info@biesbosch.org), where people can make complaints if they feel the need to. Every complaint is taken seriously and an answer on actions taken is given."

### 8.2 Communication between the protected area, local people and visitors A 3 B 3

The protected area communicate to their visitors and locals as mentioned in principle 5.

Communication with local people is described in the question above. In addition local people can come to the visitor centres, use telephone and mail to communicate and give their view on consultation events. The Parkschap also gives a lot of information on the website, by special newsletters and leaflets and in the local newspapers. To communicate with the visitors the Parkschap uses the same tools as for the local people and in addition by surveys (See principle 4).

**8.3 Mechanisms for identifying and seeking to reduce any conflicts that may arise**  
**A 2 B 2**

The Users' Forum and more or less also the Business Network is an advisory body to The Parkschap Authority. In the Forum 20 members represent a lot of local stakeholder groups and in the network more than 70 businesses are represented. Great efforts are made to achieve consensus with these groups although this is not always possible. But these groups are definitely good mechanisms for identifying and reducing any conflicts.

**Principle 9 – Benefits to the local economy and local community**

**9.1 Promoting the purchase of local products (food, crafts, local services) by visitors and local tourism businesses** A 2 B 3

Promoting these is one of the rules of the Green Key scheme, which is supported by the Parkschap. All enterprises which have obtained the Green Key offer local products. Local services, especially horeca (hospitality), will be promoted more in the smart phone routes which will be developed as a STEP action. The recreational gateways offer local products like willow baskets, honey and wine. Some Biesbosch horeca have hamburgers from Biesbosch-cows on the menu.

The visitor centres promote and sell sustainable products and produce. Willow craft is heavily promoted in the area, and the Green Key business holders have integrated this in their business.

**9.2 Encouraging the employment of local people in tourism** A 1 B 2

This is one of the main aims of the Parkschap for the next 5 years. In 2011 a survey was done to find out about the state of the tourist employment in the Biesbosch. The total share of the touristic-recreational sector in the Biesbosch-area is 3,4%. Compared to the average in the Netherlands (5,9% in 2009) this is quite low. Also: the analysis points out that the share of the touristic-recreational sector in the economy of the region (along with the number of jobs in absolute terms) is slowly decreasing (from 3,7% in 2000, to 3,4% in 2010). So the first step for the touristic sector is to counter this development. The Parkschap wants to promote innovative, sustainable enterprises, and small scale overnight stay in the area.

**9.3 Development of tourism in association with traditional economic activity (e.g. agriculture)** A 2 B 2

*Farmers are looking for ways to combine their agricultural activities with tourism. The Parkschap wants to promote small scale activities like B&Bs and campsites, the exploitation of ferries, walking routes along farms which can be visited, a 'fruit picking park' and any other innovative idea which is sustainable.*

## Principle 10 – Managing visitor flows

### 10.1 Keeping a record of visitor numbers over time and space, including feedback from local tourism enterprises A 0 B 2

Most transport in the Biesbosch is over water, so the Parkschap stimulates sustainable ways of travelling over water. The Parkschap owns the largest solar powered passenger boat in Europe. There are already 7 electric excursion boats operating in the Biesbosch. Within the next few years electric charging points will be placed on landing stages to be used by private owners of electric boats. Also the zoning system will be adapted on electric boats. Some waterways in newly developed nature areas are only accessible for canoes. Routes with GPS devices are being made for both electric boats and canoes. A monitoring scheme is made to measure the amount of visitors in the recreational gateways and in different areas of the Biesbosch, on land as well as on water. This scheme will be carried out for the next 5 years, to measure the effect of new zoning regulations and facilities. The aim is to get more people visiting the Biesbosch near the recreational gateways and on the park borders and to keep them away from the most vulnerable parts of the national park.”

### 10.2 Creating and implementing a visitor management plan A 1 B 2

The basis for managing visitors was laid in the study ‘Ondergedompeld in de Biesbosch’ (2008). With the fusion of the 2 recreation boards into a Parkschap in 2011, one new zoning plan will be made (ready 2013) with local regulations the same for all participating municipalities. Electric boating is stimulated as well as hiking, biking and canoeing.

The 3 recreational gateways will be made into main entrances for visitors by promoting them together as starting points for exploring the Biesbosch and by strengthening their National Park image. Also the position of Biesbosch-hosts will be strengthened in making it into a quality label, together with the businesses involved.

### 10.3 Promoting use of public transport, cycling and walking as an alternative to private cars A 2 B 2

Public transport in The Netherlands is dealt with by provincial and local governments, so the Parkschap can only influence this via the aldermen of the municipalities participating in the National Park. The website of the National Park provides information on how to get to the recreational gateways by public transport. In the near future visitors will have to pay for parking their car in some areas, as a kind of ‘nature contribution’, to stimulate them coming to the park by bike or public transport.

Within the Biesbosch transport is mainly over water. One of the actions in the European STEP project is to promote the use of electric boats, both for commercial boat trips and for private boats. Another action in the STEP project is to promote cycling and walking in the Biesbosch by facilitating infrastructure like bridges and gates in cycle- and footpaths, small ferries, and providing information en route using techniques like QR codes and GPS.

## 10.4 Controlling the siting and style of any new tourism development A 2 B 2

This is an important issue as there are 2 major areas of nature development in the region: Noordwaard and Nieuwe Dordtse Biesbosch. The Parkschap and the municipalities involved are in favor of promoting sustainable tourism everywhere in these areas, as well as in the other parts of the Biesbosch region. They co-operate in the plan development of these future Biesbosch areas.

### Any further comments or observations:



De Parkschap sees De Biesbosch as a pilot for sustainable tourism in the Netherlands. They are passionate and very motivated to get this right and to be an example of good practice for the national parks in Holland. Contacts between stakeholders have been made and are strengthened during the Charter process. They hope that the EUROPARC Charter award will secure a long lasting stakeholder partnership now they are formed. The eco lodge, which is being built for De Biesbosch National Park; on the left is the bedroom which

sleeps 4. The middle section is the lounge and kitchen. When you walk upstairs there is more decking for outdoor lounging and a staircase to the viewing platform. This could be the first of a series of water-based accommodation specifically build for the Biesbosch area.