

**STEP EXCURSION BEST PRACTICES,  
JUNE 15-17, 2011**



**9 AUGUSTUS 2011**

**"Investing in your future"**  
Crossborder cooperation programme  
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## SUMMARY

From June 15 to 17, 2011 an international excursion was made by STEP partners and their relations to best practices of sustainable tourism in the Netherlands and Belgium. There were 25 participants from all 3 areas involved, including project members, entrepreneurs, local government and tourist organisations.


Subjects visited and discussed were bike & pedestrian ferries (Hoeksche Waard), camp rafts (De Heen), floating tents (Eersel), visitor centres (Meinweg and Hoge Kempen National Parks), gateways and information points (Hoge Kempen and TOP Ameide) and ICT games (Bergen op Zoom). In all locations there was a presentation or a speech by the entrepreneur or organiser. Evenings were spent on presentations and discussions about accessibility (Polders of Kruibeke) and visitor centres (Meinweg, Broads, ANB Flanders, Biesbosch Museum, general).

The things learned these days will be very useful for the further realisation of the different actions in the STEP project.






## PROGRAMME

### JUNE, 15TH:

-  09.00: assemble at the starting location (Biesboschcentrum Dordrecht)
-  09.15: departure
-  09.45: arrival at Delta Ferries: visit and discussion with the operator
-  11.15: arrival at The Heen: operator camp rafts: visit (by canoe) and discussion with the owner
-  12.15: departure
-  12.45: lunch at Stay Okay Bergen op Zoom
-  13.30: NP (grenspark) De Zoom - Kalmthoutse Heide:  
 workshop ICT-game with Bureau Kloeg
-  16.00: departure
-  18.30: arrival Boshotel Vlodrop NP De Meinweg
-  18.45: diner Boshotel Vlodrop
-  20.15: Studiebureau AnteaGroup, Feedback moment access plan Polders of Kruibeke
-  21.15: Pause
-  21.30: Guus Verhorst, Thoughts about location visitor centre De Meinweg
-  22.30: End









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### JUNE, 16TH :

-  08.00: breakfast
-  09.00: departure
-  09.15: arrival at visitor centre De Meinweg : visit, explanation and discussion
-  11.00: departure
-  12.00: lunch
-  14.00: arrival at NP Hoge Kempen: 5 different kind gateways/entrees/visitor centre;  
 Discussion with Johan Van Den Bosch, project manager NP
-  17.00: departure
-  18.00: arrival at the hotel ECU in Genk
-  18.30: diner at Basics
-  20.30: evening discussion about visitor centres (presentation 10-15 minutes per partner)



## JUNE, 17TH :

-  8.00: breakfast
-  9.00: departure
-  10.00: arrival at Eersel: recreation area with tents on water/raft
-  11.00: departure
-  12.00: arrival in Ameide, Touristic Transition Point in the Green Heart of Holland: visit and discussion with the project manager of these Transition-Information Points
-  13.00: lunch In 't Wapen van Ameide
-  14.00: departure
-  15.00: back in Dordrecht (Biesboschcentrum) / end of the excursion

## AIM

To explore and discuss excellent examples of sustainable tourism tools, accommodations, routes, visitor centres and infrastructure.

All presentations given can be found on the STEP website, so this report mainly reflects impressions and discussions.



### DELTA FERRIES (WWW.DELTAPONTJES.NL)

presentation by Mellany Vonk, projectleader Nationaal Landschap De Hoeksche Waard, and Ingrid Velt, project leader Recreation and Tourism.

De Hoekse Waard is the backyard from urban area's and not well known. To attract more visitors Hoeksche Waard is developing more ways (walking, canoe, bicycle routes) to visit the area. Several organisations work together in the project: water board, 6 local authorities, Dutch government, and the funding comes from ILG and Europe money but is not sufficient for the whole project. One of the projects is called Deltapontjes (=Deltaferries). 6 ferries connect areas to cycle and walk. With this project they want to develop more water connections, so visitors can visit a bigger area. Because there is not enough money they work together with local entrepreneurs. For example one with a privately owned ferry boat. With this method some things will happen quicker, but there is no common organisation and you don't have enough grip on things. When something is a success and you have to stop because there is no more money a lot of work is done for nothing. It is good to start but do not make big investments when starting and think in the long term especially about the finance (financing for more than one year is necessary) and try to work together with companies that are already active in the area. Regional promotion to attract visitors to the area is also very important. It is a way of generating money.

Before the ferries were realised a feasibility study was done. They also did a marketing campaign: website, flags and a lot of free publicity. All 6 ferry connections are described in a free booklet (print 25.000)

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There should be a good connection with the city to have people coming to the area.

For visitors, crossing on a ferry can be a goal (experience) in itself for visiting. Therefore it is good that all the ferries have their own typical character and owned by different entrepreneurs.

For crossing the waterway they had a consult with the Department of Waterways and Public Works. When you cross the waterway in a ferry with a maximum capacity of 15 persons there are no restrictions. When you want to have a bigger boat with more people you need more certifications.



## THE HEEN, CAMRAFTS

### THE HEEN, CAMP RAFTS, JOS AKKERMANS

([www.akkermans.com](http://www.akkermans.com) / [www.campingraft.com](http://www.campingraft.com) / [www.kampeervlot.nl](http://www.kampeervlot.nl) / [www.kampeervlot.be](http://www.kampeervlot.be))

Approximately after 10 minutes by canoe there are 5 floating camping rafts, only accessible by water. It is a small wooden raft with a wooden "tent" on it. That is all there is. The barrels the raft is floating on, are from HDPE and have a long life. You can book the raft, it is for maximum 4 persons, for at least 2 nights (€ 150,- for 2 people, € 30 extra for another person), including the canoe and inflatable matras, gaslight and -burner, water, map, broom, plastic waterproof barrel). Other things such as a sleeping bag, food and pots and pans you have to bring by yourself. To rent you have to be at least 21 years old. People are willing to pay more even if it is primitive, if it gives a unique experience. The owner has a license from the water authority for the rafts. Akkermans started 23 years ago with a mini campsite, then started to rent canoes as well, and started minigolf. More and more groups came. The first camp raft was started 12 years ago. The costs for building a raft are € 10.000,-. The rafts are in the water year round and most of the people visit the rafts between April and October.

The website about the rafts gets 1.000 visits a week. Now the rafts are exploited elsewhere by franchise entrepreneurs as well.

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## WORKSHOP ICT GAME

### WORKSHOP ICT GAME WITH BUREAU KLOEG

([www.bureaukloeg.nl](http://www.bureaukloeg.nl))

Bureau Kloeg developed (by elementree order, [www.elementree.nl](http://www.elementree.nl)) an ICT game called Superboom (super tree). It is an interactive game with a GPS device. Tree heroes let you have adventures while finding your way. By following the arrow on the GPS device the users (mainly schoolgroups) walk through the nature area to look for the next point where they get more information about, in this case, trees. You also get a message to do something or to answer a question. After doing the assignment the GPS device gives the arrow again so you can walk to the next point.

It is developed for kids in the age of 11 and 12 to get them into nature. It is not specially developed to let the kids learn about nature. To make the same game for another area will take a week work.



### FEEDBACK MOMENT ACCESS PLAN POLDERS OF KRUIBEKE

AnteaGroup, Timothy Vanaght

The presentation gives an overview of the current status of the visitor management plan for the Polders of Kruibeke. The polders in itself may not have the potential for a high unique selling point and that way not attract many visitors, but with the surrounding historical villages involved and the embedding of the Polders within a larger touristic region including the polders alongside two additional tributaries (Rupel en Durme) of the Scheldt they can.

Target groups are soft recreation like hiking and cycling. Local inhabitants are more important than tourists. The main question is how to make the area accessible without damage to the area. Instead of 1 main access point, there will be 4; the 4 access points have their own specific story and (historical) character and also this way the eventual recreational flow is spread out over a larger area releasing eventual pressure on the area and the villages.




There have been workshops with different experts in the field of tourism and with local inhabitants. A research to the market potential took place with some numbers of potential visitors as a result. Bruce Hanson thinks, because of his experience at The Broads, that the numbers are an underestimation. In the Broads there was a project very close to Norwich and people want to escape from the city to a green area.

Polders of Kruibeke focus on visitors for a day. Now they study what the best ways are to get visitors to and in the area and how the visitors can do their own activity (hiking, walking, cycling, mountain biking, canoeing) without obstructing each other.

The design of the house style for the recreational infrastructure will be done by Stefan Schöning. For example there is attention for local history and natural elements.

In the presentation all steps taken are mentioned.

Some notes from the STEP colleagues:

-  Make more use of the existing ferries to complete a round trip through the area.
-  Try to involve the other side of the Scheldt in the project
-  Mieke Vander Elst asked the group for more information how to go on (infrastructure, materials)



## LOCATION OF VISITOR CENTRES

### THOUGHTS ABOUT THE LOCATION OF VISITOR CENTRE DE MEINWEG

Guus Verhorst, Staatsbosbeheer

Guus started telling something about the activities of Staatsbosbeheer (= National Forest).

As a preparation for the visit to the visitor centre the day after, Guus gave a presentation about the different aspects of the visitor centre De Meinweg. So who are the visitors (motive groups) and what are they doing (1.000.000 visitors a year instead of 100.000.000). Staatsbosbeheer notices a development in the function of a visitor centre. Most people come for the toilets and the catering. Do we need visitor centres or is a nature entrance (=gateway) enough. The main thing from a visitor centre is to give information and for gateways it is catering. See the presentation for the differences between visitor centre and gateways. Most important for visitors are parking, catering, toilet facilities, accessibility of the nature area (e.g. by routes) and a bit of information (have a pee and a tea). So the location and layout of a visitor centre are very important to attract visitors. Another development is working with hosts and zoning tools. With zoning tools you can get the people where you want them.

Working with hosts is good for the nature organisation and the entrepreneur (=host). The nature organisation provides the host with information and brochures. Visitors go to the entrepreneur for information and also take a cup of coffee or something else. There is a profit for both, but you have to keep working on it. Recommending the national park is not the core business from the entrepreneur. Organising a course for the entrepreneurs is not enough. Entrepreneurs need somebody who can 'sell' the national park. Probably somebody who comes twice a year to look after the brochures and know what is happening in the park.

The Broads think we probably can use the money we save by not having visitor centres in the relation with the hosts and the providing of information to the hosts.

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## VISITOR CENTRE DE MEINWEG

### VISITOR CENTRE DE MEINWEG, VISIT, EXPLANATION AND DISCUSSION

([www.np-demeinweg.nl](http://www.np-demeinweg.nl))

In the morning we visited the visitor centre De Meinweg. The centre is built ten years ago and must be renewed (costs € 800.000,-), but there is no money. There is a shop, an information desk, cafe and an exhibition and a playground outside. The exhibition is a little old fashioned and to make money some non-nature related things are sold in the shop. The entrance and exit to the visitor centre is through the same door and there is no logical connection with the nature park. Most of the people who visit the park are not going to the visitor centre. The building and the cafe look good but are probably built on the wrong location.



## NP HOGE KEMPEN

([www.rlkm.be/nl/hoge-kempen/toegangspoorten](http://www.rlkm.be/nl/hoge-kempen/toegangspoorten))

Before we went to look at 4 of the 5 gateways (we not visited Station As) we got a general introduction of the park from Johan van den Bosch, project manager National Park Hoge Kempen.

The park is established in 2006 and is the only National Park in Belgium. Johan van den Bosch started 10 years ago with the masterplan "How to manage". The introduction was based on the questions what, where, why, who and how.

Regional Landscape Hoge Kempen works together with 6 municipalities, a province and a lot of entrepreneurs. 12 people work for the RLHK.






**What:** A national park is a nature reserve with an area of at least 1000 hectares and the aim to protect nature. 700.000 visitors per year.

**Where:** Hoge Kempen, part of much larger area called Kempen. Hoge Kempen (High Kempen) because of all the gravel/stones in the ground, which makes the area rise 50 m higher than the surrounding area. The picture in the logo from the park are stones (not only a footprint)

**Why:** Because of the loss of biodiversity (7000 different species in NP Hoge Kempen and 1 out of 4 is on the red list) and it is a former coalmine region (closed in 1990) where 30% of the working people lost their job.











**Who:** People who love nature, local communities (=main owners of the land), Agentschap voor Natuur en Bos (ANB), divers tourism boards. It is a candidate for becoming an UNESCO World Heritage site.

**How:** There were 6000 hectares, 80% of which is owned by 6 local governments, with problems to solve

-  Make a masterplan
-  Where is the border
-  There are motorways through the park, some are transformed in cycle paths and are crossed with ecoducts and (foot-)bridges are built
-  Eliminate 10 enclaves, for example sand extraction, centre for red cross, centre for outdoor (=noisy spot), 50 hectares of industrial area → make a plan that the activities are not contrary with the national park
-  Stimulate tourism to welcome people by creating gateways in neighbourhood (=outside) from the national park



All gateways are located on existing touristic spots. Therefore they all have a touristic economic activity with their own theme. The brand on paper and in the field is the same. When the gateways are completely finished you can recognise the place because they all have a similar look:







-  Parking place shared with the economic activity (public private cooperation)
-  Constructions with stones from the region
-  Parking place for bikes
-  Information panel, with events and walking, cycle and horse ride paths
-  Have a 'real' gateway to nature
-  Wastebasket (2/3 underground), not in the park because the take in/take out (TITO) principal is used
-  Cooling down zone between parking place and visitor centre. You have to walk a couple of minutes to enter the visitor centre
-  Only oak trees are planted
-  There is flat grass
-  The benches are from oak wood

The gateways are connected to cycle, hiking and horse ride ways. They were set up as a starting point, but most gateways become attractions on itself. More visitors is more money but also more pressure on the park. It is an advantage that the gateways are outside the park. For most of the visitors it is not important that they have been in the National park, being in nature is enough. With building gateways outside the park you can generate more money without damaging nature. The best way to ask for money is when you have a specific purpose (for example a historical object or a bridge) for the money. Most people don't give money for something that is not specified.

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All projects are financed in different ways. Total investment up to now is 19 million euros, financed by Europe, private partners, municipalities. It is very important to believe in local entrepreneurs. You need each other. For example: there was a museum in the park. Now it is placed outside the park. That means less rubbish in the park and more economic benefit in the villages because people spent money in the nearby villages. When the museum was situated in the park, visitors never came in the villages. At all the gateways the private part is maintained by the entrepreneur and the public part by the National Park. The Ministry of Social Department has 12 unemployed people, who maintain the 5 areas.

### Mechelse Heide





-  Cafeteria with camp site
-  Very close to national park
-  Theme is walking heathland
-  Only gateway without visitor centre/visitor needs
-  The self built wall from stones from the region is the 'real' gateway
-  The new bridge (€ 12.000,-) is 50/50 financed by the municipality and the province of Limburg.









## Pietersheim

-  Historical castle ruin
-  1 kilometre from national park
-  Big gateway, local municipality paid for it
-  The theme is history, when you combine culture and nature you attract more people
-  The tower of the castle is the 'real' gateway

## Lieteberg

-  5 kilometre from national park, completely finished and largest distance to NP
-  Theme is microcosmos: seed garden from native species, breeding farm for honey bees, butterfly garden, insect museum (€6,- per person)
-  Bare feet path (€ 3,- per person), open from may till October, 100.000 people a year, investment of € 50.000,-, 2 kilometre taking 1 hour
-  The income from the bare feet path and catering are enough to maintain the whole gateway

## Kattevennen

-  2 kilometre from national park
-  Theme is macrocosmos, geology, erosion, climate
-  Collecting point from stones from all over the world
-  Visitor centre is built as a gate next to planetarium. When people enter the gate they think they are in the national park. But the national park is another 2 kilometres further
-  All functions are in 1 building so visitors can find their way easily (=visitor management)
-  Zoning: moutainbike and geocaching are in border from national park

It is free to enter the National Park and you have to pay for the extras such as castle (€ 2,50), ranger (€ 2,-), walking map (€ 2,-).

## EVENING DISCUSSION VISITOR CENTRES

All STEP partners gave a presentation about their ideas about visitor centres.

### THE BROADS \* SAM BATES

In 1980 everybody wanted visitor centres. They had to choose between one big centre or more smaller centres. Because The Broads are spread over a large area, it was decided to develop smaller centres in busy areas (6 in total).

In the middle eighties there was not enough money for 6 visitor centres so only 4 centres were developed in existing buildings. Because most of the tourist visit the north west part of The Broads the first visitor centre was build there.

In Great Yarmouth there was an opportunity to develop a visitor centre. The building seemed to be good but there was no parking place and no boats. The lesson we learned was that a good looking building is not the success for a good a visitor centre. Other things such as parking place and catering are more important. Before starting a visitor centre you have to do a study for the whole place.

In The Broads there are four places for boat trips. The trips are regulated from different visitor centres. The Broads is popular because of his boating experience. The visitor centres were setup to attract people to do other activities in The Broads than sailing.

The amount of people who visit the visitor centres is stable over the last years, around 250.000. The decline of visitors is not a reason to close visitor centres but the profit is. Now 3 visitor centres (How Hill, Wroxham, close to Norwich) and 3 places for boat trips are left.

At this moment the Broads Authority wonders if the visitor centres are modern enough to attract people. Maybe they have to develop other methods (Internet, cafes) to get people into The Broads. They developed a mobile digital board to promote the Broads. Cafes for example attract visitors for a coffee and a cake and when they come in and see the photos and information about the park they become interested in the park also. It is also difficult to generate money. The best way is to get more people in the park. Funding is difficult because there are a lot of charities.



## **AGENTSCHAP NATUUR EN BOS (ANB) \* LAURENT VANDEN ABEELE**

Laurent gave a presentation about visitor centres in the past, present and future. The existing 14 visitor centres are very different and have been developed without a global vision. Other problems are the costs and the fact visitor centres will be old-fashioned very quick. ANB is at the moment developing a global vision on visiting centres as a reference frame. The reference frame of ANB (see presentation) changes from education to management. 4 visitor centres will be closed. 8 centres will focus on the surroundings. 2 purely educational centres will be managed by the province, as sub local nature and environmental education is considered a task of the province. We all wonder if this is a good development. Only the xl domain types will have a visitor centre in the future in function of the access of visitors to nature sites.

## **BIESBOSCH MUSEUM \* PETER VAN BEEK**

Peter van Beek gave a presentation about the history and activities of the museum. After that he told about the expansion of the museum.

As the name says the museum started in 1974 as a museum. At the place the museum is built, the Biesbosch is in the making. Agricultural land becomes nature and there is also an opportunity to do a boat trip. All these developments make the number of visitors grow and the museum will be used more and more as a visitor centre.

From April till October the museum is open 7 days a week. People have to pay to enter the museum. The café and information desk is for free but there is not enough space to combine all the functions. There is a plan to extend the museum so there will be enough space to inform the visitors.

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## **BIESBOSCH CENTRUM \* MARIANNE DEN BRAVEN**

To wind up the evening we discussed the following quotes:

### **The future of visitor centres**

1. Exhibitions and information desks will become old fashioned. Visitors will get the information they want at home(via internet/virtual visitor centres) or during their trip (via gps, cell phone etc).
2. Therefore visitor centres will change into places where you can eat, drink, rest, find a toilet, park your car and start a tour, hike and/or boattrip in nature.
3. These places will be taken over by private enterprises (like restaurants, campsites and touristic attractions).
4. Therefore as park organisations we need to develop innovative public-private partnerships.



Most people present think visitors look for information at home before they go to a park, but there is still need for face to face information. Entrepreneurs can do a part of this job, but giving information about the national park is not their main business and they will not advertise for their competitors. Entrepreneurs aren't experts of the area.

In the discussion the question "What is a visitor centre?" arises. Is there a difference between a visitor centre and a tourist office (not in The Broads) and can we give this role to entrepreneurs? Do the entrepreneurs only give/spread out brochures or do we expect that they also give personal educational information. The information entrepreneurs give is not neutral, because their main goal is earning money.

Follow up during the meeting in October:

- what do we mean when we talk about a visitor centre and what is the role of an entrepreneur
- how do we reach new audiences.

After the official discussion was ended, several small groups continued discussions for a while, especially about public private cooperation and the functions of visitor centres.

## RECREATION AREA EERSEL

### EERSEL, RECREATION AREA WITH TENTS ON WATER/RAFTS

([www.terpegelt.nl](http://www.terpegelt.nl))

Ter Spegelt is a big recreation area with campsites, in- and outdoor playgrounds, cafes and restaurants.

There are 3 'water tents', for four persons each. You can reach them from land and the tents are on a fixed landing. The tent is well equipped. There are 3 cabins with a bed (one double and two single cabins), a table with chairs, fridge, stove, light. The costs per tent per night are € 45 in low season and € 67,50 in high season with a minimum of 3 nights. The tents are available from April till October. They earn € 4500,- a year (65% occupation) and most of the renters are families with kids. The parents enjoy the silence, while the kids go to the disco or swimming pool.





In cooperation with IVN (local nature club) they developed a nature discovery path. Kids can hire a small backpack and by following a trail they learn about nature. It is for kids in the age of 6,7, 8 and it will be used when it is not beach weather.








### TOP AMEIDE, TOURISTIC TRANSITION POINT IN THE GREEN HEART OF HOLLAND ([www.topgroenehart.nl/ameide](http://www.topgroenehart.nl/ameide))

We were welcomed by the major of Zederik, de heer Van Ee, and Jeroen Woudenberg (projectmanager TOP). The major told us about the area and Jeroen Woudenberg about the TOP Ameide.

Criteria of a TOP:

-  easily accessible for cars (they use big brown signs at the motor way and provincial road)
-  at least 20 parking places
-  close to existing cycle and walking routes and catering
-  not near a big place

Concept of a TOP (in the catalogue you can see pictures of a TOP):

-  symbol of the region on the floor (wing of a windmill) and in the air (5,5 metre high big green sign = blade of grass)
-  information panels, one with 4 pictures and one with info about signed routes and an QR code (ICT tool)
-  bench
-  bike staple to park your bike
-  signs to help you starting your trip (for example walking or biking)

Because a TOP is a starting point it is usually situated at the edge of a nature area. Some TOPs are close to public transport but that is not the primary concern. It is very difficult to find a good place. They started 2 years ago and now there are 8 TOPs in the south of Holland. They hope there will be 5 till 10 TOPs in the middle of Holland at the end of 2011 and at the end of 2012 they also want to have 6 till 12 TOPs in the nord of Holland. It is good for the publicity to get more TOPs. The organisation hopes that people tell each other about the TOP so the number of visitors will increase.

The goal of a TOP is to attract 30 till 50 people extra a week. The investment costs are € 35.000,-, including management and marketing (€ 5.000,-). The first three years the TOP organisation, in cooperation with the tourist office (VVV ZHZ and Groene Hart), is responsible for the marketing. The maintenance will be done by the municipality.

