

A countryside for all Dutch people

How the Dutch view and use the countryside

Summary

From a social and cultural perspective, the Dutch countryside underwent radical changes in the last three decades of the 20th century. The enormous increase in car mobility expanded people's radius of action in their daily lives, and the upscaling of all kinds of facilities reinforced this effect. Most rural villages in the Netherlands lost their autonomy during this period, as many inhabitants found work and leisure in the towns and in other villages. In addition, villages saw an influx of new residents, who retained their ties with their old social networks and residential environment. Rural areas became increasingly important for dwelling. The quality of life in these 'residential villages' derives above all from the good environment they offer. The inhabitants are forced to go elsewhere for work, shops and often schools as well.

The countryside is also undergoing major spatial and functional changes, though not to the same degree or with the same emphasis in all regions and all villages. Growing urbanisation is having a major impact on the countryside, since newly built houses, business parks and major infrastructure projects leave their mark on the landscape. The countryside has become an increasingly multifunctional area, which is being developed just as much as a place for recreation and as a place to live. At the same time, collective aims lay claim to the countryside, such as nature development projects and energy facilities. It is these socio-cultural, spatial and functional changes which provide the context for this study.

The renewal of the countryside which began in the 1990s is strongly focused on vitalisation. When it launched its Agenda for a Living Countryside (*Agenda Vitaal Platteland*) in 2004, the Dutch Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality set out a clear vision: "The countryside of the future will not just reflect the activity of farmers and other rural dwellers, it will reflect the activities and needs of all Dutch people."

In this population survey we attempt to discover how the Dutch perceive and use the countryside. The 2,058 respondents in the survey constitute a representative sample of the Dutch population. The central research questions are:

- 1 What does the countryside mean for the Dutch as a place to live and relax?
- 2 How do the Dutch perceive and appreciate the countryside?

Living in the countryside

The 6.2 million people living in the Dutch countryside are predominantly very happy with their residential situation. However, the countryside is not only important as a place for rural dwellers to live; it is also important for urban dwellers, around 30%

of whom say they have explored the possibility of moving to the countryside. Those who have done so are mainly people who live in moderately urbanised areas. A relatively high proportion (43%) of 'quasi-urban people' – people who have lived in the countryside sometime in their life– would like to return to the countryside in their old age. Many 'original' urban dwellers having or planning a young family (42% of 30-39 year-olds) are also inclined to move to the country. They often consider the town less suitable for growing children and wish to find a safe and small-scale world in which to raise their families. Finally, an average of 10% of the elderly people (65 years or older) say they would like to move to the countryside, but the figure among quasi-urban people is almost twice as high. This matches the picture found among 'returning migrants' – rural dwellers who have spent some time living in an urban area and return to the countryside in later life.

The satisfaction with the residential environment correlates strongly with the satisfaction with the dwelling. Not surprisingly, rural dwellers are more satisfied in this regard, because they predominantly live in detached owner-occupied homes, which are relatively large and are situated in a natural and green environment.

Living in the countryside appeals very much to the imagination. The number of Dutch people saying they would like to live in the countryside one day amount to more than 2 million households. This is of course a latent desire which in most cases will not be realised owing to constraints and competing desires. Ultimately, around 30% of urban dwellers will actually take the step of moving to the countryside. The appeal for urban people is not only the attractive residential setting, but also the perceived close-knit and safe communities. The satisfaction with the countryside as a place to live, as expressed by newcomers, can be explained to a large extent by their satisfaction with their dwelling in combination with a positive view of the rural community.

The countryside for recreation

The countryside is important as a recreational area for virtually all Dutch people. For those living in the countryside, this is not very surprising, since it forms their day-to-day environment. Yet 93% of those living in towns also say they sometimes visit the countryside for recreational purposes. At least 70% of the population walk, cycle and enjoy nature in the countryside. Rural dwellers do this in larger numbers and more frequently than town-dwellers. The more 'sportive' activities such as running, in-line skating and road cycling are carried out by a relatively small group of people (just under a third), though in most cases they do so relatively often (over half do so monthly).

On average, people engage in two activities in the countryside; there is no difference in this between town-dwellers and rural dwellers. There is a difference in terms of frequency, however, because eight out of the ten recreation types are undertaken on a monthly basis significantly more often by rural dwellers. The agricultural landscape provides a backdrop for a restrained form of recreation, in which people tradi-

tionally enjoy the natural surroundings whilst cycling or walking. Since this kind of activity is especially popular among older people, the ageing of the population would appear to signal a growing demand here. Horseriding also fits in very well with a rural environment, and the current growth of this sector is likely to continue. Those undertaking more active recreational pursuits are often younger people, and they are more attracted by water sports.

Woodland and heathland are the ultimate recreational landscape for 85% of the population. Coastal landscapes also appeal to two-thirds of the Dutch population; they owe their popularity not only to the 'wild' nature they offer, but undoubtedly also to the opportunities for beach recreation. Many Dutch people consider the agricultural landscape considerably less attractive.

At present, recreation in the countryside is not of major economic significance; on average, recreation and tourism account for no more than 3% of rural employment, slightly higher in some areas. Day trips do not generate much revenue: a walker or cyclist will spend an average of six or seven euros during a day trip. Around 80% of the population are interested in agrotourism, especially for buying homemade products and seeing how modern agricultural businesses operate. There is also a substantial market for camping on farms or staying at farmhouse B&Bs, as these attract more than 40% of the population.

Perception and appreciation of the countryside

Individuals experience the countryside in their own way, but we have found that positive feelings dominate. More than three-quarters of the Dutch are (very) positive about the countryside, with the figure among rural dwellers being substantially higher than among urban people (87% and 72%, respectively). Only 2%, mainly young people, express negative or very negative views about the countryside. The positive feelings about the countryside are based on numerous factors: people enjoy the beauty of the countryside, the peace and quiet, safety and orderliness, and also appreciate the agreeable social climate and good housing quality. People who live in the countryside particularly appreciate its vitality, the social climate and the good housing. Urban dwellers do express the prejudice that people in the countryside are somewhat old-fashioned; they are also slightly more negative in their views about the accessibility of the countryside.

The perceptions that the Dutch have of the countryside were divided into three dimensions. The *landscape* dimension is the most important for more than half of all Dutch people. Qualities such as peace and quiet, space and a green environment are related largely to the landscape. With an average score of 7.4 out of 10, the landscape is clearly positively appreciated. Young people value the landscape less than elderly people. Town-dwellers tend to attach great importance to the landscape qualities of the countryside, especially from a recreational perspective. For rural dwellers the vitality of the countryside is also important. Their opinions are accordingly

less negative about the sacrifice of the traditional agricultural landscape for other (economic) functions.

The *functional* dimension shows that the countryside is still seen mostly as an agricultural (production) area. This is not surprising, given the predominant use of land for farming in the Netherlands. At the same time, however, the size of the agricultural sector has been in decline for several decades and new functions (housing, recreation) are becoming more important in maintaining the socioeconomic vitality of the countryside. However, the Dutch regard these newer functions as less important for the countryside. Although they approve of the diversification of agriculture, they are more moderate in their appreciation of other functions which impinge on the landscape (such as the equestrian sector).

The *socio-cultural* dimension is considered important mainly by rural dwellers. This is expected, because the countryside is where they spend their daily lives. The associations with life in the countryside are formulated positively, in terms of peace and quiet, freedom, safety, agreeable atmosphere and close-knit communities. There are also some negative perceptions, albeit to a lesser extent, concerned with social control, poverty and an old-fashioned image. All Dutch people, and especially rural dwellers, express very negative views about the crumbling of social life and a dwindling level of amenities in the countryside.

Generally speaking, the Dutch have a very positive, somewhat conservative and idyllic image of the countryside. Developments which could disrupt this positive image, such as urbanisation, the presence of intrusive structures in the landscape and changes to social life, are seen above all in negative terms.

All in all, our conclusion is that the idyllic image of the countryside still holds sway in the perception of the Dutch, even though modernisation and changes have undoubtedly less idyllic aspects. This supports the findings of other studies (e.g. Heins 2002). Although people understand the need for change, changes which adversely affect the landscape are usually seen as undesirable, unless they are also 'green'. The preference of the Dutch population could thus be summarised in the phrase 'a new countryside in an old guise'.

A countryside for all the Dutch people?

The countryside is important as a place to live, not only for 6.2 million people currently living there, but also for 30% of the urban population who have indicated to migrate to the country at some point in the future. The countryside goes a long way to meeting the residential needs of a majority of rural dwellers: 95% of them are (very) satisfied with their home and 92% with their residential setting. Yet approximately 10% of rural dwellers are dissatisfied with their residential setting. Both potential newcomers and present rural dwellers feel that a number of qualities need to be actively safeguarded, namely the residential quality, social quality and landscape quality of the countryside.

The countryside is also important as a place for recreation; more than 90% of the Dutch population sometimes use the countryside for this purpose. Naturally, rural dwellers are more likely to spend their free time in the local countryside. Evidently, the countryside meets a certain need for recreation for large parts of the Dutch population, especially nature-related recreation. A number of specific characteristics are associated with this: people in search of recreation in the countryside are looking for peace and quiet, space, green and farms.

It may thus be concluded that the countryside is the domain of a large part of the Dutch population, though not (yet) all Dutch people, because around 10% of the population reported that they rarely or never visit the countryside for recreational activities. Moreover, the involvement with the countryside is selective; young people generally have a fairly negative image of the countryside and participate to only a limited extent in recreational activities in the countryside.

The future of the countryside

The Dutch people are fairly critical about all manner of developments. They are particularly pessimistic about the building of new homes and business parks, feeling that these by definition destroy the Dutch landscape. At the same time people, and especially rural dwellers, realise that new economic impulses are needed in order to retain the vitality of the countryside. Rural dwellers often also have an interest in such developments with a view to meeting their own needs for housing and employment. The Dutch are thus critical about the disappearance of agricultural land, but have few objections to the restoration of nature on former farmland or the reinstatement of the natural course of rivers. They thus appear generally not to be too concerned if the appearance of the countryside changes, as long as it remains open and green.

Of crucial importance is that the countryside, despite all the changes, retains its identity and continues to provide a contrast, especially in a spatial and morphological sense, to the urban area. This means that qualities such as peace and quiet, space and green must be nurtured. The agrarian cultural landscape remains an important element, because it largely shapes the identity of the countryside. Just as important, however, is that the rural community remains close-knit. Here again, a shared identity is important, because this creates a bond between people and motivates them to undertake new initiatives.

The same applies for the landscape quality, because this is translated into good residential quality and satisfaction on the part of rural dwellers. The traditional regional differentiation also contributes to the identity of the countryside and is crucial in meeting the divergent needs and wishes of residents, people seeking recreation and the Dutch population in general.

If one thing has become clear, it is that the Dutch population have different images of and needs in relation to the countryside, as well as widely differing preferences in recreation and housing. The more diverse the countryside is in terms of

landscapes, nature, residential environments and recreational activities, the better it will function as a countryside for all Dutch people.