Wildlife: a hidden treasure of green places in urbanized societies?
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CHAPTER 1.

Introduction
1. Introduction

1.1 Motivation for this study

“Although I have been travelling around the world for years, I still love the Wadden with all my heart. It’s wonderful to wander for days on the beaches and watch birds. This love will probably never cease.” Floortje Dessing, (Vogelbescherming Nederland, 2015).

Floortje Dessing, a well-known Dutch travel program presenter, loves the Wadden Sea area, even though she has visited many other places around the world. Watching birds is an important part of her experience of the Wadden Sea area. The importance of birds in Floortje’s love for the Wadden raises the question as to whether and how birds and other wildlife affect people’s bond with places. In general, people’s bond with places is shaped by experiences and memories (Tuan, 1974; Vanclay, 2008). Observing waders seeking mussels on the Wad, unexpectedly standing eye-to-eye with deer in a forest, or seeing squirrels in the trees may trigger emotional reactions and create memories which contribute to place bonding. However, non-human dimensions of place are often still neglected, as they are regarded as a passive backdrop for human activity (Edensor, 2010).

The aim of this thesis is to provide more insight into how wildlife contributes to lay people’s bond with green places on different spatial scales in the Netherlands. Throughout human history, people have been fascinated and intrigued by animals, as they are both like and unlike people. Eye-contact with wildlife make people aware of themselves returning the look (Berger, 1980), but wildlife may also connect people with places. In a novel about birdwatchers, Mynott (2009) wonders about hearing birds in a French town he is visiting. He contemplates about how people in the fourteenth century probably heard the same birdsong as he is hearing right there, in the same place. He argues that birds are inseparable with places: “We can no longer think of either the bird or the place without the other” (p. 206). Clearly, experiencing wildlife can be closely connected to experiencing places. When people visit exotic far-away places, they are often interested in experiencing native wildlife. The most charismatic and attractive wildlife species are frequently used as ‘flagship’ species to attract tourists. Franklin (2003) argues that the commodification of experiences, and places, gives the impression that tourists are simply hedonistic consumers, who consume shallow and symbolic products. However, Franklin (2003) questions whether these tourist travel experiences genuinely lack this depth. Indeed, various
studies have demonstrated that tourists often have extremely intense, deeply personal, and memorable experiences with large and charismatic wildlife in nature-based tourism destinations (e.g. Curtin, 2009, 2010; Farber & Hall, 2007; DeMares & Krycka, 1998). In addition, Curtin (2009, 2010) discovered that wildlife tourists do not only have memorable wildlife encounters during their holidays; they also appreciate seeing wildlife near home. Curtin (2009) argues that “the wildlife seen on home soil has equal if not more importance than exotic flora and fauna seen on holiday” (p.471). She calls for research that explores wildlife experiences near home, not only in rural or natural, but also in urban settings. Drawing from these insights, this thesis focuses on the importance of wildlife experiences in people’s bond with green places in a highly urbanized society, the Netherlands.

### 1.2 Wildlife in people’s bond with green places

Places can be described as “the coming together of the biophysical, social and spiritual worlds” (Vanclay, 2008, p. 3). Meanings and values attached to places facilitate intimate place bonding, leading to place attachment (Tuan, 1977). Studies on place attachment traditionally focused on urban and residential settings (Lewicka, 2010), but interest has been growing in place attachment to natural environments near home (e.g. Beckley, 2003; Brehm, Eisenhauer, & Krannich, 2006; Scannell & Gifford, 2010; Stedman, 2003) as well as further from home (e.g. Ednie, Daigle, & Leahy, 2010; Hammitt, Backlund, & Bixler, 2006; Kil, Holland, & Stein, 2010; Kyle, Graefe, Manning, & Bacon, 2003). The increased attention for natural environments has prompted more studies to address physical, along with social, reasons for attachment (Lewicka, 2010). People may feel attached to a place because of social reasons such as childhood memories, family ties or cultural and religious factors, but they may also feel attached to physical place characteristics; for instance the perceived beauty of a landscape and possibilities for recreation and rest (Lewicka, 2010). Stedman (2003) who contested the strong emphasis on social aspects of place attachment, found that perceptions of physical dimensions matter a great deal in giving meanings to places. Various studies have concluded that more research is needed into how perceptions on physical landscape characteristics play a role in people’s place attachment, and through what processes these attachments are formed (e.g. Beckley, 2003; Ednie, et al., 2010; Stedman, 2003).

Despite a growing attention for perceptions on physical place characteristics in attachment to natural environments, only a limited number of studies have focused specifically on the importance of wildlife in people’s bond with a place. This can be illustrated by Lewicka’s
(2010, 75 pages) study on 40 years of place attachment research, in which the words ‘fauna’, ‘wildlife’, ‘birds’ or ‘wild animals’ do not appear. In a study by Farnum, Hall, & Kruger (2005, 51 pages) on sense of place research in relation to outdoor recreation and tourism in natural environments, wildlife is not mentioned either - only in the context of a wildlife viewing center (p. 31). However, some studies did find evidence that birds or other wildlife matter in people’s bond with places near home (e.g. Hedblom et al., 2014; Ogunteitan, 2005; Ryan, 2005; Wilkinson, Waitt, & Gibbs, 2014). Other scholars found that wildlife gives meanings to, or affects visitors’ bond with, natural environments visited for outdoor recreation (e.g. Anderson & Fulton, 2008; Ednie, et al., 2010; Bricker & Kerstetter, 2002; Kil, et al., 2010; Smaldone et al., 2005).

Thus far, leisure and tourism research into the importance of wildlife has predominantly focused on mega-fauna such as whales, dolphins, big game and other single iconic species, mostly of large body size (Higginbottom, 2004). Experiences with these kinds of wildlife have been studied in relation to nature-based tourism destinations (e.g. Cong et al., 2014; Curtin, 2006, 2009, 2010; Lemelin & Smale, 2006; Moscardo, Woods, & Greenwood, 2001). Tremblay (2008) states that particular wildlife species can be true icons of natural areas, motivating people to visit. According to Forristal, Lehto, and Lee (2012), native wildlife species give places a certain distinctiveness which may create emotional bonds between places and visitors. The above mentioned studies demonstrate that many people visiting nature-based tourism destinations are interested in wildlife, and enjoy wildlife experiences. However, these studies do not make clear whether wildlife shapes a bond with these places, or whether wildlife experiences are also important in green places closer to home.

This thesis takes the perspective of place bonding to natural environments and relates it to locals’, and visitors’, perspectives on appreciating and experiencing different kinds of wildlife (e.g. common, rare, charismatic, small, or large) in green places in the Netherlands.

### 1.3 Perspectives on wildlife and people’s bond with green places

Different perspectives on the importance of wildlife in people’s bond with green places are addressed in this thesis. Attention is given to whether, to what extent, for whom, in what kind of places and how, wildlife matters in people’s bond with green places. An overview of the relationships between the most important concepts in this thesis is given in Figure 1.1.
Place bonding

Place attachment is a multidimensional concept, with person, process and place dimensions (Scannell & Gifford, 2010). The concept refers to the degree to which an individual has positive feelings about a place (Vanclay, 2008). In the process of place bonding, ‘space’ turns into ‘place’, thereby positively changing the way people feel about a place. As Tuan (1977) states, meanings and values given to a place can lead to intimate place attachment. These meanings and values are based on experiences; through experiences, individuals get to know the place better and attach values to it (Tuan, 1977). This thesis focuses on how wildlife affects the valuation of, and emotional attachment to, green places. A higher valuation of landscapes has been found to lead to a stronger place attachment (Brown & Raymond, 2007; Kaltenborn & Bjerke, 2002). Thus, these concepts form part of the place bonding process.

Green places

Given that this thesis focuses on green places in a highly urbanized country, the Netherlands, ‘green’ places refer to places in which natural elements such as trees, bushes, meadows, and/or bodies of water, are dominant, as opposed to places dominated by human presence. Green places can be part of a perceived cultural or natural landscape, and range from green places in people’s
living or working environment, such as urban parks, recreation areas, suburban woods, and
countryside to green places further from home, such as forests, and large protected areas. Due to
travel distance, green places near home are more important for everyday leisure, whereas green
places further from home tend to be more important for daytrips and holidays (Hall & Lew, 2009).

People

This thesis focuses on the importance of wildlife in a bond with green places among lay people.
Lay people may take different roles in relation to green places, which may affect the extent to
which wildlife contributes to a positive bond. Roles included in this thesis are lay people as local
residents, living close to a green place, or as visitors, travelling some distance to visit a green place –
either for a daytrip, or a holiday. It is also investigated for whom wildlife matters (most) in a
bond with green places, on the basis of sociodemographics, participation in wildlife-related
recreation, past experiences with wildlife, membership of a nature conservation organization, and
other relevant personal characteristics.

Wildlife

Which animals are considered as ‘wildlife’, depends on perceptions. They may include fish, birds,
mammals, and other types of wildlife. According to Curtin (2010), all animals living in their
natural habitat have the potential to be interesting to people. Whether an animal is regarded as
‘wild’ is socially constructed (Leong, 2009) and related to place (Brandin, 2009). In the
Netherlands, it is likely that people associate wildlife with both charismatic and large wildlife (e.g.
seals, red deer, roe deer, foxes and wild boar) and smaller and more common wildlife such as
hares, hedgehogs, butterflies and different types of birds (e.g. ducks, swans, waders and herons).
However, the wildness of some types of animals may be contested. For instance, free roaming
large herbivores (e.g. Highland Cattle, horses) in protected areas may be regarded as domestic by
some, and as wildlife by others. Officially, they are considered as ‘wild’ or at least in the process
of ‘dedomestication’ by nature managers (Van den Belt, 2004, p. 315). People’s individual
perceptions of what they regard as wildlife, determines its use in this thesis.
1.4  Researching wildlife in people’s bond with green places

This thesis is of sequential explanatory nature, as it is based on surveys, followed-up by in-depth interviews (Boeije, 2010). These methods complement each other and provide more insight into the multiplicity of ways in which wildlife can contribute to people’s bond with green places in the Netherlands. The quantitative part of the thesis consists of two extensive studies and two case studies. The extensive studies have large sample sizes, making it possible to generalize for a whole population (Clifford, French, & Valentine, 2012). The focus of these two studies is on wildlife and flora, as the studies are based on the Dutch Hotspotmonitor (HSM), an online database developed by the University of Groningen, the University of Wageningen, and the Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency (De Vries, et al., 2013; Sijtsma, et al., 2012). This database was set up to measure social landscape values in the Netherlands. The HSM gives more insight into these social values, by monitoring the valuation of people’s favorite green places and reasons why they find these places attractive (Sijtsma, et al., 2012). As the HSM studies give insight into the general importance of wildlife and flora in the valuation of green places among a general Dutch public and members of a nature conservation organization, they provide the context for the remaining studies.

The two exploratory case studies focus on respectively the Lauwersmeer area and the Wadden Sea area, which are important domestic nature-based tourism destinations (Statistics Netherlands, 2012) and relatively wildlife-rich (Logemann, Klasberg, Kampkuiper, & Van Leusen, 2003). The case studies explore the importance of wildlife in people’s emotional attachment in more detail. The qualitative research focuses on how different types of wildlife (species) shape an individual’s bond with his or her favorite green place near home. Walk-along interviews are used, as this method combines the strengths of field observation and in-depth interviews (Carpiano, 2009). This method provides a deeper understanding of people’s experiences, interpretations, and practices within a place than in-depth interviews in general.
1.5 Research aim and thesis outline

The aim of this thesis is to provide more understanding into whether and how wildlife contributes to people’s bond with green places on different spatial scales in the Netherlands. The first two studies focus on wildlife and flora. They provide the context for the following three explorative studies.

Five research questions guide the studies in the thesis:

1. To what extent do wildlife and flora affect the valuation of green places on different spatial scales, among the general Dutch public?
2. To what extent does the importance of wildlife and flora in the valuation of green places on different spatial scales differ among members of a nature conservation organization?
3. What roles does wildlife play in visitors’ emotional attachment to a protected area?
4. For which visitors does wildlife matter (most) in emotional attachment to a protected area?
5. How does wildlife shape a person’s bond with a local green place?

Each research question is dealt with in one separate chapter of the thesis.

Chapter 2 starts with a broad perspective on the importance of wildlife and flora in the valuation of green places on different spatial scales, among the general Dutch public. First, it is investigated to what extent wildlife and flora matter in the valuation of green places. Second, it is examined whether the importance of wildlife and flora differs between local and national green places.

Chapter 3 addresses differences among members of one of the largest nature conservation organizations in the Netherlands: Natuurmonumenten. It is investigated to what extent wildlife and flora matter in the valuation of local, regional, and national green places for different groups of members, based on their sociodemographics. It is analyzed for which groups of members wildlife and flora affect the valuation of green places most, differentiating between members who regard wildlife and flora as a reason for attractiveness; members who observe birds, other wildlife, and/or flora, and members who do not.

Chapter 4 presents a case study on the different roles of wildlife in emotional attachment to a nature-based tourism destination, the Lauwersmeer area. It is investigated which roles of wildlife contribute most to overnight visitors’ emotional attachment: seeing wildlife as a
motivation to visit the destination, appreciation of different types of wildlife, preferences and interests in different types of wildlife encounters, interest in (the chance of) unexpected wildlife encounters, and perceived intensity of wildlife experiences.

In Chapter 5, a case study is presented on the perceived importance of seeing wildlife in emotional attachment to the Dutch Wadden Sea Area among participants of Wad nature excursions and seal watching tours. It is explored whether the importance of seeing different types of wildlife is affected by people’s sociodemographics and behavioral connections with nature (e.g. membership of a nature organization, past experiences with nature excursions).

Chapter 6 aims at getting more insight into how wildlife affects individuals’ bond with their favorite green place. It is explored how an individual’s favorite green place becomes special through multi-sensory wildlife experiences, memories related to wildlife, and other wildlife-related perceptions related to the place.

The final chapter brings the main points of the different studies together and discusses overarching themes. Furthermore, it gives recommendations for nature conservation organizations, leisure and tourism managers, and spatial planners, as well as for further research.
References


Lewicka, M. (2010). Place attachment: How far have we come in the last 40 years? Doctoral thesis. Warsaw: Faculty of Psychology, University of Warsaw.


