

## Decentering Design - Practice in a More-than-human World

## Conserving Nature, Including Humans Gert De Keyser

Gert De Keyser (BE) is an urban and holistic nature expert for the Flemish Agency for Nature and Forest (ANB). He now holds the position of director of Urban Nature & Nature Fabric Planning and of the movement called 'Cities Thinking (and acting) Like a Forest'. In this role, he leads the project to explore the future evolution of nature development in urbanised areas. The project is developing a novel methodology, and its current conceptualisation is centred around more-than-human concepts and practices, which diverge from conventional nature conservation approaches. To this end, he introduced the term human-inclusive nature into policy. Due to this unique perspective, we sought Gert De Keyser's insights to introduce us to the project.

### Cities thinking like a forest

In Flanders, Belgium, the Agency for Nature and Forest (ANB) introduced *Nature Conservation Plans* in 2017, aiming to assist site managers in promoting and supporting nature conservation objectives. These plans empower managers to articulate their conservation goals by choosing from four different plan-types, which vary in ambition of conservation. Site managers must adhere to the strict rules that correspond to their chosen type, and the ANB, acting as the overseeing body, provides subsidies to support these plans. These plans bring strict targets embedded within conventional nature science approaches originating from an ideal vision on nature.

This way of working is a tremendous step forwards as it gives agency to site managers, both private and public, to decide on their nature conservation objective independently. Yet while effective for sites solely or primarily dedicated to nature, these plans fall short in activating the potential of more complex, multi-use sites, such as private estates, rural areas, peripheral parks, and entire cities. This shortfall stems from a mismatch between the nature conservation targets which are fixed in the conservation plans and the specific images of idealistic those targets

promote, with the reality of these sites. The idealistic images are more suitable for preservation in more 'pristine' environments, but quickly become too rigid when applied to 'non-pristine' conditions. The targets and images impose uniform requirements on sites that are much more multifaceted and dynamic than traditional conservation areas. People also relate to these places in more complex ways than the traditional conservation prism allows for. Therefore imposing these targets and images on these sites risks alienating people from conservation and negating humans as a species.

This reveals a problem within Western society, in relation to what we believe nature to be. We approach nature as separate from the day-to-day human activities and hence separate from the developments needed to facilitate those day-to-day activities. We act as if nature is found on one side of a fence and that the other side is devoid of nature. Many nature conservation organisations across Europe, and the conservation legislations and subsidies they create, consequently only focus on one side of that fence: it's either going to be 'maximally natural' or they're not going to bother at all. It is a top-down and sectoral approach in which the expertise of these organisations is enforced on certain sites and completely absent in others. It creates clarity and specific responsibilities while negating the many ambiguities that exist in reality. I am exaggerating to make a point, but this is what happens.

This begs the question: Why isn't a governmental nature conservation agency actively engaged in all spatial development projects, regardless of the supposed 'pristineness' of nature, collaborating with stakeholders to ensure that these developments enhance natural systems in the region? Why not think about how all planned infrastructure could interact with natural processes in a given area? Could we for instance imagine that a planned bike lane through an old floodplain on the edge of the city would be allowed

simply to flood during moments of peak rainfall? When flooded, humans would be unable to use the lane, raising awareness of the water system in their region while giving ecological processes the needed space to enter into more urbanised areas. Because of the very limited views of what nature is, and how it relates to us, this integrated approach is often overlooked.

These two interconnected issues – prioritising idealised nature types over the reality on the ground and the subsequent minimal engagement of nature conservation organisations in areas deviating from these ideals – led a small group of peers to reflect on our approach. Leaving nature policy only to conservation organisations is a missed opportunity. There is more nature and *other nature* than currently considered and valued. Our group believes it is therefore necessary to approach nature from a new, holistic policy perspective in order to realise then needed turnaround to address the current ecological and societal crisis.

This reflection resulted in the initiation of an innovation project, ‘urban nature’ focusing on exploring these challenges in urban and peripheral areas. This endeavour gave rise to the conceptualization of *Natuurweefselplanning*, loosely translated as ‘Nature Fabric Planning’ (NFP).

### Nature fabric planning

In NFP, we perceive nature as a dynamic, co-creative <sup>p 14</sup> process where humans and other-than-humans continually coevolve through mutual influence and construction: a social-ecological community that forms the rich tapestry of nature. Like any fabric, a natural fabric is ideally composed of a mosaic of physical (grey, green and blue) and non-physical elements (processes and relationships). In combination, they form the basis for a bio-diverse living community of human and non-human individuals. Within this perspective, nature conservation is seen as a collective effort and potential to let this social-ecological community prosper. It involves a continuous, collective learning process that (re)defines situated local issues, objectives, research questions, problem perspectives, methods, interpretations, nature valuations, conclusions, and potential actions. NFP can be understood as a process that empowers us, humans, to participate actively and constructively in this social-ecological community.

‘Nature Fabric Planning’ aims to introduce an open process as a methodology where human-included nature and local knowledge and dynamics are central in a horizontal reciprocal relationship with policy. This requires a thorough transdisciplinary approach. This

means starting from the research phenomenon of the disciplines and the local social-ecological potential, not from the discipline itself or from a generalised view of nature. On the contrary, one looks for individuals who have the best methods and techniques to recognise the phenomenon better, without regard to the discipline to which they belong. The result is a group of persons from different disciplines or fields of interest who bring together all their skills and research methods understand the phenomenon better.

This conceptualisation of nature and nature conservation has significant implications for our approach, as the social-ecological community becomes the central focus of any nature conservation initiative. While we have a preliminary idea of how NFP can function in practice, we plan to initiate a few pilot projects to test the concept further. These pilot projects aim to help us assess whether changes in legislation are necessary and how the governance and financial models could effectively operate.

The current blueprint for NFP introduces three interrelated areas of focus which need to be addressed iteratively: the construction of a social-ecological community, the development of a ‘holistic nature narrative’, and the establishment of a governance model. Those fields entail the recognition of the more-than-human community in a specific neighbourhood, the belief that this community can be inspired to formulate its vision, and the understanding that a certain framework is essential to initiate and guide this process. While theoretically simple, this idea has important and largely unexplored practical consequences.

### Room of entanglement

A primary consequence is the need to redefine the role of the agency I represent. The ANB has traditionally functioned as the legislative, regulatory, and funding body, wielding expertise in ecological

processes and nature conservation during spatial transformation processes, in essence speaking for nature in a top-down manner. This approach needs reassessment for two distinct reasons.

First, it is crucial to recognise that the expertise held by ANB is of a particular kind, and other forms of expertise also exist. For instance, a local resident might possess unique knowledge about a specific animal in their neighborhood, or an artist might be adept at working with a particular plant or ecological process. In other scientific fields, such as anthropology and urban ecology, there are different ways of looking at the living environment, and what is understood as nature.

Second, the role and position of experts within a transformation process must be scrutinised. Experts are often consulted in isolation or assigned specific, confined responsibilities. Merging the insights of different sectors separately does not inherently result in a successful project. I strongly advocate for transdisciplinary processes that emphasise discussion and debate.

Consequently, we suggest a hybrid bottom-linked governance model—a type of democratic governance crafted between social innovative initiatives, activists, their diverse and dynamic multi-scale networks, and governmental institutions and agencies. This model aims to harness the energy and commitment of various actors involved by establishing an open and empowering setting. It envisions a kind of ‘freespace’ or a ‘room of entanglement’, where stakeholders from different backgrounds within a region collaborate, blending the distinct qualities each participant brings. The responsibility for creating such an environment lies with the governing body, as I believe the government’s strength lies precisely in establishing frameworks and operational structures.

Within this freespace, it is crucial for local considerations to emerge and be acknowledged as valid by all participants. Achieving this is no simple task; it poses a challenge to transform these considerations into something constructive by integrating them with the broader ecological principles and landscape processes of the region. Yet, I consider this integration to be pivotal when addressing a community undergoing a transformative process. The community should generate the questions, explore potential paths, and devise possible answers. The energy of the community, coupled with the government’s ability to harness that energy, will determine the success of turning the process into a productive endeavour.

A vital component for steering activities within that freespace, and ensuring a link between individual or local considerations and broader ecological issues, is the engagement of a guiding figure. If we employ a bit of imagination, this figure could be understood as a ceremonial coach, facilitating the bottom linked community through their transformative journey. They play a crucial role in community decision-making, discerning when external expertise is necessary or when certain proposals lack representation of the social-ecological community as a whole. Ideally, this person and/or team does not necessarily have exceptionally extensive knowledge about the region, stakeholders and ecological processes, but is open and knows how to facilitate transdisciplinary connections and transmutations with respect and attention to mutual humility regarding different perspectives.

In our present proposal, the background of the *coach* remains unspecified. It’s conceivable from one standpoint that ANB would provide that profile, considering our role as initiators of this approach. However, as our institution is also an ecological expert in the NFP process, assuming the coach role might pose challenges from that perspective. Furthermore, ensuring equal ownership of NFP among stakeholders complicates the selection of a representational coach. The role’s significance in our current conceptualisation of NFP can be viewed as a potential risk; its success may vary. Nevertheless, I see this as reflective of a core ideology of NFP: placing trust in individuals, who, with a proper framework, can cultivate the capacity to positively influence their social-ecological community.

### Holistic nature narratives

Another significant outcome is the alteration in the timing, location, and authorship of ‘holistic nature narrative’ development. In conventional

procedures, nature conservation objectives are typically predefined, and either the government or the site owner determines the goals to pursue. This represents a relatively top-down and expert-driven approach. A fundamental concept in NFP is to empower the ‘holistic nature community’ to shape its own nature images and narratives and set its own objectives.

NFP prompts the community to question conventional narratives critically. In *Asiat Park*, one of our early testing sites in Vilvoorde, a municipality bordering Brussels Capital Region, the Belgian-Italian artist Luca Vanello informed the local community with site-specific artwork. *Asiat Park* is a former military site that has been derelict for many years, giving way to all kinds of spontaneous ecological and social processes. The municipality bought the site with an eye to redeveloping it, yet gradually decided to let the redevelopment be steered by bottom-up initiatives. Given past disturbances connected to human activities, pioneering species such as the willow are abundantly present on the site. Vanello gathers willow prunings to craft sculptures. This artistic process fosters unconventional collaborations within the community, involving entities such as green management, neighbours, interested creative people, various other-than-human actors and the artist. In another testing location, we collaborated with a wild herb and plant foraging expert, introducing the concept of utilising foraged items for cooking while highlighting the existing diversity. Embracing these practices requires a degree of openness. While there may be no immediate learning outcomes or specific goals in these collaborations, they pave the way for new perspectives and cooperative dynamics to emerge within the holistic nature community.

These artistic methods also contribute to guaranteeing the inclusiveness of the emerging social-ecological narratives. They bring in more poetic elements and highlight alternative voices. We’ve experimented with techniques to gain a deeper understanding of the perspectives of other-than-human individuals. This includes activities like role-playing exercises or on-site theatre performances. Can these practices aid us in grasping the experience of being an animal and thereby accentuate considerations from that animal’s point of view? Personally, I find it challenging to entirely avoid superficiality and artificiality in these endeavors.

I advocate approaching the challenge of representativeness by delving into our own human perspectives. Uncovering the stories we, as humans, hold within the holistic nature community we inhabit reveals the diverse ways we engage with that community. Sharing these

narratives can be inspirational for others, with small stories serving as possible catalysts for change. Consider a multicultural and intergenerational neighbourhood where a segment of the community uses small walkways and backdoors to facilitate access for neighbours and healthcare workers assisting less mobile elderly residents. This could spur the creation of a more resilient pathway system, fostering intercultural interactions. The coach could expand this narrative by emphasising the significance of these informal paths for other-than-human individuals, contributing to the development of a holistic narrative developing multi-species pathways in the neighbourhood. It is crucial to document these stories and transform them into narratives that encompass multiple species, fostering a sense of community.

Ultimately, we need to go beyond providing datasets for climate scientists and biologists focusing on biodiversity. It revolves around establishing a framework that enables individuals to recognise the diverse community of species they belong to and enable these individuals to discover ways to enhance the flourishing of this multiple and layered sense of community.





Fig. 42





Fig. 43



Fig. 44

Fig. 45

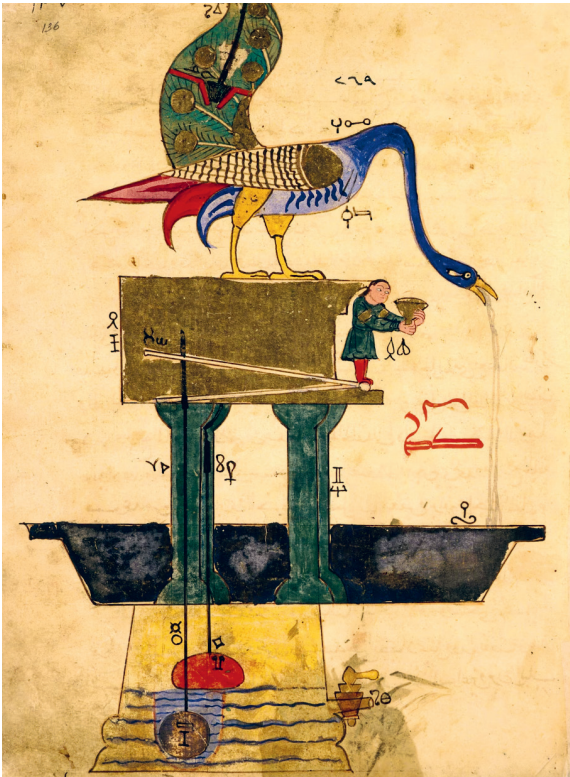


Fig. 46



Fig. 47