

Framing the Flood: Discourse, Control, and the Reimagining of Nature in Dutch Water Management

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1. Abstract

This thesis explores how Dutch infrastructural interventions—particularly those relating to flood defence—have been shaped not only by material concerns but by the language, assumptions, and narratives surrounding them. Focusing on three moments of infrastructural decision-making—1960, 1976, and 2018—it traces the development of discourse around nature, control, and human responsibility.

The research examines post-1953 Delta Works, revealing how flood safety was framed as a matter of rational mastery. While ecological effects were mostly overlooked or reinterpreted in financial terms, engineers were imagined national heroes. This framing persisted through to the mid-1970s, even as protests emerged and ecological awareness grew.

Drawing on a range of sources—including governmental reports, parliamentary debates, and newspapers—the thesis examines how acknowledgment for ecological concerns slowly increased, but was never truly independent from a controlling, top-down approach. Even in seemingly restorative decisions, such as the reopening of the Haringvliet sluices in 2018, nature was granted a role under strict parameters—constantly monitored and managed to fit human demands.

Rather than a straightforward shift from control to co-constitution, the thesis suggests a more subtle reconfiguration: in which the language of responsibility and guardianship continues to mask the systems of human dominance. This framing not only influences policy but reflects broader cultural assumptions about who is 'permitted' agency. What emerges is a need to think more carefully about what it means to share space—both ecologically and discursively.

2. Introduction

On November 15th, 2018, the sluices of the Haringvliet were reopened, the sea water mixing with the fresh water for the first time since the dam was completed and closed in 1971. The Haringvliet sluices form a part of the Delta Works in the Netherlands, the main line of defence against the age-old “enemy” of the Dutch: water. Over the decades, the ecological impacts on the estuary had become progressively more apparent, including the migration of fishes and sedimentation effects (Quak, 2016) (Tönis et al., 2002). Though presented as a human-made environmental achievement, signifying our reconnecting with nature, the change in policy also implied a submission in a certain sense. Relying on the assumed control over nature revealed this confidence in our position was misplaced, the adaptation suggesting a more complicated and dynamic system between human and nonhuman agents.

The Dutch Delta Works was for the most part designed and constructed in response to the North Sea Flood in 1953. The flood had reiterated the vulnerability of the Netherlands, made all the more pertinent considering an increasingly urbanized and high density population. Though having started on planning repairs, reinforcements and additions to the flood defence infrastructure before the flood, it was only after the disaster that an urgency was felt towards finding a more permanent solution. This attitude was indicative of the broader 20th-century ambition to control nature through large-scale infrastructure projects. In the case of the Netherlands, Dutch engineers designed a system of dams, dykes, storm surge barriers and sluices that were supposed to provide absolute protection against flooding (Wesselink et al., 2007). These water defense projects however, have led to various unintentional ecological effects in the Delta such as the disappearance of species (Nienhuis, 1978) (Nienhuis & Smaal, 1994), changes in morphology (Tönis et al., 2002) and salination (Deggeller, 2021). These ecological changes were subsequently followed by the adaptive responses of reopening the Haringvliet sluices and the redesign of the East Schelde Storm Surge Barrier, opposing the idea of a rigid, structured control over nature. This thesis seeks to explore how these adaptations and unintended ecological effects challenge the anthropogenic idea of absolute flood control.

Initially, the Delta Works were used to represent the pinnacle of Dutch hydraulic engineering, with early assessments, such as by Stuvell (1956), painting a picture of humans being triumphant in the battle against nature. However, the focus of scholars started to shift in the 1970's amidst growing ecological concerns, becoming increasingly involved in addressing the unintended ecological consequences of the human-made infrastructure (Brouwer, 2015) (Disco, 2002) (Lintsen, 2002) (Van Der Brugge & Rotmans, 2006).

Research has been done on ecological consequences, for instance the effects on specific fauna (Tulp et al., 2023), but little has been done to study these consequences through the lens of nature's agency. Furthermore, studies on post-construction adaptations, such as R. Brouwer & Van Ek (2004) and Verburg et al. (2012), tend to focus predominantly on assessing the effectiveness of the policies and the extent of the ecological impact, rather than considering how these adaptations challenge the very idea of absolute flood control. This research attempts to bridge the gap between technocratic planning and environmental unpredictability by examining the unintended ecological effects that forced adaptation, revealing the limits of a rigid approach to infrastructure. Placing this within the framework of the Anthropocene, it considers how non-human forces complicate the presupposed notions about the management of water in the Netherlands.

This paper examines how the Delta Works' unintended ecological effects have influenced the discourse surrounding flood control by considering three key moments: the Delta-commission

releasing their final report, 1960; the approving of the storm surge barrier plan, 1976; the reopening of the Haringvlietdam in 2018. Using both archival sources, such as historical policy documents and newspaper articles, and ecological reports, the chapters aim to track the objective sequence of events and the corresponding discourse. Finally, the conclusion reflects on how the unintended ecological effects and subsequent adaptations challenge the idea of human control and what this might mean for the future.

3. Delta-commission's final report, 1960

Directly after the flood in 1953 the government appointed the Delta-commission, a group of experts tasked with reviewing the possibilities regarding a (re)new(ed) flood defence system. By 1954, the commission had released a series of statements offering advice on key interventions, including damming Delta tributaries, expanding dikes, and modifying the IJssel river. These recommendations formed the basis for what became the Delta Plan.

The Delta-commission's report, introduced by A.G. Maris, who chaired the commission and was director-general of the Department of Waterways and Public Works, opens with a metaphor comparing civil engineers to doctors—'general practitioners of the country', who treat ailments when they come up and analyse, diagnose and provide preventive remedies. Though it could be interpreted as implying the sea, or in fact nature itself, is such an ailment, it seems Maris is indicating the lacking or lacklustre infrastructure is the ailment. This is corroborated by the language throughout the report, which maintains a humble and grave undertone.

The goal is, of course, not merely to make plans or to construct works for their own sake, but rather to minimize the existing damages and dangers as much as possible. Both the damages and the dangers are very great, and "aux grands maux les grands remèdes" (to great evils, great remedies). As the Delta Committee rightly says: it is a necessity. (Maris et al., 1956, p. 13)

The authors also refrain from making any specific predictions and continuously point out the gaps in knowledge presented. Though, of note are the concerns pertaining to the Delta-plan, of which the two main points discussed in the report are erosion and salinization, not given more attention than two sentences each. So, on the surface, the commission maintains an image of humble civil engineers treating the damaged flood defences of the Netherlands. Yet, by using this metaphor, it is seemingly implied that the 'disease' is 'curable', hinting at the belief that there are working solutions, or 'remedies' (Maris et al., 1956).

The Delta-commission's final report was released in 1960, including the interim advices and prior research. The report goes to quite a length to describe the full scope of the findings, consisting of 177 pages. According to this report "the effects of closing the estuaries will primarily be felt in the shellfish cultures" (Maris et al., 1961), a perspective that underscores the commission's focus points. Throughout the report, consisting of approximately 92.240 words, there is not one mention of "nature" and 84 mentions of "fish-", of which all 84 are related to or preclude the word "fishing". The commission presents these already sparsely mentioned effects on fauna exclusively in a commercial context, that of the fishing industry. The only mention of "eco-" in the entire document is when used as a prefix to "economy", which exemplifies the scope of the considerations in-/excluded in the report (Maris et al., 1961).

In verbatim reports of governmental debates and assemblies the discussion was almost

exclusively limited to either 1) emphasizing the gravity of the situation and need for safety, 2) praising the commission and engineers, 3) considering the priority and the allocation of funds, or 4) questioning the agency and power given to the Department of Waterways and Public Works through its autonomy. The financial aspect was especially prevalent in the discussions, such as in the 39th meeting of the senate in 1958¹ and the 12th meeting of the house of representatives in 1957². If ecological effects were mentioned, it was often used as a sidenote, as seen in the 33rd meeting of the senate in 1955:

By the way, natural beauty is also threatened by other measures. The implementation of the Delta Plan will result in the loss of resting places for ducks that stay on the Zeeland and South Holland islands during the winter months, with far-reaching consequences for the global population of these species. Nevertheless, this will not prevent us from carrying out this plan if it is necessary for the safety of our country. (W.L. de Vos van Steenwijk)³

Even in the 1956 verbatim report of the draft 'Delta-law' bill⁴, only two paragraphs of the total 25 pages cover the consequences to nature, even then regarding the recreational purposes of nature rather than the nature itself. Besides being the only mention of nature between multiple verbatim reports, the aforementioned quote also directly admits giving priority to safety over 'nature', something which is echoed throughout the discourse at the time.

Besides official policy and governmental reports, the Delta-plan was subject to extensive coverage in both regional and national newspapers. Initially, in the months after the 1953 flood, journalists and experts alike brought up questions about responsibility and blame for the insufficient defensive capacity of the flood defence infrastructure ("Aanleg van Terpen Is Gewenst", 1953) ("Ingenieurs Bespreken de Oorzaken en Gevolgen van de Watersnood", 1953). These questions, however, did not amount to pointing fingers in any specific direction.

The focus slowly started shifting more towards the present and future challenges of the Delta-plan. Topics discussed in governmental debates start reflecting more in the articles, such as the expected costs of the Delta-plan and, in particular, who shoulders that financial burden. This was often accompanied questioning the centralization of powers towards the Department of Waterways and Public Works, as seen in the newspaper 'de Volkskrant' on March 18th ("Debat Over Bevoegdheden Bij Noodvoorziening Dijkherstel", 1953).

Newspapers published few articles dedicated to the environmental effects of the suggested plans. Of the 2.120 newspapers making mention of "Delta-plan", only 55 were found to contain the term "nature", and no use of "ecological" or "environmental" for that matter (Delpher » Kranten, Boeken & Tijdschriften, 2025). Having said that, the few articles mentioning "nature" actually make note of the effects of the suggested works on a broader understanding of nature than the shellfish and fishing cultures.

Even this limited conservation was weighed against "the safety of the polders, villages, and cities in western Netherlands", stating that safety "must outweigh the interests of nature conservation." ("Deltaplan Wijzigt Karakter van Grote Natuurgebieden", 1954). Another article in *Het Parool* on January 20th, 1955, echoes this sentiment after presenting the ecological concerns raised, by saying "In biological terms, this means a significant impoverishment. However, when it comes to the safety of our country, no objections can be raised against the Delta Plan." ("Uitvoering Deltaplan Betekent

¹ *Handelingen I 1957/58*, 4167, p. 3289-3333.

² *Handelingen II 1957/58*, 4167, p. 3019-3066.

³ *Handelingen I 1954/55*, 3700, p. 408-409.

⁴ *Kamerstukken II 1955/56*, 4167, p. 1-25 (W II).

Verarming Aan Natuurschoon", 1955). The concerns, though considering a broader sense of nature, remained relatively superficial. This is exemplified by an article published in 'De Tijd' on March 20th, 1956: "Three different considerations apply to securing a nature reserve: a scientific purpose, preservation of landscape beauty, and recreational opportunities." ("Vijftig Jaar Behoud van Natuurmonumenten", 1956). Nature was seemingly still viewed as a tool rather than it's own entity with it's own agency.

Another side to the discourse was pride or confidence, bordering on arrogance. H.J. Stuvet, a journalist specialized in water management and engineering, wrote about the Delta-plan in the book 'Het Deltaplan; de geboorte' in 1956, describing the context and the plans. Stuvet's book uses strong language, almost provocative, when talking about the plans and humanity's position in relation to the sea. According to Stuvet, "We have only recently gained the upper hand. However, all signs indicate that humanity will rapidly increase this advantage in the near future." (1956).

It seems he, quite conclusively, claims humans are in control. It is implied through specific terminology this control was hard fought for through the framing of the sea as an antagonistic force with which humans are battling with. Terms such as "grasp of the sea", "attack", "attacking capabilities", "endangering", "battle", "occupation", "arch-rival" and "invasion" provoke a sense of danger or even despair. This confidence in the Delta-plan was not exclusive to Stuvet, though, as seen in other books, such as the quote "If our dike builders were given free rein, they would be capable of damming off the Channel and draining the Dogger Bank!" (Van der Ham et al., 2018).

Reflections

The broader discourse reflected a confidence in the Delta-commission and the plan they suggested. In fairness, the commission was considered, and was in fact, extremely thorough. This thoroughness makes the lack of consideration of the broader effects on nature all the more noteworthy. *Human* safety was, at this point an indisputable priority when compared to most, if not all, other values. This idea of safety is a recurring theme in many of the governmental sessions, in which there is an explicit acknowledgement of the permanent risk and vulnerability in the face of water⁵. After all, "Economy is the servant, not the master of life. The right to exist comes first." (Van Veen, 1955). Perhaps memory plays a role in this, the disaster of the 1953 flood was recent and still emotionally charged. The use of the specific antagonizing terms by Stuvet is especially interesting considering the relatively fresh memory of the five year German occupation of the Netherlands which ended just over 10 years prior.

Ecological effects were focused primarily on farming, such as the salination of agricultural land. Perhaps more importantly, the effects that were considered did not extend very far into the future. The main concern, safety, is in reality dependant on an incredibly complicated confluence of different parts, and not solved by simply increasing the physical attributes of the flood defences. Technology was advancing like never before and this breakthrough in civil engineering can understandably be seen as cause for celebration, as a tilting of the scales in favour of humanity.⁶

⁵ *Handelingen I 1953/54*, 3200, p. 3227-3258.

⁶ A final reflection is that on the question of blame. Putting the blame on someone begs the question to what degree human effects can actually be ignored: can, knowing what we know now, agency lay exclusively with nature? By looking to blame human error and the importance of human prevention/intervention, do you really ignore nature's agency, or do you then still attribute agency to nature, with humans simply reacting to "subjugation"?

4. Plan for surge barrier approved, 1976

Early public discourse focused on what the flood defences represented and on the engineering feat of the Delta Works. Articles on the first completed Delta Work, the IJssel storm surge barrier, uses an evocative framing of the sea as the antagonist. One such article notes the storm surge barrier “—in dimensions never before executed anywhere in the world—is an impressive testament to the Netherlands’ renewed, heightened, and reinforced vigilance in the fight against the sea.” (“Vijf Jaar Na De Stormvloed Van 1953”, 1958). Opinions on the dam remained superficial, as one minister noted: “One remark concerns the asphalt coverings. ... I would not be in favor of it and would even find it very unfortunate if we had to accept such a burial dam...” (M.A. Geuze)⁷.

Other papers, such as *De Tijd*, speak of a “first victory at the Delta-front” (“Eerste Overwinning Aan Het Deltafront Beklonken”, 1958), situating the “battle” against the sea in a more war-like context, especially effective considering the relative recency of the Second World War, or by directly illustrating the sea as the enemy, as a predator that needed to be held back or even tamed: “Holland’s lowlands safe from the water wolf” (“Hollands Laagvlakte Veilig Voor De Waterwolf”, 1958). This violence was even underscored by A.G. Maris, the Director-General of Rijkswaterstaat. In an article about an interview with Maris, the header itself refers to his role as military commander of the forces of engineering, portraying Maris as the “General of a glorious army, in a land full of trophies of peace” (“Ir. A. G. Maris Ten Afscheid”, 1961). When asked the question “How large is the glorious army you commanded as Director-General?”, Maris seemingly entertains this militaristic approach, recounting both the scale of the organization and its many achievements over the years.

Around the same time, protest had started growing, primarily gaining traction in communities dependant on the East Scheldt. One such community was Yerseke, a small town which housed a significant portion of the oyster and mussel farms and farmers. Although Yerseke experienced a good haul in oysters in 1962, Mayor Willemsen expressed his concern for the upcoming, ‘fatal’, “delta-date” (“Zoet Water Bedreigt Oesters”, 1962). For some, hopes were vested on the development of artificial oyster cultivation, in the face of what seemed to be an inevitable closing of the estuary—highlighting a widespread degree of resignation.

For others, the closure of the dam was an unacceptable conclusion. In 1969, a group of scholars, activists and Zeeland locals established the ‘Studiegroep Oosterschelde’ (Study group East Scheldt). The group released a memorandum, which appealed to the government that they “...be upright enough to weigh your national responsibility against the arguments we place before all your consciences.” (Studiegroep Oosterschelde, 1969, p. 1). The group accused the closure of the dam as being “the most simplistic measure” (p. 1), which ignored any other factors than safety. Concerns included eutrophication, loss of biodiversity and further pollution through anthropogenic instigators. Furthermore, cost comparisons between extending the dike system and the Delta Works suggested the moral onus to reconsider lay with the government, appealing through an emotional and moral discourse. These concerns were further publicized by J. Loeff in the article “Must the East Scheldt be closed?” (Redactie Zeeuwse Ankers, n.d.). Loeff uses strong environmental and moral language, such as referring to the effects as “destruction” and suggesting the outcome of a “desert of polluted...water” (“Bezwaren Tegen Onderdelen Deltaplan”, 1969).

A 1970 newspaper article reported the Haringliver sluces had been opened, citing J.A. Bakker, saying the “front door is on a chain”. Bakker, Minister of Transport and Public Works at the time, was quoted as saying “there were plenty of people who said they were afraid we might actually

⁷ *Handelingen* | 1957/58, 4167, p. 3289-3334.

close off the East Scheldt too, but no one is doubting we're capable of doing it." ("Voordeur Ligt Aan Ketting", 1970). This quote illustrates the engineering pride felt both by the engineers and the public—ability was not questioned, only intent.

In the early 70s, the Delta Works started seeing more intense protests, though still focused on fishing and recreation, as seen in *Het Vrije Volk* (Robijns, 1971). Bijker and Puentes (1993/2002) corroborate these reports and movements, which used moral and populist language, resulted in the public being deeply divided. Though divisive, the position that the closure was inevitable was widely reflected throughout public discourse, with articles—such as *de Volkskrant* ("Zoet Water Bedreigt Oesters", 1962)—reporting on the plans to cope with the various effects of the closed estuary, rather than questioning the very fact that the estuary was supposed to close. This assumption is in line with the government's position at the time. Up to this point, the government had mostly dismissed the concerns. Minister M.W. Schakel of the A.R.P. noted "...that the target cooperatives...have left no doubt in a report, ... that they believe the closure of the Oosterschelde must proceed from their position of responsibility. My parliamentary group shares this stance." (M.W. Schakel)⁸.

An important shift came with the "Keerpunt 1972: Regeerakkoord van de progressieve drie" (Turning point 1972: Coalition agreement of the progressive three). The coalition communicated the intention to halt the closure of the dam and to investigate the alternatives, such as a storm surge barrier (PvdA et al., 1972). Amidst ongoing protests, such as the demonstrations in Bergen op Zoom (Kloppers, 1973), the popularity of the progressive coalition grew, eventually being elected and installed on May 11th, 1973. Opposition nevertheless remained.

The new government oversaw halting the closure of the dam, later proposing a compromise: the partially closing of the East Scheldt by way of a storm surge barrier. This suggestion culminated in the House of Representative debates on the 19th and 20th of November, 1974. Themes discussed were costs, environmental effects, fishing, safety and durability of the dam. Notably, the language used exemplifies the polarization at the time. The debate saw ministers referring to "your" government when addressing the government, strongly insinuating that they shifted that responsibility off their own shoulders and onto the 'side' they opposed. Though met with strong opposition, political opinion appeared to be shifting away from the plan of complete closure⁹. In the next session, on the following day, minister M.W. Schakel of the A.R.P.—in opposition to the government's proposal—put forward a motion to continue with the closure of the dam. Another supporter of the closure stated that "Man is the crown jewel of creation." (H. van Rossum, S.G.P., 1974, p. 1424)¹⁰. This statement clearly prioritizes humans above non-human actors, directly referencing humanity's place in the world hierarchy. Schakel's motion, however, did not pass, and as a result, the government's proposal was accepted, albeit with caution¹¹.

The decision got mixed reception with the inhabitants of Zeeland. After the vote passed the *Algemeen Dagblad* published an article comprised of interviews with numerous "people behind the dike" (Ten Houten, 1974). The interviews indicated the topic was sensitive, with multiple recounting the lives lost and the dangers requiring response, others displaying fear for the pollution that the closing of the estuary would result in. The article underscored the divide between values of the individual: safety from floods versus safety from environmental effects.

Due to the many doubts raised by both sides, as the compromise did not completely satisfy

⁸ *Handelingen II 1972/73*, 10728, p. 834.

⁹ *Handelingen II 1974/75*, nr. 12968, p. 1341-1511.

¹⁰ *Handelingen II 1974/75*, 12449, p. 1395-1442.

¹¹ *Handelingen II 1974/75*, 12449, p. 1395-1442.

either, a report was drafted in 1976. It suggested the plan to build the storm surge barrier would be continued if it met all three critical conditions—technical condition; time condition; financial condition. T.E. Westerterp states in the document: “If one or more of these conditions are not met, then the East Scheldt will be closed off in accordance with the original Delta Plan.” (1976, p. 1)¹². Finally, during the debate on June 23rd, 1976, a majority voted in favour of the plans meeting the critical conditions, enabling the government to proceed with the storm surge barrier¹³. Still, the barrier—and in extension the government—would continue to be scrutinized on the basis of cost overruns and specific tidal opening size.

Reflections

Throughout the years from 1960 until 1976, the importance of ecology grew in consideration of policy. A large part of this was a result of the information revealed through the then-increasing number of completed Delta Work projects. Environmental activists and local stakeholders now began to gain access to hard data, further enabling them to back up their claims about the detrimental societal, ecological and financial effects of the projects. Yet, in this awareness, there lacked a consideration of nature as an “agent” itself—or the very agency of nature, for that matter—or a consideration of humans as mere constituents rather than the singular agents of change.

Though the beginning cannot be pinpointed to any singular point in time, the very first protests can be traced back to the late 1950s and early 1960s—this is simplifying the process, however, as the Delta plans were suggested decades before the flood of 1953 and were faced with protests from the start, albeit in preliminary form. Protest, as with every action, is not an independent decision but rather a confluence of histories, prejudices, emotions, and so much more.

“Creative politics and innovative civil engineering were such visible elements of the success that later accounts seriously underplayed the significant ecological challenges involved” (Disco, 2002). These successes assumed such a representational role that they appeared to become reality. When modelling a prediction for the future based on this representation, inevitably situated in the past and present, it seems the solutions to a problem are limited to ‘proven’ prior systems, quickly disregarding an ever-changing context.

5. Reopening Haringvlietdam, 2018

Instead of a quick embrace of ecological restoration, what followed was decades of delay, discussion, and partial adaptation. Examining the period from 1976 up to the re-opening of the Haringvliet in 2018, this chapter considers how the discourse around nature, control, and care shifted.

From the late 1970s, unexpected cost overruns lead to concerns being raised about the direction the projects were headed financially. The costs were often weighed directly against the “wonder” of Dutch engineering. Evocative titles of newspaper articles suggest the comparison lay not between costs and safety, but rather between the costs and the image of technological prowess; the representational power of the quality of Dutch engineering seemingly taking precedence. Additionally, articles often used language comparable to what Stuvet used 25 years prior, once more referring to the “water-wolf” and claiming “no sea [is] too high”, underscoring a remarkable confidence (Van Dijk & Rozendaal, 1982).

¹² *Handelingen II 1975/76*, 12449, nr. 25, p. 1-5.

¹³ *Handelingen II 1975/76*, 12449, nr. 25, p. 4839-4996.

The period post-completion, late-1980s, early-1990s, experienced a growing acknowledgement of increasingly noticeable ecological effects. This was especially the case for relatively older structures such as the Haringvlietdam, having been completed 25 years prior, now facing challenges of salinity and pollution ("Dag Delta?", 1991). Intending to address these effects, the Minister of Transport and Public Works released a report proposing to "implement adjusted discharge regimes" for the Haringvliet sluices so as to "reduce barriers for migratory fish"¹⁴. Experiments testing this restoration effort took place four years later, showing promising results regarding both reactions in fauna and the predicted movement of saline water.

Ruys: '...Controlling that spread — that's what it was all about for us.'...Even though the final report will only be released this autumn, Mado Ruys already dares to conclude that the process is manageable: 'We did not measure salt in places where we did not expect it. The saltwater did not spread uncontrollably. Apparently, we are fairly capable of predicting in advance how far the saltwater will penetrate. (Van Wijk, 1994)¹⁵

In the same report, the Minister of Transport and Public Works suggests "drafting a development outline with a corresponding action plan for the river area and implementing 'Ooievaar' pilot projects."¹⁶ The 'Ooievaar' project set out a framework that integrated ecological restoration and spatial planning, with the aim of giving rivers more room to flood, producing self-regenerating natural landscapes (Westra, 1987). At that time, consideration of nature was more comprehensive than ever, but still only limited to the direct, short-term effects.

Rhine and Meuse floods in 1993 and 1995 showcased "The Netherlands does not understand it's rivers" (Peetoom, 1995), with another article stating that dikes "form an obstacle in the water" ("Evacueren burgers op vrijwillige basis komt op gang in Limburg", 1993). The government was prompted to re-evaluate the flood defences, eventually taking the shape of a new plan, based on the same principles of 'Plan Ooievaar': Room for the River. After receiving official designation through the house of representatives in 2001¹⁷, the plans were unanimously approved by both the house of representatives¹⁸ and the senate¹⁹. Along with reopening the Haringvliet sluice, this approval signifies a shift in the political position towards nature, requiring better understanding so as to negotiate with nature, rather than control. Still, the nature of these negotiations contained a subliminal bias...

In protecting nature, humans assume a position of 'guardianhood', through which a hierarchal relation is asserted. On multiple occasions, the final Room for the River report, published in 2007, uses wording strongly accentuating this position of power. For one, nature is framed as a challenge to bring in line, and humans as responsible for designing and enforcing a response: "The government aims to bring the required safety level in the river area into alignment ... through a good mix of spatial and technical measures." (Ministerie van Verkeer en Waterstaat, 2007, p. 4). The report goes on to state "... improvement of spatial quality should make the river area more attractive and livable." (Ministerie van Verkeer en Waterstaat, 2007, p. 5), underscoring nature as a means

¹⁴ *Kamerstukken II 1989/90*, 21250, nr. 3, p. 56 (NV II).

¹⁵ The language used by Mado Ruys explicitly presents the intent, and perceived capacity, to control natural processes. More subversively, the article and included interview highlights the lack of political urgency behind the sought-after restoration. Though rushing plans tends to quickly lead to failures in the long run, as mentioned in an article by B. Van der Velden (1991) criticizing the Delta-plan, a crises can catalyse explosive change.

¹⁶ *Kamerstukken II 1989/90*, 21250, nr. 3, p. 55 (NV II).

¹⁷ *Handelingen II 2001/01*, 18106, nr. 74, p. 4878.

¹⁸ *Handelingen II 2005/06*, 30080, nr. 4, p. 6087.

¹⁹ *Handelingen I 2006/07*, 30080, nr. 14, p. 559-575.

to an end—humans providing conditional protection through aesthetics and functionality.

The period between 2000 and 2011 exemplifies the doubts and delays surrounding the reopening of the Haringvliet, or the “Kierbesluit”. Established in 2000, a report stipulated the reopening of the sluices was to take effect in 2005 (*Stcrt.* 2000, 110, p. 10). In 2004, however, the deadline was delayed to 2010 due to the research taking longer than expected (*Stcrt.* 2004, 254, p. 10). In 2007, as a result of legal challenges and land acquisition taking longer than expected, the deadline was yet again pushed forward, this time to 2010 (*Stcrt.* 2007, 248, p. 49). Then, a month before the deadline in 2010, the newly elected government stated they would be withdrawing from the plan altogether, as the project was too expensive and did not align politically with the new coalition agreement²⁰. However, as the plans had been constituted in collaboration with neighbouring countries and was dependant on international agreements, the withdrawal was met with opposition²¹. This, amongst a number of other factors such as costs being cheaper than expected, led to the definitive decision in 2011²² to continue with the “Kierbesluit” (Van der Laan & Marijnissen, 2011).

In the months leading up to the official opening of the sluices in 2019, articles continued to strongly imply, or even directly assure the public, that humans were in control. An article in BN/DeStem mentions the sluices will function according to the “Kierbesluit”, which “stipulates that the sluices will still close if the rivers supply too little water. The drier it is, the less the sluices will open.” (Van Dongen, 2018). Humans are then, regardless of what nature does, in a position to adjust the infrastructure according to the human-centred requirements. Others state the “herring is waiting for/in front of the sluice” (Leidsch Dagblad, 2018) or “nature rejoices, de sluices are opening” (Nuiten, 2018), portraying nature as static and dependant on human resolution. One of the most explicit mentions of human control is by Rijkswaterstaat, as published in AD/Rivierenland:

... Rijkswaterstaat will conduct numerous studies to determine the exact effects of the opening of the Haringvliet sluices....This knowledge will lead to a new operational regime for the Haringvliet sluices, which... will serve not only water safety, freshwater supply, and water levels, but also nature. (Rubio, 2019)

Reflections

The idea of restoring balance is echoed throughout the discourse, but this balance seems to be completely conditional, constantly weighed against effects on humans. Humans are perceived to be in control of this balance, blessed with the responsibility of granting permission for non-human actors to inhabit an allocated space. Even the term ‘making peace’ with nature has its implications. Peace **is—just** as the ‘human’ is—defined by what it is *not*, thus implicitly referencing the battle H.J. Stuvet and other early sources spoke of. Are we, then, in an interbellum period?

It would seem the actions of reopening the sluices or making room for the river reveals a change in perspective. Besides, there is a clear shift in government policies on nature and a significant increase in recognition of ecological effects. And yet, the intentions behind the steps taken seem to have changed little; remaining noticeably human-centred. Interventions are still highly dependant on the demands set by *human* requirements. This is in part due to the perceived passive, or non-existent, agency of nature. The placing of the human at the pinnacle of earth’s evolutionary pyramid is ingrained in society, intrinsically interwoven into our consciousness—and into the idea of

²⁰ *Kamerstukken II* 2010/11, 27625 nr. 174, p. 1-2.

²¹ *Kamerstukken II* 2010/11, 27625 nr. 225, p. 1-7.

²² *Kamerstukken II* 2010/11, 27625 nr. 225, p. 1-7.

consciousness itself. Challenging this notion is one thing, but actually changing the systems in place is unachievable in a lifetime, perhaps it is even impossible. Nonetheless trying, even when subject to questionable intent, can work towards manifesting a form of true symbiosis with nature. Calmthout and Scholtens noted that “We never learn, truly never. They ought to put some sociologists and psychologists on that.” (1995), which could be seen as foreshadowing, for understanding the world and its systems requires an interdisciplinary, intra-active approach.

6. Conclusion

This thesis has traced the shifting ways in which Dutch society has thought about, talked about, and acted upon its relationship with nature through water management. What began as a story of total control—of the Netherlands protecting itself against the sea through mastery and technocratic certainty—gradually unfolded into a far more layered and unsettled narrative.

Across the periods considered, it becomes clear that the language used to frame interventions such as the Delta Works or later ecological restoration efforts like the “Kierbesluit” is rarely neutral. Words like “protection,” “space,” “balance,” and “control” are tangled in assumptions—not just about risk and safety, but about who holds power, who decides, and who acts. While ecological concerns increasingly entered the conversation after 1976, the underlying structure of thought remained: humans are expected to act, intervene, and manage; nature is what is acted upon.

Even in initiatives that present themselves as environmentally progressive, such as Room for the River and the reopening of the Haringvliet sluices, nature is still something that must be permitted, monitored, and managed. These measures are not necessarily insincere or ineffective, nature is welcome, as long as it does not threaten economic certainty or spatial order. Even the terminology of “giving space” to rivers implies that the space belongs to humans in the first place.

What this reveals is not simply a transition from control to care, but a rebranding of control as care. The idea of “guardianhood” over nature—central to the current framing of ecological restoration—suggests responsibility, but also hierarchy. It implies that nature is something dependent, vulnerable, and ultimately unable to act on its own terms. This thesis argues that such a framing, though softened in tone, ultimately continues the legacy of human exceptionalism that shaped the Delta Works era.

By paying attention to discourse—newspaper language, parliamentary phrasing, internal memoranda—this project has tried to show how the cultural and political positioning of nature shifted, and in many ways, did not. The reopening of the Haringvliet sluices in 2018 may have marked a symbolic shift, but the wording still subliminally reflects a system where humans distribute permission rather than share agency.

Every disaster fades. The first generation after the storm surge said: never again. The second said: that may be so, but not at all costs. And the next generations think it simply won't happen again... (Van Calmthout & Scholtens, 1995)

If nature continues to be framed as an object in need of managed protection, rather than as a co-actor in a shared landscape, there is a danger that future adaptation remains stuck in the same logic that made the Delta Works necessary in the first place. Recognizing the interdependence doesn't negate the progress made—it simply asks us to maintain a sensitive and critical perspective when considering our actions.

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