

# Preserving qualities requires choice making

Findings from an expert meeting for *Biesbosch and Land van Heusden en Altena*



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## Opportunities for tourism and recreation?

*"According to many visions and reports everything seems possible in this area, but I only see a big empty space. Nothing actually seems to happen! Is that a pity?"* That question was proposed at the start of the expert meeting on the future of Biesbosch and Land van Heusden en Altena. The meeting was organised at the request of the Gebiedscommissie Wijde Biesbosch. In this joint committee, various organisations collaborate at improving the regional economy, the social vitality and the quality of the living environment. The question for the experts was whether the leisure industry can offer opportunities for development of the region and if so, how to exploit those. Moreover, what other options can be thought of?



Fig. 1: Biesbosch and Land van Heusden en Altena: located between urban areas

We deliberately chose to look at solutions on the long term and not to produce more papers. Therefore, an expert meeting was decided upon, in which specialists explored the regional developments and formulated an opinion in a one-day meeting. We brought together experts from different disciplines who are able to think outside the box. Prior to the meeting, these experts received information on existing plans for the area. During the day, practitioners from the region gave new input on specific topics. In addition, the team paid visits to some entrepreneurs. Armed with this information and these impressions the expert team formulated its findings and presented them to the joint committee at the end of the day. This leaflet contains a summary and the recommendations to the committee, including a proposal for a sequel.

## Introducing the area

The preliminary exploration of the area and the input from practitioners drew up the following picture.

### Location and accessibility

The area of Biesbosch and Land van Heusden en Altena is surrounded by water, forming an island on the borders of the provinces of Gelderland, Zuid-Holland and Noord-Brabant. This area is also a frontier in other aspects, such as the separation between the sandy soil of Brabant and the clay of Holland, the boundary between the Protestant north and Catholic south and the demarcation of liberated and still occupied territory in 1944 (World War II). The area is more emphatically seen as a gate between the busy Randstad and Brabant's ring of towns. In terms of population density, the area is a "white spot" on the map with approximately 54,000 inhabitants spread over 21 villages and hamlets. The A27 motorway is the axis along which the economic and commuter traffic moves between urban areas and that unlocks the area in north-south direction.

## Colophon

On behalf of the Gebiedscommissie Wijde Biesbosch, Regiowaarde had this expert meeting organised by Telos - Tilburg University and Interactive Consult. This leaflet includes the reflections of the expert team on the opportunities for development of the region, and the conversion of the findings into recommendations. It offers the participants tools for the subsequent process. Moreover, with these reflections Regiowaarde provides access to the acquired knowledge and insights for other regions or interested parties.

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A ferry in the west and several ferries and two bridges in the east give additional access and illustrate the (original) isolated location of Biesbosch and Land van Heusden en Altena. Tranquillity and space form an attractive contrast with the surrounding regions.

### **Identity and coherence**

The region has a rich history, which for centuries has been shaped by a variety of outside influences. This has led to a diverse cultural identity that is illustrated by the strict work ethic of Werkendam/Sleeuwijk, the entrepreneurial spirit of Aalburg, the more liberal society in Woudrichem and the more Catholic lifestyle of the inhabitants of Hank and Dussen. Unlike most islands, the population does not see the region as a unity, as traditionally every part of the island preferred to stay in proper contact with the opposite sides of the rivers, rather than with each other. It has been told that many residents still hardly, if ever, visit other villages on the island than their own.

### **Spatial character**

From spatial-geographic perspective, the area is varied and can broadly be characterized as nature (Biesbosch), inhabited river dikes and a rural area with villages within and rivers all-around. The variety of landscapes has similarities like a wide-open space, quietness and plainness. Some think it is boring, as "there is nothing to do". Others highly appreciate this and enjoy the peace and authenticity that one misses elsewhere. Spatial-economically seen, the area can roughly be split in five sections:

- [1] nature in the Biesbosch with prospects for extensive recreation,
- [2] rivers and creeks in Biesbosch for boating and water sports,
- [3] the fortress angle around Woudrichem with touristic attractiveness,
- [4] agriculture in the middle, and
- [5] on the eastern edge businesses in combination with various forms of living and working.

### **Water and nature**

Since the St. Elizabeth's flood in 1421, the battle against the water was a major factor in the development of the area. With the completion of the Delta Works, that battle seemed to have been won. However, the public authorities' program Room for the River drastically intervenes in the spatial planning of the Biesbosch area with the construction of the Kleine en Grote Noordwaard (one of the largest nature development projects in the Netherlands). Farmland has been sacrificed. This is a disadvantage for agriculture, but the nature area will be enlarged and the nature values will increase. Possibly, leisure can piggy-back on the nature development efforts.

### **Shipbuilding and inland shipping**

The developments in inland shipping and yachting offer new economic opportunities. Werkendam and Sleeuwijk have traditionally been focusing on shipbuilding, inland shipping and the dredging industry. In cooperation with the Drechtsteden, they can innovate in transport over water (goods, passengers, recreational transport) and develop new economic drivers (e.g. knowledge) without major environmental impact.

### **Agriculture**

Due to the ongoing increase of scale in agriculture, more farms become vacant. Usually, the land-use remains unchanged agrarian, but for the farm buildings new destinies have to be found, fitting into the landscape and within the municipal land-use plan. Some of the farmers seek additional income in multi-functional farming, which makes the business of the area more diverse. However, this offers no long-term perspectives without a connecting business concept for the whole area.

### **Tourism**

This last finding also applies for the attractiveness of the fortress town of Woudrichem and other cultural-historical locations. Recent initiatives to boost the flow of tourists have proven to be only incremental.

The wish to keep the Sunday rest possibly hinders the development and realisation of large-scale concepts that have a more profound impact on the regional economy. However, Biesbosch does have a substantial amount of visitors, which numbers tend to increase. The actual economic significance of tourism is relatively

small due to a quantitative and qualitative limited offer of accommodation and other recreational facilities.

### **Entrepreneurs**

The entrepreneurial spirit in the area still leads to continued expansion of retail, logistics and agricultural business. Land van Heusden en Altena has the strongest growth of start-ups in the whole of Brabant. At the same time, a number of settled entrepreneurs want to take and finance new initiatives that have spin-off effects to the rest of the region.

### **Administrative cooperation**

Other developments that affect Biesbosch and Land van Heusden en Altena are the increasing administrative partnerships like those of the cities Drechtsteden, the region Alblasterwaard-Vijfheerenlanden and the ROM-municipalities in the mid of Brabant, with among others the Leisure Boulevard project. The three municipalities in Land van Heusden en Altena participate in the inter-municipal cooperation of West-Brabant.

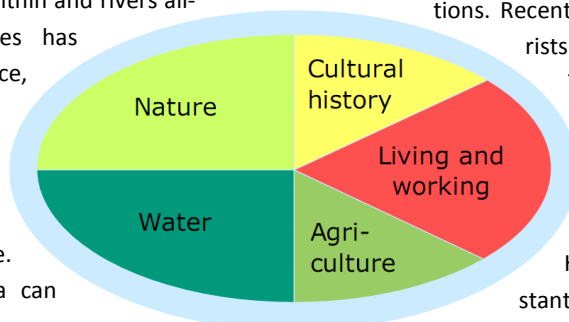


Fig. 2: Spatial-economic characteristics

## Findings: there is a way, but is there a will?

*"If one does not know to which port one is sailing, no wind is favourable" - Seneca*

### About the regional development process

The expert meeting provides a number of clear findings. There are certainly opportunities, but they are not being connected. Vision reports and project plans have been tumbling over for some years now. Several parties are working on plans for various clients. Plans are not only developed for the Biesbosch National Park, but for instance also for the triangle of fortress towns, the New Dutch Waterline, for recreational purposes along river dikes (the so-called project Dijk van een Delta), and for a general touristic-recreational vision for the municipalities. Regional parties are involved, but they seem to be overcome by the developments in the area, rather than them being in the driving seat. Therefore, no real progress is made and the area may drop behind.

However, during the meeting no serious matters have been put forward. That raises the question why this expert meeting for exploring new economic drivers, like leisure, has been initiated. What will go wrong if no initiatives will be taken? Would staying put be an option? It is unclear what the region is aiming at. One might implicitly choose for a standstill. This can be a legitimate option, but only explicit choices provide clarity. That is not easy: it requires alternative options with insight in the consequences and criteria for a proper process of consideration. Further on, we will give 'how to' suggestions. Only after making outspoken choices, determining a strategy is useful.

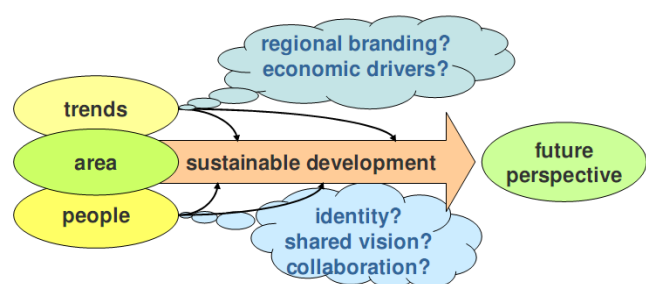


Fig. 3: No feasible economic perspective without choices

### No regional branding

During the expert meeting it becomes clear how economically varied the character of the area is. This diversity offers (economical) resilience and prevents substantial dependence on just one business sector or development. Several parties in the area share an interest, or even desires, to follow the example set by other regions and engage in regional branding and place marketing. However, Biesbosch and Land van Heusden en Altena seem not to be ready yet, despite the large reputation the Biesbosch National Park already has. For being successful with regional branding or place marketing, the demand and supply, and quality of services have to be in order, and more: the

cooperation between entrepreneurs and with public parties have to be well organised. This requires a long-term plan, in which all parties involved have a genuine trust in a positive outcome and are committed to for at least a decade. This can be learned from other regions, national as well as abroad.

### Great impact of cultural identity

For the feasibility of chances for development, not only societal economic trends and the potential of an area are relevant. Though less visible, culture is of vital and even more importance. What are the collective needs of the inhabitants? What unifies them? How will they benefit from new developments and at what costs? The true power of the region lies in its cultural identity, which for this area is characterised by residing, working and living in a border area, and resting upon one self. Moreover: battling the enemy, the water or fighting for a livelihood from which individual initiative and entrepreneurial spirit originate; faith and trust in the idea that hard work will eventually pay off. Those elements are at the core of the region's values: tranquillity and space, sobriety and a human scale. This offers opportunities as more and more people in society are looking for "an oasis of peace in a dynamic, hectic world".

In combination with the characteristics of the region, these values are probably the best starting point for improving the region's economic capacity. No wild plans for brash new activities that probably will have to be reduced to smaller proportions in the following consensus building and decision-making, with loss of aimed effect. Neither big words too, about regional branding that should attract many tourists, who will in fact disturb the peacefulness of the region and the satisfaction of the inhabitants, and therefore might not be welcomed. Nor copying the ambitions that other regions have in the field of recreation, without a good underlying business concept for sustainable earnings. The aging population might increase the numbers of recreationists, but they cannot spend their money along the bike and walking paths with hardly any recreational facilities.

### Diversity of chances for development

#### Living and lodging

Biesbosch and Land van Heusden en Altena offers a beautiful, rural living environment with its scattered villages and farms. Agricultural buildings, becoming vacant, deserve to be preserved as characteristic features in the landscape, but they also have to serve more practical (and profitable) purposes. There are certainly possibilities: these buildings along with the environment offer short and long-term accommodations for tourists and retreat. This is not just interesting for tourists and

other recreationists, but also for creative professionals, the spiritually minded or people who want to enjoy the peacefulness. Precondition is a high qualitatively supply of the buildings as well as the services (all-inclusive).

Combinations of living and health care also seem obvious. Several target groups are conceivable, such as terminally ill patients, demented people or those who want to rehabilitate or cure an addiction. Target population, environment and cultural identity (stewardship) seem a logical combination. Possibly, after reconsideration the arguments of opposing parties, synthesis with existing plans concerning new estates and other residential areas could be agreed upon.

Culture and history can be preserved, once new functions can be found for them. The New Dutch Waterline with here fortresses and other cultural-historical sites can offer both residential and accommodation facilities, and can moreover function as a décor for open air performances, shows and films, educational activities or demonstrations and other events, serving the purpose of keeping alive the region's history (Saint-Elisabeth's flood, Second World War, but also old crafts).

### **Landscape and leisure**

There are opportunities for leisure or tourism and recreation due to the attractive aspects of nature, peacefulness, space, diversity and authenticity. However, the area also faces obstacles: the current lack of adequate accommodation and the absence of sufficient recreational facilities, a regional culture that is not focused on hospitality and above all: the desire to keep the area's tranquillity and Sunday rest intact. The first obstacles are surmountable, but the culture related aspects are, if not impossible, hard to change.



Fig. 4: New opportunities for the Biesbosch area

With the redesign of the Biesbosch National Park, it will be enlarged significantly and enriched with additional types of nature. In the nearby future, this offers even more, and more diverse, opportunities for nature and recreation without compromising environmental values. For example: extensive forms of hiking, cycling, horseback riding or canoeing for individuals as well as for groups, with or without guidance (excursions) and preferably more than just day tours. To make this econo-

mically interesting, appropriate concepts and arrangements have to be made for transport (to and from the area), accommodation and entertainment. Due to its size, the area can host relatively large groups without disrupting the peacefulness. Essential is an intricate and diverse access to the area. One can think of transfer points, ferries, canoe and boatlifts, bicycle renting with local drop-off points, guided group tours to appealing attractions with varied means of transport etc. The more intricate, diverse and well dosed the access and the spread of the visitors will be, the better the nature values can be preserved, and the bigger the opportunities for local entrepreneurs will be. Large-scale recreational gates do fit neither in this concept, nor in the regional culture.

### **Innovations with water**

Water is in many respects a recurrent element, for instance for inland shipping and yachting, as value for nature in wetlands, for recreational use or as an appealing landscape for tourists. In Biesbosch and Land van Heusden en Altena, water can also be put to use for resolving mobility issues. For example by accessing the area with ferries to all surrounding villages ('the blue circle'). Also for directing the flow of yachts to mobile docks or piers with service and catering facilities, that can be relocated in accordance with the seasonal crowds. In addition, one might think of floating holiday accommodations.

Other purposes can also be lucrative. Biesbosch already supplies drinking water for a big part of the urban Randstad area. New concepts could complement this, especially concerning the Room for the River programme. This offers new perspectives for agriculture by applying Water Management, a concept that was developed in 2009 and seems to fit perfectly to the Biesbosch and Land van Heusden en Altena area. This way, the area can serve as a source for research, knowledge and development of innovative water techniques and tools. Overall, water can give the area many new meanings.

It is thus worthwhile to look at these ideas from other perspectives and find out how public and private stakes can be combined in the interest of a sustainable development of the area. The feasibility and success of implementing such ideas depend on the capabilities of region's administration to unify these economic challenges. For the moment, this remains a major uncertainty, due to the spatial-economic diversity, the continuing influences from outside and the cultural identity of the region and its inhabitants.





## Conclusions

When we summarize the findings of the expert meeting, we can draw the following conclusions.

- The urgency and direction of development is absent.
- The economic capacity is diverse and has opportunities, but mutual coherence is missing.
- The power of the region lies in its cultural identity, but this is not the guiding factor.
- Preserving the status quo is a legitimate choice and offers the region a distinct feature.
- The option of preserving the status quo – if chosen - also requires action (preservation through development).

## How to continue?

### Choosing with scenarios

To be able to consider and choose from future perspectives, it is advisable to elaborate potential consequences for a limited number of options. Directions of development become more robust and are more successful if they are not judged as unfeasible at the first unforeseen circumstance. Our advice therefore is to develop multiple scenarios. Scenario planning encompasses the knowledge of all parties involved and prevents from tunnel vision. It offers insight and enhances the ability to respond to unexpected circumstances. To illustrate the approach we have elaborated four scenarios with the outcomes from the expert meeting. Though realistic, these are just examples, as the needed underlying analysis has not been made in the expert meeting.

One uncertain factor is the ability to connect economic opportunities. That means: will Biesbosch and Land van Heusden en Altena be able to make the right choices from the identified opportunities and bring it in line with the spatial-economic diversity of the area? Another perspective or attitude might after all easily change the way an option is perceived, from opportunity to thread and vice versa.

Less uncertain, though nonetheless of great influence on the directions of development, is the cultural identity. This identity is noticeable in the extent to which individuals and organisations from the area are involved in the regional development. Placing involvement and the ability to connect on the axis in a diagram results in four scenarios.

#### 1. Conservation of identity (seclusion)

This scenario assumes an increasing involvement with the region. Improved mobility and easy access to information and networks gradually diminishes the culture of isolation. People from outside the region will come to reside in one of the villages. Close collaboration between the municipalities, or even a merger, will contribute to a better mutual understanding and respect, and later on: trust and involvement. Nevertheless, the region is – in this scenario – unwilling or unable to blend economic and socio-regional developments and convert them to promising area concepts.

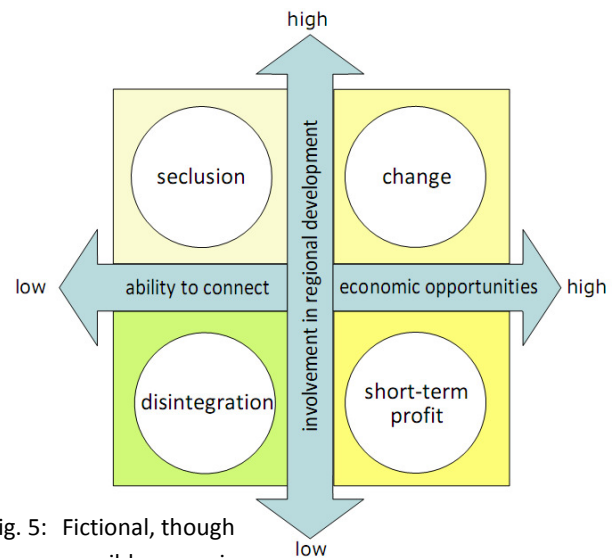


Fig. 5: Fictional, though possible scenarios

Within the region, the social cohesion increases, but as the connection to developments outside the area is absent, the region dissociates from the outer world. Such seclusion might have no – or even a positive – economic effect, but will not put the area on the map. However, that is not what the region aims at.

#### 2. Unity by diversity (change)

Whereas the connection with the outer world in the previous scenario dilutes, this one builds on increasing involvement of the population regarding matters that concern the region and on a clear, shared vision for the future. Local authorities and leaders from the region manage continuously to improve the cooperation, which is also noticeably fruitful outside the region. The area enters a positive flow with interesting and innovative opportunities for businesses, youth, the elderly etc. and combines the best of two worlds. Inveterate supporters of the original regional identity will no longer recognise it after some years.

#### 3. Soulless growth (short-term profit)

This scenario concerns the continuing merging of activities and the collaboration of public and private parties within, and from outside the region. Possibly the Biesbosch National Park manages to attract more visitors to the region by making agreements with travel agencies. Entrepreneurs seize their chances with a range of services for transport and accommodation,

entertainment and other recreational facilities. Perhaps retail organisations will find a national distributor that is willing to settle in the region in order to do better business together. This is where the entrepreneurial spirit can be seen well. However, little attention is paid to those aspects that form the regional identity. Everything is focused on economic development that really is successful, but also has negative side effects like a decrease of solidarity, mutual respect and stewardship.

#### **4. Continuing individualisation (disintegration)**

In this scenario the togetherness of the region – in spite of the best endeavours – comes under increasing pressure. Individualisation keeps going on. Inhabitants fulfil their needs from outside the region. More commuters find jobs elsewhere, youngsters get their education at schools in surrounding areas and collaboration in business associations of shop owners and entrepreneurs has decreased to a minimal level. There is no engagement for collective investments. Those who go like a dream seclude themselves from others. Possibly enclaves will be founded, in which people will solely take care of its members (gated communities). The absence of coherence causes cluttering up of the landscape. Only sports will bring people together, but when matches are over people will quickly go their own way.

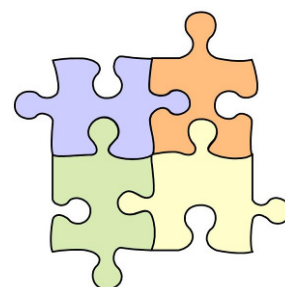
#### **Added value of scenario planning**

These are fictional, yet realistic scenarios. Looking for the driving forces behind such – or other – scenarios and their potential impact will provide insight and understanding how a scenario could develop over the years. Elaborating scenarios is not about decision making, but supporting the foregoing choice making process. It provides answers to 'what if...' questions. For example, what will happen if Gorinchem or Breda grow twice their size? What if water sports will greatly increase in popularity in the Biesbosch area, or what if agriculture will disappear from the region? How will that affect population growth, employment, business climate and attractiveness of the region? And how will it develop over time, e.g. in 2015, 2020 and 2030?

The elaboration of such scenarios should preferably take place with input from the local population: not only can they provide practical knowledge of the area, but they also work closely to prepare decisions and build support. Such a scenario approach can take place in a two-day session, possibly followed by additional input of professional experts. With striking descriptions, scenarios can be made communicable. Scenario planning results in relevant and motivated alternatives with support from the region. This will in turn lead to a better preparation on a robust development of the region than producing more papers and reports.

## **Next steps**

For a sequel to the expert meeting we suggest the joint committee and regional parties to consider the following action plan, including elaboration of scenario's, as replacement of the above given, fictional scenario's.



- 1. Recognize and name the fundamental core values**  
The core values are the basis for economic and societal activities. Without embedding the values, the success rate will be small and / or short-lived.
- 2. Filter and combine regional developments to headlines**  
A major part of the work has been done in the expert meeting. Check if relevant issues have remained undealt with.
- 3. Point out the driving forces**  
This requires more attention than can be offered in a one-day meeting. What triggers people? Who are the key players? Where might investment capital be available?
- 4. Sketch a global target**  
What do Biesbosch and Land van Heusden en Altena want to have accomplished by 2030? What will the region and its identity look like then?
- 5. Conduct a scenario planning session**  
Identify the major uncertainties and influences and name a limited number of scenarios. A gaming method could help to make the approach transparent and create involvement.
- 6. Elaborate and communicate**  
Draw up the scenarios in catchy descriptions and make visualisations in order to discuss the options. Generate insight in unforeseen developments.
- 7. Make decisions**  
Make choices and keep the scenarios close at hand in case developments (almost certainly) go different ways as thought.
- 8. Formulate a supportive programme (not projects!)**  
Describe the required strategy to put the chosen scenario to practice. Let regional parties submit proposals. Encourage initiatives and an active approach, and facilitate all the ideas that are in accordance with the goals set.