



Netherlands Commission for  
Environmental Assessment



## Landscape in environmental assessments

Many community participants attach huge importance to considering (the quality of) landscape when developing projects and plans. Nevertheless, schemes or projects to improve spatial quality or to make existing landscape the primary concern when implementing plans often fail to hold their own in environmental assessments. This key sheet outlines an approach to determining the correct role of landscape in environmental assessments.

### What is landscape?

The Netherlands Commission for Environmental Assessment (NCEA) uses the Council of Europe definition of landscape:

*'An area, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors.'*

As such, landscape can relate to both urban and rural settings, as well as to both existing and new attributes.

#### Dutch State Advisor recommendations

At the request of the NCEA, the Dutch State Advisor for Landscape and Water has made recommendations regarding the role of landscape in environmental assessments. This key sheet is based on these 2014 recommendations.

### What information is useful?

If landscape takes a more prominent role in environmental assessments, the assessment itself will acquire greater significance during discussions with local concerned parties and in the decision-making process, because these parties often view landscape as an important issue. The

quality of the plan, and indeed that of the environment, consequently also improves. The following three steps will help you to determine the information regarding landscape required in the environmental assessment:

1. Describe or determine the ambition
2. Describe the landscape qualities
3. Determine a tailor-made approach

Later in this key sheet, you'll find several important considerations regarding cancelling out negative and positive effects, selecting the research area and an explanation of the importance of visual materials.

### Step 1: Ambition

Local, provincial and national policy determines an area's attributes and purpose. These need to be outlined in order to answer the question: *what is the desired landscape quality?* The ambitions determine the appropriate functions and activities, assisting in the development of alternatives.

If landscape policy is yet to be determined, the plan's objective plays an important role. For example, if the aim of the project is to create spatial quality, the environmental assessment indicates when the objectives have been achieved and how people perceive their new surroundings.

### Step 2: Landscape qualities

Step 2 involves summarising the quality of the area. Characteristics of landscape may include openness, historic land division or the density of development. These characteristics are rated high or low, according to, for example, how intact they are (their integrity). The rating is usually (partially) drawn from municipal, provincial or national landscape/spatial policy. The environmental assessment

outlines whether the qualities are part of policy and if so, what they are.

If the landscape is not protected, expertise of local interest groups, a visit to the area together with residents and experts as well as information derived from the various points of view can all be useful. The assessment outlines which characteristics are valuable, which are not, and why.

### Step 3: Tailor-made approach

Step 3 concerns the impact of the plan on the landscape. Are there no identifiable consequences? Or are there detrimental effects? Or will spatial quality in fact be improved? What needs to be included in the environmental assessment in each instance?

#### Neutral effect

A plan is seen to have no influence on the landscape if the landscape's structure and recognisability are unaffected or only affected negligibly. For example, consider an extension to a major chemical installation within a large existing establishment or the addition of two wind turbines to an existing wind farm of 40 turbines. In this case, (visual) reasoning in the environmental assessment is sufficient.

#### Detrimental effects

If the plan is judged to result in detrimental effects, the environmental assessment outlines the effects on the landscape and possible measures to mitigate such effects.

#### Positive effects or new attributes

The environmental assessment can be utilised effectively when developing alternatives that improve (existing) attributes and/or add new spatial qualities.

- If fragmentation or spoiling has resulted in the loss of landscape attributes, the assessment can be used to evaluate whether the plan can help to tackle this fragmentation or spoiling.
- In the case of developments in areas with highly-rated (protected) landscape attributes, the assessment should in any case outline an alternative focused on maintaining and potentially improving existing attributes. This is primarily relevant to protected landscapes, but can also be relevant elsewhere.
- In the case of actions severely affecting spatial planning, such as (national) roads and major industrial and residential developments (that are certain to heavily impact the landscape), the environmental assessment

should outline an alternative that explores potential new spatial qualities.

Dependent on the area and the landscape ambitions, (multiple) divergent alternatives may be developed. This helps to clarify the decisions that need to be made.

### No cancelling out

It's important to record the effects on existing attributes and new qualities separately. Don't cancel negative impact on an existing quality out against the creation of a new quality. Separately charting the positive and negative effects facilitates the creation of a comprehensive overview of the decisions that need to be made.

### Research area

The landscape research area consists of:

- The area of the plan, access roads and the space between the access roads.
- The zone within which the planned activities can be observed.

Include significant landscape elements and structures in the area in their entirety.

### The importance of maps and visualisations

High-quality visual material is essential in order to clearly illustrate the effects. It should feature a legible key and obvious demarcation of the plan and research areas. Visibility analysis indicates where and the distance to which a plan or project is visible – making this immediately clear has obvious advantages. Visualisations from various viewpoints and routes facilitate an integral assessment of the qualities and effects.

Ensure an appropriate level of detail: a complex decision demands detailed visualisations while less detailed visualisations will suffice for a more general decision.

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