WHAT? WATER!

Climate Change and Country Estates

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When it comes to climate change and water, heritage is barely visible. An important reason is that the heritage and water worlds do not know each other sufficiently. Institutionally, politically, and especially when it comes to research and science, there is little common ground. ICOMOS Netherlands and the Dutch Castle Foundation want to change this and show the important role heritage can play in sustainable solutions. Innovative adjustments have already been made at various country estates. On May 27, 2021, over 125 participants joined the conversation on this topic.

Dr Elyze Storms-Smeets (special associate professor Cultural Heritage and Participative Spatial Planning at Wageningen University & Research) and Prof Eric Luiten (full professor on the chair of Heritage and Spatial Design at Delft University of Technology) delivered the keynote lectures. These lectures were alternated with four films of case studies on water management at a Dutch castle or country estate. The live discussion was led by Fred Vogelzang and Charlotte van Emstede and joined by commentators Natascha Lensvelt (specialist historical gardens and parks at the Cultural Heritage Agency) and Ben Olde Meierink (architectural historian, building archaeologist and head of research at the Dutch Castle Foundation).

In her keynote 'Flowing water as connecting element,' Elyze Storms-Smeets highlighted the key role that water played for castles and country estates throughout history. From location choice, transportation and as an essential part for food production to recreational and aesthetical purposes, Elyze showed how water has always been a connecting element on and between country estates, spatially, historically, and functionally. However, in these current times of climate change, a shortage or an excess of water, either through drought or extreme showers, poses several problems to country estate owners and regional public water authorities; it causes damage to historical buildings, gardens and farmland. "We need to intertwine water concerns with heritage values and our historical living environment," Elyze stressed. To succeed in this, Elyze called upon regional public water authorities, heritage organisations, country estate owners, municipalities, and local communities to cooperate.

"It is precisely by working integrally and looking at the longue durée of landscape development from the past to the future that well-founded choices can be made. And do pay attention to tangible and intangible heritage. Our heritage, our landscape is so much more than a physical fact, it is also about tradition, craftsmanship and social significance. And that brings me to participation. (…) Please do not see that as a mandatory exercise,

but as an opportunity to look together at solutions, at different scale levels and with different interests."

In his keynote, 'Water as Heritage,' Eric Luiten focussed on the significance of heritage in relation to contemporary spatial planning. The relation between heritage management and spatial planning is a complex one. "Before we can truly understand this intricate relationship, we first need to unravel the knot of heritage positions, strategies and practices," Eric stated. He did so in his lecture by introducing a conceptual framework that describes three different heritage management approaches: the sector, factor, and vector approach, respectively. These three approaches present different ways of how in the Netherlands heritage management is incorporated in spatial planning practice; from being two isolated sectors, to an interchange between these fields and finally, a practice where heritage management is fully integrated with and guides spatial planning. He then projected this conceptual framework on water heritage and management.

"We need to ask ourselves how the major water tasks relate to the large collection of water heritage. How do we assess the increasing role of relaxation, recreation, and urban influence on rural areas? How do new designs relate to old patterns and historical subtleties in the landscape? And finally, how do we deal with the need for more ecological quality and biodiversity? This presents us with an interesting dilemma and connection between the various aspirations in society."

The four case studies presented the symposium participants with plenty of insights and inspiration on how to tackle water management issues on country estates.

"We can learn a lot from studying the medieval situation. (…) It is important to take that into account when you want to alter your castle or estate."
Diana Spiekhout, archaeologist and researcher

"The borders never really stop at your estate boundaries. You have to look much wider; What are the opportunities and possibilities for adjusting water management and making the estate more climate robust?"
Bibian van Rijckevorsel, estate manager of country estate Beukenhorst

"Think long-term, because you want to transfer your estate future-proof – and that now means climate-proof – to the next generation."
Liesbeth Cremers, country estate Vilsteren

"I would like to make an appeal to bridge the gap between water management and the management of our cultural heritage."
Gerhard van den Top, Dike warden at the Regional Public Water Authority Amstel, Gooi en Vecht

During the closing discussion, several topics were raised: water quality, the effects of climate change and related water issues on historical buildings, the potential of landscape designers to come up with creative solutions, while balancing functionality with aesthetics. Moderators Fred and Charlotte concluded with a call to arms; Let this symposium be the start of a fruitful conversation and collaboration between water managers, heritage care takers, historians, designers, members of local communities, and so on. Only when we all work together, we can effectively deal with the many tasks that climate change is bringing our way and come up with solutions that will benefit both our climate and our heritage.