XXXI. WILD GEESE AND MAN IN THE NETHERLANDS: RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

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Introduction

In the Netherlands 14 million people live in an area of about 32 500 km^2 and open spaces are getting rare due to town extension, industrial and harbour developments, refuse dumps and recreational use of land and water. Some 250 000 wild geese which visit our country need these open spaces and therefore they are losing ground. Their haunts need careful management. Various factors, however, are adverse to optimal management. Some of these factors will be mentioned below.

Reallotment schemes

Geese prefer large scale open spaces with little disturbance. Reallotment schemes (redistribution of land) lead to road building and new farms; both causing more disturbance. Moreover, egalization of the land leads to loss of variety in the vegetation and to loss of puddles. In those cases where the area to be reallotted harbours great numbers of geese, nature protection is allowed a certain proportion of the land as a sanctuary. As a rule, this proportion has insufficient carrying capacity for the original number of geese so that some of them have to leave the area and to find other feeding areas. These are as a rule more intensively farmed areas nearby, where the geese are not welcome, so that problems amy arise.

Moreover, the contrast between the small and oppressed goose sanctuary and the over fertilized arable land surrounding it, induces the geese to make regular visits to the latter type of area. This leads to damage claims from the farmers. In the last five years damage up to one and a half million guilders has been paid in compensation.

– The full effect of the reallotting on the geese may be visible only after eight to ten years.

Management of reserves

Of course management depends on the origin of the pasture (old/recent, "natural"/man-made, short-billed/large-billed geese). Recently the general shortage of "natural" areas has led to a call for "multiple purpose reserves" among conservationists:

– There is an alarming decrease in breeding areas for some waders especially *Philomachus pugnax*, *Gallinago gallinago* and also *Tringa totanus*, caused by deeper drainage and (over) fertilization of pasture. As these waders prefer

low-lying, rather poor and wet meadows, and a number of goose reserves suit breeding waders, it seems obvious to keep these areas poor and wet. But this of course decreases the carying capacity for wild geese.

– A similar effect is caused by the tendency to protect rare plant communities restricted to wet and poor meadows. The bigger the area, the greater the variety of rare plant species. Hence a division between smaller areas for rare vegetation types and greater ones for the geese cannot solve this problem.

– Recently closed estuaries give special problems. Reserves on low-lying sand bars in these areas present the same dilemma: excellent breeding conditions for breeding waders including *Recurvirostra avosetta* and terns, and good habitats for rare plant communities. The former tidal pastures were "fertilized" by the tide. In such cases fertilization with some 100 kg/N/ha would be acceptable (*Fabritius*, 1979).

Damage

Most farmers agree that winter grazing of wheat and barley by wild geese does not cause damage. This has been proved to be true by *van Dobben* (1953), *Markgren* (1963) and *Kear* (1970) among others. Early grazing by the first *Anser brachyrhynchus* to arrive and spring grazing by *Anser anser* and *Branta bernicla*, however, is a source of damage.

A. brachyrhynchus arrives in the province of Friesland in October and most of the pastures are still grazed by cattle or harvested for silage by that time. Wildfowlers are not eager to shoot at the freshly arrived *A. brachyrhynchus* and prefer to keep them in their area rather than disturbing them which might cause their departure and spoil future shooting. The species is protected in the Netherlands though shooters say they cannot distinguish them in the field under shooting conditions.

A. anser breed in the Netherlands (both wild and feral birds) totalling some 200 to 250 pairs. There is also a wing moulting population of some 7000 birds in one reserve. The presence of *A. anser* during summer may lead to some complaints. In the province of Zeeland 8677 guilders were paid out in compensation in 1978, 480 in 1979 and 2580 in 1980. *A. anser* will be reduced here to three pairs at one site.

B. bernicla departs at the end of May. Moreover, they have developed a taste for grazing on inland grain fields. On the Isle of Texel the government has bought a farm of 110 ha where the geese are concentrated by scaring them from other fields. One man is employed as a full time scarer and moreover there is one special licence for a wildfowler to disturb *B. bernicla* by shooting.

An experiment on the Texel model will be carried out on a property of 1500 ha in the province of Zeeland.

Resowing of meadows

A recent habit, especially in the province of Friesland, is the frequent resowing of meadows. Each year some 7% is resown in an area of some 100 000 ha (Friese Maatschappij van Landbouw in litt 30 March 1981). The cost is about 1150 guilders per ha. The reason for resowing is that an earlier crop can

be harvested and that cattle density may rise from 1 to 3 head per ha. Geese are said to have some preference for freshly resown meadows which is conceivable, as pioneer vegetation was their original food.

An average of 245 guilders per ha has been paid in compensation in this type of meadow in Friesland (report of Friesland Game Damage Committee) in 1977.

Unequal ripening of grain

An alleged source of damage to grain by geese is unequal ripening of grain (Ned. Jager 26 March 80). It is claimed that unequal ripening is due to grazing by geese. However, unequal ripening may occur on practically any grain field, independently of the presence of geese according to three farmers in the province of Zeeland and the Agricultural University at Wageningen. Among the farmers is the director of the above-mentioned property of 1500 ha, which is visited by thousands of *Anser fabalis* every winter without damage of any kind being caused.

Unequal ripening may be due to:

– lower soil temperature caused by unequal humidity;

– unequal sowing and fertilization at the point where the tractor turns, by overlap, unequal soil level or wind effect;

– unequal soil density in the tracks or turning points.

The author is not taking position pro or anti-shooting here, but he strongly opposes this kind of finding as a "justification" of shooting.

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