

# Conservation and contestation in conversation, considerations of narrative

The role of narratives in a policy debate about emission from agriculture in the  
Netherlands



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Master Cultural Anthropology; sustainable Citizenship

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# Abstract

Within social sciences, there has been an increased interest in the study of narratives within policy debates and social movements. Narratives are a type of social construction of reality that ties into the performative aspect of social movements. Previous studies have found that narratives can serve a number of different functions, such as mobilizing people to join a movement, or as a tool for persuasion. This thesis adds to the growing body of research on narratives in social movements by showing how pervasive narratives can be in social movements. For this purpose I use a case study of the debate around cutting emissions from agriculture in the Netherlands in 2019 and the first half of 2020. This case study illustrates the many different functions narratives can serve, both by the groups involved, by mobilizing and creating unity, as well as on the individual level, by motivating action, acting as a heuristic, through meaning-making and identity formation. Additionally, one narrative may serve multiple functions at the same time, and multiple narratives may overlap. In this way, narratives are a part of a complex web of meaning. I have also demonstrated how narrative analysis can give deeper insight into social movements, by highlighting what the people in the movement find to be most important, and the moral the social movement wishes to convey to its audience. Additionally, narratives highlight differences within social movements, and can demonstrate similarities between opposing movements. For these reasons, the study of narrative is crucial to understanding social movements, both for researchers, as well as policy makers.

**Key words:** Netherlands, agriculture, nature conservation, narrative, social movement, policy debate

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# Chapter 1: Introduction

On the 14<sup>th</sup> of February 2020, thousands of farmers from all around the Netherlands headed towards The Hague. This protest was the latest in a series of protests that had started in October of 2019 against new potential new legislation aimed at reducing ammonia emission from agriculture. Despite the rain, and despite there already having been multiple protests about this issue, the field designated for the protest, de Koekamp, was flooded with people.

I arrived a little after the protest had started, and made my way over from the station, surrounded by small clusters of men, women, and children also headed to the protest. A number of farmers had decided to go to the Hague by tractor, one of which passed by on the way over from the station. I could hear the farmers behind me longingly talk about how they wished they could have also brought their tractor.

Not too long after I arrived at the Koekamp, the band playing on the main stage was replaced by the organizers of the protest. What followed were over two hours of speeches from the organizers, farmers, and other people affiliated with the agricultural sector. The mood of the protest, which had been relaxed and calm when I arrived, heated up and became more agitated. Many of the speeches made long, emotional appeals about the hardships faced by farmers over the years, and how the new legislation would force people out of business. One speaker had brought her infant son, and wondered out loud whether he would still be able to take over the family business, or whether the farm would have been forced out of business by the time he grew up. One of the organizers even demanded that the minister of agriculture and the prime minister themselves come to the stage to apologize for how they had treated farmers.

After the speeches, there was a short lull in the protest for people to get lunch. During this break, a video played on the large screen that presented the debate about cutting ammonia emission from agricultural firms in the style of a fairy tale. The protest ended when everybody was handed a sticker from Farmers Defence Force, an activist group of farmers that had organized the protest, with the intention that everybody would walk to the ministry of agriculture around the corner to leave a message. This plan was foiled by a police blockade. While no violence occurred, and the standoff with the police was calm, this protest does show that farmers were more than a little agitated about these new laws. Additionally, this protest was one of many. Everyone I spoke to over the course of my research mentioned being surprised by the size, and frequency of the protest. While joining the protest gave me a better understanding of the worries of farmers, and the emotions they feel, I

found it hard to connect to the movement. The protest, despite its reasonably calm atmosphere and lack of any violence, still felt somewhat closed for someone without any affiliation with the agricultural sector.

## Aim and theory

The scope of these protests cannot be explained merely through numbers. In order to comprehend the protests, it is necessary to understand the narratives that lay at the foundation of the debate, as well as understanding the narratives that are key in mobilizing people to both argue for, as well as against stricter emissions laws. Additionally, since social movements employ narratives, it is paramount to understand the functions of narratives to aid the analysis of social movements in the future.

This thesis aims to show the many different ways in which narratives can be employed in social movements, and the variety of reasons they may be used and adopted. Narratives can serve many functions, and one narrative can serve multiple functions simultaneously, one story can both be used to mobilize people to protest, as well as create a feeling of community in those that are already protesting for example. Narratives are thus a part of a complex web of meaning, connecting multiple aims, emotions, and ideas. The Dutch nitrogen policy debate is a case that illuminates these different functions. This case can also demonstrate how narratives can be generated and used by individuals within a movement, as well as by the movement itself. The aim of this thesis is to answer the question: in which various ways are narratives employed throughout the nitrogen policy debate?

I will aim to answer this question by discussing the narratives from two groups involved in the nitrogen policy debate this research has focussed on: conservation groups, and farmers. Other sectors are also involved in the nitrogen debate, such as construction and industry. However, the emissions from those sectors are much lower, are different (NO<sub>x</sub> instead of NH<sub>3</sub>), and the main focus of the policy debate has been on agriculture. Therefore I have decided to focus on the debate around emissions from agriculture.

## Defining 'social movement'

Looking at the ways in which social movements employ narratives first requires a definition of social movement. Broadly speaking, social movements are a type of collective action, where individuals come together to fight for a common goal. What makes creating a more formal definition of social movement difficult is the great variety between them. Any definition needs to include both very

organized movements, with a clear hierarchy and goal, as well as scattered movements with little to no leadership, and with a less clearly defined aim, like Anonymous or Antifa. Furthermore, social movements are hard to define by their purpose. Some social movements aim to change a particular law, while others might try to change larger systems, like movements to abolish capitalism. Yet others are much more humble in their aims, and might consist of student sit-ins to change the policy of but a single school. Sometimes the aim itself is vague, like the aforementioned Antifa, which is broadly against fascism, but consists of all manner of different ideologies.

What defines a social movement, then, is not its structure, or its aim, but its means of achieving its aim: social movements are, in one way or another, a performance (Blee and McDowell 2012). Taylor et al. defines social movements “not as groups or organizations but as interactive performances or protest events” (Taylor et al. 2009). At its heart, social movements use protests, debate, policy proposals, and other means to “influence audiences cognitively and emotionally” (Blee and McDowell 2012), with the intention of making audiences “act on the truth that has been presented” (Bailey 1996; Irvine 2004). Additionally, social movements are a means for activists to express feelings and attempt to elicit similar feelings in the audience (Alexander 2004). What makes a social movement different from an organization, or a single gathering, is its repeated use of performative means to achieve its aim. This performance can take many shapes in addition to protest, such as boycotts, music, and art.

### Defining narrative

Social movements frequently employ narratives. Narratives are a part of this performance of social movements. However, they are also a means of making sense of the world (Bruner and Luciareello 1989). At their core, narratives are social constructions of reality; central to narratives is not the objective facts, but what these facts mean to individual people, and the emotions they evoke. In the narratives about the nitrogen debate, what is important is not the precise statistics about emissions, but how people interpret this data, and how they perceive and think about proposed legislation. Nevertheless, narratives are still bounded by reality. While technically an infinite number of narratives are possible, they still have some foundation in reality, and are not purely random amalgamations of ideas and thoughts. They are coherent, and are, to an extent, based on observations and interpretations (E. A. Shanahan, Jones, and McBeth 2018; M. D. Jones 2018)

Additionally, narratives create a logical chain of events, consisting of a beginning, a middle, and an end, which are all connected in a coherent plot (McBeth, Jones, and Shanahan 2014). They also allow for a connection of knowledge with conjecture and speculation, allowing an individual to make



predictions of the future (Robinson and Hawpe 1986). As such, narratives are a great way to make sense of a complex world (Veselková 2017; Berinsky and Kinder 2006). Narratives are then where the idea of the 'homo narrans' meets the concept of the 'homo performans'. The former looks at humans as a creature with the innate ability to think, and communicate in stories. The latter looks at humans as a culture-inventing and self-making creature that uses narratives as a way to express their identity and communicate ideas (Winskell et al. 2013).

This realization that narratives are central to human thought and communication has led to something often called the 'narrative turn' in the social sciences (Shimazono 2003). This narrative turn has led to a renewed interest in storytelling as a social process and narrative as a social act (e.g. Griffin 1993; Maines 1993; Richardson 1990). Particularly in the study of social movements, this use of narratives has been found in numerous studies. Social movements rely heavily on narratives to create a community and garner support. As social scientist Gary Allen Fine put it: "I believe that it is helpful to conceive of a social movement as a bundle of narratives, which when expressed within an interactional arena by participants strengthens the commitment of members to shared organizational goals and status-based identities" (1995). These social movements can then employ these same narratives in a bid to affect policy making (E. Roe 1994).

As mentioned earlier, what defines a narrative is its structure, where events are causally linked to form a coherent plot. However, narratives also contain characters, a setting, and a moral (E. A. Shanahan, Jones, and McBeth 2018): The characters usually consist of a hero and a villain, although previous studies looking at policy narratives have identified that it is more common to include a villain than a hero. Often in the case of policy narratives, the hero is an advocacy group, and the storyteller is frequently affiliated with the portrayed hero (Pierce, Smith-Walter, and Peterson 2014). The setting illustrates that narratives differ from debate to debate, a narrative about racial inequality in the United States, for instance, cannot be applied to a debate about German nature reserves and vice versa. The setting is the topic the narrative is tied to, in this thesis, the setting of the narratives is either the nitrogen policy debate, or a broader discussion about the future of Dutch agriculture. The moral is the lesson that the listener or reader is supposed to take away from the story, and is often a proposal for a change in policy.

Previous research has found that narratives can serve a number of different roles and functions. Understanding these functions gives great insight into social movements. Since narratives are central to social movements, understanding how movements employ narratives gives tremendous insight

into the movement itself, both for researchers, as well as policy makers seeking to address the concerns of the movement.

Like mentioned before, narratives are a type of performance employed by social movements to promote their ideology or ideas. Frequently, this is in an attempt to shape public opinion around a policy decision in order to change legislation (M. Jones and McBeth 2010). Narratives have, for example, been found to aid in the persuasiveness of policy proposals to combat obesity in the United States (Niederdeppe, Roh, and Dreisbach 2016).

A second function of narratives is to mobilize individuals to join the cause. The most clear example of this would be wartime propaganda, which creates both an us-versus-them narrative, and might paint a story of how *you* can save your country and become a hero. This mobilization function can also be used outside of war to get people motivated to protest or join a political cause. For example, in the Arab spring, stories from the Quran might have played a role in getting religious groups to join the, largely secular, protests (Hoffman and Jamal 2014).

Third, social movements may employ narratives as a means of creating a feeling of shared or collective identity and belonging (e.g. Maxwell and Kreamer 1990)., with some researchers even going so far as to define collective identity as 'narrative constructions' or the 'totality of narratives themselves' (e.g. Brown 2006; Eder 2009).

Fourth, narratives are a form of communication. In some countries, like Haiti, people may tell lengthy stories to doctors to describe their symptoms and how their affliction affected their life (Farmer, Bourgois, and Fassin 2004). Policy actors may also use narratives to communicate information on issues they feel passionately about (Pierce, Smith-Walter, and Peterson 2014). A researcher that understands the narratives of a social movement will have a greater understanding of the movement itself, which has been found to reduce misunderstanding in interviews, since the researcher has a deeper understanding and is better able to ask relevant questions (Soliva 2007).

Fifth, narratives are a tool for persuasion. This function of narratives is commonly employed in advertising, where it has been found to potentially be more effective at getting someone to buy a product than the price of the product (Mattila 2000). Narratives can also be used to affect medical decisions (Winterbottom et al. 2008), including the decision whether to become an organ donor (Morgan, Movius, and Cody 2009). This role of narratives as a tool of persuasion is also being studied in the field of policy narratives (M. D. Jones 2018).

While the other functions are mainly employed by social movements, narratives can also be a very personal thing. As mentioned earlier, narratives can serve as a means for individuals to make sense of a complex world. However, they can also help people understand themselves and act as a form of meaning-making. The feeling of belonging to a group mentioned earlier is one example of this. Additionally, autobiographical narratives can form a type of meaning-making. Individuals can use narratives to look at how past events influenced other events from their life, and how these experiences made them the person they are (Habermas and Bluck 2000). This last function also illustrates that narratives may operate on different levels: they may be used by individuals (micro level), be employed by and within groups (meso level), and can even become broad cultural narratives (macro level).

Many of these function of narratives are present in the Dutch debate about emissions from agriculture. As mentioned in the introduction, this debate, commonly referred to as the 'nitrogen debate', is a particularly complex issue. The topic of how nitrogen emissions affect nature is complex, and contested. Furthermore, the debate touches on many different fields, including agriculture, history, chemistry, biology, economics, protected areas, and more. The issue has also led to strong emotions. This means that this debate clearly illustrates the many functions of narratives. Additionally, narrative analysis can give a deeper insight into this particular debate, and may be useful in the study of similar debates in the future.

In order to understand these narratives, I spent six months studying the debate around nitrogen, attempting to reconstruct and understand the narratives present in the debate. This thesis explains these narratives, their role, and the common themes. Its structure is as follows: I will begin by outlining my methods. This section will be followed by chapter 2, which will outline the relevant background to the debate, consisting of the history, why there is an issue with nitrogen emissions, legislation to address the issue, and the resulting protests. After this chapter about the background of the debate, chapters 3 and 4 will outline and explain the narratives used by conservation groups and the farmers movement respectively. I will finish by comparing the narratives of these two groups, and provide an analysis of the role of narratives in social movements and policy debates.

## Methods

As mentioned earlier, narratives have many different functions and may be employed by different groups for different purposes. Additionally, narratives are not restricted to the spoken or written word. Symbols and images can be a part of a narrative, as is the case with illustrations in books, but narratives can also exist in lieu of words. A good example of how images and symbols can form a narrative without words is the Catholic church's use of statues and stained glass windows to convey biblical stories to Christians that were unable to read Latin, so were unable to read the Bible. This variety of both the form and function of narratives means that an analysis of narratives warrants a broad approach, which combines multiple different methods. This use of numerous methods also helped the research continue when the methods of interviews and participant observation were hampered by the Covid-19 pandemic.

### Covid-19

Before describing these methods, it is important to briefly mention the Covid-19 pandemic and ensuing lockdown which occurred during the course of my research. This pandemic originated in China at the end of 2019, and quickly spread around the world. Due to its relatively high infection and mortality rate, coupled with the fact that no medicine or vaccine is currently available, and likely will not be for many months, measures had to be taken to prevent the spread of the virus.

In response to the pandemic, the Netherlands instituted a lockdown, which included a prohibition on public gatherings starting on the 11th of March. This has had serious effects on this research for a number of reasons: first and foremost, one large object of my study, public protests, was suddenly prohibited. Additionally, the pandemic hurt the Dutch agricultural sector due to restrictions on cross-border travel. Since a large part of Dutch agriculture is reliant upon export, this meant that many farmers, experts, and spokespersons were occupied with managing this economic downturn. This, coupled with what turned out to be the spring with the least amount of rain in recorded Dutch history, meant that it was very difficult to get into contact with farmers, since many were simply too busy to answer questions. Similarly, nature conservation groups had to close their offices and work from home, making it hard to get into contact with them as well. Interviews also had to take place over video call, rather than be in person. This research thus had to rely mostly on other methods.

## Analysis through multiple methods

Since narratives can be used for a variety of purposes, and can operate in different ways, I chose to employ multiple different methods to get a better overview of the variety of narratives employed. Interviews give good insight into an individual's motivation, social media can tell a lot about the narratives within groups, and policy proposals and interviews with news media highlight their role to influence public opinion and policy.

Despite lockdown measures, I managed to set up interviews with two conservation groups, and one farmer with her own organic farm. I also had a conversation with an expert on the topic of Dutch manure regulation. Additionally, I got into email correspondence with a few farming - and conservation groups. I also participated in a farmers protest on the 14th of February 2020, two webinars about what the government's proposals would mean for farmers, and a dialogue session between the Frisian government and a number of prominent conservation groups.

During these conversations, and dialogue session, I took notes in a small notebook. During the protest I took notes on my phone, which I elaborated on as soon as I got home. I recorded one of the interviews with nature conservation groups. I was unable to record the other two interviews due to issues with my recording device. I also did not record the conversation with the manure expert, nor did I record the dialogue session, due to a lack of consent to do so. Additionally, I did not use these sources as a means of recording the narratives, my use of them was mainly intended to give me a better insight into the debate, enabling me to better understand narratives further down the line.

I also made use of the analysis of various documents. Both farming groups and conservation groups have published their proposals for how to solve the nitrogen issue. These proposals contain both recommendations, as well as an introduction which often gives good insight into the way the groups wish to frame the nitrogen crisis, as well as their own proposal. A number of other organizations, including news media and organizations such as Milieudefensie also conducted interviews with farmers, which I included in my analysis. I also read various government documents, including documents about past, present, and potential future legislation to cut nitrogen emissions.

I also read two books on the history of Dutch agriculture and its role in society, one of which specifically about the history of the manure problem. This thesis will contain a chapter about the history of Dutch agriculture and farming regulation, since, as will be clear later, historical occasions can often serve as a part of narratives.

During the fieldwork period, I took some time every morning to check the most recent news about the nitrogen crisis, for which I used multiple online newspapers, including four which are aimed at farmers specifically (Boerderij, Boerenbusiness, Akkerwijzer, and Agraaf). I also joined the Facebook groups of Agractie and Farmers Defence Force, two of the organizations representing farmers. I used Twitter to follow involved organizations and people who are central in the nitrogen debate. I took notes here by writing down interesting statements and saving articles that were shared frequently. Lastly, I collected and analysed the text of 99 protest signs used during the farmer's protests.

## Ethics of online research

Due to the use of online sources, it is important to briefly discuss the ethics of online ethnography. Since not all online sources are the same, I have decided to sort them into three categories: public, private, and semi-public, each of which have their own ethical considerations, particularly concerning privacy and consent.

Public sources include all information that is freely accessible to all, including tweets, news articles and their comment sections, and public policy proposals. It has been argued in the past that, in this ethical consideration, it is important to look not only at the availability of the text, but also its intended audience (Pauwels 2006). For example, a video of a child uploaded to Facebook by its parents may be visible to everyone, but that does not mean it can be used freely. In the case of the data I collected, it is part of a very public debate, and was posted with the intent to be shared and read. Therefore I have decided to include this data in my analysis.

Private sources include all information shared with me personally, including video calls and emails. For these I use the same standard used for interviews in general: I will only use this information with informed consent. This means that the person who shared the information is aware of my position as researcher, the topic of my research, and could withdraw consent at any point.

The more grey category is the semi-private, semi-public sphere of closed Facebook groups. This space is not public, joining requires being accepted by a moderator. In the case of the Farmers Defence Force (FDF) group, there are questions you need to answer that determine whether you are allowed to join, including: 'why do you wish to join this group?' and 'what is your affiliation to the agricultural sector' To which my answer was that I have no affiliation, and that I am a student

interested in learning more about the nitrogen debate, meaning that my position as researcher is somewhat obscured.

I decided on this course of action for a few reasons: firstly it is impossible to gain informed consent of all members of these groups (the FDF Facebook group has over 53 000 members). Additionally, I was worried that some members of the groups might be hostile towards my position as a researcher. Before the start of this research, a number of farmers' protests had already taken place in front of the scientific institute that reports on levels of nitrogen emissions, and numerous newspapers had reported difficulty gaining access to protests and difficulty finding farmers willing to be interviewed. Other anthropology students I talked to were met with some suspicion when they approached members of the group to ask questions.

Due to the lack of informed consent, I have decided against using screenshots from the Facebook group. I have used my membership of the group as a way to get a feel for what topics are salient in the member's minds, what the general opinion within FDF is towards different parts of the nitrogen crisis, and to ask for clarification on any point I did not understand. I will also refrain from directly quoting any post from Facebook, partially since the relative anonymity of a closed group can lead some individuals to making hyperbolic statements they would not make in real life.

Lastly, it is important to mention that, especially when analysing narratives, the context of a statement is important. For example, the head of Farmers Defence Force at some point compared another group of farmers to the biblical figure of Judas. When discussing this statement, it is crucial to mention that this statement was made on Easter, following a large debate about whether emissions permits from agriculture could be sold to industrial firms (an act seen by some farmers as a betrayal, since the permits should be kept within the sector), and that this comment was met with criticism from within FDF itself and was redacted shortly after.

## Shortcomings

As mentioned earlier, due to the Covid-19 lockdown, I was unable to conduct in-person interviews (other than a conversation with an expert on manure regulation before the start of the research). Additionally many events I was planning to attend, including numerous protests, a symposium about sustainable agriculture, and a walk with a forest guard to see the damage done by nitrogen, were all cancelled. While I did manage to compensate somewhat through reading and watching interviews conducted by news media, this did mean that it was more difficult to get answers to the questions

most relevant for this study. This same pandemic also changed the methods available to conservation groups and farmers, forcing them to adapt their narratives.

One difficulty in narrative analysis is the fact that storytellers keep their audience in mind. This means that every retelling of a narrative is subtly different (Derrida 1981; E. A. Shanahan, Jones, and McBeth 2018). This introduces a bias in my interview data, since they all have the same audience (namely me). I have attempted to address this shortcoming by gathering data from a variety of sources, in order to ensure any of my findings is not the result of the method I use, and is not an isolated case. The different sources I used each include narratives with a different audience, by including multiple sources, I aim to reduce this bias, by including narratives with a variety of audiences, and by keeping the intended audience of the narrative in mind. I have also had conversations with four other students who are, or have recently been, working on topics related to Dutch agriculture in an effort to reduce bias and check some of my findings and conclusions.

There are also a number of issues arising from the reliance on online ethnography. Firstly, online research creates a bias in favour of the people who are most active. In the comments of news websites I very frequently saw the same few people posting. Additionally, many, if not most, members of the Agractie and FDF Facebook groups never post or comment. Furthermore, many - likely more moderate - farmers are not active in the debate online. This bias is impossible to completely remove from this thesis, so must be kept in mind. However, I did find opinion polls with a representative sample of farmers that I used to gauge which sentiments are ubiquitous, versus which ones are the opinions of a vocal minority. Online research also had the problem with difficulty determining tone. A number of comments on the FDF Facebook group are inflammatory or even call for violent action. However, due to the lack of audio cues and body language, I am not able to determine as well which statements are sarcastic or hyperbole.

At the time of writing this thesis, the nitrogen debate is not over. While the minister handed in her proposal, the provincial governments still have to decide how (and whether) to implement it. Therefore it has to be kept in mind that this thesis provides a snapshot of an ongoing debate. The narratives might change over time with changes in the debate.

Another consideration is that of translation. Some statements I included in my analysis were made in a dialect or in the Frisian language. Additionally, while I am a native Dutch speaker, some statements



are difficult to translate due to the cultural connotations associated with some words. Because of this, I will include the original Dutch when relevant.

A last important consideration to mention is that, while conservation groups and farmers might occasionally appear as two singular, united, groups, there is a large variety *within* these groups as well, particularly with farmers. A number of farmers have even expressed opinions that are more in line with those of conservation groups, and a number of people working for conservation groups are (former) farmers. While previous research has often worked with the assumption that policy debates consist of two opposed, unified fronts, this is not always the case (Gottlieb, Oehninger, and Arnold 2018). I will try to highlight the within-group differences of narratives whenever possible, but necessarily this thesis can only provide a simplified, condensed account of the spectrum of existing narratives, which can change from individual to individual. Even the narratives told by a single person may change depending on whom they are speaking to, or for what purpose they tell the story. This has to be kept in mind.

## Chapter 2: The Netherlands and nitrogen

This chapter will provide the relevant background necessary to understand the nitrogen debate and resulting protests, and consists of four sections: the history of modern Dutch agriculture, the problems (of too much nitrogen), the PAS<sup>1</sup>, and the protests. The section about the past will illustrate the history of Dutch agriculture following the second world war to illustrate how the Netherlands ended up with the system of agriculture that has led to excessive emissions of nitrogen compounds. The problems section will explain why these excessive emissions are a problem in the first place. The PAS section will introduce the law called the PAS (programmatische aanpak stikstof), which is the law the Dutch government put in place to attempt to address the nitrogen issue, and will explain why the law failed, and how the failure of this law was the inciting incident in 2019 to (re)start the debate about cutting emissions. The last section will give a brief overview of the protests from 2019 and the first months of 2020.

### The history of modern Dutch agriculture

While the Netherlands has a long, rich history of agriculture, modern Dutch farming started with the end of the second world war. The end of the war saw a winter referred to in Dutch as the ‘winter of hunger’ (hongerwinter). The effects of the war, combined with a particularly harsh cold, led to widespread famine, resulting in the deaths of over 20 000 people (NOS 2015). After the country was liberated, the first post-war government decided that this would never happen again. They created a policy of ‘never again hunger’ (van Merriënboer 2019).

This policy was aimed at creating cheap & abundant food, and making the agricultural sector internationally competitive by improving the circumstances of production for farmers. Core ideals were rationalism, expansion of scale and specialization. Large measures were taken to increase output, including measures that forced small, outdated farms to sell their assets, and a system called ‘ruilverkaveling’, where farmers could swap land to create larger fields more suitable to modernization and monoculture (Karel 2013c). This push for modernization has also resulted in Dutch farmers increasingly being very highly educated (CBS 2011). This policy, coupled with efforts from the European Community (EC) to increase international free trade forced farmers to drastically expand their business and specialize into one form of agriculture. Small-scale mixed farms were replaced with large-scale monocultures (Van den Broek 2005). Farmers also lost their central

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<sup>1</sup> Programmatische Aanpak Stikstof, the law whose failure sparked the 2019-2020 nitrogen debate

bargaining position in the food production and distribution chain due to the rise of supermarkets and international traders (Karel 2013d).

This approach pushed many smaller farms out of business. In order to maintain the cooperation of the agricultural sector a compromise had to be made where the government worked closely together with farmers (Frouws 1994a). This came in the form of the 'Stichting voor de Landbouw', which in 1954 became the Landbouwschap. This cooperative had mandatory membership for all agricultural firms, but in exchange served to give farmers considerable influence over the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, which in turn relied on the Landbouwschap to push modernization efforts (Karel 2013c).

In the 1960's and 70's a number of reports came out that showed the environmental damage caused by this new system of agriculture. While the ministry of agriculture initially acknowledged these concerns in 1974 with a nota that cautiously mentioned that a surplus use of fertilizer and manure could lead to pollution of water and soil (Frouws 1994a), it was slow to respond, since, as mentioned previously, the agricultural sector held large sway over the ministry. Furthermore, most ministers of agriculture at the time came from a farming background (Karel 2013c). The few measures that were proposed were either never implemented, or were only done so many years later. The predominant position of the ministry was that "It was not in the interest of the agricultural sector to sully its name through publishing alarming information about an impending manure problem" (Frouws 1994a). Additionally, farmers feared that new legislation would force them to change their business and make it harder to make a living. The aforementioned Landbouwschap also allegedly pressured researchers not to mention results that indicated a manure surplus. Other laws also failed such as a 1979 law that would limit the size of farms to prevent so-called mammoth-companies (Frouws 1994b).

Only after the Ministry of Environmental Hygiene and the Ministry of Agriculture were merged did the first laws take effect that could actually address the issue, since this made protecting nature one of the priorities of the Ministry of Agriculture, and reduced the sway of the Landbouwschap. The main environmental concern was the excess in manure, caused by the rapid growth of cattle farms, and a sharp increase in the number of animals. The compounds from this manure ended up in the ground water, causing algae bloom. As a result, early laws to cut manure pollution were aimed at limiting the number of animals. 1984 saw the implementation of two of these laws: the EU milk quota, which put a ceiling on the amount of milk that could be produced, and the Dutch interim law, which limited the number of pigs and poultry a farmer could have. The milk quota did serve to put a

cap on the number of cows, but came with negative externalities: the quota increased uncertainty in pricing of dairy, which gave some farmers an incentive to exceed their quota (Burrell 1985).

The milk quota also had the potential side-effect of simply incentivizing dairy farmers to start keeping pigs or poultry. The interim law was aimed at addressing this concern. It consisted of a counting date, where every farm's number of animals was counted, farms were then allowed to only increase in size by a specific amount. The issue with this law was that, despite efforts to keep the proposal secret, word got out. This new law was described by farmers at the time as being completely out of the blue ("een donderslag bij heldere hemel") (Frouws 1994a). In response, fearing further limits to growth, farmers started expanding as much as possible before the counting date, knowing expansion would be difficult afterwards (Van den Broek 2005). For some farmers, these measures felt like they were coming out of nowhere, which gives rise to a degree of distrust towards government legislation, and a desire on the part of farmers to get additional time to adapt to new legislation. This concern would be echoed in the 2019-2020 protests, where farmers pushed to get more time to adopt new measures, and complained that new laws were suddenly dropped on them, without proper consultation. I will touch upon this point further in chapter 4 on farmers narratives.

Many of these measures led to anger from farmers. When manure regulations were proposed in 1993, protests ensued, proposals were drafted, and farmers prepared for 'the last round of the manure fight' (Reformatorisch Dagblad 1993). Protests against these laws were, like the nitrogen protests of 2019 and 2020, in part against the 'surge' of new laws, which farmers claimed restricted their ability to modernize and innovate. The current farmers movement around nitrogen is also reminiscent of the farming protest of 1974, where farmers fought for higher prices for their produce (also a demand in the current debate). The 1974 protest, like the 2019 protests, saw the blocking of roads and distribution centres, as well as large protests in the Hague (Nienhuis 2019).

Despite these some early issues and roadblocks, the nitrogen measures from the 90's did actually manage to bring about a noticeable drop in nitrogen emissions, particularly those from agriculture. However, this drop has levelled off over the past two decades, to where there have been almost no reductions between 2016 and 2019 (see appendix C). This is largely the consequence of the fact that measures were aimed mostly at implementing new, innovative methods to store and process manure, rather than addressing the underlying issue of excessive manure production. As a result, despite these reductions, the country is still faced with a manure surplus.

More recently, in 2015, the milk quota was abandoned, and was replaced in the Netherlands by phosphate permits, based on the number of cattle a farmer had on the counting date. That same year the Dutch government implemented the PAS, which I will touch upon later in this chapter.



< Blimp used during the farmers protest in 1975, the sign reads: “Farmers and horticulturists demand action now”

## The problems with nitrogen

As mentioned previously, large scale agriculture and a steep rise in the number of cattle in the country has led to problems with emissions, particularly of nitrogen compounds. An important factor in the growth of plants is the presence of important nutrients. Many of these vital nutrients are nitrogen-containing compounds. However, an excess of these nutrients can be just as detrimental to the health of the plant as is their absence. If the levels of these nutrients get too high, plants that do well in high nitrogen conditions, such as most species of grass, will thrive, pushing out species that prefer lower concentrations, like orchids or heather (Wageningen University 2020). Additionally, some nitrogen compounds, like ammonia, can acidify the soil, washing out other important nutrients, like calcium (Gies, Kros, and Voogd 2019; Kros et al. 2008). It is thus important for biodiversity and nature conservation to regulate levels of nitrogen, to prevent the takeover of nature reserves by plants that prefer nitrogen rich soil.

The Netherlands contains a number of nature reserves that are particularly sensitive to high levels of nitrogen (Kros et al. 2008). On May 21 1992 the European Union adopted the habitats directive. This directive is aimed at *“the conservation of a wide range of rare, threatened or endemic animal and plant species”*, and instructs member states to *“take appropriate steps to avoid, in the special areas of conservation, the deterioration of natural habitats and the habitats of species.”* The Netherlands contains 161 nature reserves which have been designated as a part of the Natura-2000 project, which are reserves that fall under this directive (see appendix A). Because of this, the country is obligated to protect these habitats.

The Netherlands has high emissions of two types of nitrogen compounds: nitrogen oxides (NO and NO<sub>2</sub>, commonly grouped together as NO<sub>x</sub>) and ammonia (NH<sub>3</sub>). NO<sub>x</sub> is a by-product of combustion engines and some industrial processes, while ammonia is one of the compounds in animal manure. Once they end up in a nature reserve, these nitrogen compounds often stay there for a long time, trapped in the soil or roots of plants. Since the Netherlands has had high emissions for over 70 years, these compounds have piled up (Gies, Kros, and Voogd 2019). This has led to a loss in biodiversity, which is likely to get worse over time.

## The PAS

In an effort to reduce these emissions and protect Natura-2000 areas, the Dutch government created the 'Programmatische Aanpak Stikstof' (PAS), or the programme for addressing nitrogen, in 2015. This programme had two aims: firstly, to reduce nitrogen emissions by setting stricter emissions standards, and secondly, to restore nature where excessive levels of nitrogen were already causing damage (Rijksoverheid 2020). In one of my interviews, a member of one of the conservation groups mentioned that, when this law was initially proposed, farmer and conservation groups were allowed to read it and provide feedback. However, when this conservation group mentioned that this law would be insufficient, their criticism was ignored.

In 2019, the Council of State ruled that the PAS was in violation of the EU habitat directive (Raad van State 2019). This was because the law was ineffective at adequately protecting habitats from nitrogen emissions. This ineffectiveness was the result of how the PAS worked: the government gave out permits to projects and companies allowing them to emit only up to a certain amount of nitrogen. These permits would only be given out if the total amount of emissions would stay below a set standard, that was believed to be low enough to protect the Natura-2000 reserves. However, the PAS allowed future projected reductions to be used as 'room for development' (Jacobsen et al. 2019). This meant that if a new law was passed, or if a company implemented a new measure that would reduce emissions in the future, this reduction could be used for another project. When such a measure ended up not being implemented, or was less effective than expected, this led to more emissions than previously determined, meaning the PAS failed to achieve its aim. This approach was chosen to maximize economic growth, while reducing emissions. This was in part since the PAS was conceptualized during an economic crisis, and was worked out alongside austerity measures (Adviescollege 2020).

The ruling of the Council of State meant that the government could no longer use the PAS to hand out permits, and that projects that emitted nitrogen had to come to a sudden stop while the government created a suitable replacement. This cessation of projects led to anger from the construction and agricultural sectors, both of which were hurt by the sudden stop in the handing out of permits. Data from the RIVM (state institute for public health and environment) showed that cattle are the main source of ammonia, one of the nitrogen compounds (Gies, Kros, and Voogd 2019). As a result the agricultural industry is the sector with the largest nitrogen emissions in the country<sup>2</sup> (RIVM 2019). This led to an early proposal to cut the number of cattle in half. In response to this proposal, farmers felt unjustly blamed for the excessive emissions. This culminated in a number of protests around the country, both at the national, as well as provincial governments, which lasted until the Netherlands went into lockdown in March in response to the SARS-cov-2 virus (hereafter referred to as the Covid-19 pandemic), which prevented the organization of any further public protest, due to a ban on public gatherings.

## The Protests

The protests started on October 1<sup>st</sup>, when farmers from all around the country drove their tractors to the Malieveld, a field in the Hague, close to parliament, which is frequently used for protests. More action followed, including protests at provincial government buildings on the 14th, at which point four provinces had redacted their initial new legislation with the promise to create more lenient regulations later on. When the provincial government of Groningen refused to follow this move, a farmer drove through the front door of their office with a tractor (Winterman 2019). Another protest followed in the Hague, and at the RIVM<sup>3</sup> (Rijksinstituut voor Volksgezondheid en Milieu) in De Bilt on the 16th of October, in Noord-Brabant on the 25th, and smaller protests around the country on the 18th of December.

Parliament voted in favour of emergency legislation on the 17th of December. This set of legislation includes rules for cattle feed with low amounts of nitrogen, methods for implementing new limits for nitrogen emissions, and the implementation of a system to register emissions. The speed limit on highways has also been reduced from 130 to 100 km/hr during the day.

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<sup>2</sup> See appendix C for an comparison of nitrogen emissions per sector

<sup>3</sup> The RIVM was chosen as the site for the protest since it is the government institute that does the measurements about nitrogen emissions, and estimated that agriculture is the largest source of nitrogen (with over 40% of total emissions)

Further protests were organized in February to protest the fact that most measures to address the nitrogen surplus were targeted at agriculture, rather than other sectors. This protest would be the last national protest before lockdown measures went in place. On the 1<sup>st</sup> of April, groups representing farmers walked out on discussions with the government which had been ongoing since October. These groups felt like their advice was ignored and their proposals were side-lined.

On the 24<sup>th</sup> of April, agriculture minister Schouten handed a proposal to parliament which is centred around buying up older farms which have particularly high emissions, reducing the amount of protein in 'krachtvoer', which is one of the types of cattle feed, and restoring nature reserves that have already suffered from excessive nitrogen levels. This proposal received heavy criticism from farmers and nature groups alike for being too short-sighted, and ineffective. At the time of writing, this proposal is being reviewed by the provincial governments, which are now debating how to implement these, or additional, measures. When lockdown measures were restricted, further protests followed, including one in de Bilt on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of July (see appendix B for a timeline of the nitrogen crisis).

What we can already see in this chapter on the background, is that the PAS is the latest piece of legislation in a long list of laws that both impacted farmers, while also being ineffective. This history already introduces a couple of themes that are central to the narratives discussed in the next chapter: there have already been many attempts to curb nitrogen emissions, many of which failed. Agriculture has long been known to be a source of emissions of nitrogen and other compounds that can hurt nature. However, the system of industrial agriculture that has led to these emissions was not founded by farmers, but was forced upon them by a combination of governmental decisions and European free market capitalism. With this background in mind, it is time to discuss the narratives present in the debate.



## Chapter 3: Conservation narratives

The narratives from conservation groups are broadly centred around the opportunity the nitrogen crisis brings to, once and for all, redesign the Dutch agricultural system in a way that is more sustainable. This sentiment is clearly stated in the title of the proposal given to the minister of agriculture on the 11th of December 2019 by ten prominent conservation groups titled “Use the nitrogen crisis as an opportunity for nature and all Dutch people”<sup>4</sup>. This chapter will start by introducing the groups I refer to as ‘conservation groups’. I will then give a brief consideration of how the nature of Dutch reserves affects the conversation about nature protection and nitrogen. I will then introduce the dominant narratives from conservation groups, and will finish with an analysis of these narratives.

In this thesis, a lot more attention will be given to the narratives of farmers. This is for a number of reasons. Firstly, farmers have been more vocal than conservation groups on this particular issue, there have, for instance, not been any large scale protests to argue for stricter emissions standards. Therefore, there is more material available from farmers. Farmers also form more of an ad-hoc social movement around the nitrogen debate, while conservation groups are, by and large, existing organizations which have taken on the nitrogen debate in addition to other topics like greenhouse gas emissions, or the maintenance of specific areas of conservation. Since the purpose of this thesis is to highlight the many different roles of narratives, the narratives of farmers are more interesting. I have decided to still include both groups, for two reasons. Firstly, the conservation narratives highlight how narratives are used to persuade the public more so than farming narratives. Second, and more important, the narratives of farmers and conservation groups are two sides of the same coin, they do not exist in isolation. For example, farmers took up the slogan “no farmers, no food”. Not long after that conservation groups published their proposal which included the sentence “no nature, no food”; the two sides respond to each other. It is therefore important to not just look at the narratives in isolation, but also to draw parallels and contrasts.

### Conservation groups

Nature conservation groups in the Netherlands started out with a primary focus on maintaining and managing specific, small reserves, and accepted the strong position of the agricultural sector, as long as at least some smaller areas were protected. Starting in the 1960’s the first groups were founded that had more far-reaching goals, also when it pertained to agriculture. These groups were branded

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<sup>4</sup> Benut stikstofcrisis als kans voor natuur en alle Nederlanders

as 'the enemy' by farmers at the time. These farther reaching groups further antagonized farmers by anonymously buying up farmland to get a seat at the table during debates about the distribution of agricultural land. This move, couple with increasing awareness of sustainability issues and international agreements forced farmers to participate in the debate about nature protection. While the relation between farmers and conservation groups started out with some hostility, it did improve in the 1990's, even leading to a large degree of cooperation (Karel 2013b). Many farmers now intentionally keep parts of their land flooded to benefit a number of bird species which nest in wetlands for example.

There are a large number of conservation groups involved in the nitrogen debate. One of the proposals (10 stappenplan voor realisatie natuurinclusieve kringlooplandbouw) was signed by 60 different groups. These groups include international organizations, like Greenpeace, national groups, like Natuurmonumenten, and regional groups like the Frisian Kening fan 'e Greide. Additionally, companies are also involved, like the organic supermarket chain Ekoplaza and the bank Triodos. A number of farming groups have also advocated for changes to agriculture, including Caring Farmers, and Netwerk GRONDig, the latter of which is also one of the eleven groups representing farmers in negotiations with the government, which highlights that the two groups as presented in this thesis are not necessarily two unified, opposed groups.

Due to this variety, it is difficult to explain the structure of these organizations. Some are large organizations with memberships and paid employees, while others are local initiatives of volunteers. Some of these groups, like Natuurmonumenten, focus on maintaining nature reserves around the country, others, like Werkgroep Behoud de Peel, focus on protecting and maintaining a single reserve or cluster of reserves. The mission of the groups also varies a lot, Kening fan 'e Greide is concerned with protecting Frisian meadows, while Caring Farmers is a network for farmers to share information on how to make their own business more sustainable an animal-friendly.

The name 'conservation groups' is therefore in reality too narrow to be applicable to this group, since a number do not focus on nature conservation primarily, and a few are organizations or companies, rather than groups. Despite this, I will refer to this group as conservation groups for the sake of simplicity. Although it has to be kept in mind that 'conservation groups' refers to a mixture of very different organizations, with more or less involvement in the nitrogen debate. It also has to be kept in mind that a couple of organizations that I have included under the umbrella of conservation groups are also farming groups, and vice versa. Some groups have espoused both narratives that

argue for stricter legislation and efforts to cut nitrogen emissions, while also arguing for the rights of farmers.

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, narratives within groups can be very different from individual to individual or organization to organization. The conservation groups involved in the nitrogen debate are clearly very varied. Within conservation groups working on the nitrogen crisis, the main difference between these different groups is not so much in the narratives, but in their approach to the crisis. In my research, I identified two sets of narratives, centred around the different approaches of conservation groups: Most groups use a combination of public outreach and policy proposals. Other groups focus primarily on legal action. While both approaches carry a similar central message, they have a distinctly different tone. This chapter will illustrate both narratives, and will finish with a brief consideration of both.

## Protected areas

At its core, the issue with nitrogen emissions is their effect on nature reserves. Dutch nature is interesting in this regard in two ways: the large degree to which they are made and maintained by humans, and how open they are to the public.

Dutch nature is closely managed and maintained, and is the result of human action. As the saying goes: God created the earth, but the Dutch created the Netherlands. While anthropological research has long acknowledged how nature is created, conceptualized, and affected by humans, this fact is often underplayed or deliberately ignored by NGO's in charge of managing and protecting reserves (Adams and McShane 1992; Gomez-Pampa and Kaus 1992). In most Dutch reserves, human intervention is acknowledged and sometimes explicitly mentioned to visitors

All Natura-2000 reserves in the country are closely monitored and managed; new plants are planted, deer populations are maintained through feeding and hunting, and paths are made to allow for recreational use of the reserves. Additionally, a few reserves would not exist without human intervention. The two prominent ones are the IJsselmeer, a man-made lake that used to be sea, and the Oostvaardersplassen, which is situated on an area of land reclaimed from the water less than 100 years ago. Species that have gone extinct in the country have also been reintroduced, most notably in the case of storks.

Dutch nature is also notable in that reserves are at a low level of conservation. The International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) defines six categories of conservation, ranging from strict reserves, which disallow tourism and are only accessible to scientists, all the way to protected areas with sustainable use of natural resources, which allow for low levels of non-industrial use of natural resources (IUCN 2020). Dutch nature is closer to the latter category. Other than a few isolated cases, like the island Rottumeroog, Dutch reserves are freely accessible to the public, in most cases without supervision of a forest guard.

In the Netherlands, some areas of farmland have even been designated as reserves, while still being farmed. A notable example is the designation of areas as breeding grounds for geese, which I will touch upon in the section on farming narratives. Dutch reserves are thus more open to the public, and more closely managed than typical reserves. Because of this, and despite the nitrogen debate being about how to protect specific areas (Natura-2000 reserves), the conversation about nitrogen is less about protecting nature, and is more about how to reconcile economic interests and EU mandated levels of protection. The debate started, not as the result of a governmental desire to strengthen nature protection laws, but as a consequence of a court case ruling that the Netherlands was in violation of the EU habitats directive. The aim of the government has also appeared to be to abide by EU laws, rather than to create a broader, better protection of nature. Due to the man-made nature of Dutch reserves, coupled with the governmental intention of balancing economic growth with EU mandated levels of regulation, conservation groups cannot use the argument that nature is some primordial area, untainted by human intervention, which entitles it to protection. Instead, a different approach has to be taken.

### Narrative set 1: the nitrogen crisis is an opportunity

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, a number of conservation groups involved in the nitrogen debate have mainly employed policy proposals and public outreach. These groups come in different shapes and sizes. A number of international groups are involved, including WWF and Greenpeace. There are also a number of national groups involved, like Natuurmonumenten and Staatsbosbeheer, as well as regional groups like the Frisian Kening fan 'e Greide, a citizens collective dedicated to protecting meadows. These proposals consist of two parts: a sketch of a bright future, and a path to reach said future. Rather than emphasize the damage of the current situation, or describing at length how nature might deteriorate further if we fail to act now, they have painted an image of what agriculture might look like in the future. This image is one of circular agriculture (kringlooplandbouw). The aim of this type of agriculture is to cut emissions by closing 'cycles'. The

main way in which this is achieved is by producing cattle feed in the Netherlands itself, rather than importing it.<sup>5</sup>

On the 14th of January, a number of conservation groups, including Greenpeace and Natuurmonumenten organized a walk to The Hague, in an event titled the 'kring-loop'<sup>6</sup>. This event was organized to bring attention to their proposal for 10 steps to bring the country closer to more nature inclusive agriculture, which consists of circular agriculture, as well as a few other suggestions such as promoting the consumption of locally produced food.

The proposal (10 stappen voor realisatie natuurinclusieve kringlooplandbouw) starts with a description of an fictional, ideal future of the Netherlands 2040, where circular agriculture has been widely adopted:

*"More than now, Dutch agriculture delivers to local and European markets, chains are shorter, and there is more supply and sale of local produce. [...] Per capita we consume less food of animal origin, and the animal products we do eat have been produced with much attention for animal welfare and the environment. Burrowing pigs and free range chickens live off of by-products of our food system [...] Farmers, banks, middlemen, governments, and overseers strengthen and appreciate each other, supported by innovative economic models and regulations. The landscape is shaped by a marriage of agriculture and nature. Nature reserves are effectively connected via other reserves, agricultural areas and/or public space and the management of nature reserves and agricultural land is attuned to, and strengthen each other [...] The landscape is an inspiring place. In 2040 the Netherlands, next to being at the top of nature inclusive agriculture, is a flourishing delta for humans and nature: we achieved our goals."*

What we can see in this vision is an idyllic version of what the Netherlands could be like in 2040, if only we rethink our agricultural system now. What is also interesting is the wide scope of the changes proposed. Not only would there be fewer cattle and less imported feed, which would be

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<sup>5</sup> A main reason behind the nitrogen emissions issue in the Netherlands is the reliance on imported cattle feed. This imported cattle feed is rich in protein (consisting mainly of soy). High protein feed is important for the meat and dairy industry, since they are important nutrients for the production of dairy and meat. However, proteins also contain nitrogen. A large consumption of protein also means that the animal's waste contains more urea ((NH<sub>2</sub>)<sub>2</sub>CO). This compound can become ammonia when exposed to heat, or when it comes into contact with faeces. This is also the argument behind the minister's proposal to set stricter standards on power feed, which is usually imported. The idea of producing feed in the country itself is that this animal waste can serve as fertilizer for cattle feed. This would mean that no 'new' nitrogen enters the country.

<sup>6</sup> My information about this event comes from online sources, including news coverage, the website of the organizers, and images and videos shared by participants

changes that address the nitrogen crisis, the proposal also imagines a country where animal welfare and the environment are central considerations when producing food, and where there is a mutual respect between farmers, conservation groups, and all other citizens and institutions. This proposal is a very clear example of the use of narratives to paint an idealized future and make one course of action seem more attractive in the public outreach approach.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, when analysing a narrative, it is important to also consider its intended audience, since, as mentioned in an earlier chapter, the storyteller often keeps the reader or listener in mind when recounting a narrative. In the case of the kring-loop there was the obvious audience of the wider public, some of whom might take the event as an opportunity to read more into circular agriculture. Furthermore, another audience is the minister of agriculture. The kring-loop was organized as a walk to The Hague to hand this ten step proposal to Carola Schouten, the minister of agriculture, who had, on several occasions, expressed interest in this type of more sustainable farming, but had never acted on it in any major way. By doing this walk and handing in this proposal, the participants could espouse their support for the minister's interest in circular farming, as well as push her to actually act on it.

The walk itself is also interesting to look at. During this walk to The Hague, a central feature was a three meter tall effigy of a godwit, or grutto in Dutch. The godwit is a bird that used to be abundant, but has suffered greatly due to intensive agriculture. Additionally, the godwit is the national bird of the Netherlands. Since it is the national bird, and since its well-being is so reliant on the quality of meadows, it is a powerful symbol to show the importance of combining agriculture with nature, as well as point out how this relation has suffered in the past due to the industrialization of farming. That being said, other than this one event, and one or two offhand remarks, I did not come across other mentions of the bird. However, the use of the godwit as a symbol for the protection of meadows does point to an important question: why protect nature reserves at all?





the godwit in front! Image taken during the Kring-loop

< Onwards to Carola! (the minister of agriculture),

When arguing the importance of addressing this nitrogen issue, the question of why we should protect nature is quite central, especially since doing so would take time, money, and effort, and would require a significant change to the agricultural system, and the diet of everyday citizens. Furthermore, one might ask: 'excessive nitrogen does not destroy nature, it just changes it, there would simply be more forests and grassland rather than heather, what's the issue?' The use of a charismatic species like the godwit is one way to promote the protection of nature. We have also seen another answer in the idyllic image painted in the ten step proposal: a country with a lot of strong, healthy nature is good for us.

Both the ten step proposal and the other main proposal 'use the nitrogen crisis as an opportunity for nature and all Dutch people' use variations on the phrase 'no nature no food'. This sentence is both arguing the case for the need to protect nature, as well as being a clear mirroring of the slogan employed by farmers 'no farmers no food', but also emphasizes that improving nature can benefit the production of food, rather than detract from it. The proposal 'use the nitrogen crisis...' also begins by stating that:

*"If we tackle the nitrogen crisis once and for all, the solution will not only ensure the recovery of nature, but will also bring a sizable contribution to solving other urgent challenges our society is faced with. A reduction in nitrogen emissions has a positive effect on the quality of surface- and drinking water, air quality, and public health."*

The other main argument in favour of protecting nature, and particularly protecting against big changes in plant life is the fact that damage to one species can have ramification further up or down the food chain. Acidification of the soil could lead to the washing out of calcium, which means that plants absorb less of it. This then leads to snails with thinner shells, since they use the calcium from

their diet to make and maintain their shell. Birds that eat these snails then have thinner eggshells and their offspring have more brittle bones, to name just one example used in this debate (Van Zoelen 2019). Additionally, since the governmental approach to conservation has been to find a balance between EU mandated protection and economic growth, the broader scope of these narratives also argue that failing to address problems with nitrogen now will reduce air and water quality, which will give rise to an increase in the cost of public health further down the line. By broadening the scope, the audience (in this case the government) is again kept in mind.

After painting its future vision, these proposals ('the 10 steps to nature inclusive agriculture' and 'use the nitrogen crisis as an opportunity [...]'), lay out a path towards circular agriculture. Here 10 step proposal mentions that "A fundamental transition in agriculture is therefore the only way to structurally leave this [crisis]. This transition is the responsibility of all of us: farmers, politicians [...] consumers, science, and citizens. More than half of farmers have expressed interest in switching to nature inclusive agriculture, a few have already made this step. [...] It is not a matter of whether, but how, what, and when". What follows are a number of recommendations to bring the country closer to circular agriculture, finishing off the proposal with a clear path towards the idyllic future painted earlier.

Some previous research has suggested that the most effective narratives to bring about a change in public policy are those that are clear, and lay out a plan to ensure a positive outcome or better future for everyone (E. M. Roe 1989). The two proposals from nature groups certainly fit this description. However, they did not bring about the desired change; the minister's proposal in April did mention circular agriculture as a future aim, but failed to include serious steps, like those mentioned in the proposals, to actually get there. This hesitation on the government's part to take decisive action leads us to the topic of the other narratives: preventing paper solutions.

## Narrative 2: Preventing paper solutions

The organizations that pursue legal actions paint a less hopeful picture. I interviewed a member of Mobilization for the Environment (MOB), and a person working for Werkgroep behoud de Peel (WbdP). These are two of the organizations that use legal action to force the creation of more robust and effective nitrogen emissions laws, and the organizations whose court cases led to the judgement of the Council of State that started this nitrogen debate. WpdP is a small organization that works to protect a small group of reserves in the south of the country, and consists of only volunteers. They got involved in the nitrogen issue after seeing the damage in the reserves they manage and protect.



Mobilization for the Environment is an organization mainly concerned with fighting to protect the environment in the Netherlands, by filing cases against biomass power plants, emissions from air travel, and intensive agriculture. Compared to the idyllic image painted by the ten steps proposal, the conversations I had with members from these two organizations had a distinctly less hopeful and idealistic tone.

The member of MOB mentioned to me that the public policy proposals and public outreach from the other organizations is nice, but that their experience has taught them that they are unfortunately much less effective than legal action. Central to the more pessimistic (or realistic) tone is the notion of ‘paper solutions’, which is a phrase that popped up on numerous occasions, both in my interview with MOB, as well as in articles and interviews done by news media. This term refers to previous efforts from the Dutch government to address the nitrogen issue. These ‘solutions’ only looked good on paper, but did not work adequately in practice, hence they are ‘paper solutions’.

To understand the topic of paper solutions, we need to go back a little. As mentioned the section about the history of Dutch agriculture, the problem of excessive nitrogen emissions arising from manure has been known since the 1970’s. Efforts have been made, but these never fully solved the issue. The 1984 about compounds in manure (meststoffenwet) barely even mentioned the word ‘manure’. Later laws were more effective, particularly after the ministry of agriculture came to be in charge of nature as well, which removed conflict between the ministries of agriculture and environmental hygiene. However, these later proposals were, time and time again, either ineffective or not effective enough, often since they included too many exceptions (Frouws 1994b). The PAS itself is a clear example of regulations that were almost designed to not properly address the nitrogen surplus. While the issue of future emissions might initially seem like an honest mistake that could not have been foreseen, my interview with WbdP suggests differently. In this interview I was told that, when the PAS was initially proposed, there was an opportunity to apply to read it before it was implemented. WbdP did this in 2012, and saw that the law was insufficient<sup>7</sup>. These paper solutions look good on paper, and seem, at first glance, like effective measures, but in practice fail to do what they are supposed to.

Additionally, the large policy debate was little cause for celebration, even though the topic of nitrogen emissions was now very much in the public consciousness. This sentiment was succinctly

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<sup>7</sup> “toen zagen we al dat het veel te weinig voorstelde”

voiced by the person from WbdP I talked to: *“All those discussions, I would be happy with solutions. [...] It has led to a lot of commotion and discussions, but I am yet to see solutions. The only solution I have seen is the reduction of the speed limit [...] and that was mainly to get construction back on the rails. [...] But the big cause, cattle farming, agriculture, nothing has been done about it. Well, there is a buying out measure, but that one already existed and was mainly to address nuisance due to the smell. [...] It helps with the nitrogen of course, but not enough.”*<sup>8</sup> Someone who has been working on the nitrogen issue for decades has ample experience with how this type of debate frequently fails to actually change things.

Additionally, many of these groups have personally seen nature deteriorate. Particularly WbdP, which works to protect a specific group of reserves, rather than work to protect nature in general. This means they have a history of working hard at minimizing the damage of nitrogen, and as my interviewee mentioned: *“If nothing happens now, the position of nature is hopeless, we have now, for 20 to 30 years, been busy maintaining, maintaining, maintaining, replacing turf, sawing, cutting. Over time it will not improve, with a lot of effort we are now keeping the situation about the same”*.

This can also show why a group might pursue legal action over discussion: Their experience tells them that governmental efforts to reduce emissions always end up being ineffective, and that this lack of effect is frequently visible even before the law takes effect. As the person from MOB told me, their court cases are frequently about making sure the government sticks to its own promises and laws. This point also came up during a dialogue session I attended between the Frisian provincial government and a number of conservation groups, where considerable time was given to questions about how different policies would be evaluated and what safeguards were put in place to ensure new measures would be effective. The moral of these narratives about paper solutions come with the moral that making laws is not enough, if these laws are, once again, ineffective.

## Reflections

As we have seen, I have identified two sets of nature conservation narratives. The moral of both sets of narratives is the idea that this crisis is an opportunity the country has to seize to fundamentally improve the sustainability of Dutch agriculture. The main differences are the two approaches - proposals and legal action - and the tone of the narratives, either positive and hopeful, or somewhat more pessimistic.

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<sup>8</sup> Excerpt from my interview with WbdP

What is also interesting is that these narratives operate on the individual level, as well as on a societal level, with the aim of convincing the broader population, but do not really operate on the within-group level; the narratives are mostly aimed at the broader public, with some being personal. By setting the broader public as the audience for the Netherlands in 2040 narrative, this narrative nicely encapsulates the performative aspect of social movement.. No narratives appear to be aimed at others working on conservation to get them to join the debate. This might be a consequence of my methods, since I had little access to internal dynamics of the conservation groups. Although it might also be the result of the fact that these groups are established organizations, rather than more ad-hoc social movements, which eliminates the need for narratives to mobilize. This might mean that there is little reason to use narratives to create within-group unity. I will touch upon this point more in the next chapter on farmers narratives.

I also noticed that, while there is a 'negative' image of what a future might be like if we fail to act now, this narrative is mostly one on a personal level, guiding individual reasoning, but not really being employed in the wider public narrative. In interviews there has been mention of rare orchids or butterflies that are suffering, or examples to illustrate how ecosystems are damaged by nitrogen, but these seemed mostly to be used to explain how nitrogen damages nature, rather than paint a narrative about the future. While the aim for the Netherlands by 2040 in the ten steps proposal was very vivid and detailed, no such imagery was used to illustrate the 'bad future' where we fail to act. Perhaps this is out of hesitation to create more friction with farmers, since a shift towards circular agriculture is only possible with their support, which would fit with the lack of a clearly defined 'villain' in the narratives. Farmers might also not be seen as the opponent, since a number of groups arguing for a change in policy are farming organizations, and a number of farming groups are indeed included in the proposals discussed in this chapter. In this way, the narratives demonstrate that, while the debate initially seemed to be between two unified, opposed groups, reality is a lot more muddled and complex.

## Chapter 4: Farmers narratives

The narratives from farmers are a bit more varied than those of nature conservation groups. The narratives themselves are subtly different from farmer to farmer, but they also serve different functions, including being a heuristic for individuals, motivating (collective) action, and creating unity within farming groups. This chapter will begin with a brief overview of the various signs used in farmers protests to give an indication of which topics are ubiquitous, at least during the protests. I will then describe a few farmers' narratives, and point out the themes central to them. This chapter will finish with a brief consideration of these various narratives, their functions, and how and why they differ from each other.

The social movement of farmers is a hybrid of existing organizations and ad-hoc gatherings, and consists of farming interest groups, their members, unaffiliated farmers, and a few miscellaneous others, like citizens who are sympathetic to the cause of farmers, fishermen, representatives of companies otherwise affiliated with agriculture (such as those producing cattle feed), and the occasional protester arguing for other causes. During the protest in February for instance, there were protesters arguing for a Dutch exit from the European Union.

The main interest groups are those organized in the agricultural collective (Landbouw collectief). This is an ad-hoc collective founded to represent farmers in negotiations with the government about nitrogen policy. The agricultural collective consists of 11 organizations: the Dutch Dairymen board, NAJK, NAV, Netwerk GRONDig, NFE, Nederlandse Melkveehouders Vakbond, Nederlandse Vakbond Pluimveehouders, POV, LTO, Agractie, and Farmers Defence Force. The first nine of these are unions or representative groups for specific agricultural sectors, that have already existed for a while. LTO (land- en tuinbouw organisatie), for instance, represents crop- and fruit farmers, and was founded in 1995 after the downfall of the Landbouwschap. The other groups represent other agricultural sectors, like dairy farming, pig farming, and poultry farming. While the exact number of members for all of these organizations is unknown, just LTO is estimated to have membership levels of at least 43% of Dutch farmers, although it might be as high as 70% (Bosch 2018).

Unlike the other organizations, Agractie and Farmers Defence Force (FDF) are activist groups, rather than unions or representative groups. Both operate largely via social media, and are more involved in organizing protests, rather than creating policy proposals and lobbying. These two organizations are also much younger than the other nine. Agractie was created specifically to address the nitrogen issue. FDF was founded in early 2019 as an ad-hoc response to a group of animal rights activists that

had occupied a farm in Boxtel (Van Rooijen 2019). While originally started as a WhatsApp group to mobilize a counter protest, FDF has become an organization with formal membership and a board, and has taken on additional tasks, like filing court cases against the government.

The protests, particularly those in October, saw representation from every agricultural sector, including those less involved in the nitrogen issue, such as fruit farmers. This is interesting since, until recently, farmers were organized by sector, each of which organized its own protests and engaged in debate with the government independently (Karel 2013c). The nitrogen debate is the first time in decades where all sectors of agriculture are united. It is odd that this particular debate would unite the various sectors, since the vast majority of nitrogen emissions come from manure produced by cattle, meaning nitrogen legislation would affect cattle farmers, while having little impact on fruit farmers. Additionally, farmers from all around the country joined the protests. During each of the national protests, I could spot the flags of every Dutch province. For farmers from the far north or deep south, this meant that they had driven for over 5 hours to get their tractor to the protest in The Hague. Also represented are the different ages. During the protests, there were young children, adults, and a few people of around, or above, retirement age. Some farmers were travelling in multi-generational groups, as might be expected in a sector where most companies are family businesses. Younger farmers did appear to be slightly more likely to join the protests than older farmers.

With this understanding of the social movement itself, we can move on to the narratives. In order to illustrate the themes that will be reflected in the narratives, I will begin by offering a brief analysis of the signs employed during the protests, since these give a good overview of important topics. I will then follow by describing five narratives I identified, each followed by a brief analysis.

## Protest signs

During the various farming protests, participants frequently used signs to express their concerns and demands. Most often these were attached to their tractors. Protest signs are an interesting object of study, and can serve to deeper understand discourse (Kasanga 2014). Additionally, previous research has indicated that protest signs may provide insight into the collective identity of the group protesting (Dabbour 2017), as well as their affiliations (Wildermuth et al. 2014). Signs and symbols are also a vector to spread (parts of) narratives.

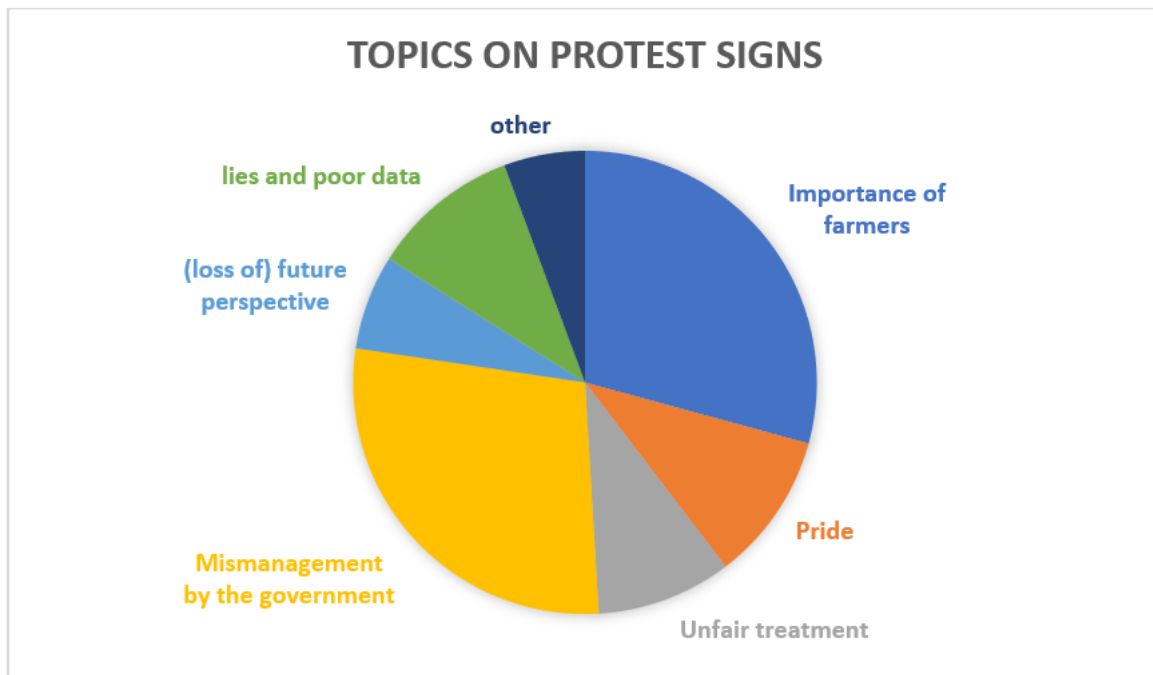
Of course the signs present at the protests do not represent all voices, only those of people who both participated in the protests, as well as took the time to construct a sign, but they do give a glimpse into which topics are on the minds of the participants of the protests.



<sup>^</sup> Sign used during the February 14<sup>th</sup> protest, with a text stating “The Hague (referring to the government) has lost its mind, which is why we make our voices be heard!”

I collected images of signs used during the various protests, both by attending a protest in February, as well as by noting down the text used on signs visible during news coverage and on social media. While I certainly did not manage to capture every sign, I did get a decent sample (N = 99) which I believe to be fairly representative of signs during the farmers protests (see appendix D for a full list of the signs I analysed). These signs can be subdivided into seven categories (some signs fit into multiple categories):

- The importance of farmers
- Pride (#TrotsOpDeBoer, meaning Proud of the farmer, was a common statement during protests).
- Unfair treatment. These signs frequently talked about how farmers are held to a stricter standard than, for example, airports when it comes to emissions.
- Mismanagement by the government. These signs often called out the government or minister of agriculture and blamed them for the crisis, or accused them of short-sighted decisions.
- Loss of future perspective. These signs were mostly lamenting the deterioration of the sector and were expressing concern about having to close their farms.
- Lies and poor data. A central topic during the February protest was that the government was making policy based on poor data, which overestimated the percentage of nitrogen emissions arising from agriculture.



What this analysis shows is that the two most central sentiments shared through the protest signs are the importance of farmers, which includes pride in being a farmer, and mismanagement by the government. The mismanagement also fits with the unfair treatment, since those signs often blamed the government for targeting the agricultural sector in favour of protecting industry and air travel (a topic that will come up again later). With this in mind we can delve into the narratives. The structure of the rest of this chapter is as follows: I will introduce five narratives, each followed by an analysis of what this narrative teaches us about the protests, and about the use of narratives in social movements in general.

#### Narrative 1: geese and an unreliable government

Early May, I talked to a Sarah<sup>9</sup>, an organic farmer who had joined the nitrogen protests. I was interested in speaking to her in particular, since I expected that the owner of a bio farm would be less inclined to protest regulations aimed at protecting nature, partially since they would hurt her business less than conventional farms. Due to the aforementioned Covid-19 pandemic and ensuing lockdown, we decided to set up a video call. During this call, Sarah told me that she and her husband had bought a small farm in 2013, with around 60 cows. They decided to try to change the business to an organic one, partially out of love for nature, but mostly because this would allow them to make a living without having to expand their farm to about 200 cows, allowing them to spend more time out in the field, rather than working behind a desk. It took a lot of effort to switch over the farm, since

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<sup>9</sup> Not her real name

there was little information available, so they had to figure a lot out themselves, and even had to cut partnerships with advisors and suppliers with whom they had formed a close connection. Her husband ended up forming a study group with a few colleagues embarking on the same journey. Despite this hardship, she described feeling like her farm is a “sweater that fits perfectly”, since the type of business brings them a lot of joy. When we started to discuss the nitrogen crisis, and the government’s approach to it, our conversation quickly drifted to an issue she had recently with geese on her farm.

She told me the story of how, a few years ago, they received a letter informing them that the area they lived in had been designated as breeding ground for geese. This meant that they would not be allowed to kill or scare off geese, even when they caused severe damage. Geese are a frequent concern for farmers, since, as the Sarah explained to me, seven geese eat roughly the same amount of grass as a full- grown cow.



*< An image of the difference between the length of grass accessible to geese, and the length when covered with a goose-proof cage. This image was shared multiple times on Facebook.*

What was initially planned to be the breeding grounds for one thousand geese quickly became home to ten times that amount. They did receive financial compensation from the government, but it was not enough to cover the damages. She described this compensation as “a lifejacket made of concrete” (een betonnen zwemvest). Additionally, when she went to her bank to ask for a loan to deal with the problem, her bank refused, telling her to find a way to monetize the geese. While she quipped that she and her husband were considering setting up a safari for all those goose enthusiasts, it was clear that this interaction left a very bad taste. This bad interaction with the government in the past was also one of the reasons she decided to join the protests; the nitrogen regulation, much like the goose reserve, felt like it had been forced upon her from above. Additionally, both the reserve, and the nitrogen law negatively impacted the ability of farmers to make a living, by further limiting their options. The goose reserve restricted her ability to scare off a pest to protect the grass for her cows. The nitrogen measures proposed by the minister in April



would also put strict limits on which cattle feed she would be able to give her cows, further reducing her ability to run her own farm in the way she would like to.

This story illustrates a few additional important points. Firstly, this narrative came up while talking about the nitrogen debate, but has little to do with nitrogen. This was far from the only narrative tied to the nitrogen debate that was mainly about some other topic, demonstrating that the anger of farmers is not just the consequence of the nitrogen debate, but has other causes as well. The setting of the narrative in this case is thus not just the nitrogen debate, but the broader topic of agriculture and legislation in the Netherlands, and how the Dutch government can be unreliable. This finding can also explain the involvement of all agricultural sectors in the nitrogen debate. Since nitrogen emissions, in the form of ammonia, come from manure, new legislation to cut these emissions affects cattle farmers most strongly, while having little to no impact on fruit farmers for instance. Nonetheless, farmers from all sectors united, even those who would not be affected directly by stricter nitrogen laws. However, if the setting of the farmers' narratives is much broader, this involvement of all sectors is only natural.

In this example, the narrative about geese thus illustrated an important aspect of the view of farmers, serving as a means of communication to an outsider (me), who subsequently had a better understanding of the movement.



^ another example of the broad nature of narratives comes from stickers from farmer activist group Agractie, which were spread during the protests. These stickers were intended to be put on groceries, marking them as 'unsustainable', having an 'unfair price for farmers', or being 'farmer friendly'. These stickers illustrate that pricing and sustainability are also themes that occur in farming narratives.

Additionally, the narrative serves as a way for the farmer to understand new legislation by looking at it through the lens of previous laws: since past laws made her ability to make a living difficult, new legislation that is similar is likely to do the same. The narratives act like a kind of representativeness

heuristic. This heuristic is defined as “[a heuristic in which] probabilities are evaluated by the degree to which A is representative of B, that is, to the degree in which A resembles B (Kahneman 2011). In this case the new nitrogen laws are evaluated by the degree to which they are perceived to resemble previous laws that hurt farmers. Since new nitrogen laws have some of the same features of the phosphate laws (such as the aim to limit growth), they are perceived to be a potential repeat of these previous laws.

This heuristic function was again illustrated through another story she told me, versions of which were also shared on social media amongst farmers, and were told during one of the online Q&A sessions for farmers about the new laws.

### Narrative 2: phosphates, bad legislation, and unity

In 2015, the EU milk quota was replaced by the Dutch phosphate law. This law was intended to limit growth in agricultural firms, much like the interim law mentioned in the history section. The phosphate law came with a counting date on the second of July 2015, at which date the number of dairy cows would be counted and used as a reference for the future. However, the law failed to account for the fact that many cows were carrying a calf at the time. Sarah had 65 cows at the time, 10 of which with calf on the second of July. This meant that she would automatically exceed the limit when the cows gave birth, which forced her to either buy additional permits from neighbours, or getting rid of 10 of their cows, effectively shrinking her business.

This story again illustrates that the social movement of farmers is about more than just nitrogen, and that anger amongst farmers may be due to a new law suddenly being dropped on their plate. Additionally, this narrative shares the function of being a heuristic. Even more so than narratives about geese, this narrative was shared widely amongst farmers on social media, in opinion panels on TV, and during online seminars and Q&A sessions, where they invoked strong emotions. This is due to the fact that most farmers were either faced with the consequences of the phosphate law, or otherwise knew a colleague who had. This shared experience does two things: it motivates individuals to join the protests, by showing them what has happened to colleagues and could happen to them, and it creates a feeling of unity by taking a stand *together*.

Sarah mentioned to me that she felt goose bumps when she arrived at the site of the protest. This was because, for the first time since she became a farmer, the entire agricultural sector was rising up together to say ‘no more’. This created a very strong feeling of unity. For younger farmers, or

individuals who only recently picked up the profession, this may even create a type of meaning-making, as it solidifies their identity as a farmer. While for older farmers, the protests were a way to really fight for their way of life. 'Being a farmer' as a great source of pride was a theme very central to the protests, as can be seen in the previously mentioned protest signs. Another telling example of this 'being a farmer' comes from one of the speeches given during the protest in February. The speaker in question was a woman who had brought her infant son with her to the protest. She proudly proclaimed that her son was also a farmer, because "a farmer is not something you become, it is something you are born as".

These two narratives – geese and phosphates – illustrate how one narrative can have multiple functions. The narrative on geese serves to communicate the difficulties of being a farmer, and serves as a representativeness heuristic, informing the decisions of an individual. The phosphate narrative shares these functions, and adds to them by mobilizing individuals and creating a feeling of unity within the farmers' movement.

### Narrative 3: the fairy tale of Stikstofje

During the February protest, after the last speaker had exited the stage, there was a brief lull, allowing people to grab lunch and chat. A band entered the stage and began to play. I noticed that next to the band, a short video was playing on loop which told the story of 'Stikstofje' (little Nitrogen), represented by minister of agriculture Carola Schouten. Stikstofje, together with her friends (prime minister Mark Rutte, and leader of the Green Left party Jesse Klaver) created a crisis. But something very special happened on a magical place (the site of this and previous protests): farmers banded together to help her out of the crisis, as long as she was willing to listen to them, which they were happy to remind her to do. The whole video had the setting of a fairy tale, with images of the minister and protests being interwoven with a video of a book of fairy tales opening and turning to the next chapter.



^the fairy tale of Stikstofje “once upon a time there was... little Nitrogen

This narrative is one that questions the existence of a nitrogen crisis, by portraying the crisis as a fairy tale, the moral being that the crisis is not real. The protest on the 14<sup>th</sup> of February, where this video was shown, was largely in an effort to bring attention to a presentation that would be given the next day, which would present the data from the Mesdag Zuivelfonds (a fund initially founded to assess and maintain the quality of milk). This organization had re-done the calculations of the RIVM, and had supposedly found that there had been a mistake in calculating the percentage of nitrogen that came from farming. Earlier data from the RIVM had estimated that around 46% of nitrogen emissions in the Netherlands came from farming, which is also the figure used as a basis for the recommendations from the government appointed advice committee (Adviescollege 2019). The Mesdagfonds had put these estimates at 25%. While this lower number turned out to be the result of a calculation error, criticism of the RIVM models remained, including criticism that the RIVM data was largely based on computer models, rather than measurements (Rotgers and Zijlstra 2020).

This narrative of Stikstofje gives insight into the fact that a number of farmers does not believe there is an issue with nitrogen emissions from the agricultural sector, or at least, that this problem is wildly overstated. As mentioned earlier, there are large differences between the views of individual farmers. The degree to which they believe there is a problem that can be traced back to agriculture is one area with great diversity in opinion. The views proclaimed in the video about Stikstofje are very much on the side of the spectrum where there is a lot of denial. However, there are also farmers who believe there is a problem that has to be addressed soon (think for instance of the farmers pushing for nature inclusive agriculture in the previous chapter). Yet other farmers are somewhere in between, acknowledging that there is a problem, and willing to make changes, as long as they are

not burdened with the cost. The Landbouw Collectief begins one of its proposals by stating that “the collective is of the unanimous opinion that agriculture is not the cause of the [nitrogen] impasse, but it can be a part of the solution”<sup>10</sup>.

Narratives can give insight into how the individuals that create and share it may feel about a specific topic, and can be a step towards understanding the diversity within the movement. Additionally, to my knowledge, the video was shown only at the site of the protest, and was uploaded to the FDF YouTube channel, indicating that it was primarily aimed at farmers, rather than outsiders, indicating it was potentially intended to create a common narrative within the movement. However, this would require further investigation.



< Protest sign on the 14<sup>th</sup> of February stating that the nitrogen policy had been cracked (meaning that underlying assumptions and mistakes had been laid bare)

Another interesting aspect of the video is that it puts the blame for the nitrogen crisis onto the minister, prime minister, and Green Left party. A central part of many narratives is a chain of causation, since it is the main component of the narrative’s plot (McBeth, Jones, and Shanahan 2014). The tale of Stikstofje demonstrates a chain of causation starting with some decision from the government, which results in the nitrogen crisis. The video does not explain how or why this crisis came to be *exactly*, but I identified two predominant views about causation within the movement: the nitrogen crisis was orchestrated out of malicious intent, or the debate is the result of mistakes due to a disconnect with farming.

Emerita professor in social policy and management, Deborah Stone finds four types of causal relationships in narratives used in policy debates: intentional, mechanical, inadvertent, and accidental (Stone 2012). Of these, two apply in the nitrogen case: intentional, and inadvertent, which

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<sup>10</sup> To give an indication of the rough size of these groups: an opinion poll amongst 1400 cattle farmers shows that 34% of farmers think nitrogen emission need to be brought down (51% thinks they should not be reduced, and 15% is unsure). On the other hand, only 14% of farmers think that this reduction in emissions should – in part – come from agriculture (Kester 2020).

are the two most commonly used in policy narratives (E. Shanahan et al. 2014). The intentional causal mechanism, as Stone defines it, is characterized by purposeful action resulting in an intended outcome. The inadvertent outcome is defined by purposeful action resulting in an *unintended* outcome. What this means in the case of the nitrogen debate is that one group believes that the government purposefully acted to create policies to protect nature (both for nitrogen, as well as phosphates), and that the government did so in an effort to make it harder to be a farmer. The inadvertent causal mechanism agrees that the government took purposeful action to implement new policy, but believes that the bad outcomes for farmers are an unintended outcome; the hardship faced by farmers is the result of a mistake. These two causal mechanisms are also reflected in the protest signs:



< protest sign illustrating the intentional causal mechanism by both stating that the government should stop lying and cheating, as well as using the pun 'roverheid', which is a portmanteau of *overheid* (government), and *rover* (robber) >

*Schouten (the minister of agriculture) makes mistakes! Sign used during the February protests. An example of the inadvertent causal mechanism >*



The intentional causal mechanism creates an us-versus-them narrative with the government acting as a villain. Stikstofje posits minister Schouten as the cause of the nitrogen issue, and positions her as the common enemy of farmers. During the February protest, one of the speakers demanded Schouten and the prime minister come to the protest to formally apologize. He did not state for what they were supposed to apologize exactly, but the statement assumes (or at least creates a frame in which) the minister and prime minister are responsible for the nitrogen issue in one way or another.

One reason stated for why the government would create a fake crisis is to take land away from farmers, which is why there was strong pushback when Friesland attempted to pass a law that would enable the provincial government to coerce farmers into selling their land to protect nature (Van der Laan 2020). Accusations about the government orchestrating the nitrogen crisis in order to take away land had been mentioned before, notably in a number Farmers Defence Force letters addressed to members (e.g. Van den Oever 2020b; 2020a; FDF 2020).

Another topic strengthening this us-versus-them version of events is the fact that most measures have been aimed at cutting emissions from agriculture. The government appointed committee published a report in early January about cost-effective methods to cut emissions from air travel (Adviescollege Stikstofproblematiek 2020). However, no measures have been taken to cut emissions from air travel<sup>11</sup> Multiple farmers have expressed anger during the protests and on social media at the fact that they are being held to a higher standard than the airport. Additionally, this lack of action feeds the idea that the government is against agriculture, rather than attempting to solve the nitrogen crisis. If their intentions were to solve the crisis, why would they not address the emissions from air travel?

This us-versus-them narrative also somewhat explains the protest signs that talk about the importance of farming. The government is accused of foolishly (or even maliciously) trading in the agricultural sector to boost industry and air travel. This was then also used to stir up emotions about the interchangeability of rights to emit NO<sub>x</sub> and NH<sub>3</sub>. One debate between farmers and the government was about whether permits to emit NH<sub>3</sub> can be bought and used to emit NO<sub>x</sub>. Agriculture mainly emits NH<sub>3</sub>, while NO<sub>x</sub> is emitted in high temperature chemical reactions often found in factories and combustion engines. Making the emissions rights for these two interchangeable means that, at least in theory, big, wealthy industrial firms could buy all the emissions rights from farmers, effectively 'trading in' agriculture for industry. This is, in essence, what happened when the government of the province Noord-Brabant bought out a number of farms around the country, planning to use their emissions rights to expand a logistics park in Moerdijk (Schat 2020; Schel 2020). This point was also brought up during the dialogue session between conservation groups and the Frisian government I attended as a concern of farmers that had to be addressed.

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<sup>11</sup> This is partially due to the Covid-19 pandemic, which shut down the air travel sector in its entirety. However, even before the pandemic, no measures had been adopted.

### **Us-versus-them within the movement**

This us-versus-them narrative, and the topic of selling emissions rights from agriculture to industry, also came up around Easter, when the head of FDF published a letter condemning farmers who were considering selling their emissions rights to non-farming businesses. In the letter, the head of FDF compared these farmers to the biblical figure of Judas, and mentioned that “a chain is only as strong as its weakest link” (Van den Oever 2020c). While this letter was intended to create a united front of farmers opposed to the sale of emissions rights to industrial firms, it stirred a lot of anger, even from within FDF itself, since it went against the feeling of unison from farmers, and served to ostracize farmers who made a decision about their own farm. Another letter was published soon after to apologize for the poor choice of words.

Previous research has indicated that the inadvertent causal mechanism can be effective at changing policy (E. Shanahan et al. 2014). However, Stone found that, while the inadvertent causal mechanism is somewhat effective on people without strong prior opinion, the intentional causal mechanism was much more effective, both at reinforcing, as well as dispelling preconceived notions (2012). The tale of Stikstofje was likely intended to use the us-versus-them narrative to reinforce beliefs, as it was shown during a protest to farmers who were already protesting.

Nevertheless, many farmers seem to favour the inadvertent causal mechanism. Outside of FDF, a common theme is that people should visit farms more often, to understand what they are like, and see which measures farmers have taken already to protect nature. Sarah mentioned that every year, she has a group of students from Asian countries around at her farm, who are very surprised by the efficiency of production, animal welfare, and mostly how cheap her produce is. Agractie planned a protest where they would set up shops outside supermarkets around the country where they would sell their produce at the price they receive from supermarkets to make the public aware of the low price they get (Schelfaut 2020). This, like the stickers mentioned in the previous section, shows a push for creating more awareness. This indicates that the problem is not one of malicious intent, but one of people being uninformed.

This distinction again highlights the variety in narratives, but also shows that a social movement can consist of different groups with different ideas, working towards a common goal. One explanation for why FDF favours the more radical intentional causal narrative could be their history: FDF was founded in 2019 in response to a group of animal rights activists which had occupied the stable of a pig farmer in Boxtel. Farmers mobilized via WhatsApp, and formed a counter protest. This loose group of farmers then united under the name Farmers Defence Force when the police did not immediately arrest the activists, and when parliament did not denounce the occupation. This group



of farmers felt abandoned by the government and police and set up a network so they could defend themselves against actions like this in the future. This history easily gives rise to hostile feelings towards activists, and a lack of trust in the government to secure their interests. This history illustrates again that the farmer's movement is not singular. Additionally, it shows that the setting of the narratives is much broader than nitrogen, even encompassing animal rights and nature activism.

## Narrative 4: a lack of respect

As mentioned in the theory section of chapter 1, narratives do not necessarily have to be written or spoken. Symbolism can be a powerful (part of) narrative as well. In the social movement of farmers, this fact is demonstrated by the central symbol to the protests: the upside-down Dutch flag. During the protests, this symbol is attached to every tractor and is flown high above the podium.

Additionally, when driving through the countryside, one can frequently see the upside-down flag flown prominently in front of a farm of residence.

As explained to me on Facebook by members of FDF and Agractie, the meaning of the flag is twofold: firstly, an upside-down flag in some countries is a sign of distress. In the Dutch case it has the added symbolism of the colours which represent the three classes from the middle ages: Red represents the common people, white represents the clergy, blue represents the nobility. By hanging the flag upside down, it reflects the feeling that in the Netherlands, the elite have been placed above the common people. What does stand out about this symbol is that there is no clearly defined 'elite' mentioned in the narrative, does it refer to ivory tower politicians in the Hague who have lost touch with the common man? Does it refer to overly zealous conservation groups, who push their own agenda to the detriment of agriculture? Or is it the people living in the city, whose desire for nature to escape to in the summer has pushed for a greater need for nature reserves? Depending on who is speaking during the protests, or on social media, 'the elite' may refer to any of these.

What also stands out about this statement is that public opinion of farmers is at an all-time high. Just after the second world war, a number of opinion polls showed that people perceived farmers as 'boorish, drunk, and loud'. In the 1970's, this changed to a view of farmers as friendly and caring, but still likely to complain and not particularly bright. In the early 2000's, this image became one of farmers as 'more caring, honest, and better with animals than the average person (Karel 2013a). Additionally, during the first wave of protests about 89% of the population supported farmers, a number that only dropped due to an excessive number of protests (Cornelisse 2020).



*<Image of a weathered upside-down Dutch flag, shared on*

*Facebook with a call to action to fly the upside-down flag in support of a national protest in July*

This discrepancy illustrates the socially constructed nature of narratives: they are based on emotions and perceptions, not cold hard facts. What matters in the narrative is not whether farmers *are* appreciated, but whether they *feel* appreciated. And the ever-increasing amount of regulations, coupled with prices for they produce that, when accounting for inflation, have only gone down (CBS 2015), it is easy to see where this perception comes from.

Also, similar to the narrative about phosphates, the upside-down flag creates a feeling of unity. Most people in the country own a flag, which is traditionally flown on Dutch liberation day on the 5<sup>th</sup> of May, when a high school student graduates, and is flown half-mast on the 4<sup>th</sup> of May in memory to those that died during WW2. The flag is thus an easily-accessible symbol that both farmers, and citizens sympathetic to the farmers' movement can use to demonstrate their support. In this way, the flag is a central symbol which paints a picture of a country where farmers are undervalued and have lost the respect their invaluable profession warrants. Additionally, this loss of respect is painted as a crisis for the agricultural industry.

Another symbol further strengthens this crisis narrative. When I first arrived at the site of the protest in February, I noticed a few small children (around 3-4 years old) who were wearing blue overalls with the text "can I still become a farmer?". As mentioned in the history section of chapter 2, farmers in the past have gone out of business as the direct result of new legislation. While the legislation that pushed most farmers out of business was aimed at increasing the scale of farms, there is a fear amongst farmers that they will lose their business. Sarah mentioned to me how she is saddened by the fact that many farmers do not have a successor to take over their farms, since younger people have little interest, largely due to the large amount of time spent on figuring out legislation and doing paperwork. Of the farmers that quit over the past years, or is considering quitting farming, 64% mentioned the excess in rules as a reason for doing so, 55% mentioned not having anyone willing to take over their farm (Kester 2020). Losing their business is particularly harsh for a farmer, since most farms are family businesses, meaning that losing the farm means losing the business one's father or grandfather worked hard to set up. Additionally, the farm is also the home of the farmer, losing the farm means having to move.



< We want to remain (female) farmers! Sign illustrating the uncertainty farmers feel about their ability to keep their business going

This narrative about a lack of future for the sector also ties in with the causal mechanisms discussed in the previous section. A statement that illustrates this was made on the 29<sup>th</sup> of April during an online Q&A session about what the new nitrogen plans mean for farmers. During this webinar, the moderator mentioned that while the Netherlands has a minister of agriculture, there is no minister *for* agriculture (een minister *van* landbouw, geen minister *voor* landbouw). As mentioned in the history section, the agricultural sector has historically has large sway over the ministry of agriculture. Additionally, most ministers had been farmers themselves, the current minister comes from a farming family, but was never a farmer herself. The sentiment then, is that the minister should stand up for the sector she supposedly is meant to represent. Instead, she made proposals that would negatively impact farmers. This feeling got stronger after the 1<sup>st</sup> of April, when the agricultural collective walked out during discussions with the Minister, expressing anger over the fact that the minister had decided to stick to an earlier set of proposals, rather than adopt the proposal of the collective (Braakman 2020).



< The logo of farming activist group Agractie contains the words “our sector is at stake”, adding to the idea that the agricultural sector is in crisis as a result of the nitrogen debate.

## Narrative 5: culture and being a ‘good farmer’

So far, this thesis has looked at narratives at the individual (micro) level, and the group (meso) level. There is a third level to narrative analysis (macro) which looks at cultural narratives. One such narrative which is relevant in the nitrogen debate is the cultural narrative establishing what it means to be a good farmer.

As mentioned in chapter 3, conservation narratives, one prominent proposal is a switch to circular agriculture, which would mean using manure to produce cattle feed. Additionally, this type of agriculture also tends to include ‘mixed’ farms, which have animals, crops, and fruit trees, rather than specializing in only one. This is an idea the minister has also mentioned at times. Around 17% of farmers mention being willing to switch to this type of agriculture, with around 33% considering it (Kester 2020). However, one thing that might stand in the way of this transition is that a circular farm looks messy. A report from Wageningen University looked at how nature inclusive agriculture fits into cultural norms amongst farmers (Westerink et al. 2019). The report found that, in some areas of the country, farmers judge their own ability as a farmer, as well as the ability of their neighbours partially by looking at how neat and tidy their land looks<sup>12</sup>. Long, clear stretches of monoculture is a sign of ability and status, while a mix of various plants and animals, while better for nature, is seen as a sign of being incompetent or lazy<sup>13</sup>. The large monocultures are also features of a modern farm, since this type of business only became possible due to the modernization effort and land swapping in the 1950’s and 60’s. The cultural norm establishes a narrative that a tidy farm means that farmer is proficient at his job. This may also explain some of the hesitation towards new laws, since they might impact one’s ability to ‘be a good farmer’.

As mentioned at the start of this chapter, a large portion of protest signs mentioned the pride farmers feel about their profession. This might also create a feeling that the government is telling them how to run their farm, like they don’t know how to do it themselves. One of the main proposals from the agricultural collective was to create a ‘cafeteria model’, where there would be a few proposals to cut emissions, such as diluting fertilizer, having fewer cattle, or a change in cattle feed. Farmers would then be allowed to pick one or more of these measures that they thought would fit their farm best.

This cultural norm is also a form of narrative. When some farmers see a mixed farm, that, at first glance, looks messy, they might form a narrative in their head of how this farm came to be, where the chain of events starts with a lazy or incapable farmer. This might create hesitation towards switching to nature inclusive, circular agriculture, out of fear of being perceived as incapable or lazy.

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<sup>12</sup> This might depend on the province though, the more fertile land in the west may be more suitable to tidy looking monoculture than the less fertile, and less even land in the east.

<sup>13</sup> Circular agriculture might also use plants like clover, which can store nitrogen in the ground, reducing the need for fertilizer. However, this makes fields of grass appear less well maintained in the eyes of farmers.

## Reflections

As demonstrated in this chapter, there is a large variety in farmers narratives. In this chapter I have described five narratives I identified. I did identify a few other narratives, and undeniably there are many I did not come across personally. The five I described in this chapter are: the narrative about geese and an unreliable government. This narrative showed how previous issues, such as a poorly implemented goose protection strategy, are still on the minds of farmers, shaping their views about the nitrogen crisis. This story illustrates the role of narratives as a heuristic, and demonstrates that the narratives from farmers are about much more than just the nitrogen debate. The narrative bad legislation and unity shows how one narrative about the implementation of phosphate permits can serve as a heuristic on the individual level, and can simultaneously be employed by the group to mobilize and create unity. The fairy tale of Stikstofje shows the degree to which farmers deny the existence of a nitrogen crisis, by comparing it to a fairy tale. This narrative also highlights the large differences within the movement. Additionally, it introduces the causal mechanism as an important part of the plot of a narrative. The narrative about a lack of respect describes the use of symbols in narrative, and how these symbols relate to uncertainty and emotion. The upside-down flag creates a story about how the elite is placed above the common man, while calling to mind . The last narrative about what it means to be a good farmer highlights that cultural norms, which are also a type of narrative, also play a role in the debate.

These narratives are very varied. Firstly, they fulfil different roles. Second, they are employed by different levels of organization, individuals, groups, or an entire sector. Third, the content is varied, both between narratives, and occasionally between retellings of the same narrative. Lastly, even the form of the narrative changes, some are spoken, like the narrative on geese, some are expressed in symbols, like the crisis narrative, and yet others are unspoken and implicitly understood, like the cultural norm of keeping a tidy looking farm in the cultural narrative about what it means to be a good farmer.

# Chapter 5: Conclusion

This thesis has shown how many different narratives can be present in a single public policy debate, and how these narratives may be used for a variety of reasons. By conceptualizing social movements as a type of performance, narratives serve to effectively communicate the ideas of the movement, both to inform, as well as to persuade its audience.

Using a mix of different methods, including participant observation, textual analysis, and interviews, this thesis adds to the growing body of narrative research into social movement and policy debates by demonstrating how narratives can serve different functions, how one narrative can serve multiple functions, and how multiple narratives can intertwine to argue one common point. In this way, this research has demonstrated that narratives are a part of a complex web of meaning, emotion, and intention within social movements.

In the case of the nitrogen policy debate, many narratives are present, each fulfilling a slightly different function. A long history of frustration with ineffective legislation informs the actions of one individual of small group. Previous bad experiences with government legislation about geese or phosphates shape how individual farmers think about new legislation, by calling to mind times in the past where environmental legislation was dropped on farmers, making it harder to do their job. The same narrative about geese or phosphates serves as a shared experience for farmers to feel more united, since they are finally taking a stand, together. These two narratives can also be used to share the hardships of being a farmer with an outsider, and to communicate why farmers are frustrated. In this way, narratives serve different functions, one narrative may serve multiple functions, and multiple narratives may overlap.

Narratives also exist on different levels. The narrative about geese is a very personal story, motivating the actions of an individual, and communicating their personal opinion and history. The farmer's crisis narrative operates on a group level to motivate collective action and create unity within the farmers' movement. The narrative about what it means to be a good farmer affects the business and pride of a sector, and makes it resistant to particular changes. The conservation narrative about the Netherlands in 2040 serves primarily to persuade politicians and the larger public to adopt a specific course for the future, by painting an idyllic future of what the Netherlands could be like if the agricultural system is changed.

These narratives differ between groups: conservation groups in the nitrogen debate use narratives to communicate and persuade, while farming groups additionally employ them to mobilize and create unity. One interesting subtle difference that illustrates this nicely is that the farmers' narratives attempt to unite farmers, while the conservation narrative of Netherlands in 2040 attempts to unite agriculture with other sectors like banking and conservation, by describing an idyllic future that might come about from such cooperation. However, even within groups these narratives are different. The narrative of Stikstofje illuminates differences between farmers in their belief about to which extent there is a nitrogen crisis, and if there is one, who is to blame. The Netherlands in 2040 opportunity narrative from conservation groups includes a society in which farmers are respected and work closely with other parties like conservation groups, demonstrating that two seemingly opposed groups may not be as singular and opposed as they seem on the surface.

In this way, narratives give tremendous insight into social movements. Using narrative analysis as a research tool allows researchers to get a better understanding of the emotions, views, and history that fuel a movement, and to better understand the aims and methods of the movement. A telling example in this case study is how broad the setting of the narratives from both groups actually are; the Netherlands in 2040 narrative includes ideals of social equity, respect, and animal welfare, while farming narratives include problems with a plethora of previous legislation, feelings of a loss of respect, and ideas of what it means to be a farmer. The narratives thus illustrate that the nitrogen debate is not just about nitrogen, but instead about the broader future of agriculture and nature in the Netherlands.

This analysis opens the door to further research into the use of narratives by social movement, by highlighting the importance of narrative analysis and by showing the complexity and interconnectedness of the narratives. This thesis also raises a number of questions about the use of narratives previously unaddressed.

Previous research into the role of narratives in policy debates has often assumed the existence of two unified, opposed groups. In some policy debates, this is the case. However, the nitrogen debate illustrates that reality is often more complex. A number of organizations are affiliated with both farmers, and conservation groups. Additionally, the two 'sides' of the debate are in agreement on a number of points, such as their dismissal of the minister's proposal in April to cut emissions by setting new regulations on cattle feed as being short-sighted.



This research has taken place over the course of a six month period in a debate that has been ongoing for nearly a year, and will likely continue into the future. Even during this short period, I noticed subtle changes in narratives. More recently, I found increased emphasis on the importance of healthy living, which is used to advocate for the production of organic produce, as well as for the protection of nature as an area for recreation. The European Union Food to Fork initiative (Commission 2020) is an example of how a desire for healthy living can lead to changes in agricultural policy. Future research could look at how narratives change over time as the debate they are situated in evolves.

The role of history in policy narratives also warrants further investigation. The history of ineffective legislation to make agriculture more sustainable is reflected in the paper solutions narrative of conservation groups, and the phosphate and geese narratives of farmers. Future research can look deeper into how history shapes narratives.

Lastly, this case study demonstrates the need for understanding narratives for policy makers. The narratives of farmers demonstrate that their anger is not just about nitrogen, but about financial difficulty, an ever-growing list of rules and regulations, and a perceived loss of respect. This shows that, in order to implement new nitrogen laws, a few steps need to be taken to appease farmers. These steps might include a minimum price for agricultural produce, better communication about new legislation to take away the feelings of uncertainty, and implementing nitrogen laws in other sectors *before* tackling the larger issue of agriculture to ensure farmers do not feel singled out. In this way, the role of narratives as a tool for communicating with and understanding social movements is interesting from a policy making perspective.

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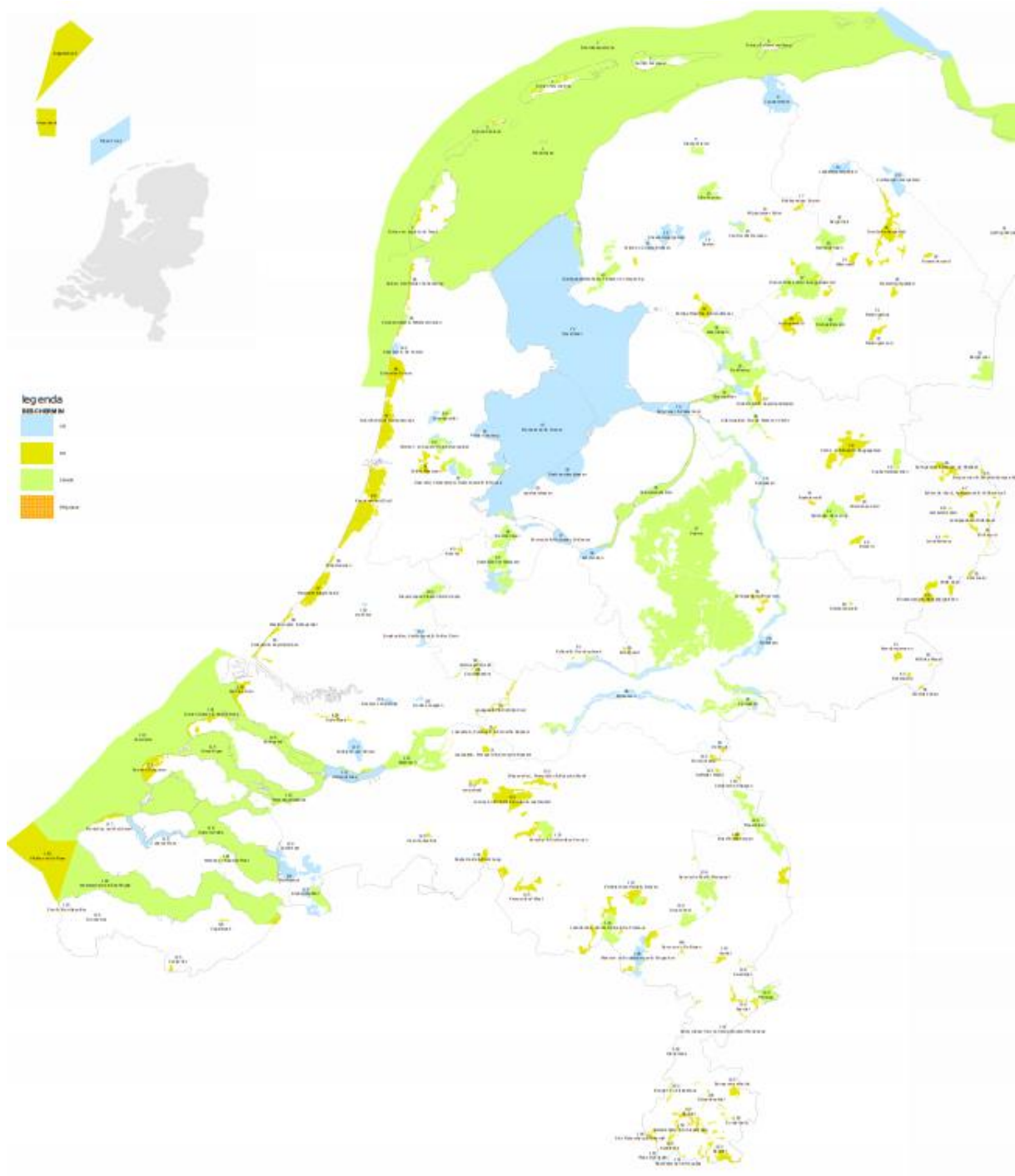
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## Appendix A, map of Natura 2000 areas

The image below depicts all natura-2000 areas in the Netherlands. Image from ministry of agriculture, nature, and food quality.

<https://www.synbiosys.alterra.nl/natura2000/gebiedendatabase.aspx?subj=n2k&groep=0>

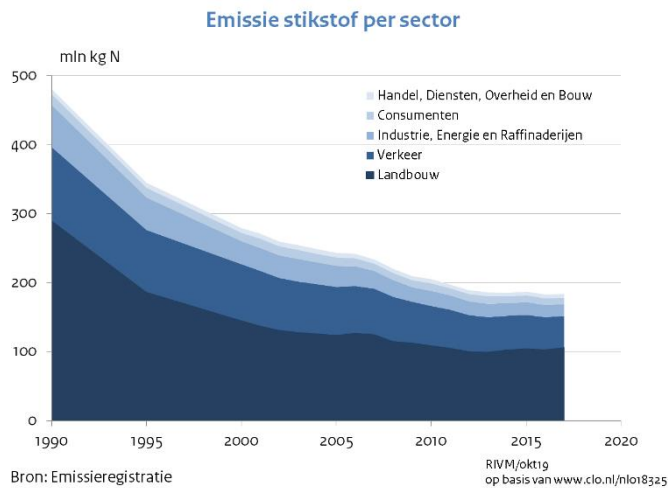




## Appendix B, timeline of the nitrogen crisis

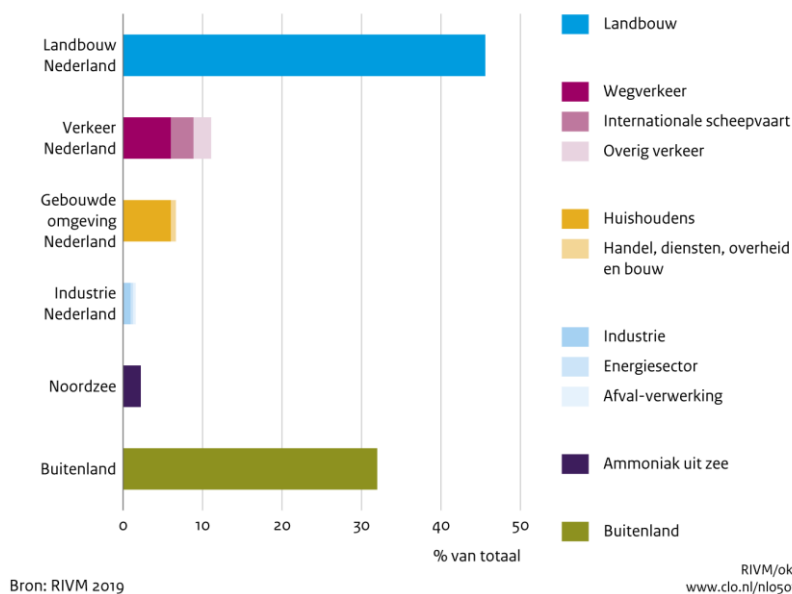
May 29	Council of state judgement ruling that the PAS was in violation of the EU habitats directive
July 12	Government appoints Johan Remkes as the head of the committee that will advise the government on the nitrogen issue
October 1	National farmers protest at The Hague
October 14	Farmers protests at provincial governments
October 16	Farmers protest in The Hague and De Bilt
October 25	Farmers protest in Noord-Brabant
September 25	First advice of committee Remkes 'Niet alles kan'
December 17	The first chamber of parliament passes emergency legislation
December 18	Series of smaller farmers protest around the country, blocking roads and access to supermarket distribution centers
February 19	Farmers protest in The Hague to draw attention to Mesdag fonds study that would show that farmers emit less ammonia than previously thought
March 12	The speed limit on highways is reduced from 130 km/hr to 100 km/hr in an effort to reduce NOx emissions from cars
April 1	Farmers collective abandons discussions with minister
April 24	Minister Schouten hands her proposal to the government
June 4	Protest near Apeldoorn, a municipality which was planning to implement stricter standards for emissions from agriculture
June 8	Last report from advice committee 'Not everything is possible everywhere'
July 3	Series of small protests from farming group Agractie, including a gathering of around 70 farmers in the Hague, and a group of tractors blocking a highway
July 22	Protest in De Bilt against restrictions of cattle feed

## Appendix C; nitrogen emission by sector



^ according to this graph nitrogen emissions in the Netherlands have declined significantly since 1990, most of this decline is due to new innovations in agriculture (source: <https://www.rivm.nl/stikstof>)

### Herkomst stikstofdepositie, 2018



^ RIVM data showing nitrogen emissions from various sectors. Agriculture (blue) has the largest emissions, followed by foreign sources (green). (source: <https://www.rivm.nl/stikstof>)

# Appendix D, protest signs

## Importance of farmers

Boeren blijven broodnodig

Stikstof of PFAS houden ons niet tegen, wij willen eten!!

No farmers, no food, no future!

Niet vergeten, zonder boeren geen eten

Nederland is opgebouwd in overalls en wordt kapot gemaakt door pakken

No farmers no food, ohne Bauern keine Zukunft, Trots op onze boeren, zusammen stan wir STARK!

Zonder jonge boer, later geen voer

Als boeren niet meer bestaan, waar komt ons voedsel dan vandaan?

Geen geouwehoer, wees trots op de boer

Geen boer geen voer

No farmers no food

Gebruik je verstand, hou de boer in 't land

No farmers no food

Wie nu de boer laat stikken heeft straks niks te bikken

Trots op onze boeren

Geen leven zonder boer

Geen leven zonder boer

Stop boertje pesten. No farmers no food

Zonder jonge boer in dit land, geen boodschappen in uw mand. No farmers no food

Hou je van brood, vlees, of friet? Zonder boeren gaat het niet

Ons grasland = de longen van Nederland

Geen boeren = geen eten

No farmers no food

NL zonder boeren is als Amsterdam zonder hoeren

No farmers no food

Den Haag, koester onze boeren

Zonder boeren zit u naar een leeg bord te loeren

Gjin boer, gjin fretten

No farmers no food

Boeren blijven broodnodig

Bij alles wat we eten wordt de boer vaak vergeten

## **Pride**

Trots op de NL boer

Trots op de boer

Geen boeren geen eten, no farmers no food

No farmers no food

No farmer no food

Trots op onze boeren

Proud to be a farmer

Trots op onze boeren

Boeren zijn top

Proud to be a farmer

Trots op ons vak, ons hoor je niet klagen, maar als nu men zegt 'halveren die veestapel' hebben wij toch echt vragen

## **Unfair treatment**

De maat is vol, haal je stikstof maar weg bij schiphol

Stop boertje pesten. No farmers no food

NL boeren al jaren aan de wereldtop, maar het verwijten houdt niet op

Iedereen vliegen, consumeren, genieten, wij boeren zijn de zwarte pietten

Vliegtuigen en autos in overvloed, gaat het over milieu, wordt de boer beboet

Veganisten moeten ook schijten, de uitstoot is ook aan hen te wijten

Na jaren reduceren gaan wij niet nog verder uit de kleren

Cijfers worden verdraaid, boer wordt genaaid

Melk de koe, niet de boer!

Trots op ons vak, ons hoor je niet klagen, maar als nu men zegt 'halveren die veestapel' hebben wij toch echt vragen

## **Mistakes of government/Government as opposition**

Met het wanbeleid van de overheid zijn boeren straks een zeldzaamheid, of zelfs verleden tijd.

Kei traag 3x Den Haag

Den Haag zijn ze het verstand verloren, daarom laten wij van ons horen

Wij zijn geen wisselgeld

Onbeleid gekraakt

(r)overheid moet stoppen met liegen en bedriegen

Nederland is opgebouwd in overalls en wordt kapot gemaakt door pakken

Het beleid moet op de schop, anders kost het ons boeren de kop

Boeren aan zet, bezem door het kabinet

Wij drukken door

Den Haag helpt ons naar de kloten

Good goan, bedankt! Weerkommen...

Mark en Carola, als je met leugens regeert, de waarheid niet accepteert, komt als snel de vraag, komen die rotboeren nog naar Den Haag

Schouten maakt fouten! Eerlijk beleid op basis van waarheid

X ~~RVD~~ V Mesdagfonds

Wij eisen een faciliterend beleid & geen onbeschofte overheid

Met dit kabinet aan het roer worden we harder genaaid dan een hoer!

Het kabinet de klos, de beerput komt los

Voer plan LC nu uit, beleid op basis van feiten, niet trucjes of berekeningen

Uw belastinggeld naar niet haalbare klimaatdoelstelling

Voedsel uit de buurt, niet meer als dit land zo wordt bestuurd!

Beleid gemaakt of fout rapport maakt voedselproducent kapot

Rutte stop met kutte

Boeren in het nauw, regering heeft geen berouw

Boeren zijn geen creditcard van de regering en EU

Fryslan boppe, us regering yn de groppe

Aan dit kabinet zit een zure lucht

Met dit beleid = boeren verleden tijd

Door dit kabinet zonder verstand gaat straks de jonge boer naar het buitenland

Door Haagse kul zijn wij weer de lul

Retteketet, wat een kut kabinet

### **(loss of) future (perspective)**

Met dit beleid worden boeren verleden tijd

Met dit beleid = boeren verleden tijd

Door dit kabinet zonder verstand gaat straks de jonge boer naar het buitenland

Papa, kan ik later ook nog boer worden?

Mag ik ook nog boer worden?

Met het wanbeleid van de overheid zijn boeren straks een zeldzaamheid, of zelfs verleden tijd.

Ik hoop dat mijn vader het redt, dan kan ik ook nog met een boerin naar bed!!

### **Lies and data**

Geesje bedankt

Geesje bedankt

Geesje bedankt

Geesje Rotgers bedankt, waarheid overwint

RIVM, met de data knoeien om boeren uit te roeien!

Schouten maakt fouten! Eerlijk beleid op basis van waarheid

X ~~RIVM~~ V Mesdagfonds

Voer plan LC nu uit, beleid op basis van feiten, niet trucjes of berekeningen

De leugen nog zo snel 't collectief brengt de waarheid morgen wel

De RIVM niet openbaar, alleen maar geknoei daar

Cijfers worden verdraaid, boer wordt genaaid

RIVM meten is weten

### **Others**

Een stal zonder dier is als een feest zonder bier

Verlaag je niet tot het niveau van een boer want dan is er een trap nodig

1 land - 1 Europa, 1 Stikstofbeleid

Een koe terug in de polder, stikstof terug op zolder

Praat eens met een boer voor u iets over hem roept

Bij alles wat we eten wordt de boer vaak vergeten