

Natura People workshop 2014 / Bruges / 2 april 2014

Presentation: 'playing in and with nature in Waterdunen' – Provincie Zeeland

In West Zeeuws-Vlaanderen (West Zeelandic Flanders) the large area Waterdunen, which is part of the coastal reinforcement plan, is developed as a nature reserve and recreation area. Waterdunen will create new nature, more tourism and facilities in the region. The design of the new nature and recreation reserve has started in October 2012. When completed, this new nature reserve will be for everyone: For local people, day-trippers and tourists.

Areas for nature play

Two parts of the reserve will be designed as *areas for nature play*. It's our aim to create a beautiful outdoor play- and learning environment. An adventurous natural setting where mainly children and even adults can play. These areas could include: water, rocks, mud and sand, bridges, hills to roll down, trees to climb, shrubs to climb through, grasses and flowers, and so on. Visitors can change it, they can discover plants and animals and experience the tidal working. This is the most attractive feature of *nature play* in Waterdunen: water comes in and out with the tides, which creates great opportunities to play with water, mud and sand.



Why Build areas for nature play?

The most obvious answer is that these areas are really fun and kids love them. They can get dirty, create, climb and splash. Evidence shows that contact with the outdoors, and especially with the natural environment, is important for children. Nature play challenges, stimulates to move and create and is an incentive for children to explore their boundaries and abilities. But it is more than just a natural playground; it touches many social domains, such as health, wellbeing and integration. Nature play is important for many people, regardless of where they come from, regardless of their age and abilities.



Public participation

The area should appeal to children and adults, people with or without a handicap, people from nearby, schools from a broader region and tourists. That is why the area is designed in a participatory way. All stakeholders are invited to contribute to several stages of the design process. The participants and the designers are the co-creators. We think community participation in developing the areas for nature play is very important. It brings in new ideas, and when people are involved and participate in design and lay-out, they develop a sense of ownership and responsibility, which helps to sustain initiatives and activities in the future. Evidence shows that the social acceptability for the result is much better.

Waterdunen is a special region. In two meetings, stakeholders have dreamt of their ideal area for nature play. They indicated the tidal aspect and the mud flats as the most spectacular features, but also pointed at the diversity of wet and dry landscapes, the presence of many birds and the attraction of plants: shrubbery to climb, plants to eat and to use as material to make things. They saw opportunities for children and adults of all abilities to play together. Waterdunen is excellently suited for activities like climbing, sliding and crawling from land to water and back, building dams and digging gullies.



Three weeks ago a part of the participation-group visited three different areas for nature play in Zeeuws-Vlaanderen and the city of Antwerp. This day-trip was successful and pleasant: it brought inspiration and new ideas but also strengthened a sense of unity among the members. In the next few months the designers and stakeholders will further elaborate these and other ideas, and design an unique spot together. In July the designers will present their definitive design for both areas. The role of the participation-group does not stop when the area for nature play is ready for use. They can also maintain the *area* and organize activities in the future.



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