

## **Requiem for the weeds: Reflections in Amsterdam city park**

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### **Abstract.**

Human and plant relationships are described within the rich tradition of multispecies ethnography, ethnobotany, and political ecology. In theorizing this relationship, the issues of functionalism, and interconnectivity are raised. This article aims to re-examine the position of plants in the context of contemporary urban spaces through the prism of environmental ethics. Despite conceptual plurality and socio-cultural complexity of human-plant relationships, social scientists fail to note how the perception of 'greenery' has objectified plants in an urban environment. Without seriously considering bioethics, theories of human-plant relationship might fail to note the exploitive anthropocentric relationship between humans and plants in urban spaces. The article is inspired by reflections of urban flora in Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

**Keywords:** bioethics, environmental ethics, plants, ethnobotany, urban spaces

### **1. Introduction.**

This boy really belonged to the age, millions of years ago, when the earth's would-be forests cried at birth among the marshlands newly sprung from the ocean's depth... The plant, vanguard of all living things on the road of time, had raised its joint hands to the sun and said, 'I want to stay here, I want to live. I am an eternal traveler. Rain or sun, night or day, I shall keep traveling through death after death, towards the pilgrim's goal of an endless life.' That ancient chant of the plants reverberates to this day, in the woods and forests, hills and meadows, and the life of the mother earth declares through the leaves and branches, 'I want to stay, I want to stay.' The plant, speechless foster mother of life on earth, has drawn nourishment from the heavens since time immemorial to feed her progeny; has gathered the sap, the vigour, the savour of life for the earth's immortal store; and raised to the sky the message of beleaguered life, 'I want to stay'. Balai could

here that eternal message of life in a special way in his bloodstream. We used to laugh at this a good deal (R. Tagore [1928] 2009:257).

Plants previously appearing on the margins of social sciences—as part of the landscape, as food for humans, as symbols—have been pressed into the foreground within political ecology, ethnobiology, and environmental sociology. In anthropology, multispecies ethnographies explored how non-human species have been pressed into the foreground as recent ethnographies take aim at “species” as a grounding concept for articulating biological difference and similarity (Kirksey and Helmreich 2010:545).

Ethnobotany drew on insights from cultural theory and ecology in addressing styles of knowledge and belief about plant life mediated through cultural values (Hunn 2007). Ethnobotanists discussed topics ranging from the natural and cultural history of tequila on U.S.–Mexico borderlands (Valenzuela-Zapata and Nabhan 2004) to bioprospecting and political economy in Mexico (Hayden 2003). Once confound to the realm of features of the landscape, or food for humans, or symbols, plants have started to appear alongside humans in political ecology (e.g., Helmreich 2009; Lowe 2006; West 2006). Feminist anthropologists pointed out that social scientists have to turn their attention to the making and remaking of biological knowledge, substance, and relatedness (e.g. Strathern 1992). However, the critiques have noted that even as “the human” shares the stage with ‘the plant’ the discussion remains anchored in human perceptions and interpretations of plants, addressing questions of relatedness, exchange, governmentality, and signification (Kirksey and Helmreich 2010).

According to the concept of biosociality (Rabinow 1999), plants might be categorized in different categories, such as domesticated (and useful) or wild (potential natural resources), culturally significant but morally undifferentiated. In the long-standing tradition of constructivism, nature, wilderness and biodiversity are perceived through a cultural, social, political or economic lens. Social scientists working in constructivist position argue that there exist no unmediated representations of nature for the latter are anchored in the social concepts – ‘concepts indelibly inscribed within the ways of knowing that generate such representations’ (Crist 2004:500). For urban plants, this has a number of significant implications, both practical – the way the plants are actually treated, and theoretical – the way social scientists interpret this treatment. In this article, we shall explore the human agency in cultivation (as in the case of planted forests), harvesting (as in the case of crops) or destruction (as in the case of weeds) of plant species through both theoretical lenses of environmental ethics and through the case study.

The failure of the current ethical framework to explicitly address the needs (and the very survival of) non-human species calls for an exploration of alternative paradigms. This article aims to examine what alternative approach to the representation of plants is possible. How do these insights about the relationship between plants and humans instruct our understanding of the everyday environment that most of the readers of this article are exposed to – urban ‘green’ spaces? In this article, we shall explore the Dutch urbanites’ perception of plants through the case study of a city park in Amsterdam. The case study carried out between May 2011 and May 2012 involved observation of its plant inhabitants as well as interviews with human visitors and park workers.

### **1.1. Plants debates**

Christopher D. Stone proposed in a 1972 paper titled "Should Trees Have Standing?" that if corporations are assigned rights, so should natural objects such as trees. The book was a rallying point for the then burgeoning environmental movement, launching a worldwide debate on the basic nature of legal rights that reached the U.S. Supreme Court. In the 35th anniversary edition, Stone (2010) updated his original thesis and explored the impact his ideas have had on the American courts, the academy, and society as a whole. At the heart of the book is a compelling argument that the environment should be granted legal rights and why trees and the environment as a whole should be bestowed with legal rights so that the voiceless elements in nature are protected.

In Switzerland, The Executive Federal Council directed the Federal Ethics Committee on Non-Human Biotechnology (ECNH) and produced the report: *The dignity of living beings with regard to plants: Moral consideration of plants for their own sake*. The report maintained that the dignity of creatures including plants should be respected. The Federal Constitution has established three forms of protection for plants: the protection of biodiversity, species protection, and the duty to take the dignity of living beings into consideration when handling plants. The constitutional term "living beings" encompasses animals, plants and other organisms (ECNH 2008).

ECNH was inspired by many discoveries in recent years that suggest that plants, in fact, might be sentient beings. Koechlin (2009: 78) inquires: But what could be the consequences of these new findings? How should we approach this situation of ‘not knowing’?

*Dignity* in terms of plants is a difficult concept; it is religiously charged and comes from the history of mankind. However, the notion could be understood as a sign, a metaphor, that plants are entitled to a

value, a worth independent of human interests. *Dignity* could be a sign that plants are to be respected and that there are also certain obligations towards them...

If we look at plants as simple things, passive machines that follow the same set of programs, if plants are only seen as organisms satisfying our interests and demands, then an attribute like *dignity* seems absurd; it does not make sense. But if we see plants as active, adaptable, perhaps even as living beings capable of subjective perceptions, possessing their lives on their own, independent of us; then there is a good reason to accept that plants have a *dignity* that is valid...

The discussion of the dignity of plants is still miles away from this point. Anything and everything can be done with plants today; there is no ethical consideration, no awareness of any problem. But it is slowly getting harder to justify this attitude toward plants (Koechlin 2009:78)

In a mocking article *The Silent Scream of the Asparagus*, Smith (2008: 3) termed "plant dignity" a 'symptom of a cultural disease that has infected Western civilization' Using overtly anthropocentric terms harking back to the Biblical invocation of Man as the ruler of the universe, Smith continues:

Our accelerating rejection of the Judeo-Christian world view, which upholds the unique dignity and moral worth of human beings, is driving us crazy. Once we knocked our species off its pedestal, it was only logical that we would come to see fauna and flora as entitled to rights. The intellectual elites were the first to accept the notion of "species-ism," which condemns as invidious discrimination treating people differently from animals simply because they are human beings. Then ethical criteria were needed for assigning moral worth to individuals, be they human, animal, or now vegetable (Smith 2008:3).

In his Letter to the Editor entitled *Bioethics: On the road to absurd land*, Simcha Lev-Yadun (2008) expressed his fear that the discussion going on in Switzerland about the dignity of plants could lead us down to an absurd and dangerous path as progress in medicine and agriculture could be slowed as a result.

## **2. Environmental ethics.**

Environmental ethics deal with questions of assignment of intrinsic values and, in prolongation, moral rights and what these rights entail (Vincent 1992). Regan (1983), for example, advocates the intrinsic value to all mammals including humans due to their supposed mental capacities that include the ability to have beliefs, memory and some kind of sense of the future. Singer (1977) is less restrictive and advocates the intrinsic value to all creatures that are able to experience pain, implying that human beings must justify needless

suffering of sentient beings. According to Singer, plants can be seen as sentient beings since "There is no reliable evidence that plants are capable of feeling pleasure or pain". Similarly, in "Plants as Persons: A Philosophical Botany" Hall (2011) challenges readers to reconsider the moral standing of plants and discusses the moral background of plants in western philosophy. Hall argued that as the human assault on nature continues, more ethical behavior toward plants is needed.

In fact, recent scientific articles have revealed that plants are active in sensing numerous parameters from their environment, communicate extensively and actively; they interact with their surroundings. On the cellular level, similarities between animals and plants are far greater than previously assumed s communication with electrical action potentials, similar vesicle trafficking, and signaling molecules, etc. (Koechlin 2009). What would follow, as Singer has reasoned before this evidence was revealed, is that we should minimize the amount of pain we cause in the course of preserving our lives.

Taylor (1986) holds that all life has inherent values and argues for respect for plants:

As moral agents, we might think of ourselves as under an obligation not to destroy or injure a plant. We can also take the standpoint of a plant and judge what happens to it as being good or bad from its standpoint. To do this would involve our using as the standard of evaluation the preservation or promotion of the plant's own good. Anyone who has ever taken care of flowers, shrubs, or trees will know what these things mean (Taylor 1986:67)

Taylor's biocentrism would require vast changes in our lives and in society that could be compared with the changes in thought, attitude, and behavior toward slaves before and after they were freed.

Before they were freed, certain things could be done to them with impunity. After they were freed, these things could not be done. Becoming a member of the legal or moral community makes a great deal of difference to how one is treated...Most people say that nonhuman animals and plants have no moral status, whereas humans do... What didn't need justification now needs justification. (Burgess-Jackson 2004:1).

Many ecocentric thinkers view traditional cultures as supporting of non-anthropocentric worldview, providing superior grounds for ecological ethics, and greater ecological wisdom, than do Occidental religions (Caldwell 1990; Shepard 1993; Taylor and Zimmerman 2005).

Hall (2011) contrasts human-plant relationships in contemporary society with other traditions, including indigenous cultures, which recognize plants as persons – active, intelligent beings that are appropriate recipients of respect and care. He finds that some Indigenous animisms actually recognize plants as relational, intelligent beings who are the appropriate recipients of care and respect (Hall 2011). Critics of such idealized indigenous peoples assert that indigenous peoples experience the same global forces of capitalism, industrialization, and consumerism (Kopnina 2012a; McElroy 2013).

Particular critique of anthropocentric bias in social sciences was developed by Pirages and Ehrlich (1974:43) through the concept of the dominant social paradigm (DSP), which they described as “the prominent world view, model, or frame of reference through which individuals or collectively, a society, interpret the meaning of the external world”. Environmental sociologists Catton and Dunlap (1980) reflected on the fact that social scientists are still predisposed to viewing non-human species as objects that have no meaning outside of human use or interpretation as.

Plants in general and urban greenery in particular in developed industrial societies have become subjected to cultivation, grooming, trimming of plants that are considered ‘good’ and eradication of those considered ‘bad’. In their influential book *Cradle to Cradle*, McDonough and Braungart (2002) reflect:

‘The average lawn is an interesting beast: people plant it, then douse it with artificial fertilizers and dangerous pesticides to make it grow and keep it uniform – all so that they can hack and mow what they encouraged to grow. And woe to the small yellow flower that raises its head!’ (p. 33)

A polished lawn is seen as a sign of civilization and (human) well-being, domination over ‘weeds’ and even control over soil are experienced as esthetically pleasing to the cosmopolitan urban dweller.

## **2.1. Love of plants**

Those who ‘speak for the trees’ as *The Lorax*, a creation of the children’s writer Theodor Seuss Geisel (1904–1991), often find themselves societally marginalized and not taken seriously (Kopnina 2012b). The deep emotional connection to nature is poignantly described in the fictional character of ‘Balai’ of Rabindranath Tagore

‘It hurt him deeply when someone plucked flowers from a tree. And he totally understood that this feeling was meaningless to anyone else... His worst troubles arose when the grass cutter came to

cut the grass, because he had watched countless wonders in the grass; small creepers; nameless violet and yellow flowers, tiny in size; here and there a nightshade, whose flue flowers have a little golden dot at the center; medicinal plants near the fence, a kalmegh here and an anantamul there; neem seeds left by birds, sprouting into plants, spreading beautiful leaves. All those were cleared with a heartless weeding tool. None of them were prized trees of the garden, there was no one to listen to their protests' (Tagore [1928] 2009:256-257).

As opposed to this gentle love of plants, some individuals have gone much further in defending the rights of plants. In a documentary film titled *If A Tree Falls*, the intensity of emotion experienced by the 'eco-terrorists' who blockade the old growth trees from being 'harvested' is palatable (Curry 2011). The documentary records of environmental activists moving from the peaceful protests of 'tree huggers' to the increasingly desperate efforts to stop logging companies and other corporate developers. In the particularly disturbing footage, federal agents are seen using extreme violence against a protester who is desperately clinging to the tree, pleading: 'But I am only trying to protect these trees' as tear gas is forcefully forced into their face (in Curry 2011). Considering this range of attitudes, ethical positions, and emotional commitments towards plants, we shall now turn to examine a somewhat more prosaic case study of plants in The Netherlands.

### **3. Plants in The Netherlands**

Between 1990 and 2010, the Netherlands lost an average of 1,000 ha or 0.29% per year (UNEP-WCMC 2011; Global Forest Resources Assessment 2011).

In 2010 it was speculated that the Party for Plants (Partij voor de Planten or PvdP <http://www.partijvoordeplanten.nl/?file=home>) will enter its candidacy in a parliamentary election in the Netherlands. Freedom for ferns, rights for roses and tolerance for tulips were on the agenda for this tiny political group. Pieter Baas, former director of the National Herbarium, told the radio program the party opposes the use of plants for biofuel. Campaign list leader Rolf Rose said the party wants communities to make free trees available and to tax the stone tiles much Dutch use to pave their back gardens (Berkowitz 2010). "The PvdP focuses on topics such as climate, biodiversity, and sustainability in general," the party said in an introduction on its Facebook page (<http://www.facebook.com/pages/Partij-voor-de-Planten>). The party has not really registered its candidacy for the election but representatives admitted that the publicity stunt has provided the needed boost for discussion of 'green issues' in The Netherlands. PvdP hoped to have

achieved a serious recognition that plants may also have intrinsic value and even associated rights. The stunt has however unlocked an avalanche of jokes on Dutch websites, social media and mocking blog posts.

Single or limited-issue parties are not unusual in the Netherlands, where dozens of parties register for the elections, with about a third of the parties actually ended up contesting the vote. In 2006 the Dutch Party for the Animals (Partij voor de Dieren or PvdD) won two seats in parliament (out of over one hundred total seats), making it the first animal-rights party in the world to win seats in a national election.

The green space in an important degree determines the quality of the urban environment in The Netherlands (Hinssen 1992). In the report of Wageningen University 'How green is The Netherlands?' (Van Dijke et al 2005) the following definition of 'green space' is given:

The Netherlands consists of cultivated areas, built settlements, towns, industry and important infrastructure as well as areas that often are called the 'green space'. This green space is often seen as the area for the development of recreational activities by people from both the urban and rural areas. The use and accessibility of this green space, however, depends on the administrator of the area. This determines how the land is used and to what extent people with recreational purposes be admitted (Van Dijke et al 2005:5).

Van Dijke's research team that combined different statistical data from e.g. central bureau of Statistics, GPS surveys, etc. has concluded that there is 2.315 m<sup>2</sup> green space per person in the whole country. The largest proportion of this territory is 'cultivated areas' or agriculture (2.287.502 hectars out of total territory: 3.789.166), followed by green spaces in 'built settlements' and towns (classified as parks) and tailed by nature and recreation. In North Holland province, of which Amsterdam is the capital, there was calculated to be 1.496 m<sup>2</sup> per person (of which 1.367 m<sup>2</sup> accessible), with the largest area being agricultural land (Van Dijke et al 2005:21). Green spaces in build settlements and towns classified as parks in North Holland accounted for a total of 3.644 against the total population of the province of 2.669.084 in 2010 (CBS 2012).

### **3.1. Amsterdam plants: a case study**

In 2011, green areas, including Westerpark and other parks such as Erasmuspark, accounted for about 9% of accessible public space. The brochure of Municipality Amsterdam, district West titled 'Green in the West' describes the 'greenery' as 'important for clean air and recreation' and 'consisting of important tree



structures, trails, parks, green squares, inner yard ecology as well as the green in the street'

([www.west.amsterdam.nl/.../groen\\_in\\_west\\_mail-05-04-2012.pdf](http://www.west.amsterdam.nl/.../groen_in_west_mail-05-04-2012.pdf)).

The research of plants in the urban spaces in Amsterdam involved the following strategies: a twelve-month period (May 2011 – May 2012) of observation of Westerpark, the 14 hector park located in the West of Amsterdam:

Perfect place to relax in natural surroundings, but also a venue for digital arts and culture...

Westergasfabriek Culture Park is part of the Bretton Zone a long, narrow strip of ecological land that stretches the 10 kilometers from the Wester Park to Spaarnwoude. Amphibians, reptiles, and fish can move freely in the waterways and among the many varieties of plants that line them

(<http://www.westergasfabriek.nl/en/westergasfabriek-en/park>).

The Bretton Zone has been however distorted because of the expansion of a highway in 2010 which considerably shortened the natural corridor (Abrahamse et al 2010). Although there are many different areas in the park, the researcher concentrated on one specific area Het Woeste Westen ('Wild West') recreation area.

#### **4. Results**

Het Woeste Westen recreation area, is meant as an 'environmental education' facility, encouraging children to 'explore the wilderness, build huts, collect wildflowers, and be a true nature adventurer'

(<http://www.woestewesten.nl/>). The area is supported by Foundation Hart voor de Natuur (Heart for Nature) which 'aims to increase overall support for nature and environment' by 'providing free play for children in nature, encouraging the provision of nature and environmental education to schools and organizing public activities and events with the theme of nature and adventure' (<http://www.woestewesten.nl/wie-zijn-wij/stichting-hart-voor-de-natuur>). Het Woeste Westen is around 200 square meters housing a 'rangers' hut' (exposition center and small café fully equipped with all modern amenities), a grass area, the bush area surrounding a small artificial creek, and a proportionally larger grass field supporting playground facilities such as boomerang. Children are encouraged to hold 'wild nature birthday parties' (for example, see some activities on <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dnzV6U3mVf0>).

During the children's events, the groups were given lemonade out plastic cups inside or just outside the hut, the children were encouraged to explore the area, particularly making use of playground facilities and

suspended bridge, and could then enjoy having 'a cup of wilderness tea' (plastic cup, disposable in mixed garbage container after use) boiled on open fire positioned in the suspended pot above the tiled ground near the hut. The wood used for the fire was normally pre-packaged and supplied from the nearby supermarket, but on two occasions included shrubs harvested in Westerpark. During the period of observation, maintenance activities including mowing grass, and weeding the area around the 'hut', as well as general birthday parties involving board games at the 'wilderness table' were undertaken on a monthly basis. Other activities undertaken at least three times during the observation period were building and deconstructing the 'suspension bridge' across the creek and uprooting shrubs, grass, and bushes to ease access to the creek. The grass was cut on a regular basis, no 'weeds' were allowed.

Both park visitors tended to equate green areas with 'nature'. Many children and their parents described their experience as 'being out in nature' and enjoying 'wilderness experience'. One of the visitors reflected on her experience with trees, 'inspired' by Het Woeste Westen:

A female (25) radio-programmer: What is interesting about trees here that there are a lot of changes – some look old, but they were actually recently planted as adult trees. I wonder whether they bring them from the forest or what. Also, a lot of young trees get planted, but sometimes it's kind of stupid, they recently put a young oak into the big flower pot, along the side of the road – I mean, it's an oak – it needs more space! Maybe it's wasn't the municipality people who put it there – who knows!... Sometimes they make a big fuss about trees if they have historical value or so. For example, the Anna Frank tree, the whole big legal case publicized in all newspapers when the tree fell <sup>1</sup> – have you heard of it?... Well, because the house [Anna Frank museum] attracts hordes of tourists, and they all want to see the tree that was described in the diary, so after the health report of – I don't know who does these reports – well, they said, tree is sick, it needs to be cut. Then there was this whole foundation making big deal out of it, trying to save the Anna Frank tree... Next, to it, many old trees were just cut to make parking spaces, but not that tree! I don't know whether there were any health reports on those trees, and they looked pretty healthy to me whatever the reports said!

A few visitors also referred to this area as offering 'useful and healthy activities', as parents of the 7-year-old boy who was having a birthday party had told the researcher: 'All this running and climbing make healthy', - the father reflected. 'But not very hygienic' – observed the mother, referring to mud. Overhearing this conversation, one of the party assistants remarked: 'Yeah, they could keep the area a bit cleaner. Children can trip over this mess... They need to remove the weeds more often'.

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#### **4. Reflection.**

In the Introduction, we have set out to explore both practical – the way the plants are actually treated, and theoretical – the way social scientists interpret this treatment – implications of environmental ethics. It is remarkable that many visitors interviewed referred to urban greenery as ‘nature’, or ‘wilderness’. The human agency in the cultivation of green spaces or parks is not seen as an imposition, or domination, or exploitation by any of the residents, and functional elements – health benefits provided by green spaces – are singled out. While anthropocentric in a sense of perception of ‘greenery’ in instrumental terms, interviewees have indicated that they do care about and appreciate the greenery and see it as an urban ‘added value’.

Removal of ‘bad’ plants and construction of modern urban landscapes which alter ‘wild’ environment was experienced as a norm by park visitors and residents. Intrinsic concern about plants was not explicitly present in any of the interviewed respondents. Concern for trees, as expressed by one of the respondents in reference to Anna Frank tree, is often instrumental as trees are seen having different functions useful for city residents.

The plants were represented in the conversations with the visitors as a mere subject outside of the human ethical domain. Generally, and on the basis of this small qualitative sample, it appears that no interviewees thought that the weeds should be spared, or that cultivating or grooming activities are imposing a human vision of what plants should be. Returning to the discussion of bioethics presented at the beginning of this article, it appears that while many Amsterdam residents might not entirely agree with the off-hand dismissals of ethical concerns with plants, the actual practice of treating plants with respect is not common.

#### **5. Conclusions.**

Examining the qualitative data provided by the observations and interviews with park visitors and urban residents have revealed an anthropocentric concern for the well-being of the plants and a variety of attitudes towards plants. Perceptions of plants by urban residents were often instrumental as concerns about the well-being of plants, including weeds, was practically absent. Without seriously considering bioethics, theories of human-plant relationship might fail to note the hierarchical, exploitive and overtly anthropocentric relationship between humans and plants in urban spaces. Re-examination of the position of plants in the context of contemporarily urban spaces may require consideration of non-anthropocentric ethics.

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