



Remembering Life Along the River: Alternative Histories along the Grensmaas

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Abstract

This article explores the banks of the Grensmaas, a stretch of the Maas River in the province of Limburg, in search of alternative narratives that contrast with traditional Dutch water management's deeply engrained tradition of "fighting against the water", where keeping the water out is the primary concern. With interviews and a workshop, focusing on historical narratives and cultural stories that have shaped the community's relationship with the river, as well as the river imaginaries people carry, alternative narratives emerged of a past life along the river that emphasized on connection with the Maas. In recollections of living along the river, locals expressed a desire to reconnect with their river where they collectively imagine a future in which their river is not something to fear, but a dynamic entity to be enjoyed and respected.

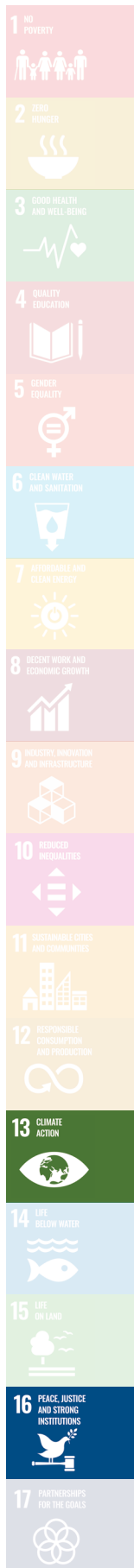
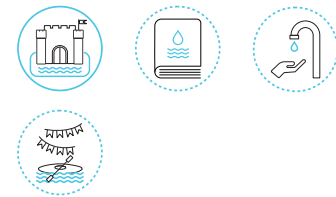
Policy Recommendations

- Policies should allow space for the diverse river imaginaries of locals and government employees and allow space for government employees to reflect on their own river imaginaries and on how their perspective influences decision making.
- Various levels of governmental bodies of Belgium and the Netherlands should continue collaborating in the Grensmaas project.
- The Dutch national government should pay more attention to how people imagine living with water in different regions of the country.
- Local communities should be allowed to reconnect with rivers and to choose how to interact with the river in the way they desire to do so.

KEYWORDS

historical narratives
alternative narratives
river imaginaries
local communities
human-river connections

WATER VALUES



Introduction

The Netherlands faces a predicament as a consequence of the combined climate and biodiversity crises. Climate change leads to increased likelihood of floods in Dutch rivers (KNMI 2023), and as a response, the Netherlands aims to increase its flood preparedness in the future. However, conventional approaches to flood protection often come at the expense of life along the river, both human and non-human (White 1967; Boelens et al. 2023; Duarte-Abadia 2023). To address this predicament, this article explores the alternative narratives along the Grensmaas that depart from the dominant narratives' assumptions of Dutch water management, which reflect a deeply engrained tradition of "fighting against the water" (Mostert 2020). The analysis focuses on alternative historical narratives, recognizing that pasts, presents and futures are interwoven and shape how rivers are imagined, designed and reconstructed.

The Formation of Cultural Landscapes and river imaginaries

Beliefs, feelings and emotions play a critical role in structuring the interrelationship between human beings and their natural environments (Dewsbury et al. 2002; Döring and Ratter 2021). Landscape evolution unfolds alongside cultural evolution, creating cultural landscapes, the landscape and its people continually shaping one other (Ingold 2021). Cultural landscapes are an important part of people's self-perception and identity (Döring and Ratter 2021; Holzhausen and Grecksch 2021). Beliefs about the environment, shaped by personal and inter-generational experiences, are shared through storytelling (Gottschall 2013). Societies create a hierarchy of narratives describing their re-

lationship to landscapes. Whereas dominant narratives are maintained by institutionalized and unquestioned frameworks, alternative narratives are often overlooked and excluded (Plummer 2020; Hommes et al. 2022).

The concept of river imaginaries is employed to understand this interrelationship between people and their landscape, specifically regarding river landscapes. River imaginaries are collectively performed ideas "about what a river was, what a river is and what a river ought to be in the future" (De Jong et al. 2024, 3). These historical narratives, or pasts, thus profoundly influence how we perceive and interact with the river in the present and how we envision the future river. Imaginaries are not just an "image" in one's mind, they are also materialized realities (Boelens et al. 2025) as the ideas physically shape the landscape. To find alternative historical narratives, several interviews were conducted with 14 locals and three government employees. Moreover, a workshop was organized with locals in which they developed a common vision of the river's past, present and future. The group was not representative of the population, as the majority of the respondents were men around the age of 60 and above. Interviewees are all referred to anonymously as collectively agreed upon.

The Dominant Narrative in Dutch Water Management

In the Netherlands, rivers are as much bound by dikes as they are by the culture they flow within. The dominant historical narrative, describing numerous floodings over the centuries, has made many Dutch people believe they need to defend themselves against the water. This belief has transformed the landscape throughout the ages into one filled with dikes,



^ Fig. 2 Newspaper clipping showing an inhabitant's mother and grandmother operating the ferry in Obbicht (Source: interviewee's personal collection, date unknown, likely early twentieth century).

ditches, sluices, dams, canals and windmills (Rooijendijk 2009; Mostert 2020).

A promising location to find an alternative narrative is the southern Dutch province of Limburg. Historically, it has had the least involvement of central government in its water management affairs (Rooijendijk 2009; volunteer at Historiehuis Maasvallei, pers. comm., December 10, 2024). Moreover, the region had its most recent flood experience in 2021, making flood events a matter of both the distant and recent past (Cornwall 2021; Tradowsky et al. 2023).

The Alternative: A Narrative of Past Connection

In the past, the inhabitants of the Maas villages in Limburg were connected to the river through their livelihoods and a variety of daily practices, including washing and employment, and as a source of food (locals of Urmond, Meers and Elsloo, pers. comm., January 21, 22, 27, 2025). Families specialized in river-related occupations – e.g., cargo shippers, river navigators, fishers, ferry operators (fig. 2) – with knowledge and skill passed down through generations (locals of Obbicht, Meers and Elsloo, pers.

comm., January 13, 15, 22, 27, 2025). Moreover, social networks centered around the river because family and friends lived on both sides (locals of Urmond, Meers and Elsloo, pers. comm., January 21, 27, 2025). This connection to the Maas changed during the first half of the twentieth century.

One factor described as fueling this change were the mines in the area that caused land subsidence. The Maas village of Urmond sank about 5 to 6 m, increasing the frequency of flooding. One resident reports that in the 1960s the government decided to step in: "They told us they would build a dike for us, to protect the people of Urmond, but what they essentially did is dump their mining rubble on those historical buildings (fig. 3); we have a dike that is 4 m high consisting of rubbish and unknown chemicals. [...] Because of the mines and the sinking of the area we have lost the connection with the Maas. For a long time there literally was a physical barrier between us and the Maas; the Maas could not come to us." (local of Urmond, pers. comm., January 21, 2025).

Whereas in the past residents felt a connection with the Maas especially because it was central to peoples' livelihoods, connection shifted to one based on leisure, fostered by activities such as swimming, ice skating and fishing (locals of Meers, Roosteren, Grevenbicht, Berg aan de Maas and Elsloo, pers. comm., January 13, 21, 22, 27, 2025). Residents frequently mentioned the "swimming pool" in Meers (fig. 4) (locals of Meers, pers. comm., January 13, 22, 27, 2025).

In the 1970s, this leisure connection was disrupted by heavy pollution. As one resident recalls: "When I was younger, I used to go to the Maas a lot. Back then it was a lively thing." (local of Elsloo, pers. comm., January 27, 2025).



^ Fig. 3 The Ur, a tributary of the Maas, and the historic docks of Urmond, both of which disappeared beneath the dike (Source: interviewee's personal collection, date unknown, likely early twentieth century).

After that, the river became a dirty and inaccessible place (locals of Meers, pers. comm., January 27, 2025).

At the workshop local people expressed a desire to revive the connection to the river, both on the individual and community level (pers. comm., February 4, 2025).

Continually Changing Connection: The Grensmaas Project

Residents expressed ambivalence about how the Grensmaas project impacted efforts to revive the connection to the river. In the Grensmaas project, which started in 2008, gravel is extracted from the area to pay for nature development and create more room for the river to improve water safety and reduce flood risk. As a result of these gravel extractions, many describe a loss of connection. Locals mourn the landscape the way it used to be and the connection it offered with their ancestors, since many old trees, dikes and roads were removed to extract the gravel (locals of Meers, Grevenbicht and Elslloo, pers. comm., January

13, 21, 27, 2025). Some say they sometimes fail to recognize the area. As one relates, "The memories in your head disappear, with the landscape changes you cannot find the exact location of those memories, and with the landscape, your memories of it disappear as well" (local of Meers, pers. comm., January 13, 2025).

The loss people feel is often justified, by using the argument that water safety has increased because of the gravel extractions. After the summer floods in 2021, people were said to be glad to have "kept their feet dry" (local of Roosteren and Meers, pers. comm., January 23, 27, 2025). This argument is an example of the reasoning of the dominant narrative: Flood safety is the number one priority. One resident expressed their frustration with this dominant unquestioned framework very clearly: "You cannot argue against that, because that would mean you argue against the safety, and that's the thing, that's not done" (local of Elslloo, pers. comm., January 27, 2025).

Locals losing their ability to read the landscape, however, can lead to a decrease in



^ Fig. 4 The “swimming pool” in Meers, a section of the Maas with changing rooms along the river (Source: Facebook group “Ut vreugere Stein,” posted September 28, 2020; photograph taken in the 1960s).

flood safety. Another resident described how he underestimated the 2021 flood and recognized the severity of the situation quite late as a result of the lack of familiar landscape readings after the gravel extraction (local of Meers, pers. comm., January 13, 2025). Many interviewees report they still keep an eye on the river, monitoring water levels and remaining alert for flood risks (locals of Grevenbicht, Meers, Roosteren and Elsloo, pers. comm., January 13, 21, 22, 23, 27, 2025). One inhabitant stated: “I always keep an eye on the Maas, to see how high the river is. Last week it was quite high, so then you pay extra attention. That’s part of me, keeping an eye on it.” (local of Roosteren, pers. comm., January 23, 2025). Another shared: “My dad used to go check the Maas once or twice a day, just to see if it was still flowing in the right direction” (local of Grevenbicht, pers. comm., January 21, 2025). On the other hand, many respondents report that the Grensmaas

project has strengthened connection to the river by making the landscape more accessible through the addition of cycling and walking paths (locals of Grevenbicht and Berg aan de Maas, pers. comm., January 21, 22, 2025).

Government and Locals: Contested Responsibility

While locals often feel a connection to the Grensmaas based on their (intergenerational) experiences in the local environment, government employees interviewed often had a different relationship with the Maas, stemming from their sense of responsibility to protect residents from the river’s dangers. A former employee of Rijkswaterstaat conveyed that responsibility by asking: “If you let the river choose which areas will flood, what do you have on your conscience then?” (pers. comm., January 8, 2025).



^ Fig. 5 Residents of Urmond during high water in 1952 (Source: Facebook group "Ut vreugere Stein," posted May 10, 2024).

Locals feel frustrated when their knowledge of the landscape is dismissed by government officials (locals of Roosteren and Grevenbicht, pers. comm., January 21 and 23, 2025). While locals often see floods as inevitable, some government officials perceive the river through the dominant Dutch narrative in which water can be predicted, controlled, redirected and defeated. One inhabitant recalled that he was dismissed when sharing their concern of flooding with a government official in the 1980s: "He told me that floods don't happen anymore, that's history. I haven't confronted him after [the floods of] 1993 and 1995 (local of Roosteren, pers. comm., January 23, 2025).

Moreover, there is a perception that government employees sometimes overreact in times of flooding. As one participant describes: In the past, "people just lived along the Maas, it was a given that it would be high and low sometimes; [...] you can see the boats in the pictures everywhere (fig. 5). Meanwhile, a few years ago, panic everywhere, evacuations. While, back in the day, you moved your stuff upstairs and lived on and you would take the boat if you went shopping" (local of Urmond, pers. comm., January 21, 2025). While the government employees' perceptions of the river are based on fear and the desire to control flows, these locals see the river more as a dynamic living entity, something

to keep in mind and adapt to, rather than fear. They argue people should move with the Maas: "A Maas village is not a stationary thing, you should consider them walking villages" (local of Elsloo, pers. comm., January 27, 2025).

Conclusion: Trust in Local Narratives of Hope

The dominant Dutch narrative, which emphasizes predicting and controlling rivers, is institutionalized and fed by fear. The river is imagined to be a dangerous thing. The alternative narrative of Limburg's locals, inspired by a past sense of connection to the river, offers a different river imaginary, one where the river is seen as a dynamic, life-giving entity, to be enjoyed and respected. People are inspired by their ancestors, inhabiting the banks of the Grensmaas, living with the river. The stories of the past provide hope for the future. The challenge now is to follow the residents' courage and to imagine a future with the river in which, even with the increasing flood risk brought by climate change, we can live with the river.

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