



## The Promises of the New Wetlands

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LYING IN THE middle of Antwerp's shipping delta, these wetlands (see fig. A) face the gigantic North Sea Container Terminal and the world's second largest BASF production site, both of which lie across the river and can be seen on the horizon. In contrast, they seem quiet and inoffensive, detached from the surrounding industrial activity. But make no mistake, many stories lie buried within. The wetlands are unusual in that they have been newly created as part of an ecological restoration scheme. People who were evicted see in this picture a rather desolate place of irreversible loss and grief, whereas ornithologists and naturalists see it as flourishing nature.

Sketching the portrait of these wetlands will require polyvocality while not forgetting to address the crucial question: What is actually going on? For the eviction of people and destruction of livelihoods put us under an obligation. Such actions cannot be ignored, nor downplayed as a necessary phase of environmental progress. Rather, they force us to move beyond the success story of ecological restoration and to identify

what structural changes are reshaping the land in the name of a greener future.

### Take One: A Tale of Recovery and Compensation

THE TALE OF the new wetlands is one of redemption: in 2005, the Flemish Government agreed to return marshes to a delta that has lost so many of them in the last decades in the interests of the economy. The diked river needs more breathing space; nature must again be developed on the banks to promote a more natural interplay of shallow and deep waters. It's a tale of ambition, too, because the 5 km<sup>2</sup> of new Flemish wetlands are added to the already existing wetlands park (inaugurated in 1975), which covers 36 km<sup>2</sup>, mostly in the Netherlands. Together these make up the largest European reserve of brackish intertidal land (see fig. B).<sup>1</sup> Finally, the tale of the new wetlands is one of far-sightedness: As sea level rises and storms become more extreme,

government and industry have understood that resilience must be built into the coastline. The wetlands are hailed by the Port of Antwerp as one of its main ecological infrastructures and they are participating in the Flemish Sigma Plan for water security<sup>2</sup> that consists of many more projects for re-inundating river banks and building hydrological resilience, all over Flanders.

It's as if the wetlands hold a promise, of a new kind of governance, of professionals, and planners who, in acknowledging the usefulness of the marshes and restoring them, have finally shed their cloak of past hubris. They could well signal a turning point for the environmentalists, a victory at last, were it not for the fact that the restoration has involved a lot of destruction.

For every piece of new wetland, farmers and villagers were forced to leave. The counterproposals they made, the discussions they tried to initiate about how to make room for the river and render farming less harmful, how to crack dikes and manage intertidal lands, were met with polite indifference at best. Administrators

- 1 For further information on the cross-border park Groot Saeftinghe, the extension of which is funded by the EU's Interreg Europe program, visit <https://www.keep.eu/project/18295/grenspark-groot-saeftinghe>.
- 2 For further information visit <https://www.sigmaplan.be/uploads/2017/08/170817-sigmabrochure-2017-en-lr.pdf>.
- 3 The Farmers Syndicate played an important role in dwarfing the Natural Protection Plans during the 1990s, lobbying for the reduction of the 353,000 hectares of protected nature claimed by the environmentalists to 153,000 hectares finally provisioned for the "Flemish Ecological Network" in 1997 (see the contextual notices produced by the AMSAB-ISG Institute of Social History in Ghent on the basis of data and negotiations reported by the main environmental institutions).

B



FIGS.: A — New nature at the Port of Antwerp, 2013. B — Aerial view of the Great Saeftinghe Cross-border Park and the polders.

offered belittling condolences and ecologists spoke with the tongue of vindication: Had it not been the farmers' Green Revolution that had polluted the land beyond reason? Had the Farmers' Syndicate not dwarfed the Natural Protection Plans from the 1990s onwards?<sup>3</sup> And so, in 2011, it was in an atmosphere of ecological self-righteousness that restoration started. Bulldozers ripped up agricultural land. A handful of farms, hamlets, and landmarks disappeared overnight. Pools and breeding places for birds were then built, where just a few months ago often centuries-old farms had stood. The place looked forsaken in the eyes of those who had lived there, and watching the nesting birds in particular left them with a bitter aftertaste. For these birds had once been their allies.

Indeed, in 2001, for the first time since the end of the 1960s when container traffic took over the world and the Port of Antwerp started grabbing land, inhabitants, ecologists, and farmers were able to stop the land grabbing in the name of the migratory birds. The building

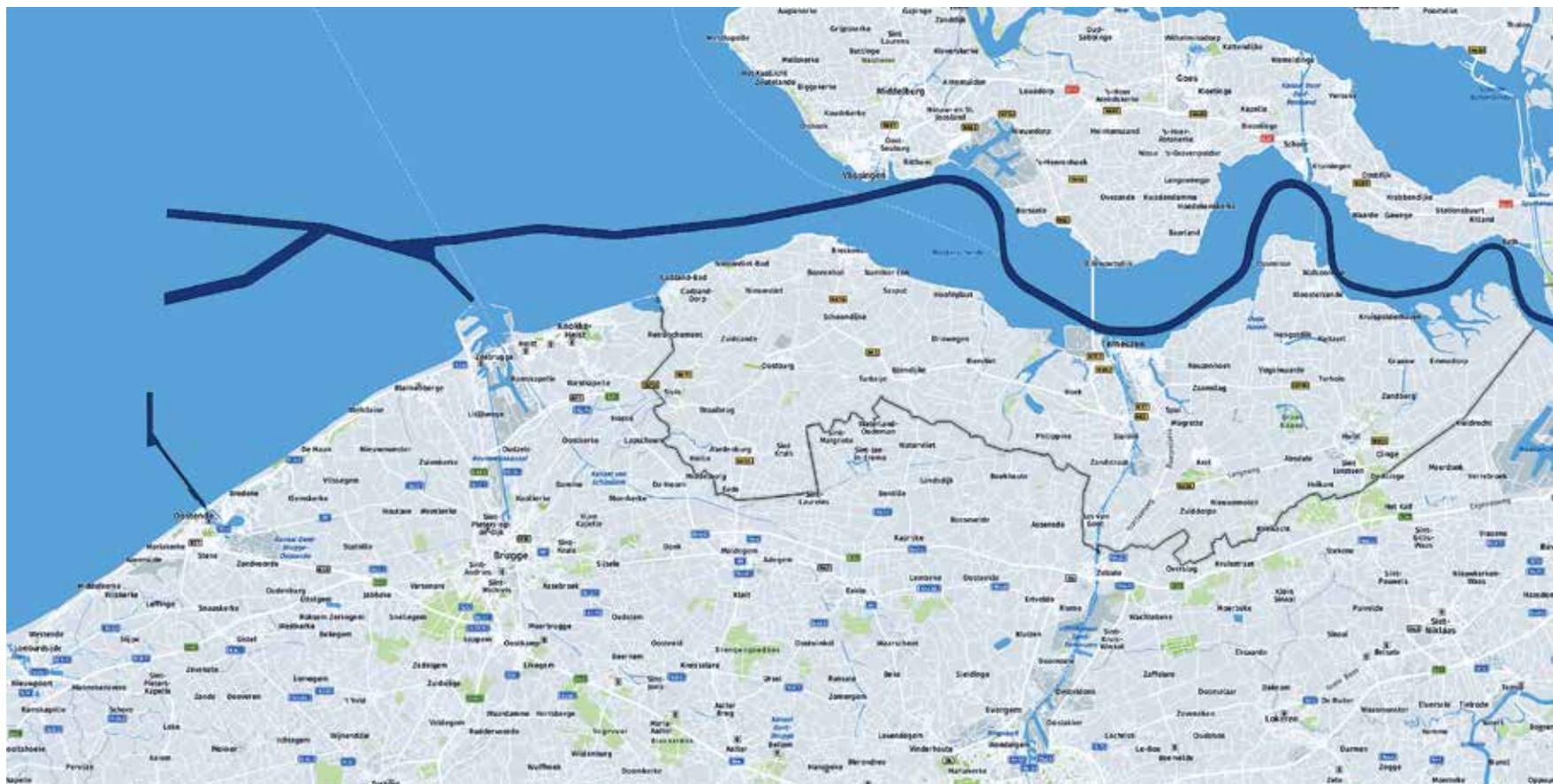
of new docks was halted (the Port lost millions!) by the combined decision of the Belgian Council of State and the European Court of Justice, who reckoned that the need for docks and the possible alternatives had not been investigated sufficiently for an area that was a breeding place of migratory birds under European protection. This complicated matters for the Port, to say the least (the docks were finally built, after much legalizing). The birds had become an obstacle.

Thus one might be tempted to think that in 2005, the Government, with the support of the Port, decided to "give back" the wetlands in order to get rid of that obstacle. In effect, this is the critical interpretation of the new wetlands that is currently being voiced in both activist and intellectual circles. Yet, something is missing. The leitmotif of legal compensation and obligation is too clean. It is hard to believe that industrialists would comply so readily nor that environmentalists are so defeated as to accept all trade-offs. What's lacking in this first take is *territorial commitment*, i.e., a sense of what the

new wetlands mean to the makers of the project, what practical and material promises lie therein beyond the tactics of formal power games. The story, then, moves beyond criticality and becomes quite grim, even sinister (commitments are not always uplifting).

### Take Two: A Tale of Eco-Systemic Consolidation

IN THE EARLY 1980s, it became clear that the Scheldt was the most polluted river in Western Europe, even more than the Rhine, and that in the delta in particular pollution was relatively recent, dating from the postwar years when the Port banked on becoming a major petrochemical transformation site. Companies such as Solvay, Monsanto, BASF, Shell, Total, and others were invited to settle or, if already there, to expand on the Scheldt's shores (the latest in line being the chemical giant INEOS who settled in 2019). They were treated benevolently by way of pollution permits and were known — environmentalists



4 For the reports and proposals on the Scheldt's ecological restoration, there are many, starting from the ecological impact analyses presented to the Flemish Government by academic researchers of Ghent and Antwerp mainly, in collaboration with the Flemish Institute for Nature Conservation, as part of the late 1980s new planning procedures, to the culmination point in 2000 when three scenarios for the Scheldt's ecological restoration were officially presented: Erika Van den Bergh et al., *Natuurherstelplan Zeeschelde: drie mogelijke inrichtingsvarianten* (Brussels: Instituut voor Natuurbehoud and Universitaire Instelling Antwerpen, Departement Biologie, 1999), <https://pureportal.inbo.be/portal/files/275561/173437.pdf>. The river's "self-cleansing capacity" figures on the very first page of this report. Archival research shows that it was discussed for the very first time in 1990, at the conference of experts and stakeholders *Symposium Schelde*

*zonder grenzen (without frontiers)* organized by the Dutch Ministry of Traffic and Water, where it was introduced by Luitzen Bijlsma in order to criticize the high levels of pollution which could no longer be absorbed by the Scheldt. It didn't take long for experts to shift from a call for ending the pollution to a call for increasing the resilience of the river.

5 Bert Denneman et al., *De Schelde natuurlijk! Visie op een duurzaam en natuurlijk Schelde-estuarium*, information brochure (Brussels: WWF Flanders, 2004), 26.

running makeshift laboratories on water made sure it was known — to release high amounts of toxic wastes directly into the river. What's more, the lab workers observed that these wastes tended to concentrate in the marshes, turning the delta's biggest natural reserve, the 36 km<sup>2</sup> wetlands park, into the most polluted area of all. Cadmium, zinc, lead — you name it, it was there. The environmentalists' dismay was only tempered by the realization that the bird populations were not declining, and they even seemed to thrive (the hypothesis being that small fish are more abundant when big and more fragile fish disappear due to riverbed pollution).

It didn't take long for public health staff, university engineers and ecologists, some of whom had contributed to the critical layout work of the 1980s, to look for solutions. That's when trouble started. For their approach was holistic, eco-systemic, part of the global trend toward Integrated Water Management. They conceived of the river basin as a system of interrelated functions and processes which had to be optimized.

In the 1990s, they presented their ecological restoration reports to the Flemish Government and recommended increasing the sedimentation areas, which amounted, they said, to boosting the "self-cleansing capacity" of the river.<sup>4</sup> As they would put it more covertly in 2004 when addressing the public, sedimentation areas, for example, new protected wetlands, allow particles of all sorts to settle, hence they fulfill a valuable "bio-reactor"<sup>5</sup> function.

In other words, when looking at the first picture (see fig. A), one must see cadmium, lead, zinc, kilos of them, even tons if widening the gaze, deposited in the mud. Therein lies the practical and material promise of the new wetlands... Partly, for there's more.

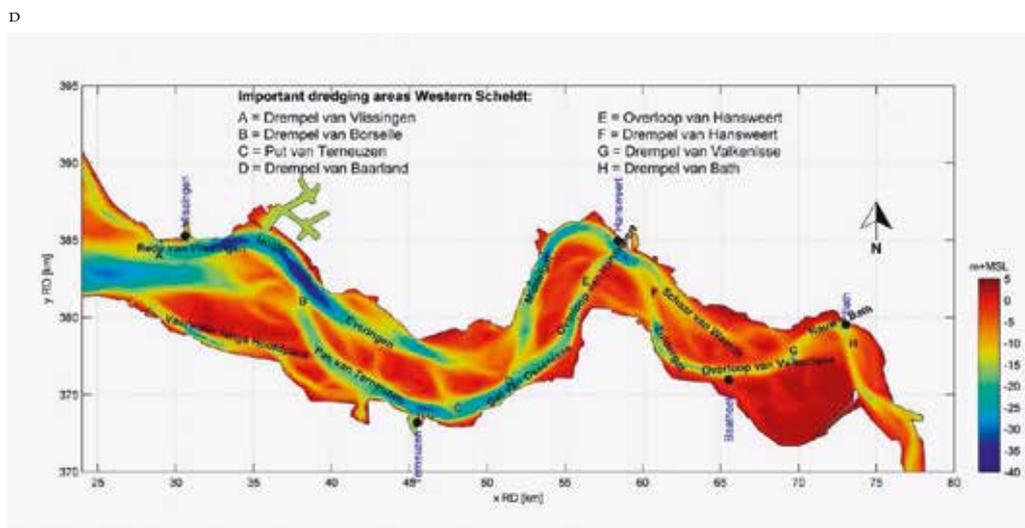
Reading the reports, it is obvious that the motive of the ecological restoration project, its guiding force, lies in the Port's need for ever deeper and more navigable waters. The story sketched here is then not only concerned with pollution, which merely brought an extra incentive to the project, but with the need for upscale water

infrastructure. To understand this, we must go back to the beginning of the 1980s, yet again.

When austerity hit, it was decided that state-funded infrastructures would only be built after passing the test of profitability. The Port's grandiose plans for increased accessibility, hatched during the boom years, had to be abandoned: no canals would cut across the land nor would the sharpest estuarine bends be straightened. One solution remained, it seemed, and that was the substantial deepening of the main winding waterway from sea to dock, mainly through Dutch territory (see fig. C).

For over two decades, the Flemish and the Dutch negotiated. In 2005, in return for systematic deepening work taken on by the Netherlands, Flanders agreed to restore wetlands or, to put it in the legally binding terms of the agreement, to "develop nature."<sup>6</sup> The reason is simple, although rarely publicly stated: deepening a river is a destructive undertaking.

There's the transfer of contaminated sediment through dredging, of course, which, even



6 “Nature development” (*natuurontwikkeling*) is the term used in the 2005 Scheldt Agreements, as presented online by the interregional commission VNSC Vlaams-Nederlandse Scheldtcommissie: <https://www.vnsc.eu/uploads/2012/08/verdragen-2005-0120827.pdf>. In the agreement itself, the exact wording is the “production of nature” (“de te realiseren natuur”), which takes place inside an overall plan of estuarial “development” (“ontwikkeling”): <https://www.vnsc.eu/uploads/2011/10/verdrag-ontwikkelingsschets2010-2005.pdf>.

C — Shipping way from the Port of Antwerp to the North Sea. D — Layout of the Western Scheldt around 1970 with names of important channels and dredging areas and tidal stations. E — Dike and Hedwigepolder near the Port of Antwerp from the air.

if it happens downstream and the dredges are dropped back into the river, this loosens the toxic particles and keeps waters blurred and hence oxygen levels low. There’s also the funnel effect: as the river deepens, its sucking power increases. More sand is drawn in from the beachline over dozens of kilometers into the river, necessitating sand import on those beaches and turning the river deepening work into an increasingly Sisyphean endeavor. The gap between the shallow waterways and the main deepened channel widens to such an extent that the shallow parts of the river may actually collapse and be sucked away (see fig. D); and even if this does not happen, they are rendered more vulnerable (while getting sandier on the surface, banks are actually getting more fragile underneath). Last but not least, paradoxically given climate change, increased water flow speed and volume considerably raise the risks of flooding. In short, river deepening is environmentally nonsensical, not to say calamitous.

It is tempting, then, to launch a diatribe against upscale infrastructures and modernist

gigantism. It wouldn’t be wrong, but it would be missing the point: today’s modernist gigantism involves ecological restoration. Shore development is the condition of deepening work, it’s their provision. The global port is drawing wetlands into its expansion equations and merging two systems, the estuarine one and the port one, to form a single integrated and highly consolidated Scheldt ecosystem that must play its role on the map of international trade and production. Therein lies the final promise. No wonder the evicted farmers were treated with condescension; their land is trivial by comparison. As for the environmentalists, their position is weak for they too see the delta through ecosystemic lenses. The Scheldt’s disaster is both material and conceptual.

Or let’s put it this way: the new wetlands hold a promise, and it is a systemic one, a sinister one, of business continuing regardless. The call for optimization means nothing else — let business continue. There’s no use in criticizing ecosystemic services or compensation rules if one

fails to realize that optimizing, systemic thinking, positing oneness, is the problem. For if the delta is a system and thus one, the Port being part of it, then petrochemical pollution and destructive deepening works become mere processes that must somehow be managed. There’s no room for oppositional thinking or for considering the necessary, gradual, and assisted breakdown of global container traffic and the petrochemical industry, which are so needed if the course of today’s societies is to change.

So, it is, in the first picture, lies the Port’s latest expansion. One of its layers is contemporary port development, the latest hybrid industrial machination. That is not a reason to turn our backs on the wetlands, nor to become despondent. The wetlands are flourishing, birds are nesting there (see fig. E), the Port will continue to develop them, and so, whether we want to or not, in fact, we will have to engage with them. It’s a turning point indeed.