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A small and densely populated country

‘Since the year 1000, we have been controlling the landscape, starting with the draining of swamps. We subsequently built dikes around them, which is how the first polders were created. The next step was to accelerate the accretion of fertile marshes outside the dikes, to subsequently surround them with dikes and to drain them with sluices. And finally we came up with something that could not be imagined anywhere else in the world: the creation of polders by pumping out seawater from an enclosed sea area. This is how our national identity came about as we made that highly productive country. That is what our painters and cartographers started to record in the 16th century. Poets wrote about it. The elite wanted to live in those areas. People became euphoric. Foreigners who came here spoke of a hypnotic experience: sliding through the flat landscape in a barge, with that low horizon of a thousand windmills.’

(Adriaan Geuze, NRC, ‘Paris, London, they cherish their landscape’)

De bollenstreek and de Vinkeveense Plassen (lakes) that originated in the 17th century through the extraction of peat for Amsterdam.

The Netherlands is a country on the north-western coast of Europe, bordered by the North Sea to the north and west, Germany to the east, and Belgium to the south. For many visitors, the most surprising feature of the country is the fact that it lies approximately 50% below sea level. To prevent the low-lying half of the Netherlands from being permanently flooded, natural (sand dunes) and man-made (dikes) defence systems have been developed over many centuries. The often massive 'Delta type' sea dikes form an especially impressive feature of the Dutch landscape.

Practically all landscapes in the Netherlands are man-made. Unlike in many other European countries, natural landscapes are scarce in the Netherlands, especially when defined as 'unspoiled areas, untouched by man'. The Wadden Sea in the north of the country may be the only large-scale natural landscape left and even there, man is present in the background: by diking in the mainland and parts of the Wadden Islands, the natural dynamics of the area have been greatly reduced¹.

However, the fact that the Netherlands has few natural landscapes left does not mean that the country does not have its fair share of natural assets. There is a lot of 'nature' to be found in the cultural landscape of the Netherlands, and most of it is conscientiously maintained. The traditional ways of land use and farming have been favourable for the dissemination of species, vegetation and populations. In a way, this 'man-influenced nature' is the closest thing to real nature in the Netherlands. As Voltaire (1694–1778) said: 'God shaped the world, except the Netherlands. That He left to the Dutch themselves.'

The image on the bottom right shows a typical lowland landscape with the prevalence of agricultural land, a canal in the middle and a mixture of crop fields, pastures and colourful flower production fields for which this country is renown worldwide. This image perfectly illustrates the four rules of the Dutch spatial planning school: purpose of usefulness, economy of resources, meaning of place and clarity of form (Reh et al., 2006). Everything seems in perfect order, neat and beautiful, with clear boundaries between urban and rural. However, behind this achievement is a labyrinth of rules and regulations, policy instruments and subsidies. Creating this apparent perfection was not simple and it is the result of many successes and failures. The Netherlands became known for its knowledge and technical skills in coping with complex spatial problems. Spatial planning has always been seen as a convenient instrument to deal with this complexity. During its more than one-hundred-years-long tradition, landscape has been an important topic in the spatial planning of the Netherlands.

Landscape in this country is often considered to represent an important public good and is seen as a living, dynamic heritage (Lörzing 2001; Janssen, Pieterse and Van den Broek 2007; Pedroli, Van Doorn and De Blust 2007). Two words related to landscape that originate from the Dutch language have been adopted internationally: landscape and polder. Both words have to do with the physical and social aspects of planning and managing the land. The word 'landscape' entered the English language in the

1. Even the seal population in the Wadden Sea is regulated by man, insofar as sick animals are given medical treatment in a volunteer-run 'seal hospital'.



View of the Vliet ship canal with the Lepelbrug in the distance. Brush drawing by Hendrik Thier, 1768. A typical lowland landscape; flower production fields near Petten in the province of North Holland.



late 16th century, derived from the Middle Dutch word 'lantschap' denoting a picture of natural scenery (Lörzing, 2001). The Dutch word 'polder' has made its way into many other languages around the world. Actually, the word polder means 'land under human water management', but in common parlance 'land reclaimed from water' has become popular. In common policy practice in the Netherlands the word polder has also acquired a metaphoric meaning. The shortage of land suitable for agriculture forced people in the low parts of the Netherlands to create new polders. To build a polder is a complex task requiring cooperation, negotiation, tolerance and continuous maintenance, which is only possible if all those living in the polder agree to work together. That is why the so-called 'polder model' became a metaphor for the culture of negotiation and consensus in this country.

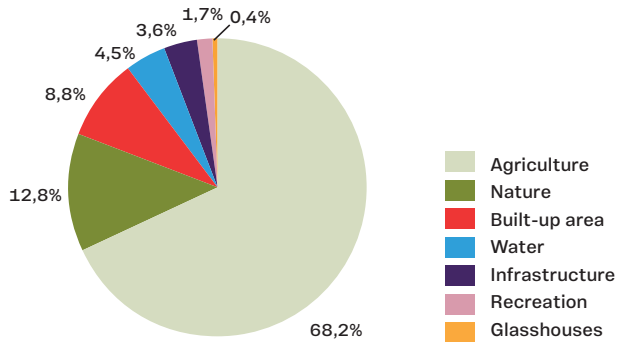
Essential geography

The overall area of the country, including some large lakes and sea inlets, is approximately 41,500 km². This makes the Netherlands roughly the same size as Denmark and Switzerland, slightly larger than Belgium and a little smaller than Estonia (and for Americans: twice the size of Massachusetts). The official language of the Netherlands is Dutch, a Germanic language. The northern province of Friesland is bilingual: besides Dutch, people speak Frisian, which is recognized as an official language in that province.

In the Middle Ages, the Netherlands was a rather loose union of semi-independent mini-states called duchies, counties and bishoprics. Today these historical states survive in a more centralized setting as provinces. In the Dutch Golden Age (roughly from 1575 to 1675), the heyday of painting, trade and exploration, the country fought its independence from Spain as the Republic of the United Netherlands. Its founders in those days were the leaders of the seven initial provinces: Holland in the west, Zeeland in the south-west, Friesland and Groningen in the north, Overijssel and Gelderland in the east, and Utrecht in the centre. After the defeat of Napoleon Bonaparte, when the map of Europe was drastically redrawn, the Netherlands and Belgium were united as a new kingdom to form a buffer state to the north of France. This situation did not last long, as the Belgians won their independence after an uprising against the Dutch in 1830. Following the secession of the Belgians, the Kingdom of the Netherlands was founded.

The former Dutch borderlands in the south became the provinces of North Brabant and Limburg, while semi-autonomous Drenthe became a province in its own right. With the partition of Holland into a northern and southern part, in the late 19th century the Netherlands had 11 provinces. This situation lasted well into most of the 20th century, when a twelfth province (Flevoland) was established in 1986 in the newly reclaimed polders in the Lake IJssel (*IJsselmeer*) area, while the province of Friesland was officially renamed in the Frisian language as Fryslân.

In June 2021, the population of the Netherlands passed the 17.5 million mark and growth still continues. The two western provinces of North Holland and South Holland are the most populous. The five largest cities are Amsterdam (870,000 inhabitants in 2021), Rotterdam (650,000), The Hague (550,000), Utrecht (360,000) and Eindhoven



The map left shows 12 provinces, the largest cities, main rivers, and the part of the country that lies below sea level. The land use map (right) shows the main categories and the percentage per category. Below the number of inhabitants in the ten largest cities in the Netherlands (source CBS).

