

The perceived values from people engaged with food forests in the Netherlands

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As part of the national monitoring programme on food forests in the Netherlands, a study was conducted to elicit the values people perceive in connection to the food forest they engage with. Perceptions were gathered and analysed from 48 self-administered questionnaires and 8 follow-up interviews. Understanding the socio-cultural values of food forests sheds light onto the intangible and intrinsic aspects of food forests and explores to what extent such aspects play a role in shaping human interaction with nature. Many topics and themes were perceived as valuable, such as human well-being, ecosystem functioning, food security, sense of place, empowerment, education, experiential knowledge, inspiration and sustainability for future generations. Many themes were found to be interconnected and complex to analyse. Overall, a biocultural perspective was seen as a central narrative where humans are part of nature and together generate meaningful expressions that are biologically and culturally diverse.

Research questions

1. What is the perceived value from people engaged with food forests in the Netherlands?
 - a) Which themes come across?
 - b) Are any (sub-)themes considered more valuable than others?

Mixed-methods approach

To explore the perceptions of people engaged with Dutch food forests, we conducted the following:

- 48 Self-administered questionnaire via the AKVO Flow app and via the web-version
- 8 follow-up interviews with survey respondents

Methodological framework

Three frameworks were drawn from to guide the research:

- Nature's contribution to nature ([IPBES, 2016](#))
- Cultural values model ([Stephenson, 2008](#))
- guidelines on cultural and spiritual significance of nature ([Verschuuren et al., 2021](#))

In this thesis, values were elicited from the perceptions gathered during the study are 7-fold: ecology; biocultural harmony & sustainability; knowledge & education; security & livelihood; health & well-being; identity & community, and experiential perceptions. These themes (starting from ecology and ending with experiential perceptions) are listed in a relative order from biocentric to anthropocentric notions; from the individual to the collective, the themes are listed in relative order from other-oriented to self-oriented and from holistic/group level to individual level, These dimensions are described by Chan, Satterfield and Goldstein (2012) to demonstrate the diverse dimensions of values and their interconnectedness; a recurring motif in the results obtained from this study.

Conceptual framework

This study adopts the [people-landscape model](#) as a conceptual model in understanding reality. The notion of landscape is seen through 5 dimensions: as a spatial entity, a temporal state, a nexus of nature and culture and a complex system. Through reflection, humans are capable of separating themselves from the landscape.

Conceptual framework

Humans are able to “compare their conceptions (expected reality) with actual perception (perceived reality) and draw conclusions” (Tress & Tress, 2001, p. 151). The drawing of such conclusions can continue or change human behaviour and their relationship with environment. This thesis focusses on the human perception of a food forest which can provide a basis for more informed action, decision-making and relating to our living environment.

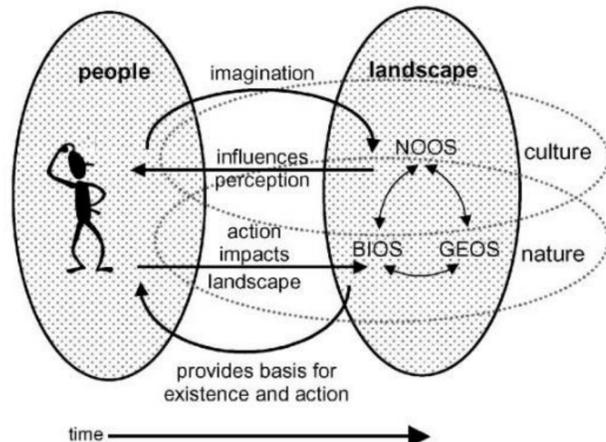


Figure 1: The people-landscape interaction model (Tress & Tress, 2001)

Main findings

In total, 24 food forest participated in the survey with a total of 48 respondents providing their perception on their affiliated food forest and on the practice of food forestry (as a whole). 60% of the participated food forests were oriented towards a mix of production and cultural goals (such as education and wellbeing).

The respondents were categorized per group with 38% being volunteers, 31% being managers, 15% as owners, 10% as employees, 4% as designers and 2% as undefined/other. The age range of respondents was diverse, ranging from 26 to 68 years of age and 98% having undergone post-secondary education. Lastly, 83% said that their food forest is personally important to them and 98% considered their food forest to both personally important and important to society in general.

The main themes that I interpreted as valuable from the perceptions gathered during the study are 7-fold: ecology; biocultural harmony & sustainability; knowledge & education; security & livelihood; health & well-being; identity & community, and experiential perceptions. These themes (starting from ecology and ending with experiential perceptions) are listed in a relative order from biocentric to anthropocentric notions; from the individual to the collective, the themes are listed in relative order from other-oriented to self-oriented and from holistic/group level to individual level, These dimensions are described by Chan, Satterfield and Goldstein (2012) to demonstrate the diverse dimensions of values and their interconnectedness; a recurring motif in the results obtained from this study.

From the survey, we were able to distinguish relative priorities between several food forest-related aspects. The aspect considered most important was the ecological aspect

Main findings

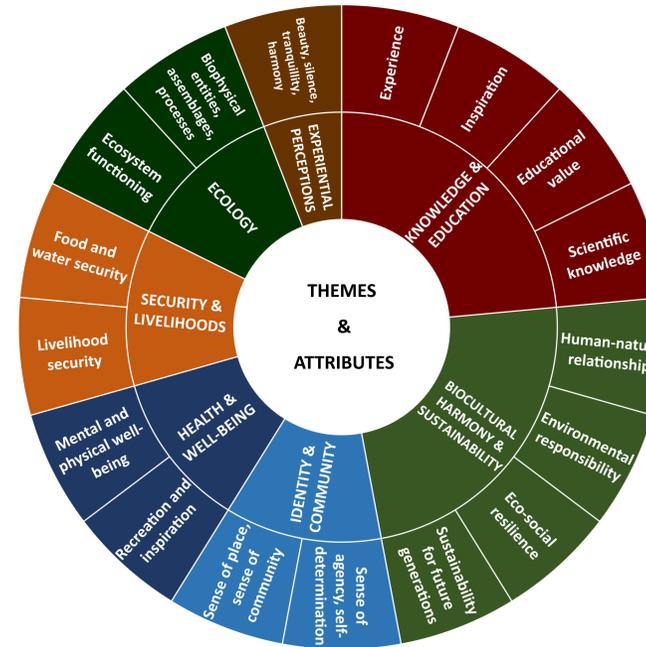
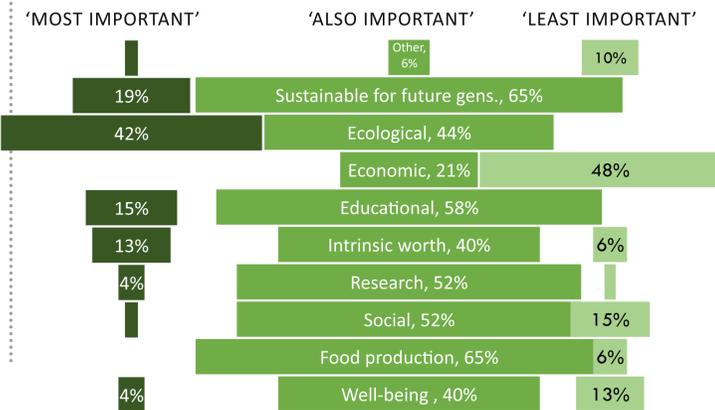


Figure 2: The value wheel showing significant themes (inner circle) and attributes (outer circle) based on the results of this study

by 42% of the respondents. The second most important aspect was the aspect of sustainable for future generations by 19%, followed by the educational aspect by 15% of the respondents. These statistics align with the narrative-based findings. Although the productional aspect was not considered as ‘most important’ by any respondent, it was considered as ‘also important’ by 65%. A reason for this outcome could be based on the assumption that if the ecology works well, so will be the productivity levels. Lastly, the aspect considered ‘least important’ was the economic aspect. Possible reason for this could be attributed to the high number of respondents being volunteers which have little/no financial ties to the affiliated food forest or because finding sources of income through food forests, particularly with young ones, is challenging or simply not a primary goal.

The amount of inspiration, joy and positive contributions to one’s own well-being was also often mentioned. This shows that interactions with food forests facilitate beneficial forms of relationships and mentalities about nature and quality of life.

Figure 3: Funnel graphs showing the aspects considered as ‘most important’, ‘also important’ and ‘least important’ by all respondents in percentages.



Conclusions

Through this study, I explored the diversity of values that exists amongst people engaged with food forests in the Netherlands. This diversity led to the development of the value wheel to illustrate the multiplicity and range of values, ranging from ecological oriented values to experiential perceptions. The ecological aspect was considered the most important aspect by most respondents, followed by the educational value, sustainability for future generations and the educational value. The amount of inspiration, joy and sense of well-being was frequently expressed from dwelling in the food forest, from observing the growth and changes over time and from the ability in being physically active at a food forest. This study shows that a plethora of perceptions and value exists from the engagement with food forests.

During the study, I observed that the stated perceptions often assumed a close form of relationship between humans and nature, where humans were seen as part of nature. The values and meanings that manifest from their interaction aligns closely to a ‘biocultural’ perspective, a sensitizing concept acknowledging the diversity in cultural and biological manifestations (Elands *et al.*, 2019; Hanspach *et al.*, 2020). I believe this relational perspective transcends the categorical and hierarchical tendency when identifying types of value and that the interaction between humans and food forests is a biocultural act leading to biocultural manifestations. This act nurtures connections between nature and humans and between fellow human beings which become valued and is valuable to all.

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