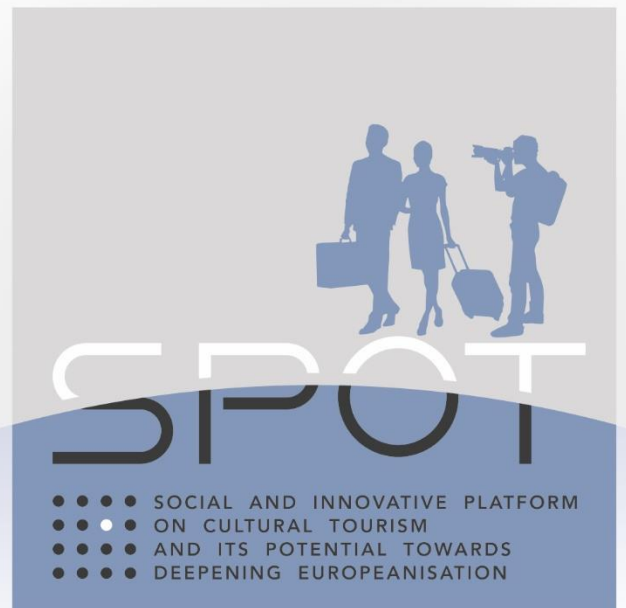


NETHERLANDS

POLICYBRIEF

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Cultural tourism and the case study Kinderdijk in the Netherlands

Different narrative perspectives

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Introduction

Kinderdijk and the surrounding areas were subjects of a case study for the EU-funded SPOT project about Cultural Tourism during 2020-2022. For those who are not familiar with Kinderdijk in the Netherlands as World Heritage, a short explanation follows. The Kinderdijk windmills are nineteen windmills (“poldermolens”, age-old windmills pumping water from a polder into the surrounding ring canal) in Kinderdijk, a village which is part of municipality Molenlanden in the northwest of the polder of Alblasserwaard, a region in the Dutch province of South Holland. UNESCO added the Kinderdijk windmills to the World Heritage List in 1997 (<https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/818>). According to UNESCO, the outstanding contribution made by the people of the Netherlands to the technology of handling water is admirably demonstrated by the installations in the Kinderdijk area. There are several opportunities to frame the case of Kinderdijk with various aspects of cultural tourism.

In this policy brief the most important results are shown for narratives around three topics: 1) width of definition of cultural tourism, 2) regions around Kinderdijk and 3) different time perspectives.



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1. Evidence and Analysis

Interviews were conducted in 2021 with key stakeholders. These interviews took place during the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns were intermittent, which certainly affected the findings. A document analysis about the case study completed findings.



Photo 1 and 2: Interview with stakeholders on 24-09-2022 (Marcel Pleijte).

1.1. Width of definition of cultural tourism

The Kinderdijk World Heritage site is based on the cultural heritage of age-old drainage systems of low-lying agricultural lands, for which the use of a series of iconic windmills as pumping units has been essential. What is special about Kinderdijk World Heritage is that the mills in the area are inhabited by culture bearers par excellence, the millers and their families.

However, many respondents emphasise that cultural heritage is a comprehensive concept, which can be understood in this area from the necessary attention to land use, climate adaptation, biodiversity, landscape quality and socio-cultural traditions. According to the Kinderdijk Steering Committee (2019: p. 15), the ambitions and the necessary measures therefore not only relate to the area of the Kinderdijk World Heritage (the 'site'), but extend over the immediately surrounding area to far beyond, covering various areas of interest (spatial planning, flood risk management, biodiversity, tourism, economy, transport).

The stakeholders differ in opinion on the extent to which this comprehensiveness actually receives the necessary attention that according to some it deserves and according to some it does not. While one regional stakeholder sees climate adaptation as the rescue to prevent the world heritage from vanishing, another stakeholder has doubts aloud whether tourists should also be told the story of climate adaptation. It is also noted in the literature that cultural tourism as a concept is still broadening. Are there limits to broadening or multiple images and stories about tourist icons for branding and marketing to tourists?



However, there must be focus and attention to different target groups that can be distinguished. The comprehensiveness cannot be ignored. The ambition of the area perspective for the Future of the Kinderdijk World Heritage and the Advice on the Future of Kinderdijk (Kinderdijk Steering Group, 2019: p.5) is: “to combine the development of the UNESCO World Heritage and increasing tourism with improving the quality of life, preserving the experience, peace and space and enhancing nature.”

1.2. Width of regional perspectives

The polder area of which Kinderdijk has always been an essential part (while tourists just focussed on the photogenic row of windmills) and is now subject of a Regional Green Deal. This makes the entire polder area a unit to be considered in the land use, water management and biodiversity, instead of only the lowest part where the waters of the entire polder were drained towards the sea.

This relates to the framing of Kinderdijk as part of:

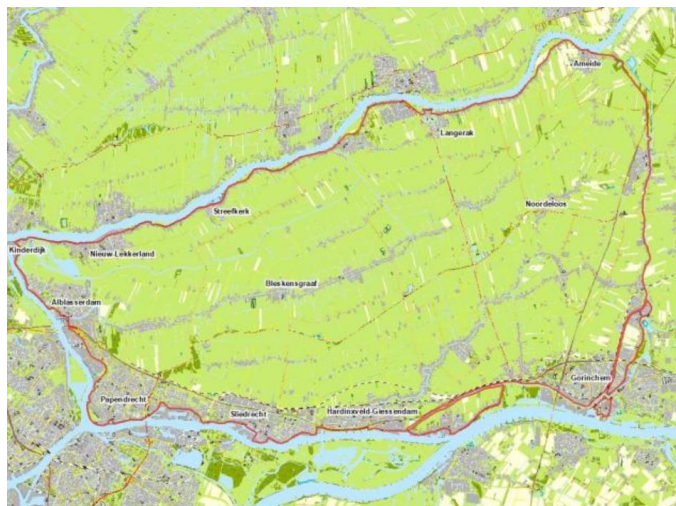
1. The Water Triangle (as part of a provincial policy), includes the historical city of Dordrecht and National Park Biesbosch, where Biesbosch is over-touristed as well, and no direct cultural-heritage-relationship is present. The Water Triangle is rather a 'heritage line' and is formed by World Heritage Kinderdijk, the Biesbosch and the Drechtsteden. The term 'heritage line' means that there are monumental places in this area and that they have a shared history. The Triangle consists of the Oude Maas, Merwede and Noord and their banks and dikes, mills and pumping stations, osier-beds, duck decoys and shipyards. The Water Triangle is the blue-green heart of the Dutch Delta and is known worldwide for its windmills and shipyards. The water in this region is the connection between iconic places, which tourists also like to photograph. Every year the Province makes money available to improve the Water Triangle and make it more attractive for residents and tourists.



Map 1: Watertriangle: Kinderdijk (above), historical city of Dordrecht (bottom left side) and National Park De Biesbosch (bottomright side) (source: Municipality of Alblasterdam, 2013. Structure Vision Alblasterdam 2040).



2. A landscape for roaming around in the Alblasserwaard/Vijfheerenlanden as a whole, forming the basis of the drainage system at Kinderdijk (which is mainly competence of the Waterboard Rivierenland). Key point of framing this is how the Alblasserwaard can be known as the champion of climate adaptation, along with the international charisma of World Heritage Site;



Map 2: The location of the Alblasserwaard area (source: <https://www.waterschaprivierenland.nl/peilbesluit-alblasserwaard>)

3. The former military water defence system (based on inundation of the low-lying polders in case of military threat) comprising the fortresses of Gorinchem, Schoonhoven, Nieuwpoort en Woudrichem/Slot Loevestein, of which Kinderdijk formed the most westerly line. The Old Waterline of Holland concerned the area of the Overwaard, which covers a large part of Alblasserwaard/Vijfheerenlanden, with the exception of the Nederwaard.



Map 3: A part of the Dutch old Waterline with Kinderdijk in the most westerly line (source: Marc Laman/ Erfgoedhuis Zuid-Holland; <https://geschiedenisvanzuidholland.nl/verhalen/verhalen/het-verhaal-van-de-oude-hollandse-waterlinie/>).

New framing of the Kinderdijk World Heritage also includes biodiversity: In the new entrance of the Kinderdijk area is a Bird Theatre, presenting 22 important bird species, stressing the high biodiversity value of the area. The biodiversity in the area goes further than the Bird Theatre¹ alone. The “Boezems Kinderdijk” is a Natura2000 area (EU-labelled natural heritage site).

Kinderdijk is seen as an ideal place, as a showcase for climate adaptation. The pumping station at Kinderdijk will soon no longer be able to process the water from the Alblasserwaard and Vijfheerenlanden. The water system as we have known it in the Alblasserwaard since the Middle Ages will change over the next 30 to 40 years. The water system may be reversed: the idea is to add pumping stations at Giessendam and possibly also at Groot Ammers, thereby reversing the drainage system, a procedure practiced in history also at other places, though at a smaller scale.

¹ The Bird Theatre is part of the Kinderdijk World Heritage site offering an introduction to the birdlife in the area.

Also, due to the growing interest in river cruises all over Europe, shipping companies are looking for new destinations, especially after COVID-19. The south-west of the Netherlands is very interesting, precisely because of the combination of city and nature, and the opportunity to get acquainted with a nice network of historical trade and maritime connections, including the central role of Dordrecht also for the polder Alblasserwaard. Interestingly, as from 2022 new concessions will be granted for the water bus network.

According to the stakeholders, in the formulation of a Regional Climate Adaptation strategy, the Waterboard Rivierenland (regional public authority responsible for water management, in which farmers and other residents have important democratic stakes) still has difficulties in defining integrative strategies. Apparently the interests of the farmers, especially in the polder Alblasserwaard/Vijfheerenlanden, are relatively dominant in the area. Also, the Waterboard has hardly succeeded to promote cultural heritage values in its policies, although Kinderdijk does tell the story of the Waterboard by excellence.

The municipal authorities have a policy to promote quality tourism. This goes as far as buying out souvenir shops and low quality catering offers that do not have a link with local identity. Also one-time tourists do appreciate quality service! The municipality is not requested to subsidise structurally the World Heritage Site, maintenance of the mills should be covered by the Province and the State.

1.3. Width of time perspectives: past, present and future

Construction of hydraulic works for the drainage of land for agriculture and settlement began in the Middle Ages and has continued uninterruptedly to the present day. The site illustrates all the typical features associated with this technology – dykes, reservoirs, pumping stations, administrative buildings and a series of beautifully preserved windmills.

Kinderdijk World Heritage originated from the water management of the entire Alblasserwaard. In the area it is uniquely visible how in different periods in history the inhabitants waged their battle against the water. The technology that was and is necessary for this is still visible. All developments in and around the Alblasserwaard area must therefore always fit within the requirements of water management for which the water board is responsible (see also Kinderdijk Steering Group, 2019: p.5). The story of UNESCO World Heritage Kinderdijk is about 750 years of living with water. This story is about the most important turning points in life with water: then, now and tomorrow. With 750 years of water management experience, there appear to be many lessons to be learned for the future of our country and for low countries in the rest of the world. The windmill area in Kinderdijk shows the Dutch water management system in all its facets: the polders and boezems (canals for discharging the pumped water to the sea) from the early Middle Ages, 18th century windmills, ultramodern pumping stations and robust, sturdy 21st century dikes. All these elements are visible in one view!

The Kinderdijk Steering Group (2019: p. 7) uses a number of principles for the story of Kinderdijk. The Steering Committee positions Kinderdijk as an international icon, with an international allure; the beauty of the World Heritage and the natural environment is displayed with pride and conviction. The steering group positions Kinderdijk as part of a unique and historic water management system that encompasses the entire Alblasserwaard and the Dutch Delta and that establishes the link between the past, present and future of Dutch water management. It includes the culture and authenticity of the Alblasserwaard: religious people who value Sunday's rest, hard work, struggle for existence, living with water. The Steering Committee assumes that the majority of the mills are inhabited by millers and their families. This unique fact will become an important part of Kinderdijk's story. The Steering group sees the following *future developments*:

- The extent to which a relationship with stories of the other water-related world heritage sites in our country can offer added value for Kinderdijk is being examined.
- As part of the elaboration of the story, it has also been suggested to investigate the added value of granting the entire Alblasserwaard water system with the associated polder mills a separate status, for example in the form of a National Park. It should be noted that any separate status does not constitute an obstacle to future water management. The suggestion is also taken into account to investigate the possibilities of obtaining the UNESCO Global Geopark status for the area.
- Developments in the immediate vicinity of the world heritage can become part of that story and contribute to strengthening the spatial quality. These are, for example, developments in the Water Triangle (Biesbosch, Dordrecht; where the Biesbosch is also over-touristy and there is no direct cultural-heritage relationship with Kinderdijk);

For the Kinderdijk Steering Group (2019, p. 8) further elaboration of the story has less urgency than taking measures to direct the visitor flows and protect the liveability of the mill area and the residential hamlets.



Photo 3 and 4: Lighting week at Kinderdijk on 11-09-2021 (Marcel Pleijte).

2. Policy Implications and Recommendations

According to many stakeholders, the width of the narrative of Kinderdijk has not yet received the attention it deserves. Different aspects should also be related to each other and not be approached separately (integrity). In addition, cultural tourism is not something static, but something dynamic.

One would wish a change in narrative:

1. from only windmills as World Heritage to broader storytelling around Kinderdijk, focussing on climate adaptation and biodiversity. The measures apply to the entire Alblasserwaard-Vijfheerenlanden, of which Kinderdijk is a part. Measures in the “Boezems Kinderdijk” Natura2000 area are part of this.

In addition, additional nature and landscape measures are needed, such as protection of the reed landscape against goose foraging. So this narrative can be combined with a timeline in future. Available area knowledge can be used even better in this regard. At present, use is mainly made of the knowledge of national knowledge institutes. Many stakeholders plead for broader storytelling



and better engagement of the Waterboard Rivierenland and for a regional revenue model for maintenance and management of nature and landscape.

2. from mass tourism to quality tourism (a) by directing flows: parking permits, river cruises etc, (b) by upgrading the branding of the area: offering more service in accommodation, catering and souvenir shops, allowing at the same time for spreading of the tourism pressure.
- 3) from tourism icons in the Water Triangle (Kinderdijk/Biesbosch and Dordrecht) to a historical water system and ecosystem approach based on the Alblasserwaard-Vijfheerenlanden polders.

It is suggested to create narratives with a multi-sector approach, a multi-time line approach and a multi-area approach, and take the suggestion into account to investigate in possibilities of obtaining the UNESCO Global Geopark status for the area. Continued monitoring and evaluation are needed and new policies should be developed regularly. Further, for an integrated approach to cultural tourism it is crucial to focus and anticipate on the different target groups that can be distinguished.



Photo 5: Ice skating at Kinderdijk on 13-02-2021 (Marcel Pleijte).



Project Identity

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