



Lizards' Lane

Proposal for Verified Conservation Area registration

Submitted by

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A. Executive Summary

Lizards' Lane is a narrow, 15 ha strip of land to be developed and managed as an ecological heathland corridor to enhance the viability of local populations of amphibians and reptiles. It is situated in the municipality of Soest, the Netherlands. The corridor consists of mixed broadleaved-coniferous forest and heathland, with 6 different landowners. Currently, the land is managed by the owners, each of them having different management objectives.

The remnant heathlands bordering the strip harbour some rare plant and animal species, some of which are Red List-ed. However the viability of these populations is at stake due to individual management regimes, fragmentation and insufficient financial means.

Landowners are committed to conservation and agreed that with the construction and focused management of an ecological heathland corridor, a migration passage for reptiles and amphibians, they could contribute to the conservation of biodiversity and enhance the viability of such populations. Additionally, such a corridor would provide them with social and economic benefits.

Parties see added value in registering the area as a VCA as in that way their efforts for biodiversity conservation will become transparent, credible and perhaps attract outside funding that will enable enlarging the corridor.

B. Area characteristics

B1 The area

Lizards' Lane is a strip of land of 15 ha (ca 3000m long and 55 m wide) that goes from Vlasakkers, a military training ground in the east, to the former airbase Soesterberg in the west and the nature area Soesterduinen in the north (see figure 1). It is situated in the municipality of Soest, the Netherlands.

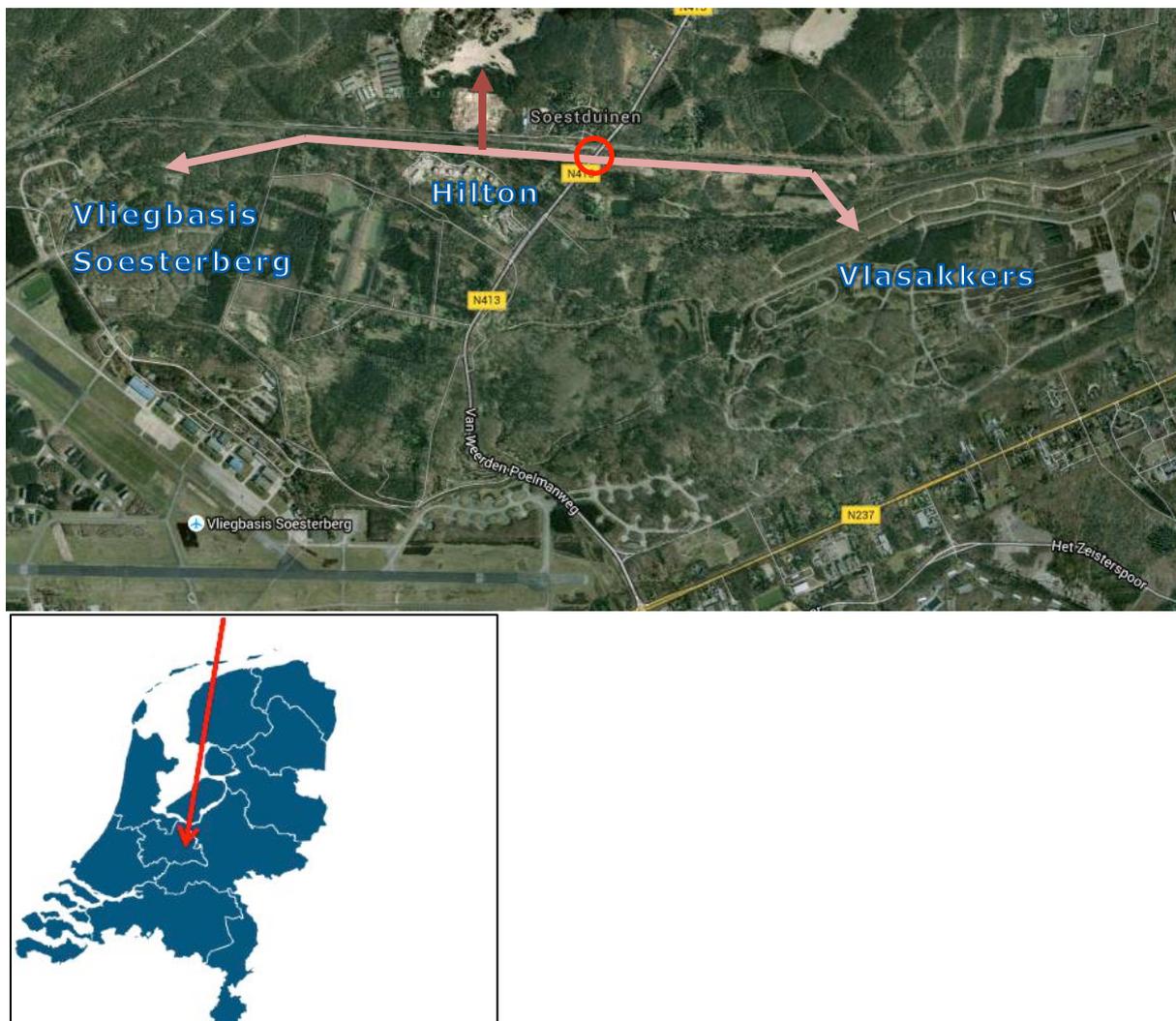


Figure 1: Lizards' Lane (red-brown line in upper panel) and its location in the Netherlands (lower panel)

Central coordinates are: 52° 9' N – 5° 18" E

The area consists of several plots of forest or woody vegetation and locally some small areas of heathland, with different owners (see figure 2).

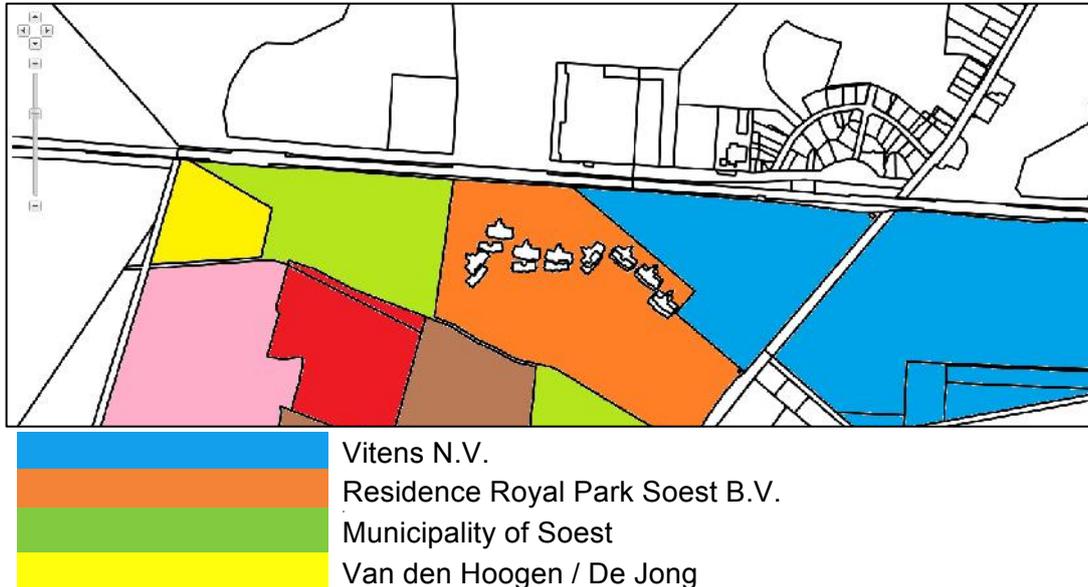


Figure 2: Ownership in the central/western part of the Lizards' Lane

Current management in Lizards' Lane is as follows:

- Soestduinen, the area owned by Vitens N.V., serves for water extraction; open mixed woodland interspersed with heathland dominates the area; there is an open water tank (pool) for management purposes (incl. fire water). There are some service buildings. The area is managed as a nature reserve. No public access.
- Residence Royal Park Soest (Hilton) is owned by Netjes Beheer. There are 8 luxury apartment blocks (96 apartments), a hotel, some other buildings and a small golf course. Apart from the golf course, the open mixed woodland prevails. Only accessible for residents and guests.
- The municipality of Soest manages the mixed open woodland with some small areas of heathland, which it owns north and south of the rail track, as nature reserves. Open to the public. Scouting uses the southern forest plot for their weekly activities.
- Private land owned by Van den Hoogen/ De Jong, connects the corridor to the west to the former airbase Soesterberg. Beyond the immediate vicinity of the house, it concerns open woodland. No access.
- Foundation Het Utrechts Landschap, a provincial nature conservation organisation that manages the land at the former airbase Soesterberg on behalf of its owner, the Province of Utrecht
- Ministry of Defence owns the military training ground Vlasakkers at the eastern end of the corridor; it is open heathland alternated with coniferous/mixed forest.
- ProRail is the owner and manager of all rail tracks in the Netherlands. The rail track Amersfoort – Utrecht borders Lizards' Lane at the northern side.

With the exception of the apartment blocks and their immediate surroundings in Residence Royal Park Soest, all of these areas fall with the Provincial Ecological Network and have a specific protected status.

A high voltage (HV) line operated by Tennet runs just south and parallel to the rail track.

See figure 3 and figure 4 for some impressions of the area Lizards' Lane.



Heathland at Soestduinen



Forest at Residence Royal Park Soest



Forest, owned by Fam. Van den Hoogen

Figure 3: Photo impressions of Lizards' Lane



Common heather



Grass snake



Sand lizard

Figure 4: Important species of Lizards' Lane

B2 Area Management

Currently, the individual parts are managed in different ways. Vitens N.V. has adopted a management regime that takes account of the occurring populations of reptiles and amphibians, and they have started a process of forest management that over time will result in more broad-leaved woodland than pine trees.

The other areas are managed in a way that combines low costs with maintaining the status quo. For the Residence the objective is to maintain an attractive open landscape around the apartment blocks while at the same time keeping a natural coulisse that shields the apartments from the rail track, and maintaining the golf course in good condition.

Het Utrechts Landschap and Vitens have taken the initiative to build an ecological corridor between the former airbase Soesterberg, the nature area Soesterduinen and the military training ground Vlasakkers, under and alongside the Tennet HV line and the rail track. The background of this initiative is the growing awareness that active heathland management is required to maintain sufficient and good quality heathland to protect heathland-dependent plant and animal species. Moreover, each of the areas connected by the Lizards' Lane harbours small pieces of heathland that are (becoming) too small for viable populations to survive. A corridor that connects these pieces could enlarge the living area for the different species, and therefore enhance their chances of continued existence while at the same time contribute to the ecological resilience of the main heathlands to the north, the east and the west.

The initiative is aligned with the provincial memorandum Heathland Restoration 1.0 that identifies areas where woodland can be converted into heathland without compensating for the loss of forest (which is required under the Dutch Forest Law). Furthermore it relates to the redevelopment programme defined for the former airbase Soesterberg.

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A document stating that all land owners agree to register the combined areas under the name of Lizards' Lane for inclusion in the VCA-Register will be provided after the upcoming stakeholders meeting, which is due to take place in May 2016.

C. Rapid Biodiversity Assessment and SWOT Analysis

C1 General biodiversity overview

Small populations of fauna species, such as butterflies, reptiles and amphibians inhabit this strip of open woodland and heathland. Presently biodiversity information is only available from the water extraction and production site Soestduinen (see Witteveen & Bos, 2015).

Soestduinen is a water extraction and production site since 1883. Because of the required safe and non-interrupted process, many extraction and production sites have been and still are managed or converted into nature area, including Soestduinen. Management is based on sustainability and ecological principles: protection of ground water and landscape, no use of fertiliser and chemical means.

Initially being a heathland area it was planted with coniferous trees (Pine, Douglas, Larch) in the early 1900-es. Not wanting any timber production any more Vitens decided to convert the coniferous forest into broad-leaved woodland that could be expected to occur naturally. Over time a valuable dry heathland developed concurrently with several rare, Red List species.

Table 1: Some rare heathland species occurring in Soestduinen

Main species class	Species
Plants	Common club moss, Small wintergreen, Gorse
Amphibians	Natterjack toad, Little newt
Reptiles	Sand lizard, Grassy snake
Birds	Great grey shrike, Hobby, Tawny owl, Black woodpecker, Common kingfisher
Mammals	Roe deer, Badger, several bat species

C2 Conservation SWOT analysis

The conservation SWOT analysis results in the following findings:

A. Strengths

- a. Every party involved recognises the benefit of the initiative to biodiversity and their individual land
- b. The initiative fits into a larger provincial programme of heathland restoration
- c. Conversion to heathland is permitted without the need to compensate for loss of forest
- d. Landowners formed a coalition to support the ecological corridor
- e. Rail track manager ProRail sees the importance of this ecological corridor and will adapt the management of the rail track verges accordingly, facilitating north-south passage of amphibians and reptiles. The company is committed to Sustainable Development and recognises its role in this initiative
- f. Tennet, the owner of the HV line, will welcome the ecological corridor with heathland management, as it will be a cost-saver. Managing the vegetation for amphibians and reptiles will prevent the development of tall shrubs and trees that require regular felling

- g. Lizards' Lane can probably be included in the Heathland Memorandum 1.0, which was presented by the Province of Utrecht to Het Utrechts Landschap and other parties
- h. Two parties volunteered to pull the cart

B. Weaknesses

- a. Reduced coulisse function of the woodland for the residents of Residence Royal Park Soest and Van den Hoogen
- b. Absence of a suitable fauna-tunnel under the N314
- c. Possibly unwanted use of the corridor, e.g. by mountain-bikers

C. Threats

- a. Landowners not coming to an agreement with respect to the design and management of the ecological corridor
- b. Interest of one or more stakeholders not being met in the final design and management plan
- c. Lack of money to build a specific reptile-tunnel under the N314
- d. Commercial interests prevailing over biodiversity and nature interests
- e. Mandatory compensation required for any other change made to the Ecological Network that will require planting trees that impact on the intended heathland development
- f. Doing nothing will result in a faster disappearance of heathland and its specific flora and fauna
- g. Insufficient heather management after formation of Lizards' Lane, which will ultimately result in disappearance of heathland and its characteristic species

D. Opportunities

- a. Combination of establishing a ecological corridor with cost reduction for Tennet due to prevention of taller shrubs and trees vegetation under its HV line
- b. Provincial road N314 is recognised by the Province of Utrecht as an ecological bottleneck
- c. Ministry of Defence has a positive attitude to restoring ecological corridors and supports this initiative.

The above findings from the SWOT require active management. The initiator is fully aware and will discuss these with all stakeholders and define a way forward in due time.

C3 Approach for 2016

The action plan for 2016 comprises the following:

- a. Additional field visits if required for biodiversity site assessments (May-July)
- b. Meetings with parties, in particular with Dutch Butterfly Conservation (Vlinderstichting) and RAVON
- c. Develop and discuss the design plan in particular with respect to:
 1. *Precise delineation of the corridor*
 2. *Design and management*
 3. *Costs*
 4. *Communication, local and regional*
- d. Interim meetings with parties involved

- e. Final approval of plan
- f. Realisation:
 - 1. *Acquiring permits*
 - 2. *Contracting out units of work*
 - 3. *Finances*
- g. Execution of the work, completion and evaluation are planned for 2017

D. Expected Conservation Impact and Stakeholders

D1 Conservation Impacts

Implementation of the planned design and management is expected to result in the following:

Biodiversity:

- Stable and where possible larger populations of typical heathland plants and animals at each of the areas involved as a result of better heathland management over a larger area
- Exchange of specifically amphibians and reptiles between adjacent areas
- Enhanced connectivity between areas east and west of N314 due to the construction of specific fauna tunnel under the road

Social benefits:

- Strengthened appreciation of the landscape by residents and local community
- Enhanced inspiration
- Opportunities for in-field education
- Opportunities for civil society to get involved in the monitoring and site-related science projects
- Example of collaborative success for nature conservation

Economic benefits:

- Increased market value for property in and next to this corridor
- Opportunity to start producing local honey products

D2 Stakeholder management

The following stakeholders are involved:

Landowners:

- 1) Vitens N.V.
- 2) Netjes Beheer B.V. (Hilton Group)
- 3) Municipality of Soest
- 4) Fam. Van den Hoogen/De Jong
- 5) Ministry of Defence
- 6) Province of Utrecht
- 7) ProRail (because of the rail track bordering the corridor at its northern boundary; moreover they are the ecological link to the heathland area north of the track; ProRail is partner in the Green Deal with Tennet, Vitens and Vlinderstichting).

Other parties:

- 1) Tennet, because of vegetation management under the HV line; also in a Green Deal with the Dutch Butterfly Conservation, ProRail and Vitens to improve Dutch biodiversity

- 2) Het Utrechts Landschap, co-initiator and area manager of the former airbase Soesterberg
- 3) Vlinderstichting and RAVON because of their knowledge of specific heathland species; see also under Tennet

Beyond their involvement as landowner of the former airbase Soesterberg, the Province of Utrecht is also involved in this initiative because of the fauna passage planned to be constructed under the N314, a provincial road dissecting the corridor, and derogation with respect to forest-replanting requirement.

One-to-one meetings with all directly involved landowners and most other parties have been held. A second meeting with all landowners is planned once the concept design plan is ready (May 2016).

E. Next Steps for Registering the Area.

In 2016 Vitens and its co-developers will execute the following work in order to register Lizards' Lane as a VCA by 31 December 2016:

1. Preparing a more detailed management plan on the basis of the design and management plan that is currently being developed. It will include:
 - a. A detailed area description
 - b. Ecological baseline
 - c. Stakeholder management plan
 - d. Detailed SWOT analysis
 - e. Biodiversity target setting (goals)
 - f. Conservation actions
 - g. Performance indicators and monitoring plan
 - h. Reporting strategy
 - i. Financial paragraph
2. Stakeholder consultation: process and outcomes
3. Timeline for these activities

The above will meet the requirements as set out in the VCA Standard.

At the start of this work and during its completion, the VCA Administrator will be consulted to stay aligned on expectations.

F. References

- Horsthuis, M.A.P., 2013 Monitoring waterwingebied Soestduinen 2012. Bosgroep Midden Nederland. 18p + Appendices (*in Dutch*)
- Witteveen & Bos, 2015 Beheerplan Soestduinen 2015-2025. Witteveen & Bos, Deventer. 31p + Appendices (*in Dutch*)

G. Signature

Signed

A handwritten signature in blue ink, consisting of several overlapping loops followed by a long horizontal stroke that tapers to the right.

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31 March 2016