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The Legitimacy of Nitrogen and Nature Policies in The Netherlands

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Abstract

Policies aimed at nature protection must navigate pluriform societal values, where conflicting interests and perceptions create significant challenges. The Dutch nitrogen crisis exemplifies complexity, emerging as a major political and societal issue following judicial rulings criticising the Dutch permitting system for failing to adequately protect nature in line with the requirements of the EU Birds and Habitats directives. The tensions triggered large-scale protests, while a considerable share of society remains disengaged. Conflicting interests, values, and perceptions surrounding nitrogen emission reduction and nature conservation policies pose a substantial challenge for policymakers to develop policies that are morally, democratically, and juridically legitimate and accepted by society.

This interdisciplinary study examines the perceived legitimacy of the Dutch nitrogen- and nature policies to understand what causes the social discontent and identify pathways towards more legitimate policies. While traditional policy evaluations emphasize the efficiency and effectivity of policies, we highlight the importance to include broader societal values. We use an operationalized framework (Martens et al. 2025) that identifies 13 criteria for legitimate policymaking and conducted a sequential mixed methods approach. This approach contained, in this order, a document analysis, expert interviews (n=9), a representative survey among Dutch citizens (n=1850) and five focus groups (n=38).

We found that different narratives among citizens, policymakers and experts affect the perceived legitimacy of the policies. The disconnect between technocratic policy discourses and citizens' realities results in a lack of recognition of their values in policies. While there is political legitimacy for solutions aimed at granting permits, these approaches remain juridically vulnerable and contested by experts, further eroding public trust in government institutions. This research underscores the need for conflict-sensitive governance approaches that bridge the gap between policy and societal values, fostering a broad set of values to advance sustainability transitions in contested contexts.

Keywords: Nature Restoration, Nitrogen, Policy Legitimacy, Social Constructivism, Mixed-Methods