

The twelfth European City Farms Conference took place from 29 May till 2 June 2002. It was the third time that this conference was organised in the Netherlands (in the Hague in 1987 and in Maastricht in 1995). The organisation was in the hands of the City of Rotterdam in cooperation with the European Federation of City Farms (EFCF) and the Dutch City Farms organisation (SKBN). Fifty participants, ranging from farm worker to policy makers from Belgium, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, Norway, the United Kingdom, Spain, Switzerland and the Netherlands, attended the conference.

The theme was: 'Farming the city, a practical way to learn about sustainability'. Sustainability was the link between all the subjects of the conference programme, which lasted for five days. Roel van Raay of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Nature, held an interesting talk about government programmes such as 'Learning for Sustainability' and their relevance to city farms. He pointed out that a city farm is still often seen as just 'a nice place with animals' and not as an interesting, easily accessible place to bring across the concept of sustainability. The written version of his talk was in great demand with the participants.

The Rotterdam city councillor, Nico Janssen, spoke highly of the educational and recreational value of 'his' city farms. De Bokkesprong City Farm, for example, which will have to give up some of its land to accommodate an increasing volume of traffic, will not disappear but be given a 4800 m² field on the roof of the underground station behind the farm. Another option is to move the farm to the Vierhavenstrip, a city park to be developed right on top of an industrial site.

These were not the only topics discussed during the conference. Theo Meyer, MP and PR chairman of the Dutch City Farm Federation, talked about the proposed accreditation of Dutch City Farms and the aim to transfer the Dutch Federation to a professional office of information, public relations and education. One thing and another led to discussions by the participants during the conference. Everywhere in Europe City Farms are concerned with and working on hygiene codes for City Farms. Professionalization is also an item discussed everywhere in Europe. An example of an already existing professional organisation is, e.g., the British Federation with a staffed office in Bristol and workers in the regions. The British Federation even persuaded Prince Charles to become its patron. The Federation also succeeded in raising funds for British City Farms that had been hit hard by the Foot and Mouth crisis.

Marc de Staercke, chairman of the EFCF went more deeply into the importance of cooperation between City Farm projects in Europe and far beyond in countries such as Australia, Canada, Japan, India and the United States. However different all these projects may be, sustainability is one of the linking factors of networking and cooperation. More and more countries recognise the importance of sustainable agriculture. City Farms can play a key role in these developments, especially when it concerns the relationship between man, agriculture and nature.

The City of Rotterdam's director of Sport and Recreation, Gerard Reussink, explained, amongst others, how his department works. Rotterdam City Farms, the centres for environmental education, the educational gardens, the cultural-historical garden and the botanical garden are the responsibility of the Department of Sport and Recreation. Rotterdam has seven City Farms spread throughout the city. Together they attract a million visitors per year. All eight City Farms are open seven days a week. The eight centres for environmental education mainly target primary schools, but they also organise activities for secondary schools and for the general public. Several target groups, ranging from primary school pupils to elderly people, practise ecological gardening in the Educational Gardens from May till the end of October. There is a combination of a city farm and a centre for environmental education at eight locations. At six of these locations there is an Educational Garden as well. A perfect situation to put cooperation into practice!

The visit to Blijdorp Zoo started with a talk by Robert van Herik, Head of the Zoo's Educational Department. In the 'Shark Room' he talked about how Zoo standards had changed over the past two hundred years. Animal accommodation has changed from 'a collection' of animals, neatly arranged in cages and stables, to typical biotopes. The handling of the animals has changed as well: to-day

wild has to remain wild, with no crowd pullers such as dressed monkeys having lunch like human beings. In the early days of the Zoo there was very little education with the exception of information boards made by the 'weirdoes' in the department. Education then was mainly a side issue and seldom even called education. Education today is recognised as an essential aspect of the zoo mission: nature conservation, responsible breeding programmes, reintegration of animals to the wild and sustainability. Sustainability is found in all the Zoo's activities: from the animal enclosures to the ticket office. After his interesting talk the participants were treated to a behind the scenes guided tour of the Oceanium.

Sport and Recreation did a great job organising a varied programme about City Farms, centres for environmental education and gardens. You simply could not miss the farm atmosphere at the conference. There was a imitation milking cow in the Town Hall's entrance hall and the platform was decorated with straw bales and a wheelbarrow. Things got off to an interesting start when Sjakel van Wesemael, Head of Nature Recreation, welcomed the participants to the city of Amsterdam; understandable if you have worked in Amsterdam for as long as she had, one can turn a blind eye to this slip of the tongue. She made amends to the farm workers by promising the real 'die-hards' among them a place in the ground or a statue in his or her own farm.

The conference programme was planned in such a way that, despite the fact that the participants did not visit all the Rotterdam farms, centres and gardens, they could fully experience every element of Rotterdam's methods. This helped give the conference a very relaxed atmosphere with plenty of time to exchange views and to hear new ideas. The participants were quite interested in activities that can be realised jointly, such as garden design, teaching methods and opportunities to experience nature. Earth Education for instance, at the Kralingen centre for environmental education, where participants experienced a nature trail. The participants were also very interested in the activities of the Eko-kids at De Kooi City Farm. The children showed the participants how to build a creepycrawlies 'hotel'. The cultural-historical garden and the botanical garden were also very much appreciated.

The participants were given a very good picture of the possibilities of City Farm work in a big city. Furthermore, they experienced Dutch culture both literally and figuratively: they rode a bike, they tasted raw herring, sauerkraut with meat balls and sausage and went on a pancake boat tour of the harbour. Everybody was full of praise for the organisation of the conference and penned their appreciation unabandonedly on the wall paper during the fare-well party: 'Rotterdam it was really great, thank you'.