

The history of Dutch City Farms can be compared with the history of city farms all over the world. It begins over 200 years ago with the movement of people from rural areas to the city on account of industrialization and the increase in population. Our forefathers left the land because they were looking for work and not because they liked the city. In Western Europe, the population began to shift. Two hundred years ago, only 10% of the population lived in cities. Today it's 90%. In a short period of time, this enormous shift has had a radical effect on our relationship with animals and the environment. The pressure for economic progress in the past and the subsequent overcrowding of cities left no place for nature as people had known before. There was no space to grow vegetables or to keep farm animals. Instead, in the cities special markets developed, to provide people with the food they needed. And so the link between people and nature began to blur. The intimate relationship between the farm with its mixture of cows, pigs, sheep and crops to supply the local people with wool, milk, meat and other foods began to crumble. The urban population grew away from its rural cousins. Something that continues to this day and is now a fact of life. This should not be underestimated in the fast changing, technological world of the 21st. century.

- Today, in the Netherlands, the public cannot freely visit an agricultural enterprise because of animal health regulations. And if even they could, they would not find different species of animals anymore. Agriculture has become a large scale mono-culture industry.
- Today, imported summer vegetables and other seasonable foods are sold throughout the year and preserving food for the lean winters is no longer required. Ready-made food is within reach of almost everybody.
- Today, for many people, pets, front gardens or potplants have taken the place of nature. People often cling to pets because taking care of them makes them feel good. It is good for their health, but in many cases they treat animals as human beings.

And in case this isn't bad enough, consider a recent study by young farmers in Europe: amongst other things it showed that children are convinced that cotton grows on sheep and oranges can be grown in Holland. It makes you wonder whether children would recognize an animal in the deepfreeze section of a supermarket.

For a long time many parents and educators have been concerned about the environment in which children grow up. The growing cities can hardly offer safe and stimulating places to play, let alone keep in touch with nature. During the seventies, increasing urbanisation finally triggered the need to bring a little bit of the country into the towns and so the city farm was born.

A general definition of a city farm

A city farm is a place where agriculture and animal husbandry are practised on a small scale. Visitors are given the opportunity to become familiar with natural resource cycles. A city farm also reminds people that animals are not humans in disguise, but are unique creatures with unique needs. Although this definition may be clear enough, the Dutch federation realizes that there are different opinions about the interpretation, realisation and effects of city farm work.

- In general Dutch people still see the city farm as a place for children. Indeed, our city farms are also called: 'children's farms'.
- Many commercial farmers believe city farms to be quite unrealistic. In their opinion city farms have nothing in common with modern agriculture. They regard them as 'museum-farms' or, even worse, 'fun-farms', where children get the wrong idea about real farming. They think that a visit to a fully commercial working farm would be much more useful.
- Many environmental workers have problems with the way domestic animals are kept and handled at a city farm. In their opinion this is too far away from natural eco-systems and their preservation. Children might begin to think that nature is one big animal park, at man's service.
- Many politicians know that city farms are popular. Even if city farms do not make a profit, they keep electors happy.

TOP J

The basic attractive elements of a city farm

No two city farms, in Europe at least, are the same. In the Netherlands there are more than 300 of them, ranging in size from small fields with shelters to large complexes, offering every amenity. According to a study in 1993, the Dutch city farms are visited up to 15 million times per year. Which other recreational facility can match these results?

- Usually a city farm is an appealing building in appealing surroundings. Often the building is what people expect it to be. That said, you would be surprised how many different perceptions of a farm there are.
- If you ask anybody to describe a city farm, they would probably answer: 'Isn't that the place where you go and see the animals and where children can feed and cuddle them?'. Of course the animals are and will always be the main attractions of a city farm. At most Dutch city farms you will find the usual farm animals, such as a cow or calf, a horse or a pony, goats, sheep, pigs, poultry and small animals such as rabbits and guinea-pigs. They very often keep rare breeds. The size, the amount and the choice of animals will differ everywhere. It depends on the aim of the farm, its size and how much money is available. But whatever the size or the costs involved, the main attraction is the close contact with the animals. All of which is largely impossible in a zoo.
- The relaxed green surroundings are ideal for picnics, playing or just watching the world go by.
- In most cases you do not have to travel very far, you do not have to make an appointment, there is no entrance fee and you can bring your own food and drink, if you want to. You meet other people and there is always a subject at hand to talk about: the animals, the children or the weather.
- Most Dutch farms have a playground or at least some items of play equipment, like a sandpit or a climbing frame.
- Many farms organize activities for different age groups to attract visitors. If you have to pay for an activity at all, the prices are usually very low.
- For many people the city farm is a place where you can get information, about animals or gardens for example.

Despite all the differences across the more than 300 Dutch farms, they all have the following in common: they bring visitors in touch with animals, nature, their environment and each other. All this has made the city farm an attractive place for all age groups. Moreover, because of the open and relaxed nature of the city farm, visitors are receptive to new impressions, information and communication. This makes the city farm very suitable for education. Visitors learn to relate to plants and animals and from this may develop a further interest in nature as a whole and from there act accordingly. In fact: these are the very steps of environmental education.

What is there to discover and what can be learned?

A well managed city farm is inviting. It is designed to offer valuable experiences and opportunities to participate for every age group: for children and adults. It is therefore very important to know about the visitors.

- Young children e.g. love to explore and repeat experiences. They like to mix fantasy with reality and to compare their own behaviour and needs with that of the animals.
- When they are a little bit older they will observe and literally discover what is behind or under the things they encounter.
- From the age of about 9 or 10 the environment is especially challenging and interesting. You can do something with it. A tree is for climbing or building huts in. Feeding and taking care of the farm animals is the same as looking after your friends.
- From the age of 11 or 12, children begin to wonder about animal behaviour. Pigs playing together, geese greeting each other and the hen defending her chicks.

- Older teenagers like to hang out together and want a bit of privacy. They want to be treated as adults. They are interested in the behaviour of animals and people.
- Most adults come to the city farm to accompany their children or simply to have a break from the daily routine. For the average adult visitor, an occasional visit to the farm may be an education in itself, simply enjoying the animals and plants and watching people taking care of them.

In general, the city farm is associated with a cloudless sky, peace and quiet and fluffy animals, rather than with air pollution, endangered species, acid rain or the destruction of tropical forests. If it's not, people simply do not even bother to come back again, let alone allow themselves to be "educated". Harsh, so-called educational confrontations and a reprimanding attitude have a negative effect on every age group.

How can visitors be educated?

It is true that information and education are closely linked, but there is a distinct difference. If you give information you supply facts. But if you want to educate, you want to try and change certain patterns of behaviour. Many Dutch city farms want to provide more than pleasant recreation and useful information. They have taken further actions. Although their actions may not immediately result in better attitudes, they do make an important contribution: they arouse interest and make people more aware. Of course, education has to adapt itself to its target group. Furthermore it makes a difference whether they come in school groups or individually, whenever it suits them.

TOP J

Many Dutch city farms have a school programme for kindergarten or primary school level

Some farms have professional staff to carry out a schoolprogramme. Other farms offer self-guided activities. The school teacher receives help beforehand by means of special meetings or booklets.

- Very young children are most interested in living animals. Especially mammals such as rabbits and guinea-pigs. They move, make noises and feel soft. Feeding and cuddling the animals are basic elements of a farm school programme. Green nature on the other hand, is not yet looked upon as living nature. For the very young an early interest in 'green nature' can however be developed by activities in the orchard or garden, putting an emphasis on tasting and smelling.
- There is no point in overburdening children of 7 to 13 years with world-wide environmental problems. It only makes them miserable and may easily lead to apathy and indifference. In order to keep them positive and interested, environmental education should be fun and not too distant. In general children learn more by doing, experiencing and participating than by just listening and watching. School programmes may include cheese-making, bread-baking, animal-husbandry, gardening or lessons on animal behaviour.

Extracurricular programmes

- Clubs may be run after school hours. Examples are a garden club, a wool handicraft club, a goat club or a Eco-kids club. The Eco-kids are children, working on the improvement of their own environment. They communicate with Eco-kids groups in developing countries. A group of children may even produce a farm newspaper.
- Unfortunately most teenagers forget all about the city farm because friends and parties become more important. Very often it is not until they have children of their own that they come back. Nevertheless it is possible to keep them interested. Giving them more responsibility might do the trick. Leading clubs or teaching younger children. Some city farms also offer facilities to groups like the Rangers of the World Wildlife Fund, the Scouts or a nature study group.

What about adults?

There was a time, early on in Dutch city farm history, when some adults would borrow somebody

else's children, in order to visit the city farm. After all, the city farm was considered to be for children only. Adults felt a bit silly going there on their own. Today, more and more adults find their own way to the city farm. Furthermore they are eagerly asking questions. Farmworkers who organise 'adult' activities such as talks and exhibitions, notice that it helps to increase adult visits. Very often from there it is only a very small step to get adults and older people involved in the organisation of farm activities such as story-telling for young children, running the shop or setting up handicraft courses.

On many city farms there are yearly, monthly or seasonal events with a theme, offering practical activities for every age-group. The possibilities are numerous: grain can be harvested, threshed, milled and the flour used to bake bread. Fruit can be made into jam or juice. The cows or goats can be milked in order to make cheese and butter. One of the advantages of these events is, that all age groups can be involved in the same project, be it at different levels, and thus forge a feeling of community. Another advantage is the opportunity for farms to get more publicity. In the Netherlands there is a National Open Weekend with a special theme every year.

Do city farms set the right examples?

Of course a city farm should be an example of how animals should be kept and treated. But it can also give a clear example when it comes to caring for the environment.

TOP J

Depending on financial means this may range from making use of solar energy or to using non-polluting paints and recycled paper on the farm. It can play a role when it comes to ecological farming by showing that wild gardens are pretty and need not look neglected.

How do you get people involved?

Children especially, want to participate in farm work. In most cases they want to help take care of the animals. But many adults too want to help and get involved, e.g. as volunteers. In this way all age groups learn to respect and understand their environment.

- They learn where their food comes from.
- They begin to understand how vulnerable a farmer's existence really is.
- They learn about the impact of farming on the environment and how dependent plants are on sun and water.
- They learn about their relationship with the life cycle that drives the world.

So far, so good

Educating people about their relationship with nature and the great cycle of life is not enough for the Dutch city farms. The world is a dynamic place. Our societies and how they interact are constantly changing. The city farm, being right in the middle of a community, is bound to be influenced by the world around it. Moreover, there is a serious cutting down on structural grants everywhere. The Dutch Federation is well aware of this and realises that in order to build on the present day success of the city farm, it has to keep an open eye for changes. It has to seek out new opportunities.

What are the changes and where are the opportunities?

- **A sustainable society**, based on ecological principles, is of vital importance for future generations. At local, national and international level, authorities consider it their task to promote and to start such developments. Perhaps in the Netherlands we are even more aware of these developments than other countries because of our high population density and increasing urbanisation. It is very important to carry out studies, to establish laws and regulations, create conditions, give information and set examples. People have to be reached, convinced and involved in this process. A city farm, where people can learn to relate to plants and animals, is a perfect place to start.
- **The ageing population.** Studies have shown that within ten years 50% of the Dutch population will be older than 50. The number of young families will be much smaller than

TOP J

today. Because the Dutch city farm is still seen as a place for children and young people, it could be concluded that you can do without them in places where the population is ageing. Yet there will be more people who have retired from work. Many of them will still be very active and will want to remain so in one way or another. Older people may have many interesting hobbies or a world of experience from which a farm can benefit. For the older age group, volunteering offers an opportunity to contribute to society. Some Dutch farm workers are convinced that you cannot find good volunteers but there is another side to the problem: will good volunteers find the city farm?

- **Valuable space.** In the 21st century there will be well over 16 million people living in Holland. Every one of them will want a place to live, to work and to spend their leisure time. Businesses are willing to pay more and more money to buy the most beautiful sites in the urban areas, for building purposes. As a result, land prices will rise even more. City farms run the risks of being banned to the outskirts of the city. This development is undesirable for a number of reasons:
 - A removal to the suburbs will increase the use of a car.
 - There will be less casual visits to the farm because it is no longer in the neighbourhood.
 - Removal will mean the loss of its many functions in the community.

The urban population could once more lose its valuable contact with nature and the environment, just as it did 200 years ago.

- **Changing regulations in farming and animal welfare.** City farms in the Netherlands are submitted to the same regulations as any other farm in the country. In 1997 there was a severe outbreak of swine-fever in Holland. Many commercial farms were cleared out. Even some city farms were closed down for months. Many Dutch people, who had no idea what had been going on in commercial farming, were shocked by what they saw on television. The farmers were under enormous pressure and hardly able to deal with all the fierce criticism. In such circumstances a city farm can be a valuable means of communication between city and countryside.
- **Health and well-being.** News about disease, pollution and the misuse of weed killers travels fast. Especially when it concerns us directly. For instance the news about the mad cow disease. Authorities and private organisations want to confront the public with these issues and are eager to encourage them to lead a healthy life. As a result, trade and industry have discovered a totally new market: the market for organic food. It is quite obvious that a city farm can act as an intermediary.
- **Co-operation of activities.** In the Netherlands many organisations which used to act on their own, now look for co-operation with others. Schools are being used for courses and training in the evenings. Churches are being used by more than one religion on Sunday and for other activities during the week. Health organisations like maternity care, home care and clinics are more and more combined in one building. It goes without saying that these developments help reduce the total running costs. A city farm can also be used as a community centre that could serve for example as a local authorities' information point, a third world shop or a centre for environmental education. Widely based activities can be offered to a wider audience. This will be very attractive for visitors as well.

So where does the Dutch federation go from here?

TOP J

It is obvious that joint efforts have more effect and will lead to more influence. As is the case in many European countries, there is an organisation for city farm work in the Netherlands as well. The Dutch Federation of City Farms is a foundation to which now more than 300 farms are linked. The Federation wants to promote the interests and mutual co-operation of city farms by providing training, newsletters, information and meeting points. The Dutch Federation has now set up a plan for the next few years. The plan deals with opportunities:

- It is very important to be on good terms with central government. In the end it is politicians and their policies which decide what is going to happen. Only recently the Dutch Federation succeeded in interesting a Member of Parliament to become its chairman. The Federation wants to link up with government policies and will make every effort to give city farm work a more prominent place. City farms can play a key role in government policy for rural development, the city as a social and sustainable habitat, open-air recreation, different cultures and youth work.
- Public relations. Many city farm workers manage their own local public relations. There is not enough joint action. A broad information campaign helps improve the image of the city farm.
- Changes bring about more job responsibilities. Many city farm workers have no training or experience to deal with today's issues such as aggression or people-management. Training for city farm workers in Holland will have to be reviewed.
- If you want to co-operate with other national organisations, you have to present yourself and explore the mutual benefits. Study days for potential like-minded partners are very effective.
- It is crucial to develop a policy for voluntary work. Today's volunteer will make demands. He wants to know what activities he can do and wants to have a say about matters. He also wants to say beforehand how much time he is willing to spend. Even more important for today's volunteer is, that he gets something out of the work for himself: experience, training and appreciation. If you recruit volunteers only as a form of cheap labour, you will find that they will simply leave.

The Dutch Federation is convinced that the city farm has to adapt in order to survive. In the past, city farm work has proved its worth in the field of recreation, information, socio-cultural work and therapy. The future will produce an even more all-round city farm. Many farms in Europe are already busy introducing new methods of working. In the Netherlands there is a new city farm where new forms of technology have been introduced, such as:

- Fewer windows, thus decreasing heat loss
- Daylight and air circulation via the roof
- Solar energy for underfloor and cavity heating

But then, what's new? These principles were also applied in the bath house of Pompei. This only goes to show that it is worth keeping your eyes open. There is no need to re-event the wheel. On a visit to a farm for mentally handicapped people in the north of France we came across a fantastic project. Mentally handicapped people were teaching schoolchildren to take care of the farm animals. We took the idea back to Holland and introduced it at a farm for mentally handicapped people in the city of Maastricht. It became a tremendous success. Integration, education and farmwork in one project.