



Beyond fences

Experiencing boundaries in everyday practices within the wandering areas in KempenBroek

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I, Jeske Straver, hereby certify that the work presented herein is my own work completed without the use of any form of assistance or support tools (incl. AI-powered tools), other than those listed and permitted. Any material from other sources (data, ideas, text, images) has been duly acknowledged and fully disclosed in the reference section. Sentences or parts of sentences quoted literally are marked as quotations, and otherwise external input is properly paraphrased. The work presented herein has not been submitted elsewhere for assessment in the same or a similar form. I have also verified that my thesis project is fully compliant with procedures on data management, ethics, integrity and privacy, as established by the Faculty of Social Sciences of Radboud University in reference to Master theses.

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Abstract

The Netherlands is a densely populated country. With growing populations of both humans and animals, the likelihood of interactions is increasing. Due to the traditional Western view of nature, humans still seem to be separate from nature. This is still reflected in current nature management practices. To ensure that interactions between humans and animals proceed smoothly without the risk of conflict, it is important to investigate what boundaries are experienced. Boundaries are often seen as physical separations, as is the case in nature conservation, where a fence often serves as a barrier between the human and animal worlds. However, boundaries do not seem to be static at all; they depend on all surrounding factors. Furthermore, boundaries are not only experienced when they are visible. People also appear to experience boundaries that are invisible to others. Because these invisible boundaries often determine how people view nature and how they interact with it, it is important to investigate what boundaries people experience. This research therefore chose to conduct fieldwork in so-called wandering areas. These are areas where people are allowed to walk freely within the habitat of large grazers, which leads to a greater likelihood of interactions between humans and large grazers. Hence, this research took place in relation to the wandering areas in KempenBroek. For this study, I approached non-humans as active agents. Since I could not ask the non-humans about their experiences, I conducted this research through a multispecies lens. I did this using a multispecies ethnography, employing methods such as sensory walks and semi-structured interviews. In doing so, I was mindful of the fact that boundaries take shape in relation to people, animals, and the landscape. In this study, I will demonstrate that boundaries in wandering areas are not experienced solely as physical separations, but are experienced, relational and in constant interplay with people, animals, and the landscape.

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1. Introduction

Imagine you are walking through nature. At some point you face a fence. There is a sign on the fence, saying you are allowed in here provided you keep your distance from the animals in the area. You get excited; as a human, you are allowed to step into another world for a moment, the world of the animals. A little further on, you see them standing there: Scottish Highland cattle, with calves too - how cute. You walk a bit closer; the bull with the large horns looks at you. You feel your excitement turning into tension. Am I too close? Is this bull going to attack me? Am I even allowed to be here? The path is public; you are allowed to be here, the animals are allowed to be there too, and yet the situation feels tense. Is this still a shared landscape, or has an invisible boundary been crossed?

In Western approaches to nature management, nature is often only considered “nature” when it is demarcated: fenced off, regulated and subject to clear rules (West, Igoe & Brockington 2006; Büscher & Fletcher 2020). This demarcated nature is man-made with the purpose of controlling nature (Boonman-Berson 2018; Morizot 2022). This way of thinking is largely rooted in Western nature-culture dualism, in which humans and nature have historically been positioned as separate domains (Descola & Pálsson 1996). With the growth of both human and non-human populations in the Netherlands, habitats are increasingly overlapping and these boundaries become blurred. This has led to an increase of interactions and conflicts between humans and non-human animals (Arts 2025). The origin of these conflicts lies in the fact that, in mainstream approaches to nature management, humans and wildlife are often conceptualised as separate categories (Büscher & Fletcher 2020; Descola and Pálsson 1996; Haraway 2008), and that management practices tend to rely strongly on quantitative ecological measurements (Ashley and Boyd 2006). Within these approaches, ecological indicators are used to monitor and evaluate the state of the environment and to guide management decisions (Carter et al. 2019). Although such approaches are important for understanding ecological conditions, they offer limited insight into how people experience and interpret their relationship with nature in everyday contexts. As a result, the lived and experiential dimensions of nature remain underrepresented. This creates a need for qualitative approaches that focus on experiences, meanings, and everyday practices.

Against this background, this research explores what boundaries are experienced by visitors and residents in wandering areas. Rather than focusing on how nature management should change values or worldviews, this study provides insight into what boundaries are perceived and experienced in everyday practice. By focusing on narratives of lived experiences, the research aims to show that boundaries are not experienced as fixed or purely ecological categories, but as relational and situational phenomena that emerge through interactions between people, animals and the landscape. In this way, the study contributes to an understanding of what boundaries are lived and interpreted in

practice.

This study is being conducted as part of the WildlifeNL project. WildlifeNL is a transdisciplinary research project, which established a study that focuses specifically on human-animal interactions (Arts 2025). This study is conducted within the one of the living labs of this project: KempenBroek. In Chapter 2, I provide a more detailed explanation of the research context, including WildlifeNL and the living labs. To study human-animal interactions, it is important to have a research area where these interactions frequently occur. That is why, in this study, I have chosen wandering areas (*struingebieden*) as my research area. Wandering areas are areas where large grazers live, but where people are also allowed, provided they follow rules set by area management (as shown on the sign on the cover of this thesis). This makes these wandering areas shared landscapes, which increases the likelihood of interactions between people and animals. In addition to being shared landscapes, a wandering area is also located behind a fence, but accessible for people. A fence is a boundary between, in this case, the human and animal worlds. What interests me, specifically about boundaries, is that in addition to forming a visible line between two worlds, they can also be experienced. The interesting thing for me about these experienced boundaries is that they are not always visible. These boundaries can also be invisible, as well they can vary between humans, and between humans and non-humans.

Although previous research for WildlifeNL has provided insight into the experiences of coexisting with red deer and wild boar in KempenBroek (Boogaard 2025), it remains unclear where and how people experience boundaries in their interactions with wild and semi-wild animals. The need for greater insight into these experienced boundaries was a key recommendation for further research (Boogaard 2025). The current study builds on this recommendation. This research aims to understand what visible and invisible boundaries are experienced by residents and visitors in the wandering areas of KempenBroek in relation to Scottish Highland cattle, Tauros cattle and Exmoor ponies. These species inhabit the wandering areas, which is why this thesis focuses specifically on them. This study distinguishes between two types of boundaries: visible and invisible. In this study, visible boundaries essentially include all boundaries that, under ordinary circumstances, can be perceived by any human or non-human, such as a fence, barbed wire or a beaver dam. Invisible boundaries include those that people experience when interacting with large grazers or being present in the wandering areas, but which cannot be observed by everyone; these are more sensory boundaries and may therefore vary from person to person or from human to non-human. Invisible boundaries can also be understood as questions that are raised, probably arising due to a lack of mutual understanding, caused by the inability to communicate in a common code (Morizot 2022, 12).

Although boundaries form the central analytical starting point of this research for understanding what boundaries people experience in wandering areas, it became increasingly clear during the fieldwork that, in this context, boundaries are not always experienced as fixed or clearly defined divisions. Instead, they often appear to be fluid, overlapping and context-dependent. In order

to better interpret this ambiguity analytically, the concept of liminality has been introduced as a complementary perspective within this research. Liminality is not used here as a replacement for the concept of boundaries, but as a means of deepening our understanding of situations in which categorical divisions are difficult to maintain. It provides a vocabulary for analysing in-between states in which categories such as nature and culture, wild and domesticated, or human and non-human are not sharply separated, but are constantly negotiated in practice. In addition, the concept of affect has also proved helpful in understanding what boundaries are experienced. This concept, too, does not replace boundaries, but made it possible to analyse the more relational, embodied and situational dimensions of these experiences in interactions between humans and animals.

To understand the perspective from which I approached the field, I first present theoretical framework in which I introduce the lens and concepts of this study. Following the theoretical framework, I describe the context in which this research took place, where I elaborate on the WildlifeNL research, the living lab KempenBroek, the wandering areas, the large grazers and the sample of interest. This is followed by a description of the methodology used to conduct this research, which employed a multispecies ethnographic approach, including sensory walks and semi-structured interviews. Building on this, I demonstrate in three empirical chapters the boundaries experienced by visitors and residents in areas where people wander, and the interplay between visible and invisible boundaries. This is followed by the discussion, in which the findings are linked to one another and to existing theories, and the limitations of the research are discussed. Following this are the recommendations I propose for the WildlifeNL project and, finally, the conclusion.

2. Theoretical framework

In this chapter, I position my research within the theoretical debates. I begin with the concept of multispecies coexistence and co-creation, as this was the lens through which I approached KempenBroek. From this perspective, I have included non-human animals in this study as active participants in the landscape. I then examine existing forms of separation between humans and nature, such as the “Great Divide,” which is also reflected in the way nature conservation is organized in the Netherlands. Next, I discuss how boundaries are often approached in the literature as fluid and relational, yet how little attention is paid to how boundaries are actually experienced in everyday situations within shared landscapes. Based on this gap, I have approached wandering areas as liminal landscapes, because these spaces demonstrate how boundaries are not fixed, as they are in transition. Finally, I use affect as an analytical lens to further understand this experiential dimension.

Multispecies co-existence and co-creation

In this research I use multispecies co-existence as an overarching concept understanding “cohabitation, co-existence, living together, multispecies communities, and living with, (...) All ways in which humans and animals engage with each other and inhabit the same area” (Boonman-Berson 2018, 26) An important part of this understanding is multispecies ethnography, in which researchers view non-human entities as active participants rather than passive elements within human-centered narratives (Kirksey and Helmreich 2010; Haraway 2008). Kirksey and Helmreich (2010) describe multispecies ethnographers as researchers who study the borderlands between nature and culture and position their work within ecological issues.

An essential concept as well as in multispecies ethnography as in this study is non-human agency, or the capacity of non-human entities, such as animals, plants, microbes, materials and natural forces, to actively act, influence and help shape the world (Despret 2004; Haraway 2008; Petitt et al. 2025; Tsing 2013). Tsing (2013) argues that it is not only humans who are social; freedom is situated in physical capacities and ecological interactions. She criticizes the idea that freedom is uniquely human and redefines it as a shared, multispecies condition, shaped by ecological entanglements. In contrast to traditional approaches, which often view non-humans as passive objects, the multispecies perspective emphasizes the active role of non-humans in social, ecological, and spatial processes (Haraway 2008; Kirksey and Helmreich 2010; Despret 2004, trans. 2022).

Co-creation is another core concept within this study, which means that multispecies realities are jointly constructed through interactions (Haraway 2008; Kirksey and Helmreich 2010). This perspective is also relevant in KempenBroek, where there are visible interactions between humans and large mammals (Arts 2025, 8). By considering non-humans as active participants, I aim to better understand how they, together with humans, help shape boundaries in the landscape. Despret (2004, trans. 2022) emphasises that animals have their own forms of agency, and that their behaviour can be

seen as a form of co-creation within shared living environments. Toncheva and Fletcher (2022) suggest the same in their ethnographic study of human-bear cohabitation, in which they demonstrate that non-humans should be understood as “co-constitutive actors” who actively shape the places they inhabit.

By combining insights from multispecies co-existence, ethnography, non-human agency and co-creation, I aim to gain better understand the relationships between people and animals in KempenBroek. With large grazers as active participants who, together with humans, help shape the social, ecological and spatial structures of the landscape (Haraway 2008; Kirksey and Helmreich 2010; Despret 2004, trans. 2022; Petitt et al. 2025). Recognizing the agency of non-human animals and their role in co-creation forms the basis for investigating what boundaries are experienced in KempenBroek. The theory of multispecies co-existence forms the lens and thus the starting point with which I approached this research. In the following section, I will examine the dominant Western approach to thinking and management that governs the wandering areas, to gain a better understanding of the perspective from which the wandering areas were developed.

Separation and the Great Divides in conservation

Various studies show that the way in which nature conservation is organised in the West, and consequently in the Netherlands too, is still heavily influenced by a separation between humans and nature. As a result, non-human animals are often not approached from a multispecies perspective, in which they are seen as active participants who, together with humans and landscapes, help to shape their environment. Instead, humans and non-human animals are generally regarded as separate domains. Here, I explain where this separation originates and how it is still evident in nature conservation today. In this research, by ‘separation’ I mean the idea that Haraway (2008) describes as the ‘Great Divides’, namely nature/culture and human/animal, which results in a lens of human exceptionalism (Haraway 2008). In line with this, West, Igoe and Brockington (2006) state that these separations mirror the Western view of nature and culture and project this onto the world. This can be seen in the research of Boonman-Berson (2018), in which she conducted a comparative study of American bears and Dutch wild boars in the Veluwe. What emerges from her research is that the Dutch system primarily aims to ensure that these animals, in her case wild boars, do not enter human habitats and that they are designated as a controllable risk factor. She describes the “free-range” of wild boars in the Veluwe to be “restricted by several fences constructed to prevent the boars from invading certain areas such as human settlements, highways and agricultural zones” (Boonman-Berson 2018, 121). This shows the embeddedness of the “Great Divides” (Haraway 2008) in practice in the Netherlands. In an earlier study, Boogaard (2025) examines how separation in KempenBroek can be seen in physical barriers such as fences, and also in how humans view non-human animals: as a nuisance or something to be avoided.

This underlying separation contrasts with the lens of multispecies coexistence that I employ in

this research. That is why, for my research, it was important to be aware of this way of thinking and the way in which it has shaped the landscape and nature conservation. This awareness enabled me to reflect critically on the existing separations between humans and non-human animals, and not to approach the field automatically on the basis of these presuppositions. At the same time, I am aware that I cannot completely let go of this separation, as I myself grew up within a Western worldview in which these ideas are deeply ingrained. These separations can influence not only the way in which nature conservation is shaped, but also what boundaries visitors and residents experience in the area and what boundaries they experience between themselves, non-human animals and the landscape. In order to investigate the experiences of visible and invisible boundaries, it is therefore important to understand which underlying separations and ideas are already present. This forms the basis for answering the following sub-questions: What visible boundaries are experienced by visitors and residents in KempenBroek? What invisible boundaries are experienced by visitors and residents in KempenBroek? In what way are visible and invisible boundaries related in the experiences of residents and visitors in wandering areas in KempenBroek? What recommendations can be given to the WildlifeNL project based on this study?

Boundaries and fluidity

Separation is a key feature in the wandering areas. This study examines these forms of separation through the idea of boundaries. This section therefore explains how boundaries are understood and applied within this study. Physical boundaries surrounding nature reserves has its origins in the epicentre of nature conservation movements, namely the creation of protected areas, called “fortress” conservation (Büscher and Fletcher 2020). Boonman-Berson (2018, 113) aligns with this by stating that current wildlife management strategies for “problem” non-human animals are solved by placing physical boundaries such as fences, so that these non-human animals can be ‘controlled’. These physical boundaries around nature reserves have already been extensively researched and criticized (Büscher and Fletcher 2020; Boonman-Berson 2018). However, by focusing solely on physical boundaries, the boundaries experienced in everyday practice are overlooked. Therefore, this research shifts its focus from the question of what non-humans ‘think’ or ‘feel’ to the way in which their presence and behaviour shape human experiences and reactions, and how these, in turn, contribute to the boundaries that people experience in everyday life. This is because the non-human remains an ‘intimate stranger’: close at hand, but never fully comprehensible (Govindrajan, 2018).

In this study, I distinguish between visible and invisible boundaries as experienced by residents and visitors. Visible boundaries, as I describe them above are, for example, the boundaries that surround a conservation area. Invisible boundaries, in this research, are approached as moments of doubt, adaptation, tension, negotiation and choice that arise in interactions between humans and large grazers within wandering areas. The focus is on the way in which these interactions shape the places where people feel they can or cannot go. This is in line with Lamont and Molnár (2002) as they

describe boundaries as relational processes that are constantly being formed, contested and renegotiated through practices, discourse and interactions. From this perspective, the boundaries in this study are always present, although they are not always actively experienced or made visible in everyday practices. A well-known example of an invisible, but if attention is paid to becomes noticeable, boundary is the separation as mentioned before: the nature-culture dichotomy, the deeply rooted Western idea that humans (culture) and nature form two strictly separate domains (Büscher & Fletcher, 2020).

West, Igoe and Brockington (2006) reviewed studies on protected areas with visible boundaries and concluded that these areas can actually lead to this Western/European nature-culture dichotomy. They demonstrate that protected areas are not merely physical locations, but active instruments that see, understand and (re)produce the world. This review is an important theoretical background for this research, because it does not regard boundaries as neutral or self-evident, but as a complex social construct that is constantly being restructured. The argument put forward by West et al. enables me to critically examine how boundaries structure the relationships between humans and non-human animals, and reproduce certain views on nature and society. The dynamic nature of boundaries becomes even more apparent when considering Mol's (2002) concept of multiplicity and fluidity. Fluidity refers to the shifting, overlapping and context-dependent nature of categories, identities and relationships. In line with this, humans in KempenBroek can be viewed not as 'fixed stakeholders', but as taking on multiple, but sometimes conflicting, roles, such as farmer, hunter and nature lover at the same time. In the same way, non-humans can constantly reshape or disrupt existing visible and invisible boundaries through their presence and movements.

This literature provides an analytical basis for, on the one hand, treating boundaries in this study as dynamic, negotiated and relational, rather than as fixed dividing lines between humans, non-humans and the landscape. Furthermore, it provides a grounding for the differentiation between visible and invisible boundaries and the significance of this. Boundaries thus not become static lines, but living, multiple and constantly changing negotiations between humans, non-human animals and landscape (Morizot 2022). As described above, much has already been written in the literature about the relational and fluid nature of boundaries. However, there is still limited attention paid to how these non-static boundaries are experienced by people within shared landscapes. This is what I will investigate in this research. Furthermore, this theoretical approach provides important background for my role as a researcher, as it helps me to enter the field with a conscious and selective approach and meaning to boundaries. The theories in this section thus contribute to answering the following sub-questions: What visible boundaries are experienced by visitors and residents in KempenBroek? What invisible boundaries are experienced by visitors and residents in KempenBroek? In what way are visible and invisible boundaries related in the experiences of residents and visitors in wandering areas in KempenBroek?

Liminality

In order to study what boundaries are experienced, a research context was required in which interactions between humans and large grazers occur regularly. Furthermore, it was important that this be a context in which boundaries are not only present, but also experienced. Based on these two requirements, I decided on wandering areas which, as I came to learn during my research, can be understood as an ‘in-between’ area. In this way wandering areas can be understood as spaces that cannot be reduced to unambiguous categories. They lie between different domains, such as nature and culture, wild and domesticated, and recreation and natural habitat. It is precisely this intermediate position that means boundaries in this context do not function as fixed dividing lines, but as dynamic and relational phenomena. The concept of liminality offers a way of approaching this ‘in-between-ness’ analytically. In anthropological literature, liminality is used to describe situations in which categories, meanings and classifications become temporarily less stable and existing boundaries become blurred (Van Gennep 1960; Turner 1979; Thomassen 2009). So has the concept of liminality its origins in the work of anthropologist Arnold van Gennep (1960), who describes the liminal phase as a transitional state of ‘in-between-ness’ in which existing categories are temporarily suspended and boundaries are not clearly defined. Victor Turner (1979) aligns with this state of liminality as a state ‘in between’, in which existing structures lose their natural state of being and new meanings have not yet fully taken shape. Although this concept was originally developed within social contexts, it has come to be more widely applied as an analytical framework for situations in which boundaries are fluid and unstable. Thomassen (2009) expands on this approach by arguing that liminality does not refer exclusively to ritual transitions, but can be understood as a more general condition of ‘in-between-ness’, both spatially and temporally. In this research, therefore, liminality is not approached as an exceptional state, but as a way of understanding the structural ambiguity of wandering areas.

From this perspective, wandering areas can be understood as liminal landscapes. These landscapes lie at the intersection of several overlapping boundaries, including nature and culture, wild and domesticated, and human and non-human. Large grazers are not easily classified within these categories and exist between wild and semi-wild. In the same way, wandering areas function as natural habitats for animals, but in the same time as recreational spaces for people. The concept of liminality thus provides an analytical framework for understanding how boundaries in this context do not function as fixed spatial divisions, but are shaped by relational and ongoing processes between people, animals and the landscape. From this perspective, this study investigates what boundaries visitors and residents experience in these ‘in-between-ness’ of wandering areas, and how they deal with the resulting ambiguity in their everyday interactions with large grazers. This has helped me to answer the research question and sub-questions. Specifically the sub-question: What visible boundaries are experienced by visitors and residents in KempenBroek?

Affect as analytical lens

As the paragraphs above show, boundaries are often not static or unambiguous, but fluid, situational and ongoing. During this research, embodied, sensory, emotional and atmospheric dimensions of boundary experiences also became apparent. The concept of affect proved useful for understanding these dimensions of experience in relation to non-humans. Therefore, in this paragraph I will introduce the concept of affect as the way I understood and applied affect in this research.

In line with Anderson (2009), in this research affect refers to the capacity of bodies to influence one another and to be influenced themselves. He describes that affect arises within relationships and manifests itself as a kind of atmosphere or intensity that precedes conscious interpretation or the attribution of meaning. Within this research, this means that boundaries are not only determined rationally, but are also experienced. This approach is consistent with the empirical study by Verploegen, van den Born and Aarts (2024), in which affect is understood as physical states and experiences arising from relationships. In this research, these relationships are not directly observed as mutual interactions between humans and animals, but emerge in how people describe, remember and anticipate their encounters with large grazers. Affect thus manifests itself in people's stories, experiences and practices, and plays a role in how they draw, shift or, conversely, leave boundaries open. In this research, affect provides a concept through which the fluid and situational nature of boundaries can be understood, while also attending analytically to forms of experience that exceed verbal expression.

At the same time, affect offers a way of acknowledging the presence of non-humans in these relationships without having to speculate about their inner experiences. Importantly, affect in this research is not limited to interactions between humans and large grazers. Rather, it emerges in broader relational configurations that also include the landscape itself. In this sense, affect can be understood as something that arises not only between humans and animals, but also between humans and landscapes, animals and landscapes, and within these more-than-human assemblages. Assemblages refer to the way in which the world is understood as something that arises through the coming together of who and what is connected, rather than as separate, isolated entities (Tsing 2013). This aligns with Haraway (2017), who further elaborates on this relational way of thinking with the concept of sympoiesis, or 'making-with'. This concept emphasises that nothing makes itself on its own and that meaning and existence arise only in relation to others. From this perspective, the wandering area as well as the large grazers are therefore not a passive backdrop, but active participants in shaping what boundaries are experienced.

By using affect as a concept, it allows me to include the more-than-human world, such as large grazers and the landscape, as active agents in the experience of boundaries, without having interviewed, observed or studied these non-humans myself. Instead, I understand boundaries as spaces of experience in which people give meaning to their relationship with large grazers and the landscape. Affect thus offers me a way to incorporate the presence of non-humans into the analysis through

people's experiences in relation to these non-human actors. This concept has helped me to answer the research question and the sub-questions. Specifically the sub-question: What invisible boundaries are experienced by visitors and residents in KempenBroek?

2.1 Research objective and research questions

The aim of this study is to understand what visible and invisible boundaries residents and visitors experience in wandering areas in KempenBroek in relation Tauros cattle, Scottish Highland cattle, and Exmoor ponies. These three animal species have been selected because they represent the large grazers present in the wandering areas. A secondary aim of this research is to bring to light the narratives and everyday experiences of residents and visitors, in order to gain a better understanding of how human–animal interactions are experienced in everyday practice within these wandering areas. Finally, this research aims to formulate recommendations for WildlifeNL that contribute to a more context-specific understanding of human–animal interactions, based on everyday practices and experiences by visitors and residents in these wandering areas.

Research question

What boundaries are experienced by visitors and residents in wandering areas in KempenBroek in relation Tauros cattle, Scottish Highland cattle, and Exmoor ponies?

Subquestions

1. What visible boundaries are experienced by residents and visitors in wandering areas in KempenBroek?
2. What invisible boundaries are experienced by residents and visitors in wandering areas in KempenBroek?
3. In what way are visible and invisible boundaries related in the experiences of residents and visitors in wandering areas in KempenBroek?
4. What recommendations can be given to the WildlifeNL project based on this study?

3. Context

In this chapter, I will examine the context of this research. First, I will provide a detailed description of the WildlifeNL project, of which this research forms part. I will discuss the project's design and its underlying objectives. I will then focus on the Living Lab KempenBroek, which includes the wandering areas where this research was conducted. After that, these wandering areas themselves are described, including the rules and guidelines that apply to visitors. I then discuss the large grazers found in these areas, which play an important role in this study regarding the boundaries experienced by visitors and residents. Attention is paid both to the introduction of these animals with a view to re-wilding, and to relevant behavioural characteristics. Finally, the sample of interest is discussed, explaining which participants were included in the study and which groups were excluded.

WildlifeNL

The WildlifeNL project (2023–2030) is an eight-year, transdisciplinary research project that focuses on how humans and large mammals in the Netherlands can coexist more effectively (WildlifeNL n.d.; Arts 2025). The project arose from the realisation that human-animal interactions in the Netherlands are changing due to developments such as infrastructure and increasing recreational activity, but also due to the growth of certain animal populations. These changes lead to more interactions, but also to tensions and conflicts, both between humans and animals and amongst humans themselves. Furthermore, incidents and conflicts involving animals provoke much public and political debate. WildlifeNL aims to investigate how coexistence between humans and large mammals can be improved by reducing negative reactions and encouraging positive forms of coexistence. They therefore focus not only on practical wildlife management, but also on underlying mechanisms, such as human and animal behaviour, as well as social and cultural contexts, that drive these interactions. The project thus aligns with an approach in which human-animal relationships are analysed not only in institutional or ecological terms, but also through social and cultural contexts and the everyday experiences of interactions and the resulting perceived boundaries: a perspective that is central to this research. The key principle of the WildlifeNL project is the transdisciplinary approach, which combines scientific knowledge with the experiences and insights of societal actors such as policymakers, land managers, farmers, conservationists and local communities. The aim is to produce research that is both scientifically relevant and socially useful. Collaboration, inclusivity and building trust between the parties involved are central to this knowledge co-production. The project is organised into various work packages and is being carried out by a consortium of around twenty organisations. A core team of project leaders coordinates the whole initiative. Within the project, several PhD researchers and postdocs are working on specific sub-themes. The knowledge gained in the various components of the project will ultimately be integrated to develop scenarios for future coexistence between humans and large mammals in the Netherlands (WildlifeNL n.d.; Arts 2025).

Living lab

The WildlifeNL research is being conducted in two so-called Living Labs: Zuid-Kennemerland National Park and the UNESCO Man and the Biosphere Reserve KempenBroek. Living labs are real-life environments in which research, co-creation, and innovation unfold in practice rather than in isolated laboratory settings, often in collaboration with local communities (Ballon and Schuurman 2015; European Network of Open Living Labs 2026). In the context of WildlifeNL, these living labs function as field sites where human-animal interactions in different landscapes can be studied, as well as tested and evaluated in practice (Arts 2025). This study will take place in one of the living labs: the UNESCO Man and the Biosphere Reserve KempenBroek (Figure 1). KempenBroek is one of only two UNESCO biosphere reserves in the Netherlands and forms part of a global network of over 700 UNESCO areas (UNESCO Nederland



Figure 1: Map of UNESCO Man & Biosphere Reserve KempenBroek. Source: Wikipedia, "Unesco Mens & Biosfeergebied KempenBroek," last modified June 11 2025, https://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unesco_Mens_%26_Biosfeergebied_KempenBroek

2024). Since 5 July 2024, Kempenbroek has been the first cross-border UNESCO Man and the Biosphere Reserve in the Benelux, the first in Belgium and the second in the Netherlands (KempenBroek 2025). What makes the UNESCO Dutch biospheres, including KempenBroek, unique is that they explicitly include the word 'man' in their title. The UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere Program chose this name because it aligns with the central aim of the biosphere program: to foster a balance between humans (man) and nature (KempenBroek 2025). This human-nature interaction is essential for this study, as KempenBroek serves as a testing ground for similar places where practices of co-existence with the non-human are negotiated. The living lab KempenBroek is an area with a mosaic of habitats: marshes, stream valleys, fens, forests, heathlands, and agricultural lands, interspersed with small villages and towns along its borders (KempenBroek 2025). Within KempenBroek a collaborative vision is shared by multiple local and regional actors: this includes governments, citizens, companies, schools, knowledge institutions, and NGOs, who work together to promote sustainable development (UNESCO Nederland 2024; KempenBroek 2025).

Organizations such as ARK Rewilding Nederland and Natuurmonumenten are actively engaged in rewilding the area of KempenBroek (ARK Rewilding Nederland n.d.). However, the fact that the area is inhabited and also has cultural and historical value can create tensions between rewilding and the preservation of the cultural heritage landscape (Drenthen 2015). Drenthen (2015) states that, on the one hand, wild nature is increasingly valued and rewilding is seen as a way of restoring natural processes and biodiversity. On the other hand, he states, traditional landscapes are increasingly recognised as cultural heritage deserving of protection. As a result, ecological and cultural-historical values may come into conflict. This suggests that nature conservation in such a

multifunctional landscape cannot be viewed in isolation from the way in which people relate to the area and the meanings they ascribe to it. Because of this interplay between ecological diversity and human involvement, KempenBroek offers an ideal setting for studying what boundaries are experienced. For this research, I will focus on the wandering areas of KempenBroek, which I elaborate more on below.

Wandering areas

Smeetshof, Kettingdijk and Wijffelterbroek are the areas in which the wandering areas where this study took place are located. As described above, these areas form part of the KempenBroek nature reserve and are jointly developed and managed by organisations such as Natuurmonumenten and ARK Rewilding Nederland. These organisations manage these areas as a connected nature and wetland landscape. Central to this development is the restoration of natural water and ecosystem processes. This is done by creating a climate buffer, whereby water is retrained by the landscape (Natuurmonumenten n.d.-a). By retaining groundwater and rainwater, this combats drought during dry periods and also reduces peak flows during heavy rainfall. Thereby climate buffers reducing the risk of flooding in downstream areas. In addition to this hydrological function, the development of the area contributes to nature conservation and biodiversity. The restoration of marshland and wetland habitats creates space for species that depend on wet, dynamic landscapes. ARK Rewilding Nederland emphasises that natural processes, such as grazing by large grazers and spontaneous vegetation development, play an important role in shaping the landscape. As a result, the areas are increasingly developing into a semi-natural system in which water management, nature development and space for wildlife are interconnected (ARK Rewilding Nederland, n.d.).

In these semi-natural systems, which provide space for wildlife, wandering areas were created. Wandering areas are areas where visitors are free to walk, meaning they are not required to follow designated paths. Within Smeetshof, Kettingdijk and Wijffelterbroek, these wandering areas are habitats for large grazers, making these locations particularly relevant for studying the experiences related to human-animal interactions in practice. Although the area is freely accessible, its use is subject to a number of rules of behaviour aimed at ensuring safe and respectful coexistence between humans and animals (Natuurmonumenten n.d.-b). For example, visitors are welcome in the grazers' habitat, but must maintain a minimum distance of 25 metres from the animals. In addition, visitors are advised not to walk through herds, particularly when calves are present or during the bulls' mating season. As animals may sometimes lie on paths to rest, visitors are asked to take a different route in such cases, even if this means they have to leave their route (temporarily). Dogs are permitted in the area, provided they are kept on a lead, as interactions between dogs and large grazers can be unpredictable. Furthermore, visitors are advised to turn back and choose an alternative route if they are in any doubt or feel uncertain about the situation. Finally, feeding animals is strictly prohibited, as habituation to human food and human contact can lead to behavioural changes that may ultimately

result in the animals being removed from the area (Natuurmonumenten n.d.-b). Visitors are informed of these rules via information signs at the entrances to the wandering areas, as shown on the cover page of this thesis.

Large grazers

The wandering areas are grazed by Tauros Cattle, Scottish Highland Cattle and Exmoorponies. These are large grazers, which play a central role in the ecological functioning and development of the landscape. According to Natuurmonumenten (n.d.-b), these animals are essential for nature conservation, as they carry out processes that cannot be replicated by humans or machines. This primarily involves the continuous grazing and maintenance of open spaces, thereby preserving the natural dynamics of vegetation structures. This view is supported by ecological studies such as Dumont et al. (2007), Søndergaard et al. (2025) and Bonavent et al. (2023), in which large grazers are described as key drivers of ecological processes. The ecological studies mentioned generally include large grazers; therefore, in this paragraph, I also explain large grazers in this way and do not go into species-specific details here. In winter, when the availability of grass is limited, large grazers switch to tougher vegetation. This breaks the dominance of fast-growing plant species and allows the vegetation to recover in different combinations. Dumont et al. (2007) describe in this context how grazers, through their so-called patch grazing, create a mosaic of short and tall vegetation, leading to greater spatial heterogeneity within the area, which ensures high biodiversity. In addition to this vegetation-structuring role, large grazers also have a strong influence on the physical formation of the landscape. According to Natuurmonumenten (n.d.-b), young Tauros bulls create so-called ‘bull pits’ through scraping and stamping with their hooves and horns. These open, sandy patches form important microhabitats for reptiles and heat-loving insects and also provide opportunities for pioneer plants to establish themselves. Søndergaard et al. (2025) and Bonavent et al. (2023) refer to such behaviour as trampling, and suggest that this activity by cattle and horses makes an important contribution to creating variation in vegetation structure, as it breaks up dominant grasses and creates space for herb-rich vegetation. Natuurmonumenten also states that Tauros bulls play a role in protecting the area from wolves; this interaction is emphasised to such an extent that Exmoor ponies are said to seek out the bulls in the evening for protection. In this study, large grazers can be referred to as ‘semi-wild’. This term refers to the fact that, whilst the large grazers live in a largely natural landscape and control ecological processes independently, they are simultaneously under the supervision and management of livestock farmers and volunteers. This is in line with the definition provided by Bonavent et al. (2023), who describe semi-wild populations as animals living under conditions that approximate the natural situation as closely as possible, but where there is still minimal human intervention. The distinction from fully wild (feral) populations lies in the continuous monitoring and intervention where necessary, such as counting animals, tracking their condition and monitoring the food supply.

4. Methodology

To answer my research question, I applied a qualitative research method, following the methodology of multispecies ethnography, in a case study of the wandering areas in KempenBroek. Multispecies ethnography is based on the idea that species are interconnected in shared social and ecological worlds (Kirksey and Helmreich 2010). This approach helped me not only to understand human experiences, but also approach non-humans as active actors that play a role in shaping these experiences and relationships. In this sense, multispecies ethnography served both as a methodological approach and as an analytical framework. In this chapter I elaborate on the methods I used, sampling methods, exclusions, data analysis and finally reflect on my positionality and ethical considerations.

I started my fieldwork with an exploratory phase, I familiarised myself with the KempenBroek area and the more-than-human actors present there. To fully immerse myself in the field, I stayed in a cottage within KempenBroek for the first week. During this stay, I went cycling and walking through KempenBroek to familiarise myself with the area in different ways. Based on this exploration, I narrowed my focus to the wandering areas within KempenBroek. I made this decision because in these areas large grazers live in a setting where human recreational use is permitted, meaning the likelihood of direct interactions between humans and large grazers is relatively high. This makes these areas suitable for researching what boundaries are experienced by visitors and residents.

My sample of interest consists of visitors and residents of the wandering areas in KempenBroek. Local residents are included in this research because they know the landscape by hand and experience this over a longer amount of time. Visitor as tourists and recreational users offer perspectives on encounters with non-humans and the boundaries they perceive. This research focuses on lived experience and situated knowledge (Haraway 2008). I approached participants in various ways. Initially, I approached potential participants through informal conversations during the stay in the cottage. However, this resulted in only two participants for the semi-structured interviews. I therefore posted calls for participants on LinkedIn and Facebook, which resulted in a few additional participants. I therefore subsequently used snowball sampling (Noy 2008), asking participants at the end of interviews if they knew of any other suitable people. I also approached one additional resident of the area via online searches. In total, I spoke to nine people through semi-structured interviews (six men and three women).

My data collection consisted of sensory walks and semi-structured interviews. I used the sensory walks as an embodied method to explore the field and boundaries myself, and gain a better understanding of the participants' experiences (Pink 2015). During these walks, I consciously opened up my senses and allowed myself to be guided by what the landscape, humans and non-human animals revealed through sound, smell, movement and presence. This method was relevant because it

helped to develop a situated and experiential understanding of the research area, which in turn informed the topics of the interviews and the interpretation of the data. I decided to use semi-structured interviews because they allow for personal stories and experiences, whilst still providing direction through pre-determined topics relevant to the research question (Knott et al. 2022). This enabled me to investigate both everyday practices even as their experiences. I used a topic guide to structure the semi-structured interviews (Knott et al. 2022). This consisted of thematic guidelines rather than fixed questions, leaving room to respond to participants' narratives whilst ensuring that the key topics were covered in all interviews. The themes in the topic guide were: history of relationship with the area, daily use and practices, experiences of connectedness and identity, and interactions with more-than-human actors such as animals and the landscape. Together, these methods provided complementary forms of data: the sensory walks contributed to a more embodied and spatial understanding of the non-human landscape, while the semi-structured interviews offered insight primarily into human experiences and meanings.

My research proposal originally included plans to also approach stakeholders, such as nature conservation organisations (Staatsbosbeheer, Natuurmonumenten, ARK), ecologists and farmers. In the final research design, I chose not to do so. This decision was made because, in this research, I focused on the everyday, lived experiences of residents and visitors in relation to the landscape and the large grazers. Given that lived experiences and everyday practices are a subject that has not yet been widely explored in the current literature. For this reason, stakeholders have remained outside the scope of this research. In addition, my original plan was to research wild boars, red deer, roe deer and beavers. I have shifted my focus from these wild mammals to large grazers in wandering areas. The large grazers I have included in this study are Scottish Highland cattle, Tauros cattle and Exmoor ponies. I made this choice because interactions with these large grazers occur more regularly, as these animals are semi-wild and live in wandering areas. Finally, my plan in the research proposal was to conduct multispecies observations. I also decided to exclude this from my final research. I made this decision because time did not permit it, and I had to make choices in order to focus my attention on certain topics. In this case, on the narratives of visitors and residents. I am therefore aware that, as a result, this research has become more human-centred than I had originally intended. Had I had more time, I would have liked to immerse myself in the animal species through literature and observations before following the exploration phase.

For the analysis, I made use of a non-linear, inductive thematic analysis, inspired by grounded theory (Denscombe 2021; Braun and Clarke 2006; Braun and Clarke 2022). This means that the analysis process was iterative in nature, involving several rounds of coding and interpretation based on patterns that emerged from the data. I began by transcribing all the interviews verbatim. This formed the first step in familiarising myself with the data (Braun and Clarke 2022). I then proceeded to initial coding, re-reading the transcripts and identifying fragments relevant to the research question. Some codes were newly developed, whilst others were reused when similar patterns recurred across

different interviews. During the coding process, I visualised relationships between codes using concept maps (Denscombe 2021), which can also be regarded as a form of domain and taxonomic analysis (Spradley 1979; Borgatti 1998). These visualisations helped to highlight connections between emerging categories and were continually adapted as new data was analysed. Due to the inductive nature of the analysis, an iterative process emerged in which earlier transcripts were revisited and codes were adjusted, merged or replaced as new interpretations arose. Codes were subsequently refined and reduced through collation, whereby similar or overlapping codes were grouped into broader analytical categories. These categories were then organised into themes, which formed the basis for the structure of the results. This process was not linear, but iterative: themes and codes were continually adapted and refined whilst writing the empirical chapters and revising the theoretical framework.

A key strength of my chosen research methods is the iterative research approach. This approach allowed me to flexibly work with the data and left room for new insights that emerged during the research process. By shifting between coding, interpreting, reviewing literature and writing throughout the research, findings could be continually refined and linked together. At the same time, this working method also presented a challenge, as the analysis process became complex and at times overwhelming. I therefore regularly returned to earlier stages of the analysis in order to maintain an overview and ensure consistency. Another weakness of this study, which I have taken into account and which stems from the decision to adopt a multispecies ethnography approach, is that the research remains dependent on my observations and interpretations as a researcher. Although I attempt, through this approach, to assign an active role to non-human actors, their experiences are ultimately always interpreted from a human perspective. The research therefore remains mainly human-centred. To partially overcome this limitation, I employed sensory walks (Pink 2015). This method enabled a more embodied engagement with the landscape and non-human animals. At the same time, these engagements also remain based on my own sensory experiences and interpretations as a researcher (Braun and Clarke 2018). With this acknowledgement this limitation does not deny my influence as a researcher, but it does make it explicit. By presenting the data not as objective, but as the result of a reflexive research process, transparent narratives emerge that can contribute to further research (Knott et al. 2022; Pink 2015). Finally, semi-structured interviews were also a strength of this study, as they allowed participants to share their own experiences, stories and perspectives even when these were not in the topic guide. The open nature of this interview method made it possible for me to explore non-predetermined topics and insights that proved relevant to the research question (Knott et al. 2022). However, a limitation of this method is that not all interviews covered all the exact same topics or went into the same depth within all themes. This leads to the data being less comparable across the different participants. At the same time, this open nature was essential to this research, as it allowed for themes that had not been anticipated in advance. It is precisely these unexpected

narratives and experiences that add value to this anthropological research, in which new questions and meanings emerge during fieldwork rather than being entirely predetermined.

My position as a researcher has influenced both access to the field and the type of data collected. Participants were selected partly through informal contacts and online platforms, which meant that the study primarily reached participants who were accessible and willing to take part. I obtained written informed consent from my participants. All participants were informed in advance about the purpose of the research, the nature of the questions and the way in which data was collected and processed. Participation was voluntary and participants could withdraw at any time without consequences. All data has been anonymised and pseudonyms have been used in all written reports. Recordings were used solely for the purpose of transcribing the interviews and were deleted as soon as the transcription was complete. The anonymised transcripts were stored securely in a password-protected and encrypted digital storage environment and will be retained for one year, after which all data will be permanently deleted. Only I had access to the raw data, including interview recordings, transcripts and field notes. All recordings have been deleted after transcription. With regard to non-human actors, I attempted to minimise the impact of my presence as much as possible during the fieldwork. I did this by maintaining a distance in accordance with the area's guidelines. No actions were taken to provoke or influence the animals' reactions. At the same time, I acknowledge that it is impossible to have absolutely no influence, which meant that reflecting on my presence remained an integral part of the research process. Furthermore, my interpretation of the data was partly shaped by my own presence in the field during the sensory walks, my background as a white European woman, and my prior knowledge from biology and cultural anthropology regarding human-animal relationships. Consequently, the analysis is situated and interpretative in nature. This positionality was regularly subject to critical reflection during the fieldwork and the analysis.

5. Visible boundaries

It is the end of January 2026, I set off on my bike to visit one of the wandering areas within KempenBroek. It is one of those winter days when everything is grey and wet, and the landscape makes it immediately clear that this is not going to be an easy walk. The entrance to the wandering area consists of a wooden bridge made of two half-logs with wire in between. Once across, the path quickly turns into marshy ground where my shoes immediately sink in. What looked like a route feels more like a search here. A narrow wooden walkway manages to keep my shoes dry for a while, but that path suddenly ends. After that, I have to find my way through patches of grass, whilst mud surrounds me on all sides. The further I walk, the less the landscape resembles a path. Routes disappear, puddles become too deep, and every step requires an assessment. On a higher stretch of ground, I come to a barbed-wire fence. On the other side, I can clearly see a passable path. I do not feel like going back through the marshy section at that moment, so I carefully open the gate and walk through it, without really knowing if that is what I am supposed to do. It is only later that I see on my phone that I have crossed the border into Belgium without realising it. I turn back. What strikes me during this walk is how varied my experience of the area is. Sometimes there are signs confirming that I am in a wandering area, where walking is allowed and I can choose my own route. At such moments, the area feels ‘right’ for a moment: as if my presence here is intended. But that confirmation stands in contrast to the physical reality of the landscape. Due to the high water levels caused by a family of beavers, paths become impassable or disappear altogether. This creates a strange kind of tension. On paper, this is an area where you are allowed to walk and wander, but in practice it feels as though it is resisting that. During this walk, I came across several points where it was physically almost impossible to continue, or at least not without difficulty. These difficulties in the wandering areas are what I will discuss further in this chapter as visible boundaries. In this chapter, I will explain what visible boundaries are experienced by participants in the wandering areas. I begin with two experiences in which participants perceive a visible boundary between themselves and a wandering area. A first example of this emerges in Bert’s story.

Bert describes a situation in which he and his wife come face to face with a cow with large horns whilst out walking in a wandering area. Although the animal does not approach them, he immediately feels vulnerable: “I’m vulnerable here; this animal could easily overpower me.” Despite the absence of any immediate threat, he decides to play it safe and, together with his wife, climbs over a barbed wire fence. It is striking that, in this instance, the animal itself does not impose a hard boundary. Yet, in the experience of the situation, a boundary seems to be crossed: at that moment, the area no longer feels safe or passable. The visible boundary in this experience is the barbed wire that Bert and his wife climb over. This visible boundary can be understood here as being in the wrong place for Bert. As you and I probably know, barbed wire is not meant to be climbed over, nor does it seem comfortable either. The fact that Bert climbs over the barb wire shows that, for him, it is an

important boundary between the cow and himself, one that gives him a sense of safety. At the same time, two other boundaries emerge here: the boundary between Bert and the cow with large horns, as well as the boundary of the sense of security in the area. This shows that visible boundaries often come together with invisible boundaries. I will explore this interplay with invisible boundaries further in Chapter 6.

A similar tension emerges in the story of Rob, a biologist and keen walker. He explains that he avoids certain areas when he is alone, due to the presence of Tauros cattle. At the same time, he tells me that he would enter a particular area without hesitation if the fence were not locked. This shows that it is not only the visible boundary, the locked gate, that is deciding, but also the interpretation of risk and access that determines how the space is experienced. The experienced boundary thus appears to be linked to the visible boundary, the fence. Yet in this situation, the fence does send a clear message: people are not allowed in here. This is also evident from the experience Rob tells me about, as he would have entered the area had the fence been open. This situation suggests that Rob knows what certain visible boundaries mean without the need for a sign explaining them. A closed fence is off-limits. This suggests that what visible boundaries are perceived is closely linked to the norms and values instilled in us by society. These two examples provided by Bert and Rob illustrate how a fence can be experienced in different ways. For Bert, it is a visible boundary between himself, the cow and his escape route. For Rob, the closed fence represents a social norm; otherwise, he would have wanted to enter the area. These experiences show that the experience of a space is not the same for everyone, and that it shifts between accessibility and threat, depending on the situation and how it is perceived. The visible boundaries are, in this context, visible and materially present, yet they do not, nevertheless, constitute the same experience of the place.

This visible and material presence of a boundary is not the only experience people have shared with me. The following experience shows that a visible boundary can be more than just a dividing line between a wandering area and a person; it can also raise moral questions. Saskia, the owner of a restaurant on the edge of KempenBroek, told me about a walk she took with her husband during which they came across a Tauros that had become entangled in a fence and had eventually died. This incident made a deep impression on her. She describes how the animal was trapped in the fence and could no longer free itself. What stayed with her most was how difficult it became to still see the animal as 'wild'. In her words, the incident evoked anger and sadness, precisely because the animal did not die of natural causes, but because of a man-made structure. In this experience, the fence functions not merely as a visible boundary in the landscape, but also as a morally charged element. It not only marks where animals and people can move, but also becomes part of the way in which the area itself is experienced. This aligns with the way in which Saskia describes the landscape in a broader sense: "We do appreciate nature, but the more barbwire you see, the less attractive it actually is." This statement shows how the presence of barbwire directly influences her perception of nature. Barbwire is not experienced here as a neutral or purely functional and materialistic object. For

her, it seems to draw attention to human influence or control over animals and land, which appears to bring out feelings of pity rather than thoughts of (semi)wild animals, which seems for her to influence the extent to which an area is considered natural. Another participant, Charles, described the presence of fences not so much as a disruption to nature, but rather as a form of care and responsibility. In his view, the fences are necessary to protect large grazers and prevent them from ending up in ‘the wrong places’, such as on the road. This phrasing suggests a distinction between areas deemed suitable for large grazers and areas primarily designed for human use. The difference between Saskia and Charles also suggests once again that what visible boundaries are perceived depends on the situation and the person who experiences it.

It appears from the conversation with another participant, Leo, that the experience does not depend solely on the situation, but may also signify a transitional phase in which certain existing structures are placed. Leo lives in one of the wandering areas and has witnessed the change first-hand. According to him, the most visible change since the arrival of the large grazers has been the increase in barbwire and fencing. He calls this a ‘very bad thing’, because, in his view, it ‘steals the atmosphere of nature’s openness’. Remarkably, the introduction of large grazers, intended to rewild the landscape, simultaneously leads to an increase in human infrastructure. Whilst ARK Rewilding Nederland 2023) consider this development necessary to encourage plants and animals to do what they do naturally once again, others, such as Saskia and Leo, seem to perceive it as a reduction in wildness or nature. This shows that wandering areas are not static landscapes, but places where there is a constant negotiation of what nature, wildness and coexistence with animals mean. These experiences suggest that visible boundaries in wandering areas are more than just physical objects that regulate access. Whilst fences do mark visible boundaries in the landscape, they only acquire their meaning in relation to the experiences of the people who encounter them. As my own walk through the KempenBroek shows, access on paper does not automatically mean that an area is also perceived or experienced as accessible. The physical characteristics of the landscape, the presence of large grazers and the interpretation of risk seem to play an important role in what visible boundaries are experienced. The stories of Bert, Rob, Saskia and Leo suggest that visible boundaries take on meaning in different ways. Sometimes they seem to function as gateways to an area where humans and large grazers meet. At other times, they seem to be experienced as obstacles, as human control, or even as morally problematic elements that detract from the experience of wildness. As a result, this suggests that visible boundaries do not simply mark divisions, but are actively involved in the way in which nature, safety, accessibility and wildness are experienced.

It is precisely within this ambiguity that the concept of liminal landscapes proved to be useful in understanding what visible boundaries are experienced in wandering areas. As Turner (1979) describes, liminality refers to a transitional phase between two social or cultural states. In the case of wandering areas, it is not just a matter of a change in management, namely, the creation of a wandering area, but also a shift in how nature now relates to everyday users. These areas have been

designed as places where people and ‘wild nature’ may meet and interact within certain boundaries, yet the experiences seem to vary. By interpreting a wandering area as a liminal landscape, it enabled me to understand all of these different experiences within the same situation without them being, or having to be, the same, and them having to be fixed. The experiences with visible boundaries suggest that wandering areas are in a transitional phase, as these experiences are perceived differently by different people. This may be because it is a relatively new phenomenon for people to interact in and with the habitat of large grazers, certainly in the Western-Europe, where nature and culture were traditionally viewed as separate domains (Descola and Pálsson 1996). In wandering areas, however, these domains are literally merged: people are allowed into spaces where large grazers are also present. What is interesting here is that the visible boundary, the fence, not only marks a separation but also becomes an ambiguous object. It is simultaneously a gateway and a reminder of potential risks. In this way, it functions not merely as a boundary between nature and culture, but as a boundary that is constantly being redefined through the experience of the landscape itself. By viewing wandering areas as liminal landscapes, such an area can therefore be seen as one in transition and need not be one or the other.

Although the visible boundaries could be described without the use of the concept of liminality, the concept is proven useful because it allows these conversations to be brought together within a coherent framework. In doing so, it enabled me to interpretate visible boundaries as dynamic, context-dependent and relational, and not as fixed spatial demarcations. Therefore, participants’ experiences can all be understood as experiences with a visible boundary. Liminality creates space for these different experiences; it does not require all participants to experience visible boundaries in the same way, nor to explicitly recognise them as such. It is by viewing wandering areas as liminal landscapes that their relational and transitional nature is made clear.

Behind every fence, every gate and every stretch of barbed wire, the meaning of the visible boundary emerges through people’s interactions with, interpretations of, and feelings about safety, notions of nature, moral judgements and expectations regarding human-animal relationships. In the following chapter, I therefore focus on these invisible boundaries and examine what invisible boundaries are experienced in the wandering areas.

6. Invisible boundaries

As described in the previous chapter, visible boundaries are not static or fixed in terms of how they are perceived by different participants. At the same time, the previous chapter suggests that visible boundaries do not, in themselves, reveal what boundaries people actually experience. Their meaning emerges through people's interactions with, interpretations of, and feelings about the boundaries. This chapter therefore turns to invisible boundaries. In the first section, I examine what boundaries are sensed and experienced affectively. I then explore whether repeated encounters and familiarity can alter, blur or shift these boundaries over time. Finally, I discuss that invisible boundaries are not understood in the same way by everyone.

During my stay in KempenBroek, I invited several people to join me on a walk through the wandering areas. During one of these walks, Floor came along with me; this was her first time in a wandering area. Within a minute of stepping into the wandering area, she mentioned, "It feels as though we are being illegal here." Following this remark, a conversation ensued in which I tried to understand why she felt this way. As the conversation unfolded, I realized that it was not merely a sense of not following the rules that applied here, as the term 'illegal' formally implies. She described it as a sense of wonder at entering the habitat of these large grazers, but also a feeling that arose because we were not walking on a path and had to step over the faeces of Exmoor ponies to continue on our way. In this situation, a moment of 'matter out of place' (Douglas 1984) seems to arise. According to Douglas, feelings of disorder arise when people encounter something that does not fit within existing cultural classifications. For Floor, the animal faeces on the ground and the lack of a clear walking path disrupt her expectations of how a walking area should be organized. As a result, she seems to feel somewhat uncomfortable and not entirely at home in this environment. This suggests that an invisible boundary can be understood as a relational experience of (non-)belonging. This experience can be understood through the lens of affect, as an embodied and situational response to the encounter between human, animal and landscape. The Exmoor ponies do not intentionally deposit their faeces in this place to produce this situation, nor is the landscape designed to create exclusion; quite the opposite is the case, as wandering areas are intended as shared spaces for humans and non-human actors. Yet in practice, it becomes apparent that this is not experienced unambiguously. This suggests not merely a transfer of meaning from the Exmoor pony to Floor, but a relational process in which landscape, a human and animal presence together interact with their landscape, and respond to it with an affective experience of (non-)belonging.

The fact that not everyone seems to experience the openness of the wandering area the same way becomes clear in a conversation with Henk and Truus, a couple of keen walkers and nature lovers who own a holiday home near several wandering areas. Unsurprisingly, I met them for the first time whilst they were walking their dog. They told me that they regularly walk through the wandering areas with their dog, and do not find the presence of the Exmoor ponies a disruption or a source of

discomfort. Truus described it as follows: “They just look at you and do not pay you any mind... I think they are used to people walking there all the time.” Henk also made a similar comment about the Tauros cattle in a nearby area that is temporarily closed to visitors: “You could just walk right through there, because they do not pay any attention to you; they are quite sociable.” In these descriptions, the large grazers are attributed a social nature, with their behaviour interpreted as a form of acceptance of human presence. At the same time, Truus noted that this experience, for her, has changed over time. The first time she walked through a wandering area with Exmoor ponies, she actually found it quite intimidating, partly because her dog was off the lead at the time. Henk responded to this with a humorous remark that “she”, referring to their dog, “probably understands it better than people do, I think.” This aligns with another experience shared by Sandra, who also regularly walks her dog in the area. She explained that she actively adapts her behaviour to the presence of the animals: “Yes, if they are really lying there, I leave them be. Because I am walking with a dog too, and of course I do not want them to be scared by the dog or anything like that.” This suggests that in these cases the presence of large grazers may go hand in hand with a form of self-regulation, in which keeping one’s distance and avoiding disturbance become part of the experience of the space. The experiences of Henk, Truus and Sandra suggest that invisible boundaries in relation to approaching large grazers vary or can be interpreted differently, depending on the behaviour of the large grazers, the presence of a dog, and previous experiences in the area. Whilst some visitors did not seem to experience a sense of non-belonging because they regard the grazers as sociable and used to humans, a form of affective alignment develops in which behaviour is adapted to the presence of the grazers and the perceived implicit, unwritten rules of the space. At the same time, the experiences together suggest that this experience may not be static, but develops and changes over time. Repeated interactions with the landscape and the grazers contribute to a growing sense of familiarity, in which an affective relationship develops between human, animal and place. In addition, these statements suggest that not only human experience, but also the presence of an animal companion helps shape the perception of the area, and how this perception is formed through experience and time.

Yet another conversation seems to reveal that this change over time and the repetition of experiences does not always lead to the same understanding of the situation; my conversation with Leo suggests that it can also lead to criticism of management policy and that this can be explained as an example of a cognitive connection with nature. Leo, voiced strong criticism of ARK, the organisation responsible for the rewilding of the area and the release of semi-wild grazers. His criticism focuses in particular on the idea that the area is presented as a form of ‘wilderness’. He stated: “There is no evidence of how it was before,” and described how, in his view, ARK presents the cattle “as a kind of natural factor that will guide the entire process here.” In his interpretation, the Tauros cattle seem to function not only as ecological agents, but also as bearers of a narrative that determines what is regarded as “natural” and “wild”. This example suggests that Leo’s connection and experience with the wandering area around his home, is based on his knowledge of the area. Ives et al.

(2018) describe this as one of the types of connection a person can have with nature, namely a cognitive connection. In this vein, the invisible boundary can be understood not as an affective experience between humans, animals and the landscape, but a form of knowledge of the environment and values towards nature. What is comparable to the affective experience here is that the message is not received as intended. In this case, ARK's aim is to create a habitat for thousands of plant and animal species, as well as a place where people can experience peace and nature (ARK Rewilding Nederland 2014). This seems to highlight a difference with Leo, who says: "They are behind a fence, aren't they? So you could say, yes, it is wild and they have to figure it out for themselves, but then you have to open the fence." This difference in knowledge and values appears to create an invisible boundary, suggesting that it is not only emotion, the situation and change over time that can influence what invisible boundary is experienced. The cognitive connection with nature, knowledge, also seems to play a role in what invisible boundaries are experienced.

This chapter demonstrates that invisible boundaries are experienced and interpreted in different ways. This chapter differentiates between three invisible boundaries that are experienced differently. The first is the way in which people experience a situation in terms of affect, which is related to their sensory perception. The second is how the experience can change over time or by taking a dog along. And the last is the cognitive connection with nature, which can provide a different perspective on the situation. Furthermore, in both this and the previous chapter, it has proved difficult to consistently distinguish between visible and invisible boundaries, as these are in fact always in interplay with one another, as well as with people, animals and the landscape. That is why, in the following chapter, I will explore the interplay of visible and invisible boundaries.

7. The interplay of visible and invisible boundaries

The previous two chapters suggest that visible and invisible boundaries can be experienced in different ways. However, in practice, the division between visible and invisible boundaries is not always clearly definable. In the previously described participants' experiences, visible and invisible boundaries already seem to appear in constant interplay. Drawing on participants' experiences, I demonstrate in this chapter that boundaries do not stand alone, but arise from the relationships between people, animals and the landscape. First, I discuss situations in which it is the absence of a visible boundary that gives rise to an invisible boundary. I then explain that these boundaries can change over time, through experiences and processes of familiarisation. Finally, I discuss that this interplay of boundaries can evoke ethical reflections and tensions surrounding wildness, nature conservation and responsibility.

The first experience which suggests interplay between visible and invisible boundaries is Bert's, which I explained in greater detail in chapter 4. Together with his wife, Bert climbs over a barbwire fence after they have come across a cow with large horns. The cow does not approach them, and it seems there is no immediate threat. Nevertheless, a sense of vulnerability and insecurity seems to arise, leading to the decision to cross the barbwire. The absence of visible boundary, the barbwire, in between them and the cow, seems to give rise to the invisible boundary emerging between them. The absence of a fence between the cow and Bert seems to create a sense of unease, or even fear. There is no clear separation between the cow's space and the human's, which seems to make the situation unclear and uncertain for Bert. This seems to be the reason why he and his wife climb over the fence, creating a visible boundary that reduces unfamiliarity and fear by making the cow's presence more familiar and less uncertain. This reaction cannot be explained by any single factor or boundary. It seems to be precisely the combination of the cow's presence, the spatial context of the wandering area and Bert and his wife's position within this situation, and the boundaries that give rise to this experience. A similar dynamic seems to emerge in the experience of Floor who said she felt she was in the area 'illegally'. Here too, there is no explicit restriction or direct intervention, yet a sense of a boundary seems to arise nonetheless. What is similar here is that there is no fence or other visible boundary between the large grazer and the participant; in these instances, this seems to lead to a sense of vulnerability. What probably initially felt like excitement at entering the area with these large grazers gives way to a different feeling as the participants get closer to the large grazer within the area. Another common feature of these experiences is that, for both participants, it is their first time in a wandering area, which I have noticed also seems to have an impact on the experiencing of boundaries.

This can be shown by the experiences of Sandra and Joost as for them this is not the first time they have visited a wandering area and experienced the large grazers. Sandra and Joost are familiar with the area, which seems to suggest that they experience it differently and behave differently to the

boundaries. Sandra suggests this by illustrating the following experience: when she comes across large grazers behind a fence whilst out walking her dog, she chooses to leave them be and take a different route: “If they’re laying there, I leave them be.” This action suggests an invisible boundary, in which taking the presence of animals into account becomes part of her practice of movement. Instead of feeling unfamiliarity and fear at the presence of large grazers on her route, she knows that, with her dog, she is better off taking a different route and leaving these grazers in their own space. Here, she chooses to leave the visible boundary between herself and the large grazers be, by means of an invisible boundary: namely, the knowledge and familiarity she has built up over time. This familiarity and knowledge also seems to be evident when speaking to Joost, who works in wildlife management. He articulates a comparable but normative perspective when he states that we should not claim the landscape as our own, but approach it as if we were guests: “not as some sort of owner. But as a good guest.” In doing so, he suggests that the landscape belongs to the large grazers. This can be understood as an invisible boundary that management makes visible in a different way by setting rules for the wandering areas. These two participants appear to have more experience within and of the wandering area than the first two participants. It can therefore be suggested that familiarity with the wandering areas and the large grazers, can also prompt ethical reflection, encouraging people to consider their own responsibility within a wandering area. This suggests that the interplay with the landscape and the large grazers is not static but can change as a result of accumulated experiences, ethical reflections and change over time. Ethical considerations appear to have emerged in the participants’ experiences, which is why I will explore them further in the following section.

In the upcoming experiences of Saskia, Joos and Leo, ethical reflection seems to take the form of ethical friction. Saskia describes how seeing a dead Tauros in a fence evokes feelings of sadness and anger in her. This experience touches on her ethical beliefs about how to treat large grazers. Here, the fence seems to function not only as a visible boundary, but also becomes an ethically charged object in which care and responsibility converge. This suggest that this ethical form of care blurs the boundary between wild and not or semi-wild. Leo seems to align with this ethical form of care by pointing out that one cannot speak of something as ‘wild’ when there is a fence around it. His comment suggests that he experiences an ethical tension between how the wandering areas are intended to be used and how he perceives them. Like Saskia, he implies a sense of responsibility and care that we, as humans, therefore have towards animals kept within a fence. This also evokes during the conversation with Joost, when he mentioned: “We cannot put fences around everything”. This suggests that he, too, has engaged in ethical reflection, in which the tension between control and letting go appears in the form of care. This can be understood in such a way that, here too, visible and invisible boundaries are in constant interplay with both one another and the people, animals and landscape, and cannot be viewed in isolation from one another.

This chapter demonstrates that visible and invisible boundaries are almost always in interplay with one another, and also with people, animals and the landscape. This can be seen both in the

experiences of Bert and Floor, who are in the wandering area for the first time, and in the experiences of Sandra and Joost, who have been in these areas much more frequently and are therefore familiar with the area, possessing knowledge which they apply when interacting with a large grazer. For them too, this interplay appear to shape their experiences. Additionally Joost, Saskia and Leo share a more reflected relational experience of boundaries where they show ethically grounded insights, which seem to imply that they sometimes do not understand why certain management decisions have been taken, or that it at least evokes a sense of friction in them. These experiences show the interplay between boundaries in a broader aspect. With this in mind, I conclude the final empirical chapter and, in the next chapter, I will link these findings to one another and to the broader theories associated with these topics.

8. Discussion

The interviews with visitors and residents have shown that both visible and invisible boundaries can be experienced in different ways. They also suggest that visible and invisible boundaries often do not exist in isolation from one another, but are in constant interplay. In this chapter, I discuss these findings in relation to the theoretical framework and the existing literature. In doing so, I focus specifically on the contribution this research makes to our understanding of boundaries in wandering areas. For this research, I adopted a more-than-human and multispecies perspective. This perspective proved useful, as it made it possible to approach boundaries not as fixed objects, but as relational phenomena that arise in interactions between people, animals and the landscape (Haraway 2008; Kirksey & Helmreich 2010; Tsing 2013). Whilst previous studies have primarily emphasised that relationships are central to more-than-human worlds, this research examines the boundaries actually experienced by visitors and residents in their everyday interactions with large grazers in wandering areas.

The interviews suggest that experiences of boundaries are not shaped solely by visible boundaries, such as fences and barbwire. Encounters with large grazers, past experiences, personal beliefs and views on nature also appear to play an important role. This suggests that boundaries are not experienced uniformly. Even within the relatively small group of participants, clear differences emerged in the way wandering areas, nature and large grazers were interpreted. These findings align with the idea that boundaries are constantly negotiated and interpreted, rather than existing as static categories (Lamont & Molnár 2002; West, Igoe & Brockington 2006). Several participants described that their experiences changed as they visited the area more frequently or had more encounters with large grazers. What impressed me here was that a first encounter with a wandering area could evoke a range of reactions, varying from enthusiasm to uncertainty or fear. As participants gained more experience, they seemed to develop a better understanding of what to expect from the area and the animals. This suggests that boundaries are not merely spatial arrangements, but also experiential phenomena whose meaning depends on context, knowledge and interaction.

Another finding that arose from both my own experiences and my conversations with participants is that wandering areas are commonly perceived as in-between spaces. They exist between the wild and the domesticated, between nature and recreation, between closeness to and distance from the animals, and between familiar and unfamiliar ways of experiencing nature. This sense of an in-between space was already apparent during the exploratory phase of my research, but it emerged even more strongly in the conversations with participants. The concept of liminality helped me to better understand these experiences. As liminality refers to a transitional phase, wandering areas can be seen as landscapes in transition. What became particularly apparent in this research is that this transition is linked to a relatively new way of coexisting and engaging in recreational activities with semi-wild animals. Within the Dutch and European/Western context, people have long been

accustomed to a clear separation between humans and animals (Descola & Pálsson 1996). Wandering areas appear to break down this separation, giving rise to new forms of coexistence. The results therefore suggest that wandering areas cannot be understood as static landscapes, but rather as liminal landscapes that are constantly changing and in which various experiences may arise that can only be understood through the experiences of everyday users.

As well as differences in the experience of the landscape, differences also emerged in the way in which interactions between people, animals and the landscape were experienced. During the analysis, I initially found it difficult to describe this dimension, until I came across the concept of ‘affect’ in the literature. This concept proved helpful in understanding experiences that participants sometimes found difficult to put into words and which were also difficult for me, as a researcher, to describe. Feelings of tension, uncertainty, freedom, comfort or alertness often played an important role in how boundaries were experienced. In several instances, participants became aware of a boundary even where no physical barrier was present. The presence of large grazers or certain features of the landscape evoked physical and emotional responses that acted as a form of boundary. This finding highlights that boundaries are not only experienced consciously and physically, but also arise through affective embodied and sensory experiences.

When these various findings are viewed together, it becomes clear that visible and invisible boundaries often cannot be understood in isolation from one another. An interplay between the two emerged in just about all the interviews. The presence or absence of visible boundaries influenced what invisible boundaries participants experienced. At the same time, emotions, experiences and encounters with large grazers influenced the way in which visible boundaries were interpreted. Moreover, these boundaries do not exist in isolation, but are closely linked to the landscape and the animals within it. As a result, invisible boundaries did not appear as abstract concepts, but took on meaning in the interactions between people, animals and elements of the landscape. These findings are consistent with insights from the literature on boundaries, multispecies relationships, affect and liminality, whilst at the same time demonstrating what boundaries are experienced in everyday practices in the wandering areas. The results suggest that boundaries cannot be understood solely as fixed spatial dividing lines, but that they are also shaped by relational, affective and liminal processes. This research thus contributes to a better understanding and new narratives of the ways in which boundaries are experienced and interpreted in everyday encounters between people, large grazers and the landscape in wandering areas.

At the same time, this study has a couple of limitations. Firstly, the research is based on a relatively small group of participants. This is because recreational use of the areas studied was limited during the research period, making it difficult to reach a larger and more diverse group of respondents within the time available. Furthermore, the sample was not gender-balanced, as more men than women were interviewed. This may have influenced the analysis to some extent, as not all perspectives may have been given equal consideration. However, this study did not aim for statistical

representativeness, but rather to gain in-depth insights into situated experiences of human–animal interactions and the boundaries experienced within them. In this regard, the gender imbalance poses less of a problem, given the qualitative and exploratory nature of this study, although it remains a relevant consideration when interpreting the diversity of perspectives. At the same time, the smaller sample size made it possible to delve deeper into the participants’ experiences and analyse them in greater detail, which has enhanced the analytical depth of the study. A second limitation concerns the research’s multispecies ambition. Although this research was inspired by a multispecies ethnographic perspective and approaches animals, boundaries and landscape as active participants in the creation of experiences, the empirical material remained largely human-centred. Even though, the sensory walks contributed to a more embodied engagement with the field and made the presence of non-human actors more visible, the data collected ultimately consisted mainly of human narratives and interpretations. At the same time, it is important to recognise that even if more extensive observations of animals had been carried out, these observations would still be interpreted from my own epistemological perspective. This approach proved effective for studying the narratives and experiences of everyday users, and made it possible to gain more in-depth insights than would have been possible had non-human observations also been taken into account. This results in a more human-centred perspective, whilst still offering greater analytical depth within the chosen focus.

For future research, it would be valuable to combine ethnographic methods with ecological or ethological approaches that focus on the behaviour of large grazers. Such a combination could provide greater insight into the way in which both human and non-human perspectives contribute to the emergence and experience of boundaries within wandering areas.

9. Recommendations

As this research forms part of the WildlifeNL project, I would like to add a few recommendations that may be relevant to the project's further development. During this research, I have examined the experiences of visitors and residents of the wandering areas in KempenBroek in relation to the large grazers present there. Both the interviews and my own experiences suggest that these experiences vary considerably. Not only do people differ in their views on nature and large grazers, but previous experiences, familiarity with the area and repeat visits also appear to influence what boundaries are experienced. On this basis, I would recommend making space within the WildlifeNL project for the experiences of those who use these areas. The interviews conducted as part of this research show that boundaries do not simply exist in the form of fences, grids or rules. They acquire meaning through the everyday interactions between people, animals and the landscape. As a result, an area may be experienced differently by its users than by those responsible for its design and management.

Furthermore, the interviews revealed that boundaries are often not perceived as clear dividing lines. For some visitors, for example, large grazers formed a clear boundary, whilst others actually perceived these animals as part of an attractive and accessible landscape. This shows that the same management measure or landscape design can have different effects on different user groups. It would therefore be valuable, in future phases of WildlifeNL, to focus on what users actually experience in and around the areas. Not only through surveys or one-off consultation opportunities, but also by engaging in longer-term dialogue with people who use the areas regularly or live right next to them. Such insights can help to better understand what changes to the landscape are experienced and which factors contribute to feelings of safety, uncertainty, freedom or a sense of connection. Which, in turn, contributes to people living together with wild animals.

Finally, the interviews suggest that experiences change through repetition and familiarity. Several participants described that their perception of large grazers or the area changed as they visited the area more frequently. This suggests that acceptance and understanding do not depend solely on the provision of information, but also arise from repeated encounters and experiences. It may therefore be valuable not only to communicate about the presence and role of large grazers, but also to seek ways in which visitors can become familiar with this form of coexistence in an accessible manner. Taking users' experiences into account provides a more complete picture of how recreational areas function in everyday practice. This not only enables ecological objectives to be achieved, but also ensures a better alignment with the ways in which people actually experience and use these areas.

10. Conclusion

Visible and invisible boundaries are almost always experienced in interplay with one another, with the animals and with the landscape. In fact, both the visible and invisible boundaries chapters already demonstrated that these cannot be perceived or understood as isolated phenomena. That is why, in Chapter 6, I demonstrated in what way this interplay nature became apparent during my own experiences and conversations with participants throughout this research. It appeared that it is not only the visible and invisible boundaries that are in constant interplay. In fact, boundaries cannot be viewed separately from the people, animals, and landscape in which these boundaries are situated or occur. This suggests that a change in a boundary, a person, an animal, or the landscape influences the other relational aspects in this area. That is why the concepts of liminality and affect proved useful in this research. They helped me understand that both visible and invisible boundaries as well as the experiences are context-specific, fluid, capable of changing over time, related, and in transition. Therefore, in my recommendations to the WildlifeNL project, I have included the importance of taking into account the everyday practices and experiences of those who use the area in future research of this project. This enables a better understanding of both the experiences with the areas and the large grazers in practice. These insights can then help to improve the coexistence of people and wild animals.

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