

# **Turning The Tide**

Essays on Dutch ways with water

Cover picture

Citizens of the village Arcen en Velden, near Venlo, constructing an emergency dyke.  
Photographer: Raymond Rutting, courtesy ANP. Date: 30-01-1995

### **About the author**

Professor Henk L.F. Saeijs (1935) studied biology (Utrecht) and aquatic ecology (Amsterdam) and gained his doctorate with the thesis 'Changing Estuaries' (Leiden). In this thesis he showed the relationship between technology, ecology and administration during large hydrological projects and in doing so, he laid the foundation for modern water management which is based on a holistic and ecological approach. For twelve years he managed Environmental Research at the Delta Project and for a further six years was Chief of Water Management at the Central Management Office of the Ministry of Public Waterworks and Water Management.

There he was the spiritual father and driving force behind modernization and "ecologization" of water management (integral water management, water system approach, active biological management, guided ecosystem development, etc.). After having been Acting Manager of the Directorate Noordzee he was appointed Director Zeeland (a Dutch province). Among other activities he is a member of the 'International Commission on Large Dams' (ICOLD), chairman of the Dutch delegation (NETHCOLD) and chairman of the international Committee on the role of dams in river basins. He advised a number of large water hydrological projects outside Nederland such as the storm surge barrier at Saint Petersburg. For 10 years he was a professor of water management at the Erasmus University of Rotterdam. He has lectured at countless gatherings and has written many articles for (inter)national journals and symposia. These many achievements brought him royal recognition for public services by being appointed an Officer in the Order of Oranje Nassau (one of the highest Dutch honors to be awarded).

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Essays on Dutch ways with water

*H.L.F. Saeijs*

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tel. +31 15 278 2124, telefax +31 15 278 7585, e-mail: [hlf@vssd.nl](mailto:hlf@vssd.nl)

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*"We are facing the challenge to find a new relation to nature, where respect for ecological balance, cautious and caring measures are prime considerations"*

*H.M. Queen Beatrix, 1999*

## **Preface**

Dutch history is characterized by a constant struggle against water. For centuries the inhabitants of the Low Countries have been fighting the rising level of the sea and the rivers.

Displaying their technical genius they developed defence strategies, ranging from primitive terps to technical marvels such as the Delta Works. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century a new problem presented itself: pollution. The Dutch society was not only threatened by the amount of water but also by its quality.

One could say that the Dutch water problems have swollen to torrential proportions. Protection against flood disasters is still the main objective and has become even more complicated by factors that are hard to forecast, such as the rise of the sea level with simultaneous sinking of the land.

Quite paradoxically Nederland is increasingly confronted with a shortage of water, high quality fresh drinking water to be precise.

When distributing this water, different and often conflicting interests need to be weighed against each other: the need for housing, the requirement of water for agriculture, nature and ecology. This kind of interactive, yet differing interests have made water management a complex affair.

My motto "problems don't exist, only challenges do" has guided the path in my working years and provided me with the required enthusiasm when dealing with water management.

I have had the good fortune to have first hand experience with all the pro's and cons within the department of Water Management, in what may very well be termed one of the most exciting periods of Dutch water management.

Even after my retirement I am still bombarded with questions on this very subject. To me this is proof that even today many people are concerned with its different aspects. This led to the idea that it might be useful to put the experiences and knowledge I have gathered over the past decades on record.

I hope this publication will deepen the reader's understanding of the turbulent developments over the last 30 years and contribute to sharpening the insight of present and future water managers.

This little bundle of 17 essays has been written and collected with a broad audience in mind. It includes businessmen, politicians, water managers, students and last but not least the large group of interested members of the general public, who simply wish to know more about the aspects in the background of this area that is so vital to their country.

Mainly because of this broad spectrum I refrained from placing references to source literature in the text and sufficed with a list following the essays.

The essays can be read on their own in any sequence. When choosing for a bundle of essays one can hardly avoid that some subjects will be mentioned more than once, sometimes from different viewpoints when this fits the flow and argumentation of a specific essay.

I hope that the kaleidoscope of all the essays jointly will shed some relevant light on the problems and complexity of the world of water. The common feature is the process of rejuvenation in the field of water management, the “wet revolution”, “ecologisation” and the global impact. I have not sidestepped anecdotes and personal experiences. Discussions go with the flow, be it the flow of salt or the flow of fresh water.

The title “Turning The Tide” encompasses more than that. It symbolizes our fear of water, yet at the same time it stands for my passion for water, a passion I share with many others.

The foreign readership will in many cases not be familiar with the topography of the Netherlands. Those essays that discuss Dutch matters inevitably contain Dutch names. I have chosen not to translate those names, even if there is an English name for e.g. the Rhine, the Scheldt, the Meuse, The Hague, Antwerp, or even The Netherlands. So all topographical names have been kept in Dutch, and to be of some help to readers who wonder where all those places are to be found, a map has been included on page 142.

### **Acknowledgements**

Books like this are never the work of only one person, so I would like to thank those who helped me. In the first place my gratitude is to Jacques Schievink, who impressed upon me the importance of transferring knowledge and experience in this way, helping me with his constant drive and enthusiasm to bring this task to a fruitful end.

I further owe thanks to all those who have cooperated with me in the past forty years when writing hundreds of lectures and articles. Some of these articles have inspired a few essays of this book.

That is the main reason for mentioning Leo Adiaanse and Inez Flameling by name, very closely followed by Leo Santbergen, Cees-Jan van Westen en Madeline Winnubst, Mark van Berkel, and Toine Smits, Willem Overmars and Daphne Willems for their indirect contributions. Finally a warm word of thanks to Annie van der Meer and my daughters, Astrid and Geesje Saeijs, who were always there with good advice and a helping hand.

Henk L.F. Saeijs

Middelburg, April 2008

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