



# Animals on their own

Experiences from the Netherlands

Renée Meissner, Herds&Homelands, November 2021

# Experiences semi-wild grazing of horses and cattle

30 years experience

Theory to practise

- ethics
- law and regulation
- herd-management
- ethology
- public support
- education



# Animal welfare leading..

- ethics
- law and regulation
- herd-management
- ethology
- public support
- education



# Rooting of the concept



- seventies: new thinking
- scientific and popular publications
- criticism, misunderstanding
- practical experiences
- symposia
- today: commonly accepted



# First examples of near natural landscape with semi natural herds

1983

Oostvaardersplassen

State forestry

3000 ha new wetland

Heckcattle, Konik horse  
and red deer



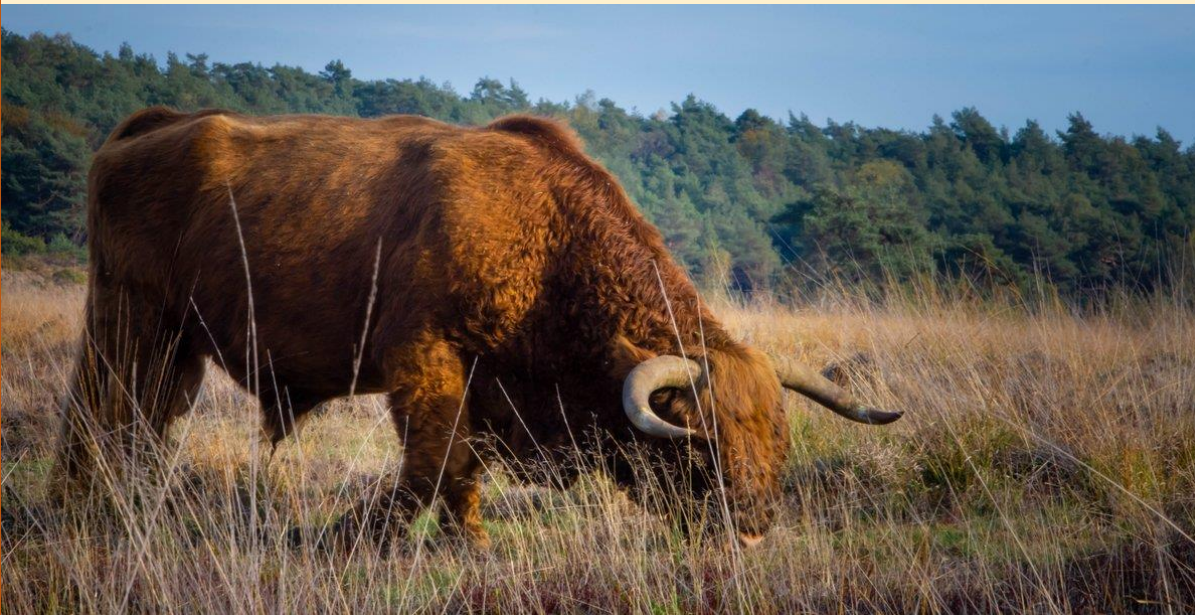
1985

Nationaal Park Veluwezoom

NM – private organization with members

Pioneering on 5 ha with Highland cattle

Upscaled to 5000 ha sandy soil mixed forest with Highland cattle and Red deer



1991

Ark

Foundation for nature development. Floodplains

Start 16 ha with 3 Konik horse

Upscaled to ten-thousands ha mixed grazing



# Ark

## Nature development on former agricultural land

From pioneering in the last century to nowadays practise

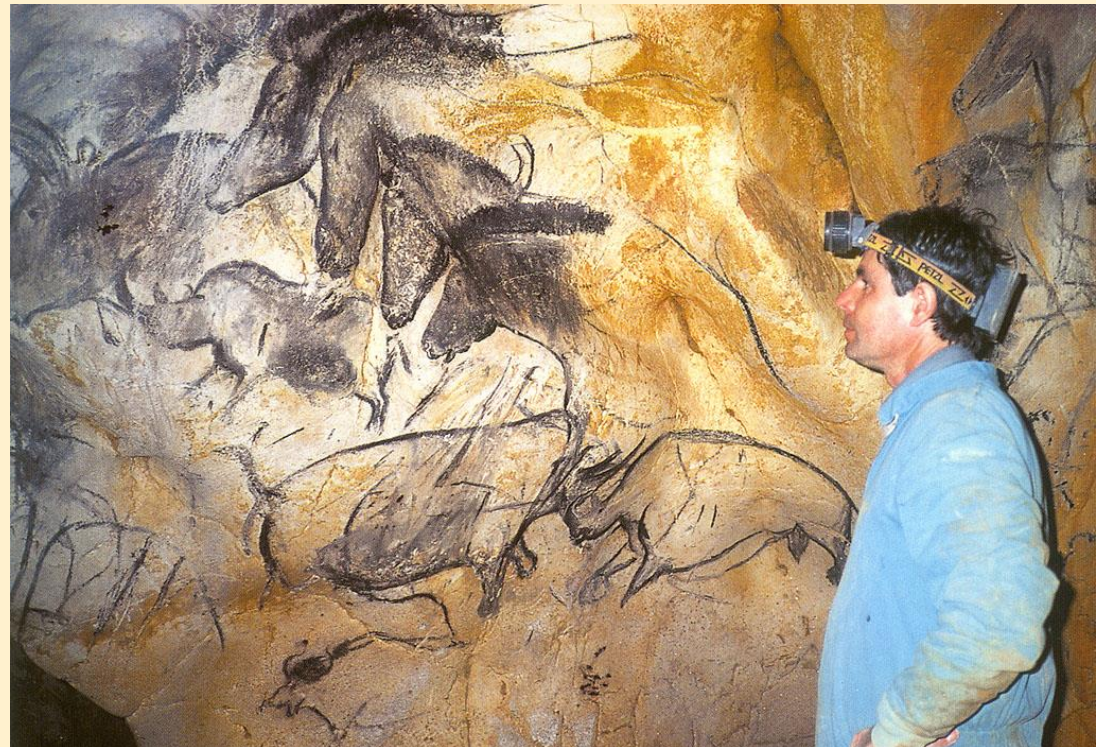
- Many ten thousands ha of this form of land use:  
Rewilded by natural grazing
- Thousands of bovines, horses, waterbuffalo and several wild species, wisent
- Open acces to public
- New nature area's. Often close to city. Easy to experience
- Education
- Wilderness meat for sale from most of the area's



# Experiences horses and cattle

Focus presentation on cattle and horses as substitute for wild extinct ancestors

Wisent : similar principles but own approach as a wild species





## Principles

- a) Herds as natural as possible
- a) As less intervention as possible
- a) DNA sampling for research





## a) Herds as natural as possible

- Equal distribution sexes
- Natural age structure
- All year round
- Birth till death in the wild
- Migration



## b) As less intervention as possible

- Hands off management
- No additional feeding
- No antibiotics, no deworming
- No (claw- or hoof) trimming
- Reluctant veterinary treatment





## c) DNA sampling for research

- Knowledge gained through observation in combination with DNA determinations
- Species specific behavior leads to species specific management







Nakomelingen van deze koe

Caitlin vd Groenlanden

Nakomelingen van deze stier

naam	geb. datum	naam vader
Cairenn van de	♀ 26-08-1999	Johannes vh Lilbosch
Cathy van de	♀ 1-07-2001	Black Adder van de
Chantal van de	♀ 14-05-2002	Black Adder van de

naam	geb. datum	naam moeder

&

Caitlin vd Groenlanden

2132 4972 2

? Mandol  
1218 2242 4

? Mac Martin  
72 19521

? Max  
72 22180

/ Nancy  
72 11614

? Majestic of Glenturk  
47 1347 WSA M.47

/ Favourite  
72 30763

/ Favourite of Castefairn  
47 1939

? Mac Martin  
72 19521

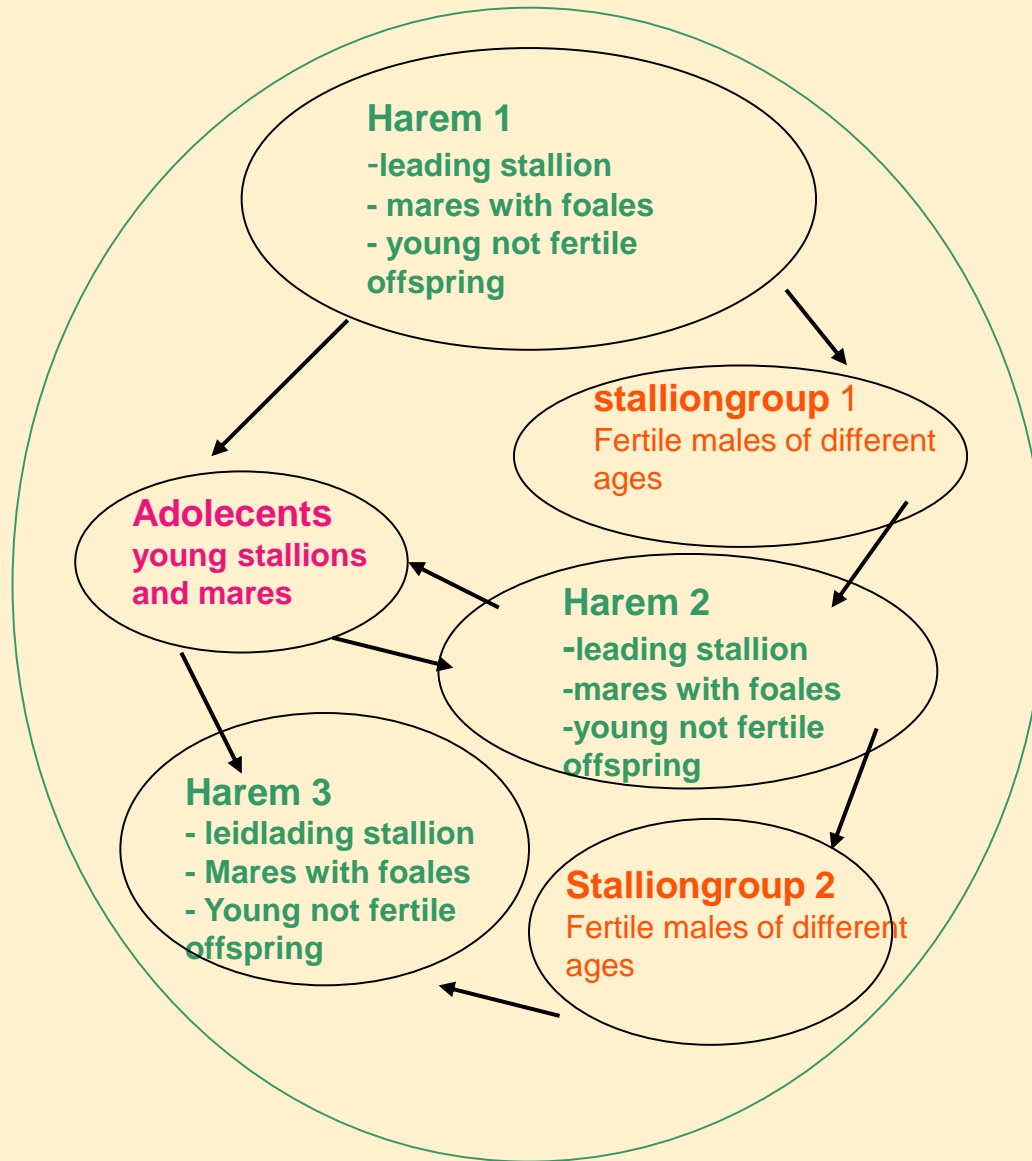
? Mandol  
1218 2242 4

/ Favourite  
72 30763

/ Carpa van het Duin  
1462 1759 9

# Horses

**Social  
herd**



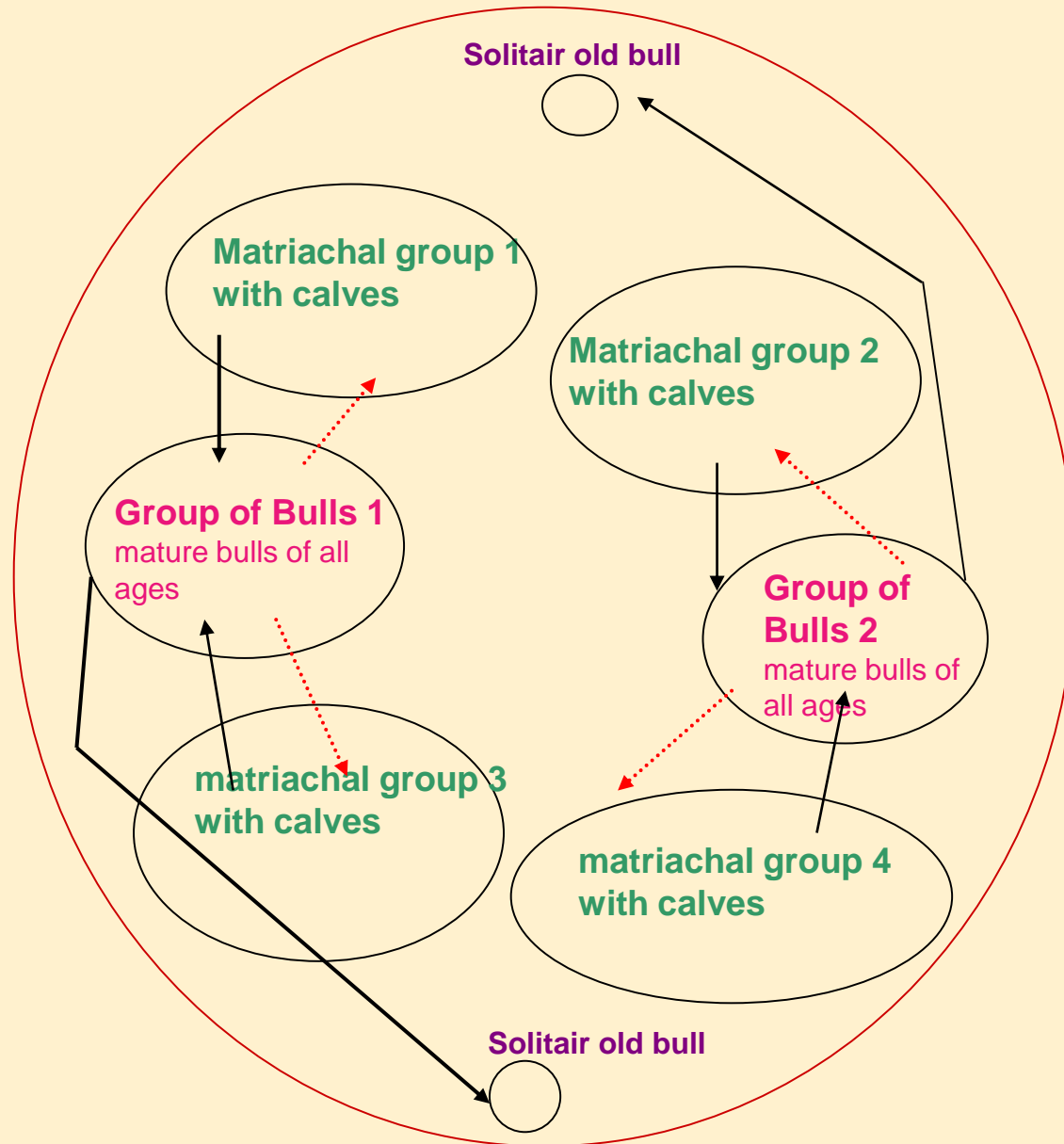




Harems can still be distinguished

# Cattle

**Social  
herd**







Mothers and daughters close





Group of bulls



RUTTING



SUBSONE



# Guidelines for herd management

## lessons learned



- Species specific group formation
- Inbreeding avoidance due to dispersion
- Social bonding



# Rewilding leads to dedomestication

## Consequences

- Does not comply with regulations for classically kept animals
- Cooperation with like-minded people
- Framing untaming
- Meetings and mutual field visits
- Cooperation with ministry and enforcers



# From wild to domestication, to dedomestication



Domestication took thousands of years!

What to expect of dedomestication?



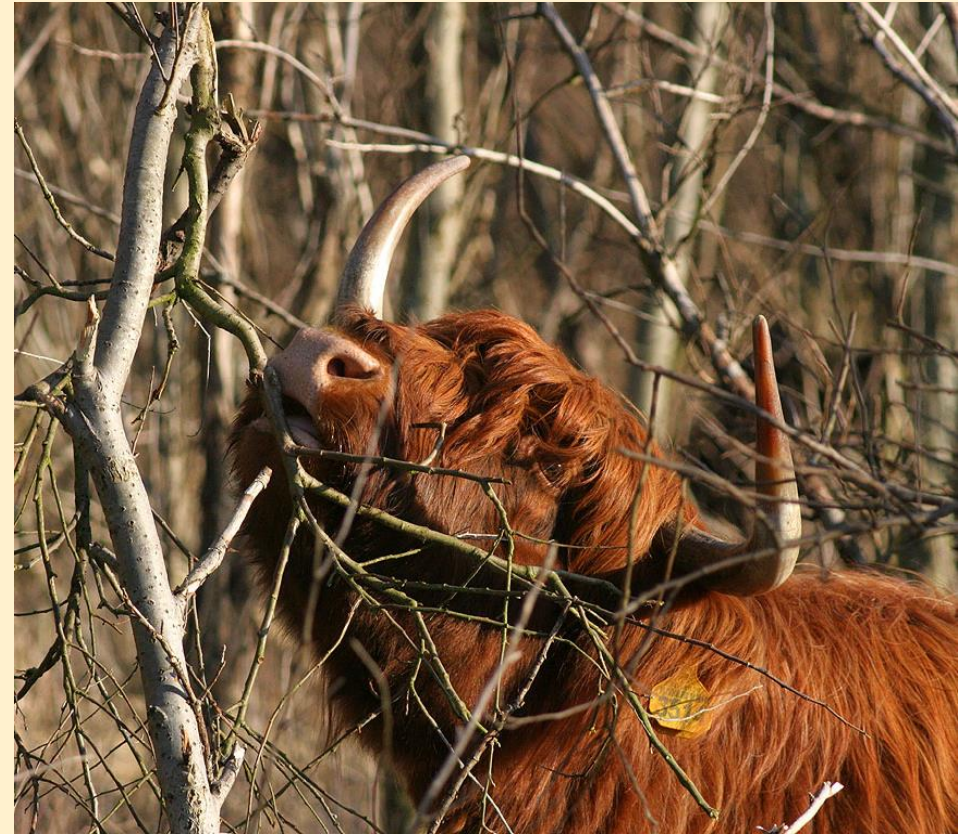


# Domestication

- Changed use of senses and physics
- Either different emphasis or loss
- Loss of survival tools

## Dedomestication

- Giving back survival tools
- Measures that stimulate animals to refind natural behaviour







Synchronised births





Calves-Crèche





Natural partner choice





Equal time budget



# Number regulation and introduction

- Adjust herd management to natural dispersion
- know the group hierarchy and work with it
- do not break strong bondings
- keep leading animals with field knowledge
- introduce in social group
- exchange to similar habitat





# No additional feeding

Effect:

- Optimal use of the area, seasonal migration
- Optimal herd knowledge nutritional and medicinal plants
- Seed dispersal
- Optimal adapted digestive system
- More resistance

! Condition determination at end of growing season

! In exceptional cases hay, high water, legal obligation animal welfare



# Natural healing



8/11/2001



11/12/2001



29/12/2001



17/02/2002





Mourning

# Dutch national policy since 90-ties

Track A B C

Distinctive areas and regulations exemptions:

- Track A: seen as wild animals: 5000 ha
- Track B: semi-wild animals: 100 ha
- Track C: kept animals, classic

Track A OVP and Veluwezoom

- no I&R
- no replacement
- no consumption
- shooting in case suffering
- carcass may stay in field
- often discussion





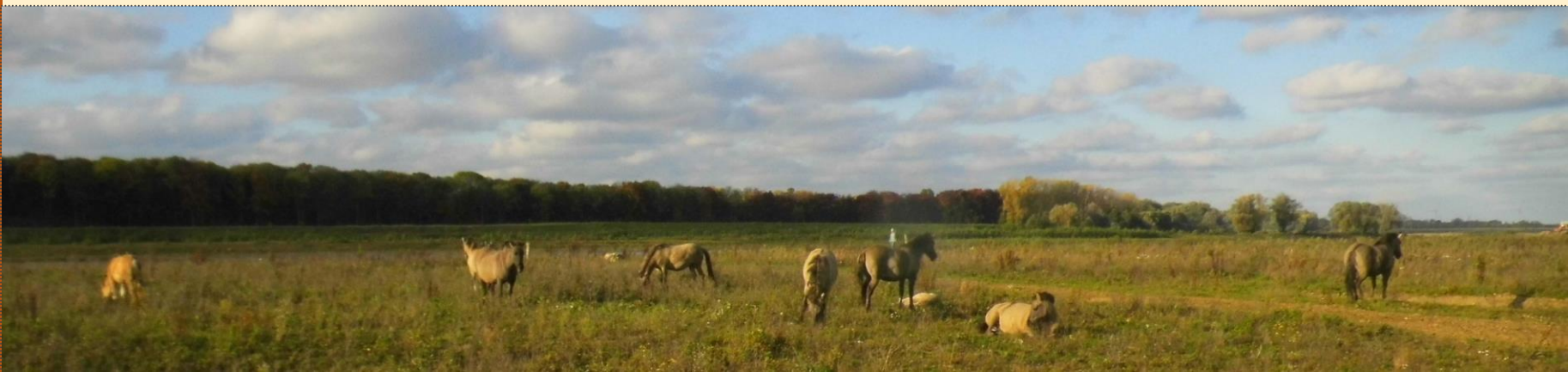
## Track B

- Minimum 100 ha
- Tens of areas , Ark and other owners
- Law and regulations as for kept animals
- Exemptions
- Animal welfare and law can be contradictory
- Later marking
- Transport in social group
- Pilot for carcasses
- Copied to the AHR



# After 10 generations dedomestication

- Public acceptance and recognition
- For many Dutch people: nature close to home, part of daily life
- Part of infrastructural planning
- Grazing and rewilding in academic and practical education
- Rewilding and dedomestication seen as a modern specialism of animal husbandry
- More biodiversity





# Discussion on animal welfare

*Where and how to find the balance between ethics and ecology.  
How to move the management in agreement with the changing degree of wildness.*

*From which point of view is animal welfare determined:  
With a human view or from the animal sight?*





