
History of 'Het Staelduinse Bos'

The history of 'Het Staelduinse Bos' is closely linked to the genesis of 'Het Westland'. After the last ice age shallows formed along the shoreline, and in later years these protruded from the water in the form of sand ridges. Grains of sand, consistently blown inland from these ridges, formed dunes during the Middle Ages. These linear dunes contained openings through which rivers entered the sea. Southwest of Monster was such an opening. Along these river estuaries ridges developed. 's-Gravenzande, Monster and the Staelduinse Bos are all situated on such ridges. Two important events in the 12th and 13th century defined the Staelduinen: a stronger dune formation, creating a.o. 'De Beer', and the building of a dike along the north side of the area.

Nowadays traces of this genesis are still visible in the wood. A small group of very low dunes and ridges run across the wood (just east of the 'Oude Hooislag'), indicating that this used to be a beach with dunes forming.

In around AD 1240 the 'Maasdijk' was constructed. In the area south of the dike was a large area of newly created grounds, called the 'Sandelingen' which contained a line of dunes called 'Radunen'. These grounds slowly spread further south and shortly after the year 1300 a dike was built around its northernmost part, which is now called the 'Andel'. In 1371 Willem, lord of Naaldwijk, was granted a lease of the Andel. The 'Staelluden's right to visit the area at all times was laid down in the contract.

This contract marks the beginning of the written history of how the Staelduinen came to be. Around 1300 fishermen must have lived at the Staelduinen. They fished for salmon using traps and nets. These were attached to stakes ('stalen') which were deeply driven into the river bed. They scraped out a miserable existence. It is most commonly believed that the name 'Staelduinen' is derived from this type of fishing (Staelvisserij).

Soon after Willem of Naaldwijk received the lease of the Andel, he donated a chapel to the 'Staelvissers'. This chapel was dedicated to St. Ursula and her 11000 virgins and was served by monks of the Norbertine Order in Heymond (close to Westerlee). The monks used to walk to the dune across a little dike. Hence the little dike between the Maasdijk and the wood became known as the 'Papedijk' ('Pape' referring to 'papal') .

The houses and the chapel were probably located at about the same place as the current forester's house and visitor centre, but up until today not a single trace has been found of this wooden settlement. The settlement was never very big; in around 1420 only 6 or 7 houses and a chapel existed. During this time people built dikes around the 'Nieuwlandspolder', and as a consequence, the Staelduinen then lay on the outside of these dikes. Around 1500 the settlement disappeared because of the silting of the Maas estuary and the rivers moving further south.

After 1500 a tenant farmer lived in the Staelduinen, whose task it was to supervise the area. At that time there were one or two bigger farms in the Staelduinen, located at the place of the current 'Wetering' farm. Dune grassland was being grazed by sheep. South of the Staelduinen, a vast area of new grounds were developing because of the rivers' changing course. This period also saw the creation of the 'Beer'.

Up until the 18th century the Staelduinen lay outside the dikes. This changed when the current 'Bonnenpolder' was enclosed by dikes, now situating the Staelduinen on the inside of the dikes.

In the 19th century the area transformed and took on the shape as we know it now. Mr P. J. van Oosthuysen, a rich manufacturer bought the land in 1807. His daughter married esquire J.J. van Rijckevorsel. In around 1850 the Rijckevorsel family started to develop the southern part of the Staelduin. Mr A.H. de Bruyn took it on to plant woods in the northern part with the objective to create timber-producing woodland. The Staelduinen then lost its original dune character and became a forest. Roads in the forest were constructed to facilitate the wood production business.

The dunes and surrounding grounds were home to plenty of wildlife, making the area a popular place for hunting. The Rijckevorsels invited members of the House of Orange and foreign ambassadors to hunt in the area. Pheasants were released to provide sufficient game.

At the turn of the twentieth century the farm in the forest, which is now the forester's home, was inhabited by the van den Burg family and the Van Koppen family. This remained unchanged until 1913, when the farm was leased to the Wetering family. By then the farm was more than 150 years old. During the interbellum period there was a tea garden in the farm yard. This came to an abrupt halt when the Second World War broke out.

In its early days, acts of war severely damaged the wood. This got even worse when the Germans started to build bunkers in the eastern part of the wood. These bunkers still exist today and provide excellent shelter for bats. After the war the eastern part was used as an ammunition storage depot.

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In the sixties the wood seemed to become less accessible to visitors. The Rotterdam Golf Club bought the western part, with the aim of turning it into a golf course. This was successfully prevented by an action group, which would later become the 'Vrienden van het (Friends of the) Staelduinse Bos'. The province of South Holland bought half the wood and transferred the title deeds to the foundation 'Zuid-Hollands Landschap'.

The 'Vrienden van het Staelduinse Bos' established an association whose aim was to liberate the eastern part of the wood. In the meantime an old cow stable was turned into a visitor centre by the association and fitted out for this purpose.

In the seventies and eighties the Ministry of Defence had finally been convinced of the environmental importance of the wood and agreed to abandon the area. For one million guilders, raised by the province, surrounding municipalities and the association, the entire wood was handed over to the 'Zuid-Hollandse Landschap' foundation.

In the ensuing year the eastern part was made accessible for the public and the fence that had separated both parts for such a long time, was finally removed.

With this, another chapter closed in the history of the Staelduinen, from fisherman's habitat to nature reserve, popular with nature lovers, hikers and rest seekers.

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Vereniging "Vrienden van het Staelduinse Bos"

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Open: Sat 13-16h, Sun 11-16h, in April - October also on Wed 13-16h