

Belgium Gains Its First UNESCO Biosphere Reserve with KempenBroek Cross-Border Park

Today, the International Coordinating Council for UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere Program in Agadir (Morocco) decided to recognize **KempenBroek as a cross-border Biosphere Reserve**. This makes KempenBroek **the first cross-border UNESCO Biosphere Reserve in the Benelux**, the first in Belgium, and the second in the Netherlands.

There is great celebration in the KempenBroek Cross-Border Park, both Limburg provinces, North Brabant, and the Kempen and Maasland Regional Landscape.

An International Network and 'Strong Brand'

The UNESCO Man and the Biosphere Program was established in 1971. It focuses on the relationship between humans and their environment, translating the principles of sustainable development into a local context and connecting science, society, and policy. Sustainable development in practice involves all stakeholders: from local governments, residents, and businesses to schools, research institutions, and NGOs.

Worldwide, there are 748 biosphere reserves in 134 countries (2023) serving as icons for sustainable development. Only 23 are cross-border, with KempenBroek now being the 24th. Until now, Belgium had no Biosphere Reserve, while in the Netherlands, Maasheggen became the first UNESCO Biosphere Reserve in 2018.

KempenBroek immediately becomes a "**strong brand**" as part of the **UNESCO World Network of Biosphere Reserves**, a dynamic and interactive network of areas promoting harmony between people and nature for sustainable development through participatory dialogue, knowledge sharing, poverty reduction, human well-being enhancement, respect for cultural values, and society's ability to cope with change.

A New Jewel in the Crown

The **Kempen and Maasland Regional Landscape** has once again been **the driving force** behind this recognition. With Hoge Kempen National Park, RivierPark Maasvallei, and now KempenBroek Cross-Border Park, an international standard is set again in nature, heritage, and landscape development with strong social support and significant socioeconomic returns.

The KempenBroek Cross-Border Park is a unique, nature-rich, high-quality mosaic landscape located at the intersection of the two Limburg provinces and North Brabant, where the Kempen and Maasland Regional Landscape has been **collaborating with many partners for 24 years**, including all Flemish and Dutch municipalities (Bree, Bocht, Maaseik, Kinrooi, Weert, Nederweert, and Cranendonck) and the provinces of Limburg (BE), Limburg (NL), and North Brabant (NL).

Eight years ago, in 2016, the application procedure was started at the request of the provinces and municipalities that are part of KempenBroek. To prepare this application, a **master plan** was developed with the partners to sustainably develop the region. The application was submitted by the Flemish and Dutch UNESCO Commissions on September 29, 2023.

There is enthusiastic reaction in both the Netherlands and Flanders. In 2014, the municipality of Weert was already recognized as the greenest region in the world², partly due to its investments in KempenBroek. The Belgian Limburg province gains a new jewel in the crown with this UNESCO recognition, after two national parks (Hoge Kempen and Bosland) and three landscape parks (RivierPark Maasvallei, Heart of Haspengouw, and Borderless Bocage Landscape).

² <https://www.metonsinweert.nl/nl/toeristengids/item/245195954/weert-groenste-regio-wereld>

Ignace Schops, director of Kempen and Maasland Regional Landscape (translated from Flemish): *"This recognition is very important not only for the protection of nature, landscape, heritage, and agriculture but also in marketing terms. UNESCO is a very strong brand. The baker and butcher; the hotel owner or café operator; the farmer and nature conservationist; the mayor and entrepreneur... the entire local community benefits from this UNESCO recognition. In short, this is a feather in the cap of everyone for their years of support and belief! And what I find so powerful is that UNESCO recognition does not have direct authority, but it does have status and high appreciation from the general public. I count on the Flemish and Dutch governments to invest financially in this recognition."*

"With the recognition of KempenBroek as a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve, the Kempen and Maasland Regional Landscape and the province of Limburg once again set a milestone in Flanders and the Netherlands in the field of area-based cooperation. It again shows that nature and landscape protection can go hand in hand with sustainable socioeconomic development," said **Bert Lambrechts**, Deputy for Environment and Nature and Chairman of the Kempen and Maasland Regional Landscape (translated from Flemish).

What Does It Involve?

Biosphere reserves are areas where local communities work together for a positive, sustainable future for themselves and their region – their part of the biosphere, the thin layer of our planet where life is possible. Characteristic of biosphere reserves is that they are dynamic: innovative methods for biodiversity protection go hand in hand with socioeconomic development. It is about the sustainable development of an area, and it also has a scientific character, with research and educational activities as important pillars.

Typically, these areas do not work in a 'top-down' manner from a central government but form a lively partnership of local governments, residents, businesses, schools, research institutions, and NGOs.

A biosphere reserve must have significant natural and cultural values and contain some protected areas. The area must be representative of a type of landscape and/or marine area so that the results of the biosphere project can be used elsewhere. Biosphere reserves can consist of both natural and cultural landscapes. Pure nature or wilderness is not necessary.

No Additional Rules

UNESCO has no legislative powers, and recognition as a biosphere reserve does not lead to additional policy or protection of the entire area. UNESCO expects biosphere reserves to achieve their goals not by creating additional legislation or imposing restrictions but through active dialogue among the various *stakeholders*. Moreover, nothing changes in the rights of citizens to their property.

KempenBroek, the Best-Kept Secret of the Netherlands and Flanders!

Through centuries of interaction between humans and nature, KempenBroek consists of a particularly varied landscape where wet and swampy areas alternate with dry sand ridges. It is a true mosaic of landscapes with marshes, stream valleys, fens, forests, heathlands, and agricultural areas. Villages and some towns are also scattered in or on the edge of the area on higher grounds, currently housing about 75,000 residents in total.

This landscape diversity is reflected in rich biodiversity, and the area plays an important role in preserving habitats and species in Flanders and the Netherlands. For the preservation of some species, the area even plays an essential role!

Economically, the area, both the Flemish and Dutch parts, is an important agricultural region responsible for food production. In recent years, the importance of tourism as part of a sustainable rural economy has significantly increased.

For centuries, humans have drawn boundaries on the canvas of the area, the last time in 1839 when it became a border region between Belgium and the Netherlands. Traces of this centuries-old border past and present, in

the form of border markers, defence systems, etc., are readable in the landscape or are part of the shared oral heritage.

It is an area with a quiet, modest history. In this region on the edge of the Kempen, the need for food on poor soil led to a daily struggle for existence for centuries. A rich cultural history is not translated into ostentatious cathedrals or monuments, but into functional buildings like many wind and water mills. A rich culinary tradition and (traditional) festivities are living witnesses to the resilience of people who, despite the daily labour, enjoyed life.