Inspiration farmer: A visual ethnography on a Dutch agroforestry farmer

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[1] This includes copied and revised parts of my proposal.

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With all its issues and challenges, this world asks a lot of us. We all try our best but - struck by the magnitude of it - we often do not know where to start. But what if you just start, even when you cannot see what is coming for you?

I am honoured to have met someone that took the risk of doing this. He did not know what he was in for and still learns while doing his practices every day. Led by his ideologies, Mark Venner started his agroforestry practices to make the world a bit more beautiful, even with the thought that this would only be 'a drop in the ocean'.

I am very excited to provide insight into Mark's practices through this visual ethnography. I hope that his 'drop in the ocean', accompanied by this research, leads to waves, inspiring many people.

This master has been a wild ride, but such a good one, as it taught me a lot. My fellow students were incredible as they created a safe and loving atmosphere. Thank you all so much for helping me in all kinds of ways this year. The supervisory group meetings were also wonderful. I look back at many good talks, lots of tea and numerous laughs. My supervisor, Sander Hölsgens, created the best environment to be in. I could not have asked for better; your empathy, sensitivity, calmness and criticality fit me. Thank you so much for guiding me throughout this year.

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Abstract

The global climate crisis shows the need to take measures to reduce our emissions. With agriculture taking up more than half of the land in The Netherlands, policies to achieve this primarily focus on the agrarian sector. Consequently, the uncertainty for farmers' future practices led to big national farmers' protests, followed by a national win for the farmers' party on a provincial level. With farming deeply rooted in culture and place, acknowledging the need to look at the social side of the issue is vital for establishing a sustainable agricultural system. This research uses visual ethnography's strengths, giving insight into a sustainable practice in the Anthropocene and providing a new view of human-environment relationships. It does so by looking at a Dutch agroforestry farmer who acknowledges an inherent connection between humans and non-humans within his practices. Moreover, the motivation for his practices lies in his ideologies, prioritising non-human nature over humanity. These perspectives can help us find a way to overcome the agrarian crisis in The Netherlands by producing an alternate view on human-environment relationships. It overall inspires us to think that when we care for the non-human, we will ultimately take care of ourselves.

[Key words: Agriculture, Agroforestry, Human-environment relationships, Anthropocene, Sustainability]

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1 Introduction

Human-caused environmental degradation, leading to the global climate crisis, is one of today's biggest challenges. With its different layers, this crisis also shows its consequences on other scales. A prominent challenge in The Netherlands is the current crisis in agriculture.

Agricultural practices occupy more than half of the Dutch landscape (CBS 2020: 10), making agriculture a big part of the Dutch environment (Van Dorp & Stobbelaar 2020: 5) and culture. The agrarian crisis in The Netherlands stems from a history of Dutch farming that asked for continuous adaptation of farmers to new measures (Karel 2010; Van Der Ploeg 2020: 590). In the period after the Second World War, farmers were cheered on by the government to expand their businesses with intensive farming practices. What shows the size of the Dutch agricultural sector today is the fact that The Netherlands is the world's second-largest food exporting country after the United States[2]. Meanwhile, warnings about the negative environmental impacts of the intensive agricultural sector were dismissed for decades. There was always the argument that innovative technological solutions would come to fix these problems, but they were never enough.

Consequently, intensive farming practices have negatively impacted the environment and led to the fact that the nitrogen levels in soil and water in The Netherlands are now higher than European Union regulations allow. Hence, Prime Minister Rutte has committed to halving the nitrogen emissions in The Netherlands by 2030, mainly by imposing rules on farmers. Some farmers even face compulsory buyouts. After continuous adaptation pushing most farmers to intensify their business, adhere to new rules, and already substantially invest in being more sustainable over decades (NOS 2022a[3]), these restrictions feel like a threat for most of them. This threat resulted in big farmers' protests repeatedly obstructing highways to give attention to the situation and national flags hanging upside-down all over The Netherlands as a symbolic representation of this movement. These acts showcased the announcement of a national emergency in the name of the farmers, supported by a big part of Dutch society. This support was reflected in the big win by the right-wing populist party the Farmer-Citizen Movement in March 2023 (during this research), now the biggest Dutch party on the provincial level (NOS 2023b[4]).

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[2] CBS 2022 *Nederland in EU grootste importeur Braziliaanse landbouw* https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/nieuws/2022/27/nederland-in-eu-grootste-importeur-braziliaanse-landbouw#:~:text=De%20Verenigde%20Staten%20(196%2C0,landbouwimport%20voor%20de%20eigen%20export. 10-06-2023

[3] NOS 2022a *Dit is wat je moet weten om de stikstofcrisis te begrijpen.* https://nos.nl/collectie/13901/artikel/2433131-dit-is-wat-je-moet-weten-om-de-stikstofcrisis-te-begrijpen 10-06-23 10-06-2023

[4] NOS 2023b Bekijk hier alle uitslagen van de Provinciale Statenverkiezingen. https://nos.nl/collectie/13923/artikel/2467604-bekijk-hier-alle-uitslagen-van-de-provinciale-statenverkiezingen 11-05-2023.

As The Guardian (2023[5]) states, "(…) Dutch farms have become a test case in navigating the vital politics of the green transition", as achieving the reduction of emissions could be done through the promotion of more sustainable agricultural practices. However, while a move towards a more sustainable form of agriculture would reduce nitrogen levels, this often remains too big of a step for many farmers as they would need to adjust their farming practices again and because of the many insecurities that come with this switch. The most prominent insecurity farmers have lies in the long-term perspective of nitrogen policies in The Netherlands. Already anticipating the agricultural measures yet to come, banks are currently wary of investing in more sustainable forms of agriculture. Therefore, many farmers willing to switch towards more sustainable practices cannot do so financially (NOS 2023c[6]).

On top of that, possibly most importantly, it is hard for farmers to step away from their current farming practices as these are not solely working practices but have also become a way of life. Therefore, within a time that asks for sustainable ways of practising agriculture and empathy in a polarized agricultural debate - with environmental needs on the one side and farmers' needs on the other side - we should acknowledge that solving the agrarian crisis cannot be done only by looking at technical solutions. It urgently asks us to look at the social side of the issue by looking at the culture behind these agricultural practices. After all, with people practising agriculture, they are always situated in a specific place and culture that influences their practices. Hence, this shows us the need to humanize the agricultural debate to enable us to find critical solutions to the issues presented.

Agricultural anthropology does precisely this: holistically studying the human part of farming practices to apply this knowledge to make the food system more efficient and sustainable (Veteto and Crane 2014: 1). While I aim to add to anthropologic environmental debates within this study by contributing to a holistic understanding of human-environment relationships, focusing on an agricultural practice will simultaneously add to agricultural anthropological knowledge.

Environmental anthropology is a sub-discipline within cultural anthropology that studies human-environment interactions (Kopnina & Shoreman-Ouimet 2017: 3) and pursuits a more ecologically and holistic understanding of human-environment relationships. With that, it might offer solutions to environmental decay (Ibid.: 3)[7]. Veteto & Lockyer (2017), in their book *Environmental*

[5] The Guardian 2023 *The Guardian view on Dutch farmer protests: a European test case.* https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/mar/05/the-guardian-view-on-dutch-farmer-protests-a-european-test-case 13-05-2023

[6] NOS 2023c 'Stikstofonzekerheid remt verduurzaming bij boeren'. https://nos.nl/collectie/13901/artikel/2470598-stikstofonzekerheid-remt-verduurzaming-bij-boeren 11-05-2023.

[7] I elaborate on environmental anthropology in chapter 2.

Anthropology Engaging Permaculture, take this a step further by stating that solutions to environmental decay already exist and that we should focus on these alternatives to learn about human-environment relationships. They acknowledge that farming is more than technology and that there is an "importance of emotion, passion, and spirituality in human-environment relationships" (Ibid.: XIV). As I claimed in the previous paragraph, farmers see their practices as a way of life. Hence, enabling them to prioritize the long-term over the short-term requires firm conviction and devotion towards a particular ideology (Veteto and Lockyer 2017: XV). Veteto & Lockyer focus specifically on people and communities that "(…) are driven by a complex dream: creating a world that is not only ecologically sustainable but is also personally rewarding", which makes the practitioners able to prioritize the long-term (Ibid.). They acknowledge that they focus on sustainable ideas that are utopian but that the crises of today demand creative responses that we can study by diving into these alternatives (Ibid.: 1) and claim that anthropologists are fit to conduct these studies as anthropologists focus on finding possible paths towards a more just and sustainable world. Moreover, critical academic analysis can make these solutions more feasible and secure (Ibid.). Ethnography, a way of doing anthropology, enables the researcher to understand the lifeworld of their participant(s) by studying broader power structures through the context of everyday life and personal action (O'Reilly 2012: 10). Therefore, doing ethnography and focusing on a case study can give insights into large issues in small places and, with that, help humanize the agricultural debate.

Because some farmers can and do choose to practice more sustainable agriculture, focusing on these farmers might offer some of the insights and solutions needed in this crisis (Hoes & Aramyan 2022). After all, it will give us insights into the way of life of these farmers by learning about their practices and ideologies, wherein we might find possible solutions to the agricultural crisis through alternative human-environment relationships. Hence, this study builds on the idea of Veteto and Lockyer (2017) that anthropologically studying people practising sustainable alternatives and the human-environment relationship they have will give an insight into the ideology of this farmer, which might inspire us to become more sustainable too.

1.1 A visual ethnographic portrait

This article and a 30-minute ethnographic film together create a visual ethnography[8]. Visual ethnography aims to give a more holistic view of the studied situation by combining visual and written knowledge. It enables our audience, both inside and outside academia, to engage with our protagonists' experience on a sensory level, making it a powerful tool to influence the shaping of future

[8] I elaborate on the specifics of this visual ethnography in chapter 3.1, and I discuss the methods I have used for it in chapter 3.3.

narratives (Pink 2021: 4). For this research, I decided to focus on only one protagonist, drawing on anthropology's strengths to provide insights into small places and, ultimately, apply the knowledge gained to the global context. I ground my audiovisual work in observational cinema[9] by giving a realist representation of the lifeworld of my protagonist (Postma 2021: 119) and emphasizing the presence of both the researcher and the protagonist(s) (ibid.: 120).

I made a visual ethnographic portrait of a 27-year-old farmer called Mark Venner[10] in Baexem (Province of Limburg) in The Netherlands. Mark started an agroforestry farm four years ago, not because the government restricted him due to the nitrogen crisis, but because of his ideology. He started agroforestry on the farmland his family owned since 1818, on which all the sons of the farmers in his family have continued with the farming practices ever since. Up until the 1970s, the farm has been one with mixed practices. However, with the rise of intensive forms of agriculture, the grandfather of Mark slowly started to specialize in dairy cows. Mark's father, Peter, later took over this dairy farm and decided not to expand it as new regulations restricted him[11]. However, this way of dairy farming was not generating enough money to hand it over to the next generation. Hence, the family decided to explore other farming options. At this time, Mark, the youngest of the four children of Peter and his wife Mieke was studying Forest and Nature Conservation which trained him to be a forester. At that time, he had also developed an interest in sustainability. Mark became inspired to merge his forestry knowledge with agriculture at a public reading about food forests. Herein he saw an opportunity to work with 'nature'[12] instead of against it and proposed to his parents to practise it on the farmland. The family, easy as they are, decided to go for it. So, their story of pioneering agroforestry in The Netherlands began.

The agroforestry farm consists of a food forest (five hectares), row cultivation (seven hectares), and an orchard where the chickens and cows can graze (one and a half hectares). Lastly, horticulture (one hectare) will be established. Because the food forest takes up to seven years to be productive enough for profit, Mark now mainly generates an income from chicken eggs and row cultivation. We did not go into the specifics of his current business model. However, I know that, after twenty years of growing, the food forest is estimated to produce a minimum of €10.000 per hectare[13], which is way higher than the average farmer's income.

[9] I elaborate on observational cinema in chapter 3.3.2.
[10] All consent was given to use names and recorded material of my participants.
[11] I elaborate on this in chapter 4.3.
[12] To acknowledge that 'nature' is a discursive concept and that I step away from the supposed nature/culture division, I used quotation marks when writing it throughout this research, except when I quoted my protagonist.
[13] Nathalie van Wijkvliet 2021 *10 vragen aan Mark Venner, de boer die zijn koeien inruilt voor bomen* https://maatschapwij.nu/blogs/mark-venner-leuker-voedselbos/ 10-06-2023

In Baexem, Limburg, only five minutes from the farmland, I am visiting Mark's parent's house for the first time for an interview. When entering the house, in the hall, my eyes immediately fall on the dozens of varying small cow sculptures in front of the window- a collection of Marks' father, Peter. During the interview, Mark, Peter and Mark's mother, Mieke are sitting at the kitchen table, and I am standing on the other side of the table, handholding my camera to film our conversation. I initiated a visual elicitation interview about the history of the farm. Hence, there are old photobooks and maps on the table that all tell pieces of the history of the farmland and a newspaper article from a few years back which states: *young food forest farmer has a dream*. I did not prepare questions, so the visual material guides the conversation.

We are talking about how things went when the family decided to start agroforestry practices on the land. I ask them if they immediately agreed with Mark's plans, and both his mother and father start to nod with a face that reads, 'Why not?'. Mark laughs and says: "They are not that difficult". His parents explain that they do not need the money from the land for their pension reserve. That is why the combination of circumstances was perfect for taking this step and handing over the business to their children, with Mark practicing on the land. Mieke states that they are people who are not afraid to try something new and just do it. Peter agrees with a short and casual "No", upon which Mark starts to laugh again and says: "Well, this response says enough".

While Peter starts analysing old maps of the land, Mark and his mom continue discussing how they were convinced to start, in the first instance, with food forest practices on their land – being only one branch of agroforestry. Experiencing another food forest and trying out food forest produce raised their interest – moreover, the documentary *My Biggest Little Farm* made quite an impact. Particularly Mieke passionately talks about it, convincing her of the need for sustainable agricultural practices by showing how a dead piece of land came to life with the help of people and animals and now flourishes in complete harmony with every living thing.

Subsequently, Mieke states: "If we continue the way we did, then the children of my grandchild will not have a life here anymore." She points at the baby monitor on the kitchen shelf that shows a recording of Mark's little niece sleeping and shrugs her shoulders. "So, yeah… Then, there will be an end somewhere. And that is not really the intention, I think". Peter stops analysing the maps, lays them down, looks at Mieke and responds, agreeing: "No, I don't think so". Mark quickly follows: "But nature will survive." His parents somewhat agree with a hesitant "yes". "It depends on how highly you think of humans", Mark continues, "or how much value you give them". For just a few seconds, the conversation falls still. Mieke then enthusiastically continues: "But we have faith! At least…" She looks at Peter and Mark in anticipation of their reactions. Peter responds with a quiet "yes", but then he and Mieke see Mark's confused face. "Faith in what?" Mark asks- I guess wary of too much faith in humanity. "In the whole system that we are building together", Mieke responds. "Oooh…" Mark chuckles, almost relieved to me, "Yes, no, that's right, fine".

This vignette shows how the Venner family decided to start agroforestry practices. It shows that long-term thinking has a significant role in the decision and that, while Mark's parents are thinking about their grandchildren's future, Mark seems to be finding some rest in the idea that – however the circumstances of humanity may be – 'nature' will survive. This makes us question Mark's 'complex dream' (Veteto & Lockyer 2017: XV), which can be answered by looking at his relationship with the environment where he practices agroforestry. Therefore, this study will answer the following research question: *What is the relationship that people who practise a sustainable form of agriculture have with the land on which they work?* I answer this research question through the following sub-questions:

1) What are their practices?
2) What are their motives for doing this work?
3) What are the consequences of these practices and motives for their relation to the land on which they work?

The first question will show the everyday activities on the land and thus answer what sustainable agricultural practices entail at this place. The second question dives into the motivation of Mark to do this practice. The third question brings these former questions together and answers how these practices and motives influence how Mark relates to the land, which will show his ideologies.

This article complements the film; it explains Mark's practices on the land more expansively. It goes deeper into the consequences of his practices stemming from his motives and grounded in his ideologies, insecurities, the history of the farm, and future prospects already pointed out in the film. This research argues that myriad perceptions and beliefs lay bare how place and culture are interrelated, influencing Mark's relationship with the land. Thereby, it forms knowledge on how someone who practices a sustainable form of agriculture relates to the land they work on, which adds to place as something that is embodied and constituted relationally through interactions of humans with their environment by continuous co-becoming (Scherini 2022: 23). This relational understanding of a place has the potential to redefine the debate on climate change by stepping away from constructed human/nature binaries and showing a more holistic acknowledgement of place being something where continues encounters between the human and the non-human take part (ibid: 25).

Chapter two goes into the theoretical framework of this thesis to link this research to anthropologic debates. Following this, chapter three explains the methodology of this study. Chapter four then shows the results of this visual ethnography, finally leading to the conclusion in chapter five.

2 Theoretical framework[14]

To understand the lens I took in this research and link it to anthropological debates, I will now explain the core concepts of this study: the Anthropocene, human-environment relationships and sustainability. As you will come to understand, these three concepts are highly interrelated.

2.1 The Anthropocene

The Anthropocene is a proposed name for a geological epoch that describes the impacts of human activities on global ecosystems (Mathews 2020: 68), whereby humans see the earth as a source for economic development (Maggs and Robinson 2016: 4; Toncheva 2019: 60; Uggla 2010). It gained attention as a response to the growing awareness of environmental degradation caused by climate change (Mathews 2020: 68) and the danger of crossing planetary boundaries (Ibid.: 69). However, determining the exact starting point of the Anthropocene remains a question amongst scholars from different fields (Ibid.: 68). Mathews (2020: 69) argues that earlier scholarship on the causes and consequences of "capitalism, empire, racism, and settler colonialism" was, in retrospect, grappling with the Anthropocene.

One of the critiques and concerns associated with the concept is that it emphasizes the power of humankind - particularly that of white, male, and European – potentially leading to human glorification (Ibid.; Clarke and Haraway 2018: 11). Additionally, technical approaches to the Anthropocene often overlook power dynamics and inequalities, which can justify narrow technical solutions to climate change while neglecting the political, economic processes driving environmental destruction (Mathews 2020: 70; Tsing, Mathews, and Bubandt 2019: 192).

Some anthropologists propose alternative terms like 'Capitalocene' to shift the focus to the economic system as the primary cause of environmental destruction rather than humanity itself (Eriksen 2022: 5-6). However, despite its criticisms, the concept of the Anthropocene remains valuable in drawing attention to global environmental changes in the scientific world (Mathews 2020: 77; Tsing, Mathews, and Bubandt 2019: 187).

Many scholars argue that the concept of the Anthropocene challenges the nature/culture division, which is deeply rooted in 'Western'[15] culture and anthropology (Mathews 2020: 70). Approaches such as multispecies anthropology and feminist sciences move away from this division and explore human relationships with the non-human (Ibid.: 71). Recognizing the interconnectedness between humans and non-humans is crucial for understanding the ecological transformations of the

[14] Parts of this chapter include copied or rewritten parts of my proposal.
[15] I put this term between quotation marks to acknowledge that it is a dichotomous, discursive concept.

Anthropocene (Ibid.). Some scholars even view this interdependence as an opportunity to develop new ways of living in the Anthropocene (Chua and Fair 2019: 9).

Examining human-non-human relationships is essential because they have significant implications for anthropogenic environmental changes (Mathews 2020: 71). For instance, in their book *Making Kin Not Population* (2018), Clarke and Haraway discuss concerns about population growth and its environmental consequences, advocating for inclusive kinship that extends to non-human entities. By decentering humans and embracing social relationships across species informed by queer and feminist theories, anthropology can redefine our understanding of humanity (Johnson et al. 2022: 9).

Anthropologists play a vital role in shaping the understanding of the Anthropocene by producing ethnographic reports that shift the narrative from technical and numerical approaches to an exploration of how people experience "spaces, places, bodies, and earthly relations" (Moore 2016: 40). Through this approach, anthropologists challenge the oversimplification of the concept and open up alternative perspectives on life in the Anthropocene (Chua and Fair 2019: 8). Anthropology's tendency to ask critical questions about concept development, and its sensitivity to ontological differences across time and place, position anthropologists to intervene in the discourse (Johnson et al. 2022: 4-5). Anthropological studies demonstrate how the global interpretation of the Anthropocene has influenced responses to climate change (Ibid.: 12). Ignoring variations in human impacts on environments over time has allowed society, including policymakers, to overlook the core drivers of climate change – extractive capitalism and colonialism – resulting in failed climate policies (Ibid.: 12-13). Anthropologists fill this gap by critically reflecting on the structural drivers of climate change, examining the complexity of the Anthropocene discourse across different contexts and periods.

Through the lens of the Anthropocene, my research examines a specific case of human response to environmental degradation, shedding light on how people experience anthropogenic events in particular contexts (Chua and Fair 2019: 4). By focusing on social processes central to environmental destruction, I aim to highlight the significance of studying these dynamics. The findings of this study[16] reveal how Mark positions himself within the Anthropocene and offers an alternative perspective on life in this era[17].

2.2 Human-environment relationships

The Anthropocene challenges the notion of human separation from the environment, emphasising the need to study this interconnected relationship and its consequences, particularly within anthropology.

[16] I elaborate on this in chapter 4.
[17] This is especially comes to the fore in chapter 4.5.

The idea of human-environment separation emerged during the Enlightenment, rooted in the epistemology of reason and the dichotomies of Modernity, such as facts/values and nature/culture (Maggs and Robinson 2016: 4). This separation has shaped the rationality of 'Western' cultures for centuries. The insights of the Anthropocene disrupt this paradigm by highlighting the inherent link between humans and their environment, signalling the end of the Modernist era defined by dichotomous thinking (Maggs and Robinson 2016: 15; Kopnina and Shoreman-Ouimet 2017: 5). However, these dichotomies persist, contributing to anthropogenic climate change in the Anthropocene (Maggs and Robinson 2016: 5) and leading to a sense of alienation. The question arises: How can we find the motivation to protect a world we do not perceive ourselves as undeniably connected to?

Louv (2005) proposes that changing our perspective and improving our relationship with the environment can help overcome the "nature-deficit disorder" and contribute to a sustainable world (Peng 2020: 1). This involves moving away from the nature/culture dichotomy (Toncheva 2019: 59) to find solutions to environmental problems (Scherini 2022: 5). Hence, the need to redefine our relationship with the environment (Latour 2011: 18) can be achieved by changing how we talk about it (Muradian and Gómez-Baggethun 2021: 2; Pritchard et al. 2020: 1146). Recognizing the interconnectedness of everything on Earth and stepping away from dichotomies can support sustainability by suggesting models that reflect our inherent relationship with 'nature' (Toncheva 2019: 59, 61 & 71; Uggla 2010: 87).

In anthropological studies, particularly environmental anthropology, a holistic understanding of the relationship between humans and their environment has been central (Russell et al. 2013: 474; Orr, Lansing and Dove 2015: 156). Environmental anthropologists bridge the gap between the social and natural worlds, acknowledging the influence of larger-scale power structures on local contexts (Kopnina and Shoreman-Ouimet 2017: 4). Recognising in this study that we cannot apply one conservation effort to every environment and that it thus must be locally specified through place and culture is, therefore, essential (Ibid.: 5). Their expertise in local human-environment relationships can be applied on a broader scale, aiding policy-making and offering insights into how humanity can address and reverse current environmental issues (Ibid.: 4-6). By focusing on alternative practices that challenge norms, environmental anthropology contributes to envisioning ecologically and socially sustainable futures (Veteto & Lockyer 2013: 53).

For these reasons, I decided to focus on such a practice, possibly helping us get a future perspective on living in the Anthropocene while providing a possibility of how to achieve this (Ibid.). Human-environment relationships are central to my research, focusing on the relationship between Mark and his agroforestry farm while acknowledging the interrelationships between place and culture. Agroforestry offers a sustainable solution, making it an exciting place to study such a relationship. It

provides insights into connecting with the environment while offering a way to achieve this, possibly informing policy-making for a sustainable future.

With agroforestry being a practice that acknowledges the intrinsic relationship between the farmer and his environment, the first sub-question that goes into the practices of Mark shows us an alternative possibility of relating to our environment. The findings of the second sub-question show us that Mark specifically chose this practice to show people their connection to the environment to improve this relationship. Ultimately, the findings of the third sub-question show us that many things influence Mark's relationship with the environment.[18]

2.3 Sustainability

Eriksen (2022: 1) proposes that "a sustainable system is one which is capable of reproducing itself for an extended period without undermining its own conditions, absorbing incremental changes without collapsing". He thus sees sustainability as something that can sustain itself while being open to change (Ibid.). Tsing (2017: 51) describes sustainability as "the dream of passing a livable earth to future generations, human and non-human". Sustainability is herein described as offering intergenerational environmental and social well-being for all species.

According to anthropologists Brightman and Lewis (2017: 2), the term was first used in the 18th century and referred to the responsibility of people towards the forests to not cause irreversible changes by turning them into agricultural lands. However, the term became most influential in the 1987 United Nations Brundtland report *Our Common Future*, trying to shed new light on economic growth by using the term 'sustainable development' (Ibid.: 3). Then, it soon became clear that the core of ecological unsustainability directly relates to "modernity, capitalism, industrialism and the ideology of growth and progress" (Eriksen 2022: 4). Hence, scholars often argue that the only sustainable option is degrowth as sustainable ecology does not fit in a capitalist world that focuses on growing and technical solutions (Ibid.: 5). This is something that anthropologists like Bruno Latour have often been pointing out (Ibid.). Moreover, through ethnographies on alternative ways of living – mainly learning from Indigenous cultures that have been living ecologically sustainably for many centuries - anthropologists showed possibilities of a life beyond neoliberalist capitalism and have thus made vital contributions to the discourse of sustainability (Ibid).

Kothari et al. (2018), with their book *Pluriverse – A Post-Development Dictionary*, challenge the modernist ontology of sustainability solutions labelled as universal and offer insights into a multiplicity of possible worlds: a pluriverse. Anthropologists study sustainability by looking at cultural processes

[18] I elaborate on this in chapter 4.

from different perspectives; they look at the needs and wants of specific societies rather than a universal truth about what is most sustainable (Brightman & Lewis 2017: 1). Brightman & Lewis (2017: 2) argue to approach sustainability within anthropology "as the process of facilitating conditions for change by building and supporting diversity – ontological, biological, economic and political diversity". Anthropology thus sees sustainability as the moral principle of respectfully engaging with other humans and non-humans while acknowledging different ontologies (Ibid.: 20). The specialization in everyday realities - and their connections to the global - make us well-placed to contribute to sustainability debates (Ibid: 16). Moreover, anthropologists can help exchange thoughts and practices across the (scientific) world (Brightman & Lewis 2017: 1).

In this study, I looked at Mark's ontology of sustainability by studying his agricultural practices and his motivation to do this. The conversations we had continuously reflected Mark his priority of long-term thinking, leading him to make sustainable decisions. These insights into the thoughts behind the practice at the local scale could offer inspiration for how to apply sustainability at a larger scale.

2.4 Placing the concepts in their context

As already explained in the introduction, with the Dutch agricultural crisis at its height, there is increasing pressure on the sector to become more sustainable. Farmers can have a crucial role in realizing these more sustainable agricultural systems wherein they build a strong connection with their environment through agricultural practices (Giagnocavo et al. 2022: 2). Moreover, the relationship farmers have with their environment is said to be of significant influence on other peoples' understanding of agriculture, but also specifically their (world)view on non-human nature (Giagnocavo et al. 2022: 4). This study, looking at a sustainable agricultural system where undeniable interrelationships are acknowledged, can help with a discourse that sees humans as inseparable from their environment (López 2018: 603) and therefore provides the opportunity to work towards sustainability in the Anthropocene.

2.5 The interrelationship of the concepts

While there is often a focus on technical solutions for the Anthropocene, anthropologists emphasize the need to study the social and cultural aspects at the core of human environmental destruction. They propose to do this by studying human-environment relationships as, within the Anthropocene, there is a need to achieve a sustainable world by fundamentally changing how we interact with our environment. The Anthropocene inherently shows that people are not separated from their environment. Hence, studying this relationship – especially in a context that shows sustainable alternatives - can help redefine our relationship with the environment and make it more sustainable in

the long term. These concepts, therefore, help me understand human-environment relationships within a sustainable agricultural practice in the Anthropocene.

3 Methodology

This chapter explains how and why I did a visual ethnography, followed by the positionality, collaboration and ethics of my research, and, lastly, I reflect on the methods I used in this visual ethnography.

3.1 Making a visual ethnography

This study is based on eight weeks of fieldwork from January till mid-March 2023[19]. In the first instance, I was looking for several food forests to conduct my research. So, in January, I started doing voluntary work at a food forest called Ziedewij while I continued looking for other food forests. When I saw some interviews online with Mark, I immediately felt enthusiastic about how he talked and his story. I reached out to him by email and received a welcoming response. Mark proposed to meet through Zoom as the distance between Leiden - where I live - and Baexem is quite big for me to visit him. We started by telling each other a bit about ourselves, I explained the ideas for my research, and then, because of his positive reaction, I immediately felt - in my gut - that I wanted to focus only on Mark for my research. So, I asked him; if he was okay if I focused only on him. Easy as he is, he was open to that. Consequently, I said goodbye to Ziedewij and started my fieldwork at Mark.

This thesis is a visual ethnography; hence a 30-minute ethnographic film accompanies this article. The film shows Mark's daily practices on the agroforestry farm and his embodied sensory experience of being there while also providing conversations on his ideologies, insecurities, the history of the farm and future prospects. I chose to use a specific typeface called 'Faune'[20] in the film. Alice Savoie made this font in collaboration with The Centre national des arts plastiques (CNAP).The idea of this font is to study the multi-speciesism of the natural world in order to create a typeface ecosystem. I chose this font because it values the strengths of diversity in natural ecosystems, which Mark also highly values in his agroforestry practices. I also chose to provide some information on both the agricultural situation in The Netherlands and what agroforestry entails before the film starts for people unfamiliar with either. Mark approved this information.

This article complements the film. It does so by explaining Mark's practices on the land more expansively, allowing me to form an answer to the first sub-question. Additionally, it goes into the consequences of his practices and motives for his relationship with the land by expanding on his ideologies, insecurities, the history of the farm, and future prospects already pointed out in the film. Overall, this research argues that myriad perceptions and beliefs lay bare how place and culture are interrelated, influencing Mark's relationship with the land.

[19] Accompanied by three more visits in the months after (till May).
[20] CNAP 2023 *Faune.* https://www.cnap.fr/sites/faune/en.html 02-06-2023

3.2 Positionality, collaboration and ethics[21]

As an ethnographer, I acknowledge that my personal experiences inevitably shape my own perceptions and interpretations (Pink 2021, 40). MacDougall (2006) refers to this as the 'corporal image', stating that images are always made in relation to who is behind the camera.

Being Dutch, I had a good grasp of the agricultural situation in The Netherlands. My passion for food and sustainable agriculture had already familiarized me with some agroforestry practices. Moreover, my bachelors in *Future Planet Studies* deepened my understanding of sustainability and the problems of Anthropogenic environmental destruction rooted in capitalism, colonialism and patriarchy. This background allowed me to relate to Mark's motives to practice agroforestry in the Anthropocene and his thoughts behind it. Moreover, as a highly sensitive person, I often find solace in green spaces and appreciate their sensory aspects, which helped me understand Mark's joy in experiencing the farm. Finally, our close ages (26 and 27) further facilitated mutual understanding.

Ethics are essential for establishing rapport and obtaining valuable data in ethnographic research (Marion and Crowder 2013: 4). Following ethical guidelines, including The AAA Code of Ethics (2012) and the 'Seven Key Issues in Visual Ethics' (Marion and Crowder 2013), I prioritized the wellbeing of my participants. Informed consent was, therefore, crucial from the beginning. I discussed my research intentions with Mark throughout fieldwork to ensure his comfort. I also let him fill out an informed consent form wherein he agreed that all recordings and observations could be publicly shared. For the interviews with his parents, I let them sign the same form. This ensured me that they understood the intentions of my research.

During our first conversation, Mark expressed frustration with the media framing him as an unnuanced activist. I reassured him of my intention to portray him as he really is, which he was happy to hear. However, my initial perception of him was also influenced by these interviews. To explore his perspective, I asked him about his annoyance with the activist label in our first interview[22]. I did my best to incorporate all of Mark's nuances, but this proved challenging within the constraints of a 30-minute film. His thought process, often starting with bold statements followed by nuance, required lots of complex decision-making to balance the story. When I showed Mark the film, he expressed his satisfaction with the level of nuance and praised the portrayal of the whole story, visuals and sound. This positive feedback relieved my concerns about representing him accurately. During the final day of filming, I already asked Mark about his experience of my presence. He then stated that he felt

[21] Parts of this chapter include copied or rewritten parts of my proposal.
[22] I elaborate on this in chapter 4.7.

understood, which he could not say about everyone. This was good to hear and affirmed my own thoughts.

In conclusion, building rapport with Mark enhanced my research's ethical conduct and collaboration, enabling me to gather the necessary knowledge for fruitful research.

3.3 Methods[23]

Visual ethnography is committed to knowledge production or ways of knowing other than data production (Pink 2021: 40). Hence, it does not claim to generate objective truths but offers an insight into the ethnographers' experience that is as accurate as possible (Ibid.). By recognizing the interconnectedness of the senses with our environment through the visual, we can offer ways to understand the invisible - being the sensory experience and knowledge of our participants and ourselves (Ibid.: 40 & 42). Doing visual ethnography enabled me to study Mark's relationship with the land on which he practices his agroforestry. I show what methods I used in doing this visual ethnography below.

3.3.1 Video recordings

Video recordings served as a powerful tool to explore my participants' sensory perception and lived experiences – everyday practices, experiences and realities (Lawrence 2020: 26). Hence, they provided valuable insights into the intangible aspects of human experiences through capturing emotions, senses, space utilisation and the creation of emotional environments (MacDougall 1999a: 68). Using film as a tool throughout most of my other methods, enabled me to create a thick description - meaning that it works as a tool to capture intangible, subjective social pieces of evidence of human experiences by focusing on the body, emotions and the senses (Kharel 2015: 155-56). I have tried to use the 'triangle of action' suggested by Lawrence (2020: 33) to capture this bodily sense and experience. Doing this helped me lay bare the interrelationship between body-mind-environment. Finally, film recordings allowed me to see things I did not notice in the first place, adding depth to my understanding (Pink 2021: 165). Given that agroforestry practices engaged all of Mark's senses, video recording was an excellent tool for capturing the multi-sensory experiences of practicing agroforestry and Mark's connection to the place. It provided insights into the meaning Mark attached to these experiences and how they influenced him.

In addition to handheld camera recordings, I utilised drones for aerial shots at the farm. Drones offer a distinct visual perspective that differs from our everyday visual culture (Serafinelli and O'Hangan

[23] Parts of this chapter include copied or rewritten parts of my proposal.

2022: 2). They can capture images from hard-to-reach places and provide new ways of visualising and experiencing the world, "acting as intermediaries between humans and nature" (Ibid.: 4). While the vertical, top-down view of drones may carry negative connotations associated with military dominance, it is essential to recognise their potential to subvert these associations and change our understandings of ordinary places (Ibid. 7-8). For example, drones can establish a spatial context or show the positioning of a protagonist within their environment (Lawrence 2020: 44 & 99). Hence, I utilised extreme-wide drone shots at the beginning of the film before transitioning to closer handheld recordings, effectively establishing a sense of place for the agroforestry farm.

3.3.2 *Observational cinema*

Observational cinema prioritizes informal and intimate conversations and the recording of ongoing events, aiming to provide a realistic glimpse into the world of our participants (Carta 2015: 1). In observational cinema, the camera works to show the 'corporeal image', as MacDougall (2006) states, referring to the different ways of knowing the body can play in film recordings. It emphasizes the presence of both the participant and the researcher, fostering a deeper understanding of lived experiences through filmmaking (Postma 2021: 120).

Establishing a good rapport with Mark was crucial to ensure that the camera's presence did not impact his behaviour (Ibid.: 2). I regularly spent time with him without filming, which helped us build a personal connection. For instance, on a day that I knew Mark was tired, I intentionally refrained from filming in the morning, which made us have conversations whereby we got to know each other more personally. Later, when I resumed filming, Mark pranked me [00:15:21-00:16:01]. This felt like a unique moment for me as this was the first time he had made such a joke on record. For me, this showed that he felt comfortable enough to do so.

While observational cinema traditionally emphasizes 'show not tell' and thus should not prioritize knowledge from speech (Carta 2015: 6), I discovered that Mark shared his knowledge through storytelling. Rather than reducing his speech, I embraced his natural expression, allowing his true personality to shine. This resulted in a film that heavily features dialogue but authentically represents Mark. However, I was not fully able to show rather than tell his relationship with the agroforestry farm.

Observational cinemas' unique ability to communicate peoples' experiences and emotions enables the viewer to relate to these protagonists and engage with them through their own senses, fostering empathy in ways that written texts may not achieve (Postma 2021: 118). It situates participants' lived experiences within the context of the recording location, adding a sensory perspective to anthropology (Carta 2015: 11). By representing these perspectives, the film generates empathy among the audience, generating feelings of rapport and compassion as they watch (Ibid.: 12;

Pink 2007: 248). This aspect is particularly relevant for Mark as an agroforestry farmer as he is *longing to be understood*[24] and *longing to be an inspiration*[25].

For my film, I was inspired by *Of Men and Mares* (1998) by Metje Postma on workhorses in agriculture. This film has a similar structure to mine as it also goes into practices, the social world around the practice and the history of agriculture. Like her, through editing, I aimed to show an ethnographic understanding of my protagonist and his way of life (Postma 2006: 350), although mine relies more on speech to achieve this.

3.3.3 Participant observation

Participant observation is a foundational practice in cultural anthropology. It involved establishing rapport with Mark and immersing myself in his agroforestry practices to gain experiential knowledge (Bernard 2006: 342). Since agroforestry practices vary with the seasons, my primary involvement was planting. I carried plants to the food forest, measured planting locations, dug holes, and planted. Additionally, I assisted in preparing the land for blueberry cultivation by covering it with root fabric and woodchips. I also contributed to setting out rows for planting in another food forest, supervised by Mark, using poles to mark the points to plant. Engaging in these practices provided hands-on experience and allowed me to gain personal insights into agroforestry practices (Ibid.: 342-344). Consequently, it gave me an intuitive understanding of the data (Ibid.: 355). I also used informal interviewing during this process, mainly to build rapport (Ibid.: 211).

Overall, participant observation provided valuable knowledge about my protagonist's relationship with the land, focusing on his sensory experiences and care for the environment while working there, and helped me find the key topics that Mark engaged with through informal interviews.

3.3.4 Interviews

The interview methods I used were the go-along method, semistructured interviews, and visual elicitation interviews.

The primary interview method that I used was the go-along. This method consisted of me walking along with Mark, filming his practices. As the go-along acknowledges that humans relate to their environment by showing how place and culture shape lived experiences and worldviews (Springgay and Truman 2019: 3 & 19), it helped to study the relationship of Mark to his farm by focusing on his interrelationship of body and mind (Ibid.: 23-24). As 'place' is increasingly seen as something sensory, walking through it is vital to gain embodied communication and sensorial understandings of

[24] Chapter 4.6.
[25] Chapter 4.4.

our protagonists (Pink 2007: 246). Moreover, it helps to gain knowledge of protagonists' "experiences, interpretations, and practices" (Carpiano 2009: 5). As Mark often thought aloud during this method, it helped me gain a deeper understanding of his ideologies. Ultimately, this method enabled me to gain knowledge about the embodied and sensory human-environment relationship key to this study and also helped me gain a deeper understanding of Mark's view on living in the Anthropocene and his thoughts on sustainability. Ultimately, it helped to provide a holistic understanding of Mark's relationship with the farm.

Moreover, I did semistructured interviews, one at the beginning of fieldwork and one towards the end. Both helped me to go into specific topics while leaving room for Mark to share other thoughts (Bernard 2006: 210). As in-depth conversations with Mark already occurred naturally, these interviews were especially valuable to go into the core of Mark's ideologies. It supported me in forming a more in-depth answer to my research question.

Lastly, I conducted two visual elicitation interviews to gather information about the history of the agroforestry farm, the perspectives of Mark's parents on changing farming practices, and the process of starting agroforestry practices. Using visual materials in interviews provides different insights than solely verbal discussions as it "evokes deeper elements of human consciousness" (Harper 2002: 13) than with words alone. The first interview, involving old photos and maps, was unstructured and meant to be collaborative, allowing Mark and his parents to choose the visuals for discussion (Ibid.: 23). However, the lack of order in the materials created some tension and limited the conversations' structure. Despite gaining valuable knowledge, I felt this approach had untapped potential. To address this, I organized a second visual elicitation interview. For this, I asked Mark and Peter to select around seven visuals each that could provide us with pieces of the information I wanted to gain. They send them to me in advance, enabling me to prepare questions. Because Mark and Peter also chose some landscape photos of the farm, I brought drone photos of the land to assist them in clarifying landscape changes over time. For a good structure, I decided on a chronology of discussing the oldest to the most recent pieces. This clear structure and understanding of intentions created a more relaxed and insightful conversation, enhancing my understanding of the farms' history and family dynamics.

Ultimately, using ethnographic methods combined with video recordings, I gained insights into Mark's embodied sensory experiences, which facilitated me to learn about Mark's relationship to his working environment. Additionally, Mark's storytelling habit allowed me to follow his thought processes. Hence, these methods helped me capture both the human-environment relationship and his ideologies, which allowed me to understand better his thoughts on living in the Anthropocene and his idea of sustainability.

In the following chapter, I discuss the knowledge gained through these methods and connect it to the theoretical framework to answer my research question. This will lead up to the conclusions of this study.

4 Findings

This chapter will answer my research question: *What is the relationship that people who practice a sustainable form of agriculture have with the land they work on?* The answer to this research question consists of multiple aspects, explained in the following sections.

4.1 Everyday practices

As stated before, the practices of an agroforestry farmer are diverse and focused on the long-term, making it a sustainable practice. Moreover, the practices are highly dependent on the season, the weather of that particular workday, and the days before and after it. Therefore, it is a prominent theme in his everyday practices. Whereas row cultivation got more attention with, for example, creating a pleasant climate for the plants, in the food forest, Mark only planted things and left them to do their work for the long term. I was familiarized with new plant species every time I visited the farm. The focus of agroforestry as a practice on diversity and the interconnectedness of the human and the non-human to achieve sustainability could already help produce a discourse that reflects this thought (López 2018: 603).

Mark's focus did not only lay on these working tasks explained above. Every day I spent with him, Mark was very aware of his surroundings: soil textures, smells, colours, insects, birds, animal spores, etcetera. It was already on the first day that I visited the agroforestry farm and met Mark that I noticed the highly sensory experience of the place. I will show this with a vignette.

> Within my first few meters of walking along with Mark on the land, I notice that his walking rhythm is closely related to his thoughts. We start walking on the land from the side of the bus stop. There is yet to be something planted on this plot of the land, and Mark walks very fast, crossing it. I try to keep up with him, listening closely but at the same time looking around me to soak up the impressions that I get from my surroundings. The food forest appears on our right as we walk through a new wooden fence. Mark starts talking about the food forest and then suddenly stops. He walks towards the barbwire that encloses the food forest and looks closely at it. I don't know what he is doing at that moment, but when I come closer, I see some hair stuck in the wire. "I wanted to see if it was the hair of the badger, but I don't think so; badger hair is stiffer." On our way to Mark's office, on the opposite side of the land from where we started, Mark stopped several times to point out birds while introducing me to the agroforestry farm. Later that day, we continued our walk.
>
> We are now walking on the farm's row cultivation plot towards the row of blackberry plants. Mark walks up to one of the plants and breaks off a twig. I am slightly startled for a moment: why would he break off a twig of this plant? Then he says: "Here, smell this". Confused about what will happen, I smell the twig and immediately notice the sweet smell of cassis. "Wow!

> That smells so sweet!" I say. Mark laughs, I think happy with my surprised reaction, and says: "It really smells like cassis, right?!". A few meters from there, we arrive at a boundary of the land. Mark explains that the whole outer edge of the land is planted with bushes to form protection for the land and a shelter for birds and other animals. He mentions that there are often hares finding shelter in these bushes and that it could very well be that we will see one coming out of the plants. When Mark takes one step back, a hare jumps out of the bushes, running away from us. "See?" Mark says excitingly. He sees my surprised face, and we start to laugh.

From that day on, I knew that being in this place is about more than just the working practices; it is about the whole experience.

This focus on details can also be seen in the film when Mark starts talking about the lands' soil and structure [00:07:48-00:11:56]. After that, he passes a tree that he starts to investigate because he likes its colour of it [00:12:14-00:12:45]. There were also many times that Mark was in conversation with me and suddenly saw a bird flying over the land [00:22:38-00:22:47]. Moreover, Mark once searched for tracks of the badger to find a spot to hang up a trail camera to capture a picture of it. That same week he captured a fox on that camera.

Mark employs his awareness and knowledge of his environment in one of his working tasks: guided tours. These consist of farmers, or others interested, coming to the farm for a tour consisting of Mark showing them around. The idea behind these tours is to inspire people with the experience of being at the farm[26].

Mark thus uses agroforestry as a tool to overcome the "nature-deficit-disorder" (Louv 2005) by acknowledging the interconnectedness between everything on earth (Toncheva 2019: 61; Uggla 2010: 87). With this, he provides a model that redefines the human-environment relationship (Toncheva 2019: 59 & 71; Latour 2011: 80) and, thereby, could redefine the debate on climate change by stepping away from constructed human/nature binaries (López 2018: 603; Scherini 2022: 25).

This section answered the first sub-question, being: *what are their practices?* As has become clear, agroforestry practices not only consist of working on the land but are also about the experience of the land itself. Mark's knowledge of the land is vital to how he experiences the land, which shows Mark's relationship to the farmland. This is nurtured by his wonder and love for the environment. His work of guiding people through his farm, letting them experience the agroforestry land, can work as a tool to strengthen human-environment relationships.

[26] I elaborate on this in chapter 4.4.

4.2 Motivation

In the interview wherein I asked Mark about his dislike for humanity[27], I also asked him what motivated him to do agroforestry [00:18:51-00:20:07]. Mark explains that he wanted to create a beautiful place, a piece of 'nature' which, by experiencing it, can show people its beauty and makes them "connect to that what they are not connected to anymore", referring to 'nature'. What also motivates him is proving to people that it is possible to do this and that there are alternatives to practices that are destroying the earth. Mark's motivation to do agroforestry practices comes from his love for the environment and his ideology on people needing a connection with their environment whereby they would learn not to undermine themselves. Mark derives his motivation to do agroforestry in the first place from his love for the environment and experiencing 'nature', which shows his human-environment relationship. Moreover, living in the Anthropocene, where many people are in an unsustainable human-environment relationship, Mark wants to strengthen this relationship again by letting people experience his agroforestry farm.

This answers my research's second sub-question: *What are their motives for doing this work?* The ideology behind it will become more apparent when reading the following sections, together answering the last sub-question: *What are the consequences of these practices and motives for their relation to the land on which they work?*

4.3 Family history

As explained in the introduction, the farm has been in Mark's family for more than 200 years, and his family has been practicing it ever since. From 1818 on, the farm had mixed practices and self-sustained the family. Peter remembers from his grandfather that he had some chickens, pigs, cows, and a horse and grew barley, potatoes, sugar beets and tubers in winter as food for the cows. At the start of the 60s, specialization took place in broilers and dairy cows; in '63, they went from 10 cows to 20-30 cows, and in the 70s' the cubicle stables and irrigation came, along with heavier machines. Peter continued only with dairy cows, sugar beets and corn. However, when he was restricted to having 70% of his land as grassland only his cows were left. He had to face more restricting rules – milk quotas and rules on manure – which made him get as efficient as possible, getting as much milk as possible from a limited number of cows (50 cows at the end). Peter mentioned in an interview that farmers are now facing even more restrictions and that he thinks that many farmers are stopping their practices now because they are tired of these constant limitations. When I asked Mark why he chose not to continue with his father's dairy farm, he and Peter said it would have been practically impossible. The farm was too small and would have had to grow, but it would not have been possible to organize with the bank. Moreover,

[27] I elaborate on this in chapter 4.5.

Mark did not like the practise of milking cows at least twice a day; this would have felt to him as a restriction, and, on top of that, he finds these practices too intensive physically. He feels like the practices he chose are giving him way more freedom than those he would have had as a dairy farmer, which is valuable to him.

Mark also grew up on the farm, as his family home was on the farmland all his childhood. As a child, he always looked out of his bedroom window to see the land and used to be excited that the land was flat, that you could look so far away in the distance. Then, at some point, he realized that it was "not okay" that you could look all that way as it meant that there was not much life on the land. What mainly inspired him was the steam flowing on one side of the land. That stream used to flow straight all his childhood, as that was how people made it in 1930. A decade ago, they decided to give this stream its natural flow back and thus let it meander again, which resulted in a more vital ecosystem along the stream. The positive influence of this meandering stream on the environment inspired Mark to start his Forest and Nature Conservation studies, raising his interest in sustainability.

Moreover, the family ties to the farm are shown throughout the film in the interviews with Mark and Peter[28].

This section clarified how Mark relates to the farm in terms of its (family)history. He grew up at the farm, seeing his father getting more restricted in his practices. Seeing the environment benefit from the stream's natural flow, Mark was inspired to bring more natural processes to the land, letting it revive. This history with the farmland made Mark practise an agricultural form in the Anthropocene that would not restrict him for environmental reasons and fit his ideologies on sustainability.

4.4 Longing to be an inspiration

One part of Mark's work is inspiring others with his agroforestry farm[29], as he also explains in the film [00:25:08-00:26:16]. In my first interview with him, he told me that he wants to show the people coming to his farm that we are part of nature and can function in harmony with it. One part of that is making people conscious of the role we, as people, have in 'nature' by showing that it is natural to live with the seasons and therefore have a different supply of products every other time of the year. The other part of this is the life experience on the farm: what you hear, see, and smell, the sensory experience, opening up peoples' feelers there. In that same interview, Mark explains the need for people to look at the place through different eyes. He explains that he has noticed that people do not see certain things and consequently do not have the same experience as he has on the land. Because

[28] [00:02:13-00:05:59; 00:13:19-00:14:16; 00:20:53-00:22:09; 00:29:15-00:30:26]
[29] Discussed in chapter 4.1.

Mark aims to give them precisely this experience, he wants to put signs on the land as mnemonics to hint at what they could be experiencing at the farm.

> "It's funny, I was walking here with friends once, and a robin sat on a pole. I think it was two meters away from us, well… it was really, really close. And I was like: "Don't you all see that?!". Mark laughs, "They really did not see it. That is striking to me."

Ultimately, he wants to convince people to change the way they look at their environment by being on the land and experiencing the farm, offering an alternative view on life in the Anthropocene (Chua and Fair 2009: 8). As farmers' relationships with their environment have a significant influence on peoples' understanding of both agriculture and non-human nature (Giagnocavo et al. 2022: 4), Mark's longing to inspire provides an opportunity to work towards sustainability. This is especially relevant for a country like The Netherlands that clearly values farmers' views.

In the first interview with Mark, we discussed the supposed division between 'nature' and agriculture and what Mark thinks about this. He stated that people often plead for more intensification, but he does not think that is the solution because then we would probably get too far away from the origin of our food. Moreover, Mark thinks that agroforestry practices could also work well for educational purposes and benefit people's physical and mental health, for example, because you are standing close to your food at this place. Mark explained that many species he planted on this land could not function in conventional agricultural practices in monocultures because most of the species are functioning well in combination with others. He could see intensive and extensive agriculture living side to side in the future, working as systems that complement each other. Mark often stressed the importance of looking at the specifics of a place to know what agricultural practice would fit best, which overlaps with anthropology's emphasis within sustainability debates on acknowledging differences when engaging with humans and non-human nature (Brightman & Lewis 2017: 2 & 20). This shows both Mark's nuance and criticality on agricultural practices working for the long term.

What becomes clear in this section is that Mark wants the agroforestry farm to be an inspiring place for people who experience being there. He hopes to bring people closer to their food and teach them about natural processes to strengthen human-environment relationships. Moreover, Mark underscores the need to choose agricultural practices that best match a specific place for a sustainable agricultural system.

4.5 I don't like people

Throughout my time with Mark, he told me several times that he did not really like people. In need of clarification on why that was, I asked him in an interview [00:16:54-00:18:51]. While talking about this,

it became clear that Mark does not understand that people constantly want more and more – belongings, power, etcetera – and do not see that they undermine themselves by doing that. People undermine themselves by going against 'nature'. Mark thinks this is weird because, as he says: "Whatever happens to humanity, nature will survive, also without people". Even if humanity is not here anymore, the thought that 'nature' will live on brings him to rest. I think it is because of this that he dares to say he would not mind a world without people. I think this statement could be a coping mechanism for handling living in the Anthropocene, mainly because Mark states that "when you only start looking at everything people are ruining on this planet, you will turn yourself crazy".

Moreover, I understand this thought process as I have had it myself. Then, the idea that 'nature' will survive is soothing, especially when you love the experience of being in 'nature', as Mark does. However, his longing to inspire others[30] clearly shows that he cares about people. Therefore, I think Mark may like people more than he would dare to admit, just not when talking about humanity as a whole.

Hence, Mark's stated dislike towards humanity is linked to the Anthropocene as it stems from the human idea of superiority over the non-human. Like Johnson et al. (2022: 9), Mark underlines the need for humankind to decenter itself to enable a more holistic approach to being human in the Anthropocene. Moreover, it links to Clarke & Haraway's (2018) thoughts on the environmental consequences of population growth, consequently pleading for a kinship that is both diverse and inclusive of non-human nature.

This section showed Mark's idea about humanity. He states that he does not like people and finds his rest in the thought that 'nature' will survive, also without humanity. Hence, 'nature' seems to give him a grip on life where humanity does not.

4.6 Longing to be understood

Before the first interview with Mark and his parents, I was on the agroforestry farm, planting trees in the food forest with Mark. Somewhere between planting, he approached me and told me that a neighbouring farmer had asked him about his way of doing agriculture. He had asked Mark why he did not use a few square meters of his land. Mark explained to me that this comes from the ruling thought that you, as a farmer, should use every square meter of your land to earn money. For many farmers, therefore, just letting a piece of land 'be' is an anxious thought. Later, within the interview, this also became clear. I will show this in a vignette.

[30] Discussed in chapter 4.4.

> At one moment in the interview, Mieke - Mark's mom - states that she really believes in the agroforestry system they are building together. I agree that what they are building up together is beautiful. Then Peter responds: "Yes, it's drastic". "Yes? Drastic?" Mark responds. "I think many people think we are crazy", Peter continues. "Many", Mieke agrees while nodding, "people think lots of things about it". Mark states that a fault that many people still make is comparing his practices with conventional agriculture, while you cannot compare the two. When I asked them if there were many questions from neighbours about the agroforestry practices, they all agreed: people do not ask about it personally, but we know there are many questions within our surroundings. The favour they have as a family, however, is that people from the neighbourhood take them seriously because, up until now, their businesses have always been a success.

Back to the moment we were planting, after explaining his conversation with his neighbour, Mark starts explaining that he has an agreement with his parents. The agreement is that when someone asks them about Mark his practices, they cannot respond to that and should send these people to Mark so that he can explain his practices himself. He is afraid they do not tell the whole, solid story otherwise. This story, one that everyone should be able to understand, is essential to Mark, primarily to be understood by farmers.

This *longing to be understood* also comes forward in the film in my interview with Mark and his dad [00:21:28-00:22:09]. Herein, it becomes clear that Mark thinks that people practising alternative agriculture often have a big ideology which stands in the way of being understood by other farmers, creating too big of a gap between alternative and conventional farmers. In the same interview, Mark said that he, therefore, tries not to bring this ideology to the fore, while it often still shines through by stating that they do these practices for "this and that", which makes people often think, "what kind of tree hugger is that?". While Mark states that it is precisely that reality that he thinks we should live in and that this ideology is at the base of their practices, he stresses the need to approach everything like a farmer would and that, therefore, everything should have a purpose and a creative revenue model behind it to make the practice appealing especially to them. While Mark thus also has a big ideology, he tries not to show this in his communication to the outside world -especially farmers - to try and smaller the gap between his world and that of the conventional farmer. Also, because of this, Mark does not want to be seen as an activist[31] and is concerned with his media representation[32].

The last time I went to the farm to film, we talked about the chickens' eggs on his farm and that he has made a lovely logo stamp for his eggs. Mark told me that he posted a picture of the stamped eggs on Instagram and got an adverse reaction from someone. The reaction was more so a question: if Mark knew that these chickens were bred to lay this many eggs and that this was not natural behaviour.

[31] I elaborate on this in chapter 4.7.
[32] Discussed in chapter 3.2.

Mark did not say it, but I could see that he was touched and annoyed by this comment and needed it to get off his chest, mainly because this person acted like he never thought about these things before. Of course, Mark was aware of this, and therefore he would have liked to have chickens that have a more natural egg-laying pattern – as he probably will in the future. However, this was impossible for now because he had to earn money from the eggs. After all, the other agroforestry practices do not yet produce enough yield to make ends meet. To him, the idea of doing everything as well as possible and then still getting such comments is just unnecessary. It shows another way in which Mark wishes to be understood. The film also shows that Mark reflects the goodness of his practices [00:27:37-00:28:32].

Within this section, it became clear that others often misunderstand Mark while he does a lot to be as understandable as possible to others by creating a solid and nuanced story for his practices. It mainly shows that doing a sustainable practice within the Anthropocene raises many questions on both conservative and progressive sides, leading Mark to refrain from emphasizing the ideologies forming the basis of his practices. Because Mark's longing to inspire others with his practices draws from his ideologies, not feeling the space to express them could stand in the way of this sustainable alternative and its benefits.

4.7 Pioneer in public

As learned from the previous section, with Mark being a pioneer in his practise, he gains much attention. He never wanted this attention, but it just came with the practice of agroforestry in The Netherlands because it is new here. In my search for a food forest to research, I found several articles presenting Mark as someone who goes against the norm[33]. My impression of him, therefore, was him being an activist in his field. However, along the lines of what I explained in the previous section, Mark stated, already in our first online video meeting, that he did not see himself as an activist. Curious about what was behind this, I asked him about this in our first. Herein, Mark discussed climate anxiety, a subject we had discussed the previous day. He explained that five or more years back, he was also anxious about negative human impacts on the world and could not put that into practise somewhere. The agroforestry farm enabled him to make an impact, even while he also sees it as "a drop in the ocean".

> When I ask Mark whether he thinks he would have been an activist if he did not have this land, he responds that he might have been but does not know for sure because he cannot imagine not having this farm anymore. Then I ask him if he does not see his practices on this farm as activist practices. He immediately responds with "no". "Why?" I ask. He thinks for a few seconds and

[33] Discussed in chapter 3.2.

> starts to smile, which may be a sign of doubt. “I think that somewhere I am trying to make a statement, but it is not that I want to impose something on anybody. And that is the impression I get with the word ‘activism’, maybe undeserved. It is not that what I do here is the way to go for everyone. Specifically for this location, it is something I think of as better and could inspire people. However, what I already said, maybe my view on activism is… No, maybe it is activist after all.” He starts to laugh. “I am trying to get around it. Well… I don’t know, I don’t know… It may be.”

When Mark would agree with himself being an activist - which means going against the norm - he creates a gap between himself and people that have an image of activists as people that want to impose something on others. As I discussed in the previous section, the thought of having a big ideology attached to the word would then stand in the way of him and his relationships with others he wants to inspire.

During my fieldwork, Mark did a Q&A at the premiere of the documentary *Planet Soil* [*Onder het Maaiveld*]. I went to this Q&A and recorded it. After a while, repeatedly hearing Mark’s dislike for people and his not wanting to be seen as someone to imply something to others made me wonder why he chose to do this Q&A. I asked him in the second interview with his dad.

> “I just find it hard to say no”, he responds. “The story may be good, but I just don’t see myself as the person that should be telling it. My oldest brother could do that way better; he’s a born storyteller. I never wanted to be busy with these things, but I understand that it’s a story that wants to be heard.” He explains that he just gave workshops organized by the Ministry of Agriculture and that he liked those because these were interactive and with a small group. To him, that’s very different from giving a presentation. When he goes back to the question about the Q&A, he tries to think about why he said yes to that. Peter quickly responds that Mark is also building up a network by it. “Yes, you also saw that with the American documentary about us, I got so many LinkedIn messages and potential relations and ideas. You just miss out on so much if you don’t do it. So, I also recently said that I like to let myself be used for that”, he chuckles. “And he does it well”, peter adds. Mark remains unsure about that. “What comes with that is that many people want something from you, and at the moment that it will bring me something, like visual material, I’m in for it. Otherwise, people should book a guided tour. I would have spent my money on it if it had been there when I started.”

This section shows that Mark never asked to be in a position that brought him to the attention of the bigger public as a pioneer and that he also does not think he is the perfect person to tell this story. However, he sees the value it brings him - connections and ideas – and the overall agroforestry movement. Therefore, he quietly embraces the public position that comes with being a pioneer. It

shows that practising a sustainable agricultural alternative in the Anthropocene gains much attention that Mark carefully deals with so that he can share his story nuancedly.

4.8 Summary of the results

As this chapter has shown, Mark's relationship with his farmland is influenced by multiple factors: his everyday practices, his (family)history with the land and his motivation stemming from his ideology. His ideology concerns his want to inspire - therefore embracing being a public figure as a pioneer, despite the negative sides that come with it- his want to be understood by others and his supposed dislike for humanity.

Therefore, the relationship that Mark, as an agroforestry farmer, has with the land he works on could be explained by emphasizing his love for the environment, with a focus on the sensorial experience of being on the land. He wants to share this experience with others to inspire them to restore their relationship with the environment, which could result in stepping away from the supposed human-nature division to achieve sustainability. The idea of the Anthropocene as an era that shows human destruction of the environment is leading in Mark's thoughts. His priority is, therefore, not humanity, but the environment, the thriving of 'nature' - also without humanity. However, while the idea is that the motives behind his practices, forming his relationship with the place, will result in sustainability for the non-human, they might also result in a more sustainable world for humanity.

These results reveal that even when the ideologies behind alternative agricultural practices are not focused on benefitting humanity, prioritizing relationships with the environment with the thought to 'do better' [00:19:53-00:20:08] for 'nature' – even if this does not mean humans – will ultimately come around to be essential for human relationships with 'nature' and therefore for the sustainability of human and non-human. Ultimately, this shows that the idea that the Anthropocene brings with it – the idea of human destruction of the earth - can restrict sustainable agricultural farmers from sharing their ideologies. At the same time, these could greatly inspire us to restore our relationship with the environment and achieve a more sustainable future. Therefore, Marks' "complex dream" (Veteto and Lockyer 2013: XV) – which shines through his ideology – is something he is proud of, longing to inspire others with it to achieve a better relationship with the environment, and simultaneously something that he is reluctant with towards people who do not seem to understand him.

5 Conclusion

I started this research to explore a sustainable alternative to living in the Anthropocene, particularly in the context of the extensive agricultural crisis in The Netherlands. The government's focus on climate change regulations focused on numbers and prioritization of technical solutions often overlooks the human element behind these agricultural practices. Recognizing the importance of human perspectives and the influence of farmers on public perception, I sought to humanize the debate by drawing on the strengths of anthropology. The recent success of the Farmer-Citizen Movement in Dutch society further emphasizes the value placed on farmers' viewpoints. By studying the human-environment relationship within sustainable agriculture, I aimed to inspire a reevaluation of our understanding of this relationship and challenge the nature/culture binary. Ultimately, I hope to contribute to a more sustainable and equitable future for both humans and the non-human world.

With this visual ethnographic research, I have provided an insight into the life of agroforestry farmer Mark Venner by using the strength of visual ethnography - with film recording as a method - to show Mark's everyday experiences and create empathy. By showing Mark's practices, motives and the ideologies that motivated his agroforestry practices, I showed how myriad perceptions and beliefs reveal how place and culture are interrelated, forming Mark's relationship with the farmland. These findings provide us with knowledge that could be applied on a bigger scale.

Firstly, Mark's perspective shows us that the agricultural and nitrogen crisis in The Netherlands should be about more than just technological solutions because the issues are much more complex than that. The human side of the problem is often overlooked as it does not acknowledge farming as a way of life situated in place and culture. Where the agricultural debate is currently polarized - with environmental needs on the one side and farmers' needs on the other side - Mark provides us with an alternative way to relate to the Dutch landscape that steps away from this supposed nature/culture divide and shows us the importance of acknowledging the interconnectedness of the human and non-human for long-term sustainability. A consequence of farmers taking along this insight in their agricultural practices - as a way of life - could result in the reduction of emissions that we strive for in this agrarian crisis.

Secondly, Mark teaches us an alternative way to live in the Anthropocene. He is stunned by humans undermining themselves by undermining nature. Therefore, he chose agroforestry practices, not in the first place, to establish a utopia for humankind but rather to take care of 'nature', also without humanity. This teaches us that we can make sustainable decisions first and foremost to care for non-human nature while simultaneously enabling ourselves to benefit from that. So, prioritizing non-human nature over ourselves could ultimately help the sustainability of both humans and non-humans.

Overall, zooming in on Mark his agroforestry practices, motives, and ideologies inspires us to acknowledge the interconnectedness of the human and the non-human to achieve sustainability

through our human-environment relationships and provides a different view on living in the Anthropocene, creating a pleasant environment for ‘nature’ as a whole by not seeing humans as superior.

I hope this inspires other anthropologists to also focus on human-environment relationships in alternative sustainable practices to encourage a change in humanity’s view on the environment and possibly help stop undermining ourselves by undermining ‘nature’.

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