

# A TRIP TO MORGENSTOND



## Governance of Sustainability students investigate the challenges of urban biodiversity in Morgenstond in The Hague

Tags: #Morgenstond #urbanbiodiversity #nature  
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When you hear “urban biodiversity”, images of parks, gardens, ponds, or green buildings tend to spring to mind – these are the backdrop of the neighbourhood or the setting for our lives. However, as we discovered, urban biodiversity goes far deeper than that. Far from being a static environment, it is a complex, moving system that requires a large number of actors and engagement to maintain. Aside from its environmental benefits, increased urban biodiversity has significant social and economic advantages. It fosters a sense of community and can spur local initiatives to make use of the natural areas. It also increases the value and thus the wealth of a neighbourhood and encourages the development of local businesses and entrepreneurs. This is the story of our journey into the Morgenstond neighbourhood in The Hague, what we learnt about biodiversity and the challenges facing the local stakeholders, and what lessons we can share with fellow and future students.

### Morgenstond at a glance

Morgenstond is a small post-war neighbourhood in The Hague Southwest. With just over 20,000 residents in the 1.63 km<sup>2</sup> neighbourhood, Morgenstond is a primarily residential area, well connected to the city centre. It is lively and the busy shopping precinct sees a constant stream of locals there to shop at the diverse small businesses, supermarket chains, or just passing through this thoroughfare. On an initial walk through the neighbourhood, the effects of a busy residential and commercial hub

the standard, municipality-maintained trees, lawns, bushes, that oftentimes included litter and single use plastic waste which were noticeably prevalent. The residential gardens were very well maintained and suggested a sense of pride and ownership that individuals took to the green spaces within their area.

### A Snapshot of biodiversity

In order to dig a bit deeper and sketch a better picture of the existing biodiversity in the neighbourhood, we spent the morning documenting the different species of trees, plants, moss, lichen, and animals that we observed. Rows of Ash Leaved Maple (*Acer negundo*) were a common sighting along with Ivy (*Hedera helix*), while Curly Beard Moss (*Barbula convoluta*) was often found occupying the spaces between the pavement.



*Coprinellus micaceus*

One of many diverse fungi spotted in and around the pavement and sidewalk in Morgenstond

The Eurasian Coot (*Fulica atra*), common to large parts of the Netherlands, was also happily at home in Morgenstond, sharing the canals with Egyptian Geese (*Alopochen aegyptiaca*), in Europe since the 18th century. However it was clear that this perspective of biodiversity was one that had to be actively searched out: a particular idea of biodiversity guided our investigation.

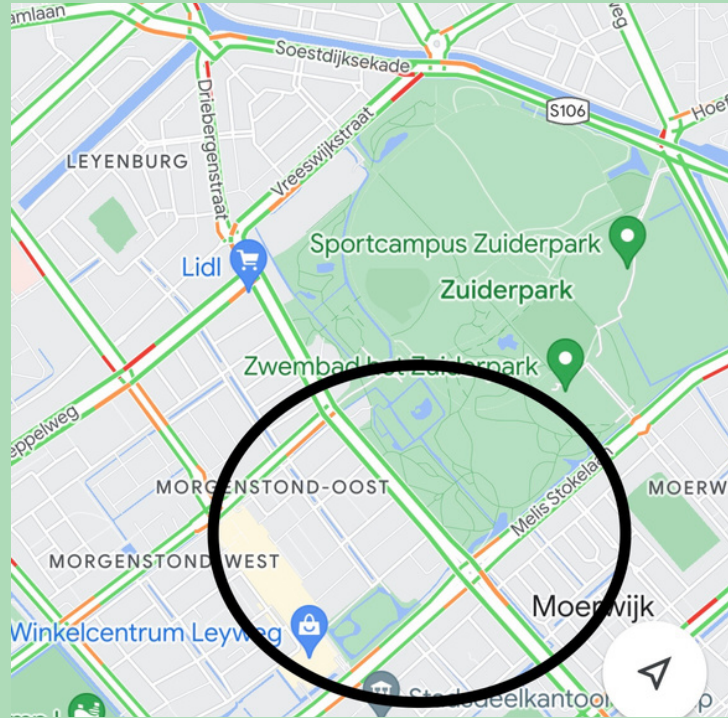
As students with an assignment and set of objectives, our measurement of biodiversity was performed within the context of data, observable micro-environments, and a general preconception of natural superseding the artificial. This is what biodiversity meant to us. And in this framework, it was puzzling to see many stretches of lawn and pavement devoid of insect life, or rows of identical trees. We had knowledge of the concept of a green desert and wanted to understand the story of the neighbourhood a bit better. For this, it was necessary to get back to the streets and engage with local residents and businesses to understand what their perspective is on urban biodiversity and its role in their neighbourhood.

### What does biodiversity mean to Morgenstond?

We quickly found that the story is far more complex than simply an urban planning issue. Two significant challenges emerged in regards to the development of the local urban biodiversity: a lack of understanding and a lack of valuation of biodiversity in the neighbourhood.

When approached for their thoughts on biodiversity in the neighbourhood, a common response was one of satisfaction and sufficiency. Many locals shared that they think the area is green enough, the upkeep of the green spaces is sufficient, and that they were often unphased regarding the level of greenery in their neighbourhood due to the proximity of the large Zuiderpark.

Time and again the same perspective emerged. Biodiversity was equated with the presence of green; the maintenance of biodiversity was represented by the maintenance of the green spaces. These observations denoted a particular conception of biodiversity within the neighbourhood.



***Zuiderpark is only a short 10 minute walk down the road***

However it was not the only one. We were fortunate enough to have an insightful conversation with a teacher from the local elementary school. While also generally appreciative of the natural greenery in Morgenstond, she highlighted the importance of green spaces for the children. Getting outdoors and ensuring activities take place among nature was a priority for her as she emphasised the value of biodiversity through the eyes of a growing child. Zuiderpark also played an important role for the school in this regard. She included that the school itself has its own natural garden: a place where the children can learn about the importance of nature as well as how different plants and animals work together to share, survive, and thrive.



However important the concept of sharing is, it clearly must be done in such a way so as not to encroach upon one another's way of life. In this light, our conversation with the teacher took a turn towards the less enjoyable aspects of the neighbourhood's biodiversity, predominantly centred around the local domesticated geese (*Anser anser domesticus*).

The geese are considered by all to be locals of the area, though not always the most welcome. We were told of instances where the geese droppings prevented the school from using green spaces for activities with children.

This was an example of a negative perception of biodiversity: that it becomes something to manage or control and opposes the functionality of the space with the nature of it. And while nobody went so far as to suggest evicting the geese from the neighbourhood, these stories did contribute to our understanding that the locals tend to perceive biodiversity and greenery primarily from an aesthetic point of view – that it is nice on the eye and more is welcome up to the point that it hinders functionality and activity.

Was this a fundamental misunderstanding of biodiversity? Perhaps. But what this also seemed to highlight to us was a lack of value attributed to the local greenery and nature in the neighbourhood. In order to drill down into this theory, we arranged another expedition and set out to meet with more local stakeholders to get a sense of where biodiversity placed on the neighbourhood's list of priorities.



**Locals were sometimes hesitant to share their opinions and stories during the field trips**

## **How important is urban biodiversity in Morgenstond?**

To find out what was being done about biodiversity in the neighbourhood of Morgenstond, we organised an informal meeting with a representative from the local office of the municipality of The Hague. We learnt that there are no known local initiatives centred around biodiversity. The green parts of the neighbourhood are mainly seen as beneficial in that they improve the atmosphere of the area. Improving the condition of urban biodiversity is not high on the list of priorities. This perception was also mirrored by residents we engaged with. Multiple individuals cited the pleasantness of the greenery as well as its stability through the years, but repeatedly observed that individual responsibility seemed to be lacking. Littering was a significant issue to the local residents as well as the management of dog droppings. Ostensibly, keeping the neighbourhood clean was more important than improving the neighbourhood. This slowly became clearer to us as we encountered more locals satisfied with the level of biodiversity in the area but hoping for better upkeep and more communal effort towards the maintenance of common spaces.

While we entered the neighbourhood with a focus on urban biodiversity, we quickly learnt that this framing came only through our subjectivity and particular circumstances. A simple lesson we could have drawn from our initial observations would have been that the locals do not know nor care about biodiversity as much as they should.

But this perspective is one that in our opinion would be far too narrow and linear. The perceived value of the greenery in the neighbourhood is borne through the individuals' perception of the role it plays for them and for their community.

This realisation was at times troubling or difficult to grasp and challenged us, especially as we approached the neighbourhood with our own preconceptions in the beginning. But the diversity of the neighbourhood as well as the stakeholders we engaged with helped highlight an important point. Indeed, as we learnt, Morgenstond is a multicultural neighbourhood with a significant portion of non-Dutch speakers.

**Diversity is everywhere in Morgenstond, bringing with it benefits as well as challenges.**

At Nutsschool Morgenstond for example, 25% of the parents do not speak Dutch which poses a challenge to communication. Not that this seemed to be a deterrent when we observed the bustling shopping strip, or spoke with people from many backgrounds who all mostly shared a very fond appreciation of their neighbourhood as it met their needs in their individual ways. The neighbourhood itself began to resemble its own kind of ecosystem – perhaps an extension of the urban biodiversity we initially went into to study. We encountered many actors, a high level of diversity, and learnt of the underlying issues of social cohesion in the neighbourhood. And just as one solution or perspective does not represent the sum total frames to a problem, the multiplicity of perspectives we observed, heard, and shared during our time in Morgenstond underlined the complexity of biodiversity issues especially in urban areas, and simultaneously highlighted the important yet varied and multifaceted role that nature plays in each and every one of our lives.