

ONBOARDING NATURE: A CASE STUDY AND EXPLORATION OF CONCEPTUALISATION

An in-depth review based on a one-year research project at The Hague University of Applied Sciences

Introduction

In April 2024 the Onboarding Nature Toolkit was published. Developed by B Lab Benelux, Earth Law Centre and Nyenrode Business University, the toolkit enables organisations to give Nature a voice, a place and a role in their own operations. The Onboarding Nature Toolkit distinguishes three steps in Onboarding Nature:

- 1) **Conceptualise** (Clarify your understanding of and relationship with Nature, and ascertain why you want to bring it on board)
- 2) **Contextualise** (Choose a Nature as Stakeholder model, and adjust its design to your vision)
- 3) **Implement** (Amend and adjust relevant constitutional documents, corporate structure, and organisational governance culture as required)

Taking Nature onboard as a stakeholder in your business is a fundamental step in changing your way of doing business by changing the way you see the world. Onboarding Nature requires a shift in thinking and doing that is based on ecocentrism rather than anthropocentrism, placing humanity within nature rather than above it. Conceptualisation is the first and foundational step of engaging with and implementing onboarding Nature in your business or organisation. Conceptualisation focusses on clarifying your understanding of Nature and your relationship with it, which is the basis for moving towards long-lasting and material impact with your practice of onboarding Nature. Without a clear conceptualisation, onboarding Nature runs the risk of becoming superficial or instrumental. Therefore taking this step seriously and going in-depth with it is what this 'add-on chapter' of the Onboarding Nature Toolkit focusses on.¹ This ensures a practice of onboarding Nature that is well thought through and creates not only a legal and structural, but also cultural change in the organisation.

¹ Onboarding Nature Toolkit, 2024; p58

The Research Project – Aim and Methodology

The Onboarding Nature toolkit offers four models in which the onboarding can be applied. Each model proposes a different way in which Nature is engaged as a stakeholder. **Nature as Inspiration** embeds Nature's voice through a policy-based declaration of intent/values, or through a legal entrenchment of Nature as Purpose in an organisation's constitutional documents. **Nature as Advisor** is either a policy or legal commitment, to onboard Nature as a stakeholder in a consulting capacity, within the governance of a company, via the creation of an advisory board, or advisory board seat. **Nature as Director** is a legal commitment to embed the voice, the vote, and the interests of Nature in the constitutional, strategic and operational governance of the company. Finally, **Nature as Shareholder** is a legal commitment to entrench the voice, the vote, and the interests of Nature, through the ownership structure and governance of the company.

Following the publication of the toolkit, The Hague University of Applied Sciences started a one-year research project to explore the implementation dynamics of Onboarding Nature. The project kicked off with a Round Table in January 2025, engaging 50 participants to discuss the question of 'how to' onboard Nature. The Round Table meeting led to a few early conclusions which guided the rest of the research and created the focus on the 'conceptualisation' step. It became clear from the discussions that the motivation for Onboarding Nature needs to be ingrained in every layer and aspect of an organisation. In order to get to this motivation and integration, a shift in thinking is necessary in the way we relate to our surroundings, the natural environment.

The Round Table also resulted in a partnership with *Nationaal Park Duinen van Texel*, a national park located on a small island in the north of the Netherlands. Small and larger entrepreneurs on Texel offered a case study for the research in a compact area that can serve as an inspiration for the rest of the Netherlands. Texel's business owners were asked about their relationship with Nature and the potential for including Nature as a stakeholder in their decision making. The results of these interviews, together with the Round Table discussions, and supplemented by literature research, inform the findings of this project. The research explored the question: *What are the implementation challenges of Onboarding Nature, and how can businesses deal with these challenges?*

Case Study Context: Texel and National Park Dunes of Texel

Texel is a small island in the north of the Netherlands, in between the North Sea and the Wadden Sea. It is the biggest of five Dutch Wadden islands, and has a population of a little

under 14.000 people.² The north part of the island, 4300 hectare, is designated as national park, under the National Park Dunes of Texel, “consisting of natural areas, water and/or forests, with a special landscape and plant and animal life”.³ The purpose of the national park is to protect and develop nature and the landscape, stimulating communication, education, and nature-oriented recreation, as well as promoting research.

The national park also has close to 100 ‘hosts’: businesses and entrepreneurs with training from the national park to inform their guests about Texel’s natural landscape. Together with these hosts, the chair of the national park wanted to explore Onboarding Nature on Texel. The axiom of the national park is to “pass on the park to future generations at least as beautiful as it is now. Where we make a very strong link between nature protection and future generations, not only of people but of all life.”⁴

Texel thus served as a case study with inspiring examples of entrepreneurs who already operate in relative vicinity of nature, and often had a ‘Nature as Inspiration’ approach in their business. This exploration of Onboarding Nature draws on their practices and the conclusions of the Round Table, offering new insights into conceptualisation and using Nature as Inspiration through a place-based philosophy.

The following sections expand on the steps of Conceptualisations as defined previously in the Onboarding Nature Toolkit, and provide guidance for further, in-depth engagement with Onboarding Nature.

Step 1. Define a common understanding of Nature within the company

Nature as a concept is contextual, it will mean different things to different people, across different sectors, regions and cultures. Understandings of Nature range from the natural environment, flora and fauna, biodiversity, ecosystems and their services, non-human species, Earth, the planet, the community of life, and much more.⁵

The idea of Nature is elusive, and trying to engage ‘Nature’ as a concept in your business decisions is likely to be too abstract for an effective implementation of onboarding Nature (Laine, 2010; Ducarme & Couvet, 2020). When engaging Nature as a stakeholder in your business, it is therefore helpful to be as specific and concrete as possible considering who and what exactly you are onboarding. A direct relationship with the land, the direct natural environment you operate in, will help increase your understanding of what onboarding Nature means in practice, and will allow you to integrate it in your daily operations.

² <https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/visualisaties/dashboard-bevolking/regionaal/inwoners>

³ <https://www.npduinenvantexel.nl/7914/over-het-park/wat-is-een-nationaal-park>

⁴ Interview with Jan van de Venis, chairman of Nationaal Park Duinen van Texel

⁵ Onboarding Nature Toolkit, 2024; p59

Connection and interaction with your direct environment became clear as an important factor of onboarding Nature in the interviews with Texel entrepreneurs. All interviewees (n=8) mentioned that their direct surroundings played an important role in their way of doing business; either through their interaction with the ecosystem (n=3) (by being a farmer, food forester or green-spaces manager), the location of their establishment (n=2) (directly in or right near the dunes), or by being dependent on tourists who come to Texel because of the natural environment that they get to enjoy there (n=3).

A clear understanding of Nature requires a willingness to learn from the natural landscape and processes. Two interviewees mentioned learning a lot from the landscape they work with, about how to best take care of the ecosystem and biodiversity. They also noted the necessity of being out in the field for making decisions about how to manage the ecosystem, for example in terms of how to mow a certain field in a way that does the least damage to the biodiversity. Another interviewee mentioned that the moment you start engaging with your immediate surroundings, for example by increasing biodiversity around your building, you will become aware of the impact you have on Nature as a business. This was mentioned as a first step in the onboarding Nature process: familiarising yourself with the biodiversity that surrounds your establishment, in order to learn from it and build up a relationship with the ecosystem. This will motivate further steps of onboarding Nature, as you get to see the impacts of your actions up close.

The necessity to physically get in touch with Nature as a first step for Onboarding Nature also came up in the Round Table discussion,. Within Zoöp – the organizational model that helps businesses to collaborate with human and other-than-human life by instating a Speaker for the Living as an advisor – this step is called ‘sensitising’: “Learning to see your organization as a part of the living world. Developing an *ecocentric* sensibility.”⁶ In other words, a cognitive and emotional recognition of our intertwinement with all of life. This theme came up in various conversations during the Round Table; the need to have a felt recognition that we are connected with and mutually dependent on our natural environment. This points towards the fact that, besides cognitive awareness for the necessity of onboarding Nature, a more sensitive, intuitive, emotional awareness is also necessary.

Wonder is an important starting point of increased involvement with Nature. To wonder about Nature nearby, what Nature is, and how people are connected to it.⁷ This finding is reiterated in a recent research paper, where wonder about Nature is the first principle of Nature-inclusive learning (Lütteke and Laclau Massaglia, 2025). Wonder and sensitivity

⁶ Round Table discussion 17 January 2025; break-out group Businesses

⁷ Round Table discussion 17 January 2025; break-out group NGO's & Nature organisations

about Nature will guide further motivation to include the interests of Nature in decision-making.

Step 2. Clarify the vision of the future with Nature on board

For a company, onboarding Nature is neither a destination nor a project with a predetermined end. Rather, it is the first concrete step in integrating Nature into a company's governance and thinking.⁸

This step helps clarify what world you are working towards by taking Nature onboard as a stakeholder. It is also necessary to define how Nature as a stakeholder fits in your specific business model. Here is where the four different models onboarding Nature come in. Smaller businesses with five or fewer employees might not find it sensible to adopt a voice of Nature in your board or as a director. More than half of the interviewed entrepreneurs on Texel (n=5) operated businesses with three or fewer people. All indicated that formally onboarding Nature as an advisor, board member, or director, through a proxy or representative, would not be feasible for them, as their management structures lack the capacity for such a role. However, these were all businesses that did already take Nature into account in their decision-making in a Nature as Inspiration way. Either by the fact that their work was directly intertwined with the ecosystem (n=3), or by the awareness that their business is dependent on tourists who come to Texel for the natural environment, as well as trying to make sustainable decisions such as reducing plastic use (n=2).

Two businesses also expressed the feeling that 'onboarding Nature' is already in their DNA. They indicated that their preferred way of Nature governance is having Nature included in every decision out of common sense and inherent care from each employee, rather than instituting a single 'voice of Nature' to bring it into their decision-making. For example, one interviewee mentioned that the technical department of his business came up with the proposal to make spaces for swallows to nest in their new buildings. In this way, onboarding Nature is more of a bottom-up process through employees rather than a top-down change instituted by the board. This again indicates a preference for the 'Nature as Inspiration' model, where Nature's wellbeing becomes part of the mission or purpose of an organisation.

Especially for the small businesses who work directly with the landscape they operate in, (n=3) the self-evidence of making decisions based on what's best for the natural environment became clear. These businesses all had a strong ethos of caring about and for the landscape and ecosystem they work with. They expressed a motivation to preserve a

⁸ Onboarding Nature Toolkit 2024; p57

healthy ecosystem and biodiversity as well as the cultural landscape of Texel for future generations. For example, by managing green spaces in such a way that keeps biodiversity intact, keeping Texel's original sheep that maintain the cultural landscape, or by creating a food forest to increase biodiversity and ecosystem resilience.

The same business owners indicated that bureaucracy was often an obstacle for them in being able to make or execute Nature-inclusive decisions. For example, zoning plans determining how a piece of land should be used, or regulations about mowing made in a boardroom often neglect the lived reality of a landscape. One participant mentioned that what bothers them is that people who make policies and take decisions are never in the field, which creates a gap between the problem in the field and the solution proposed. This again points towards need to experience Nature up close, experience your direct surroundings and learn from ecosystems in order to onboard Nature in an effective way.

Step 3. Describe the change desired with Nature as Stakeholder

For a vision of the future to be different from the present, something has to change.

Therefore, onboarding Nature is an acknowledgement that the current status quo of a business needs to evolve.⁹

The change required to onboard Nature needs to be integrated in every layer aspect of your business. Ecocentrism comes in here, as a value system and worldview that, unlike anthropocentrism, places humanity *within* nature rather than *above* it (Hernández & Muñoz, 2022). Ecocentrism focusses on the relations between humans and Nature, and shifts away from hierarchical and dualistic oppositions. It therefore also applies to social relations, focussing more on mutual support and dependence, and less on hierarchy. Ecocentric management is the way of applying these ethics to the management of a company. It encompasses all business functions, including the goals, values, products, and organisation (Shrivastava, 1995). Shrivastava also mentions that “organizations in the ecocentric paradigm [...] establish harmonious relationships between their social and natural environments.” (Shrivastava, 1995; p130).

The interviews on Texel clearly revealed the connection between the social and the natural. One interviewee, working on maintaining Texel's cultural landscape by keeping Texel sheep, mentioned how a social network of volunteers around their business helps them stay afloat. The group of volunteers support the business, for example by helping out with work that needs to be done to maintain the property. They create a sense of trust that the business will

⁹ Onboarding Nature Toolkit, 2024; p59

make it through difficult times. The entrepreneur described it as creating a ‘shell’ around your business, a group of people who are involved with everything the business does, and regularly come out to help maintain the landscape. This group of people then creates the trust that the business is supported, also when times are tough.

In another conversation, an interviewee noted that they prefer to onboard Nature by fully integrating it into their organisation, encouraging each employee to consider Nature in their decisions. This also relates to the small scale of Texel as an island and the inherent connection to place and community this often goes along with. One participant summarised this as following: “The more you’re connected to the community, the more you’re connected to nature. That way you see that the social aspect and nature – not only on Texel – are very closely linked. You can’t just talk about nature as nature without humans, and you can’t talk about social aspects without nature playing a role in it either.”

Step 4. Determine the purpose of formalising Nature as Stakeholder

Both the vision of the desired outcome, and the changes required to achieve it, inform the purpose of formalising Nature as Stakeholder in the company governance structure. This initial alignment is essential to guarantee the conscious, authentic, and cultural nature of the onboarding process.¹⁰

The previous steps focused on the purpose, frame of mind, and culture of onboarding Nature. As mentioned in the Onboarding Nature Toolkit, “to avoid [...] tokenism and greenwashing, the transformation of corporate governance must be cultural as well as legal, structural and enforceable over time. This encompasses changing ways of thinking, relating, and doing business; and must be based on conscious ethical decisions that can be underpinned by tangible legal and structural changes. Therefore, the power of imagination, coupled with resourcefulness and determination, will help businesses succeed with this onboarding process.”¹¹

The scale, purpose and place of your business all play a role in creating your own version of onboarding Nature, one that is suitable for your organisation. The main reason that came up for formalising Nature as a stakeholder during the interviews was to secure future-proofness. For example, taking more Nature-inclusive business decisions can often depend on the mindset and values of the leadership of the company. Formalising onboarding Nature can ensure that regardless of changes in leadership, Nature’s interests will always have a seat at the table. It can also help to solidify Nature’s voice in difficult business decisions.

¹⁰ Onboarding Nature Toolkit, 2024; p60

¹¹ Onboarding Nature Toolkit, 2024; p58

One interviewee said that they “would like to see a situation where it is clearly stated, including in the statutes [...], that we are not only there for people, but also for nature in the area. That we recognise the intrinsic value of nature and that we also want nature to have a say and participate in decision-making within our organisation.”

Formalising Nature as a stakeholder is thus necessary to solidify the intention of including Nature in business decisions, ensuring that Nature serves as a compass and cannot be overlooked or overturned. The cultural and formal shift of onboarding Nature are two sides of the same coin; both necessary to ensure that Nature will have a seat on board that cannot and will not be pushed aside when other stakeholders might demand that. A strong conceptualisation is key to ensure a well thought through, integrated, and deeply felt implementation of onboarding Nature, and will form the basis for further implementation.

Conclusion and next steps in Onboarding Nature

This research project focussed on the early steps of Onboarding Nature and used a case study to explore the potential implementation of Onboarding Nature in small to medium sized businesses on Texel. In this way, it had a different focus than the Onboarding Nature Toolkit, which explored businesses that were already applying different models of Onboarding Nature. The added value of this research is a more in-depth and focussed exploration of the first step of Onboarding Nature in a case study context, learning from businesses that already work in close vicinity to their natural environment.

The main conclusion of this research project is that Onboarding Nature should be implemented with a place-based approach, and a shift from anthropocentric towards ecocentric management of the company. This research has focussed more on the cultural shift necessary for Onboarding Nature, and less on the legal and formal shift. The lessons of this research can be used by companies already applying Onboarding Nature to deepen their practice, as well as by businesses curious to start implementing Onboarding Nature.

The following points summarise the lessons learned from this research project:

- Onboarding Nature requires a solid conceptualisation of Nature as a starting point. This conceptualisation needs to be ingrained throughout the business or organisation in order to create a common understanding of why onboarding Nature is necessary and important. The common understanding among employees ensures that decisions are being made based on the same ecocentric ethics.
- Taking a place-based approach will help the conceptualisation of Nature as it moves away from an abstract ‘Nature as the natural world outside of us’, and connects your

business directly to the ecosystem it operates in. The place-based philosophy and strong sense of place and community identity of entrepreneurs on Texel demonstrates how a deep sense of connection to the landscape and community creates an ‘automatic’ onboarding of Nature in business decisions.

- A shift toward ecocentric management will help in gaining a deeper understanding of onboarding Nature and the changes that need to be made to move to a more future-proof economy. Ecocentric management helps combine the social and natural factors of change, operating your business in balance with the natural ecosystem as well as shifting social relations to be more reciprocative, inclusive and equal.

Steps to start conceptualising and applying Onboarding Nature

During the Round Table various methods were brought up to help bring Nature’s voice onboard in decision making:

- Add an extra chair to meetings to represent Nature. This simple gesture can help remind you to consider the unspoken interests of the natural ecosystems you operate in.
- Consider the question ‘What would Nature think of this?’ after every meeting or decision made. See if this question changes your way of thinking and helps you include different values in your decision-making.
- To shift your relationship with your natural surroundings, an exercise from ecological philosopher Matthijs Schouten was suggested: say hello to a tree you encounter daily, every day for a week.
- Nature constellations, a variation of the family constellation, where people represent different elements of a certain ecosystem, were mentioned as a valuable practice which helps to tap into intuitive rather than only rational knowledge about the ecosystem you operate in.
- Include Nature in your evaluations to ensure that decisions that onboard Nature are encouraged.

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