

# ANALYSING REGIONAL IDENTITIES IN THE NETHERLANDS

CAROLA SIMON\*, PAULUS HUIGEN\*\* & PETER GROOTE\*\*

*\*Danish Institute of Rural Research and Development (IFUL), University of Southern Denmark, Esbjerg, Denmark. E-mail: carola\_simon@hotmail.com*

*\*\*Department of Cultural Geography, Faculty of Spatial Sciences, University of Groningen, Groningen, The Netherlands. E-mails: p.p.p.huigen@rug.nl; p.d.groote@rug.nl.*

Received: 12 December 2008; revised 28 April 2009

---

## ABSTRACT

Scale-enlargement processes have made people more conscious of the identity of their region. Professionals, or those actors involved professionally in the development of a region, also recognise this impact on popular perception and they use characteristics of regions to fulfil their goals. They play an important role in employing the identity of a region. The extent to which this occurs varies between regions, which mean that some regions have stronger identities than others. In this paper evidence from two case studies in the Netherlands, Waterland and the Noordoostpolder, is used to explore why these differences occur. By counting the occurrence of names of regions, which are thought to be the most important symbols of a region's identity, insight is gained in the embeddedness of a region in social perception. Representations of regions commodified by professionals show that these actors influence the embeddedness of regions and as such regional differences; so professionals have a great impact on the strength of a region's identity.

**Key words:** Regional identities, professional discourse, region names, representations, the Netherlands

---

## INTRODUCTION

Over the years it seems that two contradictory developments have occurred. On the one hand, globalisation and other processes of scale enlargement reduce the attention on regional characteristics. As Voisey and O'Riordan (2001, p. 33) note, new technologies of communication disrupt and loosen traditional cultural ties and lifestyles. Furthermore, many express the fear that globalisation will lead to a uniform world. Wiskerke (2007) speaks of the disconnecting, detaching and de-twinning of the production of food, products and services from the region. These kinds of developments cause a decline in variations between regions, leading to a loss of regional identities.

On the other hand, people feel a greater need to embed themselves in a secure and stable environment which is often the place they call 'home'. An increasing awareness and attention for regional characteristics and regional identities is the result (Brouwer 1999; Van Ginkel 1999; Simon 2005). Specific features of regions, such as landscape and heritage, seem to hold more significance than before, heightening differences and variations between regions. This increasing attention is often explained as a reaction and a counter-movement to globalisation. Knox and Marston (2001, p. 191) state that 'place matters more than ever in the negotiation of global forces, as local forces confront globalisation and translate it into unique place-specific forms'.

Consequently, there is a relationship between regions and regional identities. A region can be defined as an area to which people, for some reason or another, ascribe specific regional identities. People with different interests can describe and interpret a region in several ways, and consequently, the meaning of a region can change when interests in a region are transformed. Thus, the creation of regions is a social act; regions differ because people have made them so (Johnston 1990). Simultaneously, regions are social facts, since they can generate (and are generated by) action as long as people believe in them, and as long as they have a role in publicity spaces or in governance (Paasi 2002b, p. 805). These points of view support the assumption that a region only exists because of its ascribed identities (Massey 1995; Keating 2001; Paasi 2003). Following this line of thought, a region can be said to cease its existence if identities are no longer allocated to it, or in other words, no region without a regional identity. When people have stronger feelings for a region they ascribe stronger identities to it and the popularity of the region will increase. And vice versa, when people ascribe weaker identities to a region, its popularity will decrease or disappear. The extent to which this occurs varies between regions: some regions are more popular than others or some regions have a stronger identity than others. The aim of this paper is to explore why these differences in identity allocation occur. Why have some regions a stronger identity than others? And who or what influences that? Furthermore, the concept of regional identity has not been studied often in an empirically way. The present study provides new insights into methods which are useful for measuring regional identities.

Two methods are introduced. First, the occurrence of the most characteristic symbol of a region, its name, can be regarded as essential in the existence of a region; if a region has no name, then no identities are ascribed to this region. The use of the name for a region indicates that a region has an 'established' identity within the community (Paasi 2002a). Second, representations of regions show how different actors define and interpret a region, and consequently how they allocate an identity to a region. In particular, actors in the professional

discourse, described by Jones (1995) as actors involved in a professional way with the development of a region, use strategies to reach their goals (Paasi 2001). The concept of regional identity may be one such strategic expedient. This means that professionals, for example, nature conservancy councils or tourist agencies, employ regional identities with specific motives, for example, to conserve heritage, to promote a region, to attract more visitors or simply to finance regional projects. Therefore, this paper focuses on how professionals utilise and apply regional identities.

### CONCEPTUALISING REGIONAL IDENTITIES

It is generally agreed that the concept of regional identity is complex and hard to define. According to Paasi (2002a) the concept of regional identity is still unclear, although it has been an important element in geographical research for a long time. However, Tempelman (1999) does not consider this an issue as the question 'what regional identities do' is of greater importance and relevance. Nonetheless, there is agreement on some fundamental aspects (see also Groote *et al.* 2000).

Several authors (for example Cloke & Perkins 1998; Kneafsey 2000; Simon 2005) define regional identities as the specific meanings, including the sentiments and images, that are attached to a region by an actor or groups of actors. Often these actors experience a region differently. Authorities and specialists may have, for example, different ideas about the built environment as compared to the way that residents 'read' their surroundings. This difference in experience means that regional identities cannot be seen as obvious, objective, 'natural' qualities, but are viewed as socially constructed. Thus, identities are constructed by people and changes on views and goals make identities constantly subject to change. Consequently, regional identities are dynamic. For example, the power balance between actors may shift, the feelings for a region may change, new actors may arrive in the region, or new regional functions may be ascribed. Therefore, it may be better to speak of various identities, rather than 'the' or 'one'

identity. This means that regional identities have multiple meanings.

Furthermore, regional identities are based on the experiences and sentiments of people and because of that regional identities are embedded within wider sets of social relations (Rose 1995). Policy-makers, academics, entrepreneurs, tourists and residents, for example, tell their own 'story' dependent on their experiences, strategies and needs. For that reason, different groups of people interpret and represent a region in different ways. To quote Holloway and Hubbard (2001, p. 112), 'different social groups engage with places in very different ways, so that places can be experienced in different ways according to a person's gender, social class, ethnicity and so on'. Some (groups of) actors might be more active in the construction of regional identities than others. Accordingly, some actors have more power to make their ideas dominate over how a region should look like while others are relatively powerless (Paasi 2001; Brace 2003). Politicians, the media, businesspeople and researchers have, for example, more means to produce identities than residents or tourists. The power balance between (groups of) people, therefore, determines the identities that dominate over a region which means that regional identities are acts of power (Paasi 2001).

The line of thought followed is that actors base their proclaimed regional identities on perceived characteristics or qualities of a region. A variation is seen in characteristics of the landscape, historical events, traditions and symbolic characteristics such as flags and so on. These so-called 'identity markers' are signs that people use to distinguish one area from another (Tempelman 1999). As the future remains unknown, these characteristics are closely linked to the past. Actors use those elements of the past that they themselves interpret as interesting and binding to a region. Often the past is presented as nostalgic and idyllic (Kneafsey 2000).

To summarise, regional identities are social constructions that are proclaimed through perceived characteristics or qualities of a region, which are closely linked to the past, but at the same time continuously in flux. Different actors ascribe different identities to a region at the same time. As a result the allocation of

identities may vary in one region and between several regions.

## INTRODUCING THE CASE STUDIES

The aim of this paper is to use evidence from case study research to explore why differences in the allocation of regional identities occur. In the context of the study, two rural regions were selected as case studies: Waterland and the Noordoostpolder (Figure 1).

Although the two regions have an agriculture-based economy, they differ from each other in landscape, built-up area, type of farming and history. Waterland is located north of Amsterdam, the capital of the Netherlands, and it is within commuting distance from the city. The region enjoys benefits such as frequent bus services, as well as disadvantages such as elevated house prices as a result of the influx of wealthy urban dwellers. In terms of housing prices it is one of the most expensive areas of the Netherlands. Waterland consists of eight municipalities. According to the definition of urbanisation developed by Statistics Netherlands, three of these are 'more urbanised' and five are 'low' or 'non-urban municipalities'. In 2007, with a population in Waterland at 173,800, the density was 600 inhabitants per square kilometre. The region is a traditional open peat pasture landscape thanks to the occurrence of bog peat and the numerous drainage channels. Characteristics, such as type of soil, water balance and small parcelling, make the land suitable for pasture and pastoral farming. Almost all farms keep grazing animals for milk production, supplying Amsterdam's needs since the end of the Middle Ages. As in other rural areas in Western Europe, however, the number of farms has declined drastically by almost one-third from 942 farms in 1988 to 631 in 2005. The region has a cultivation specific for the area with wooden houses, small roads and *stolp* farms. Since Waterland is located so close to Amsterdam, many of its residents work in the city. It is a popular recreation area for people from Amsterdam as well.

The Noordoostpolder has a very peculiar history because the land was reclaimed from the sea relatively recently. It was brought into existence in 1942, and since 1986 it has been

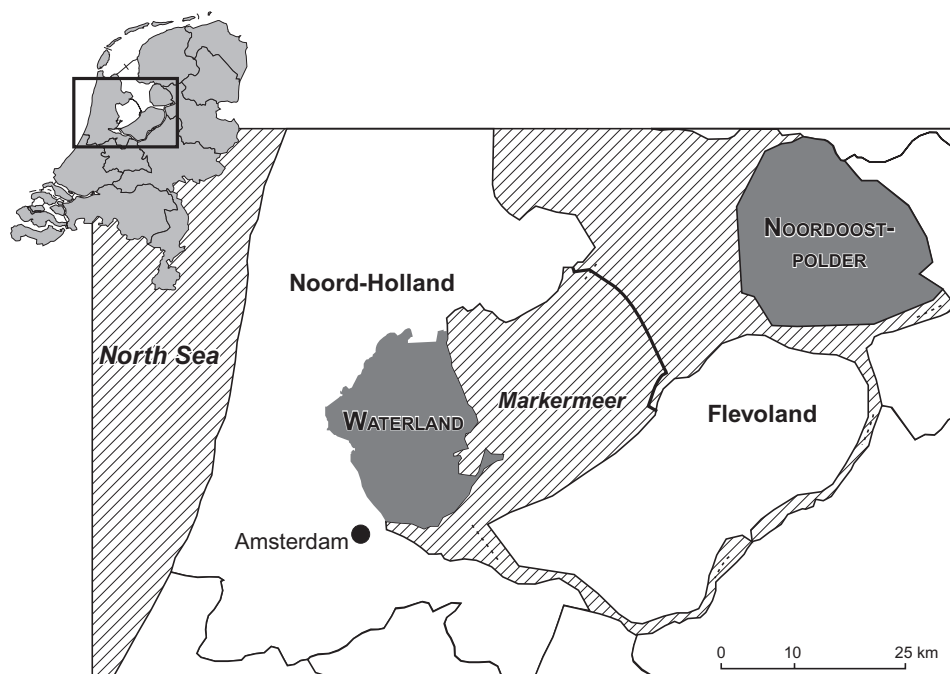


Figure 1. Location of the two case study regions Waterland and Noordoostpolder.

part of the province of Flevoland. The Noordoostpolder consists of two municipalities and both are characterised as low-urbanised. In 2007, 63,400 people lived in the area with a population density of 125 inhabitants per square kilometre. The region is man-made and deliberately designed according to a blueprint. Most of the land is used for agriculture and farms occupy considerably larger parcels than in Waterland (300 by 800 metres or 24 hectares). Arable farming dominates, and the main crops grown are tuber and root crops, onions and grain. However, the last decennium has witnessed a growth in horticulture. The declining trend in farm numbers, however, is also seen in the Noordoostpolder; from 1988 till 2005 there was a drop of almost 25 per cent, from 1,489 to 1,120 farms. Two former islands, Urk and Schokland, still exist as two independent elements in the landscape. Urk has a completely different community with a distinct lifestyle. It is mainly a fishing community whose members are orthodox Protestants. Schokland is no longer inhabited and it was designated a

UNESCO World Heritage site in 1995. The former island stands as a symbol of the battle against water (UNESCO Centrum Nederland 2002). The pioneering inhabitants of the Noordoostpolder were selected in a rationalised decision-making process with the intention of creating a community that reflects Dutch society as a whole, that is, with people of all faiths as well as non-believers.

### REGION NAMES AS SYMBOLS OF REGIONAL IDENTITIES

One method in measuring regional identities is through the names of regions. If a region lacks meaning to its inhabitants, it can hardly be said to exist culturally (Shortridge 1985). This argument is fundamental in discussing the importance of region names; it is the name of a region which connects its image with the regional consciousness of both the inhabitants and outsiders (Paasi 1986). Names act as sources of information, facilitate communication, help us

to know and serve as repositories of values (Cohen & Kliot 1992). Thus, a region's name can be regarded as essential in the existence of a region: no region without a name, and presumably, no name without a region (see also Eriksson 2008).

The name of a region may unveil aspects of the allocated identities. Names have, for instance, an economic functional meaning or are landscape-related. As a consequence of this attached meaning, actors may try to re-name a region with the idea of changing its identities, often attempting to give regions saddled with a 'bad name', or 'negative identity', a new and positive identity. An example from the Netherlands is the *Oostelijke Mijnstreek* (Eastern Mine region) in the southern province of Limburg. Around 1900, the mining industry began to develop and transformed this region into a flourishing area. After the collapse of the mining industry in the 1970s, the local government wanted to get rid of the, in their opinion, negative identity. In 1999, the region was officially renamed *Parkstad Limburg* (Parkcity Limburg) and a whole publicity campaign was launched to give this new name, and new identity, a good start. After almost three years, the new name was not only used in administrative circles but also by companies and institutions. In Paasi's (2001) terminology, *Parkstad Limburg* is gradually evolving from a 'region on paper' into a 'region as social practice'. This example illustrates the birth, or rather the creation, of a new regional identity. On the other hand, it shows the death of an older regional identity because the *Oostelijke Mijnstreek* will disappear from the collective memory of society.

**Methodology** – The occurrence of region names can be seen as an indicator for measuring the 'birth' and 'death' of regions. The number of times a region's name is used gives an indication of how firmly this region is embedded in society. Longitudinal inquiry identifies changes in the popularity of regions, which provides insight into regions that have become more popular in a specific period of time (emerging regions), retained their same popularity (stable regions) or have become less popular (disappearing regions).

The names of regions were traced and counted in the period 1950–2000 in different

data sources: regional newspapers, geography schoolbooks, book titles and business names. Three criteria were used in the selection. First, region names should appear in the source. Second, it should be possible to formulate a time series. And third, it should be possible to correct for the general development of the data in the sources. For example, the number of books published each year has grown enormously since the 1950s (Hemels *et al.* 1997) and therefore an autonomous increase in the number of books about regions is to be expected. To correct for this general development, the number of simple counts of region names in a year is divided by the total number of books published in that year. Comparable corrections were performed for the other sources. A more detailed discussion of this methodology can be found in Simon (2005).

Linear regression was used to determine which regions became more popular, remained stable or became less popular over a fifty-year period. In total, 480 different names of regions were identified for the Netherlands which experienced various trends in popularity. The two most contrasting regions were Waterland and the Noordoostpolder. Comparing the regions, the Noordoostpolder was the region with the clearest declining trend, while Waterland was one of the regions with an unambiguous rising trend. Therefore, we decided to study these regions in more detail.

**Results** – Figures 2 and 3 show that the name Waterland is used more frequently than the Noordoostpolder. This already demonstrates that Waterland is the more popular region. The less frequent appearance of the name Noordoostpolder might be explained by the fact that this region has a shorter history and therefore has a less established identity. Although the Noordoostpolder has existed only for nearly 70 years, we see another trend in the geography textbooks; in this source the Noordoostpolder is mentioned more than Waterland which was only mentioned twice. It can be argued that this is due to the specific history and the specific design which is pertinent in a geographical perspective.

The figures show furthermore that the two case studies follow completely different trends. In the last 50 years the name Waterland seems

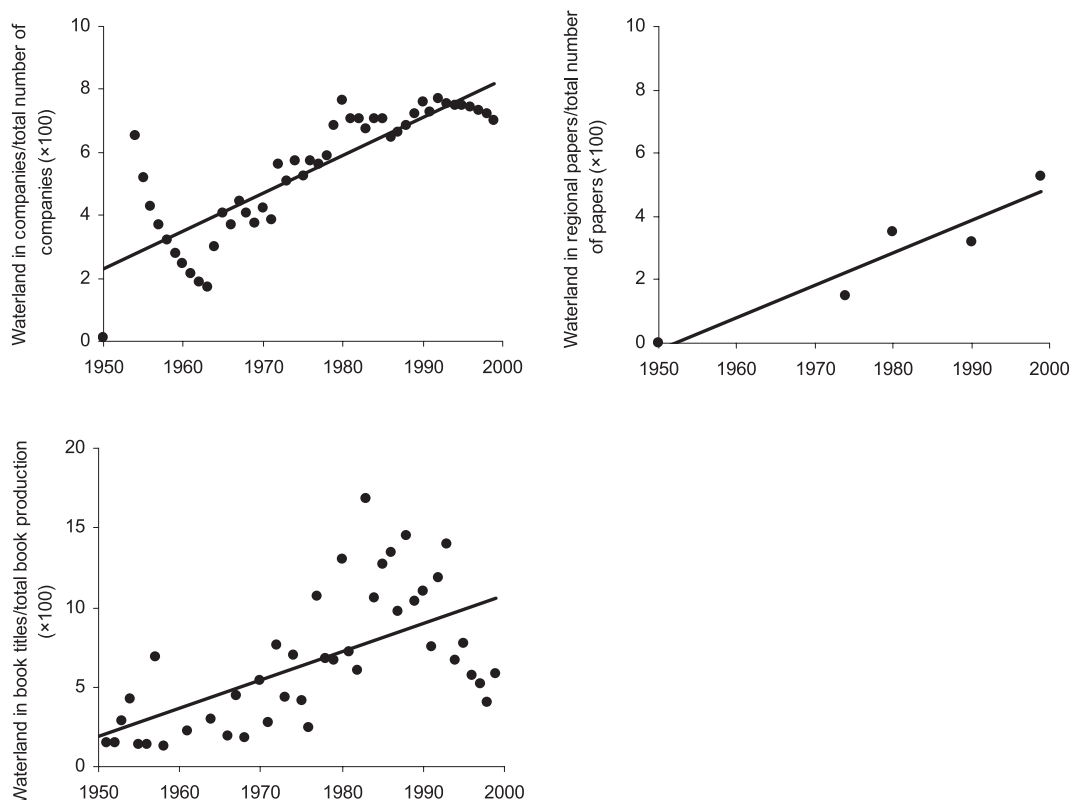


Figure 2. *The use of the name Waterland in company names, regional newspapers and book titles.*

to emerge and the name Noordoostpolder seems to disappear. This descending trend of the Noordoostpolder might be explained by its shorter existence, and therefore a lower probability of an established identity. More explanations can be found in processes dependent on the sources, for instance the increasing usage of English names by companies in the Netherlands. The name Waterland is the same in Dutch or English so this region is not influenced by this linguistic trend. The tendency to put more emphasis on thematic subjects rather than regional divisions of the Netherlands, as seen in geography textbooks, might explain the declining trend (De Pater & Terlouw 2002). On account of these changes, there is more focus on economic themes, resulting in more attention for economically important regions, such as Rotterdam Mainport and

Schiphol airport. Waterland, as an attractive recreational area for people living in Amsterdam and for tourists, might be less affected by this trend.

In general, these findings imply that Waterland is a region that became more popular in the period 1950–2000, and the Noordoostpolder a region that became less popular. The expectation was that the more popular a region is the more established its identity is within the community. The results indicate that Waterland has a stronger identity and regional identities play, presumably, a larger role in the development of the region, while in the Noordoostpolder regional identities most likely play a smaller role. Qualitative indepth research was carried out in the regions to uncover why these processes of regional differences occur.



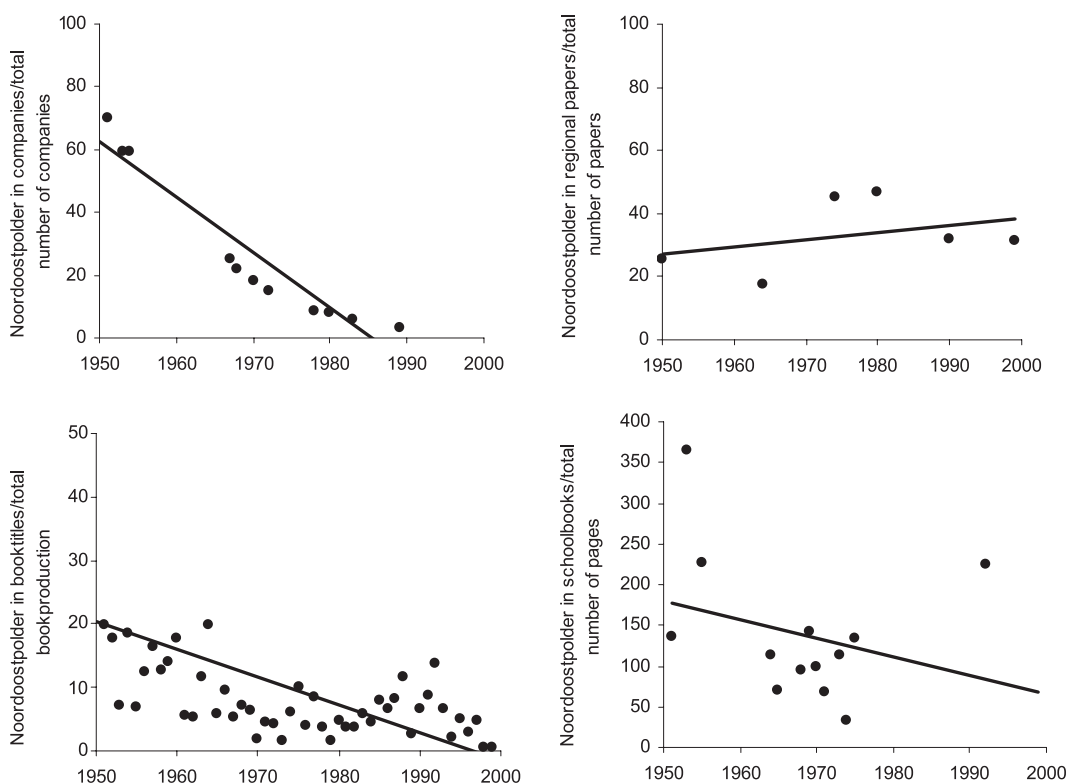


Figure 3. The use of the name Noordoostpolder in company names, regional newspapers, book titles and geography textbooks.

## REPRESENTATIONS OF REGIONS

A second method in measuring regional identities and their differences is through representations of regions. Representations are social constructions in which signs and symbols, such as words and visual images, are used to communicate with others and to give meaning to something or somebody. Representations of regions show how different actors define and interpret regions and, in this way, they give meaning to regions. Such meanings have an impact on regional identities (Kneafsey 2000). Representations of a region influence the experiences as well as the behaviour of people in this region (Holloway & Hubbard 2001). In tourist folders, for example, only the most beautiful spots are shown and only those characteristics are described that make a visit to this region or

place worthwhile. A utopian ideal identity is constructed and people form and reform a certain 'reality' (Paasi 2002a).

Accordingly, representations of regions are used in the selling of products, or in processes of commodification. Both Ray (1998) and Kneafsey (2000, 2001) assert that the commodification of, in their case, the countryside, involves the upgrading of 'place' through the use of cultural identities within the process of 'production'. Following these thoughts, the commodification of regional identities deals with the relationship between product and place. It concerns the use of regional identities in projects and activities that are associated with a region and that are turned into 'products to be bought and sold' (Holloway & Hubbard 2001, p. 154). Products are developed for particular purposes and the identities of a region are the means for reaching these goals. In this

way, the identities of a region are used to add value to products.

**Methodology** – Representations of the two case studies are used to ascertain how different actors define and interpret regions, and in this way to examine how they allocate an identity to a region. The expectation is that in Waterland, a region on the ‘rise’, identities play a larger role while in the Noordoostpolder, a ‘disappearing’ region, regional identities play a less significant role. We focus on representations engaged by professionals as these actors have ulterior motives in the construction of regional identities. In-depth interviews were held with key persons in regional organisations, such as governmental agencies, organisations related to agriculture and horticulture, tourist agencies, environmental organisations, cultural-historical organisations and local businesspeople. From these regional organisations, which we further refer to as professionals, we analysed representations in folders, slogans and logos.

Folders are used by professionals to distribute information about their work and the area of work. Actors (here the developers of the material in folders) employ those representations that they see as symbols for a place or region. Folders convey meaning to a region and therefore, folders are a ‘powerful narrative [...] of values and ideas’ (Hopkins 1998, p. 65). As a result, folders are seen as commodities through which regional identities are ‘sold’ with the purposes of attracting more tourists and informing potential visitors about attractions and characteristics of a region or place. In this study we analysed the folders and brochures that refer to the case areas. So folders concentrating only on cities, nature areas or attractions situated in Waterland and the Noordoostpolder were excluded. Content analysis was used to analyse representations (Hannam 2002). Both written texts and photographs found in the folders were analysed and classified according to three dimensions. First, the surroundings and the environment or ‘how regions look’. Themes such as landscape (wildlife, characteristics of the environment), heritage (characteristics of historical buildings) and location belong to this dimension. Second, the economic-functional dimension or ‘how

regions work’. This concerns activities related to the spatial use in the case areas, such as agricultural, recreational and industrial activities, water management and nature conservation. And third, the socio-cultural dimension or ‘what regions mean as a way of living’, including characteristics of the community, myths and traditions, like regional languages. It should be noted that each sentence or photo can be classified in more than one dimension. Therefore, the score by dimension is higher than the total number of sentences and photographs. The frequencies of the scores in the dimensions were counted, but because the folders were of different length and size, a correction was made for the total number of sentences and photos. In this way the dominant identities allocated to Waterland and the Noordoostpolder were obtained from every folder.

Further, representations in logos of the interviewed organisations and slogans used in advertising campaigns and folders were analysed. Logos and slogans function as powerful symbols that construct identities of the organisation itself or the ‘place’ where the organisation is located (Barke & Harrop 1994). Logos are graphical representations which aim to encourage ‘consumption’ and to create elements of recognition. Slogans are short, clear and simple expressions that are used to attract the attention of consumers. According to Hopkins (1998, p. 74) they create a recognisable trademark, and as such ‘the commodity and/or its sponsors are given an identity or brand recognition which conveys positive, often multiple and abstract messages’. From the interviews, we were able to uncover the decision-making processes behind the folders, logos and slogans.

**Representations of Waterland** – Waterland is a region that became more popular in the period 1950–2000. Because of that the identities assigned to Waterland are expected to play a large role in the way they are employed by professionals to reach their specific goals. The interviews show that most organisations, despite different goals, work closely together on the preservation and development of the area. This institutional co-operation stems from the fact that all actors share a common consensus about the qualities of the region and that



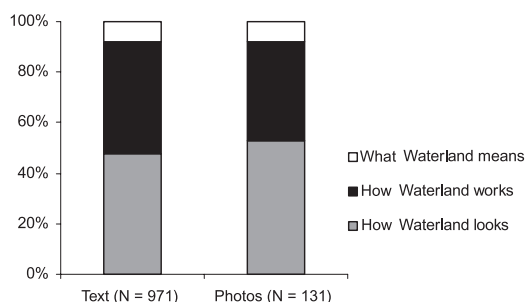


Figure 4. *Representations of Waterland in folders.*

these qualities should be maintained. This improved the idea that Waterland has an 'own' identity. An important impulse for the co-operation was the designation of Waterland as a valuable cultural landscape in 1994 by the Ministry of Agriculture, Nature Conservancy and Food Quality. Subsidies that arose as a result of this designation made it possible to start projects aiming at the renewal of agriculture and recreational activities. In this period many projects were carried out, much co-operation was achieved and more importantly, Waterland commanded increasing attention in both political and lay discourses which improved the strength of its identity.

All interviewees agreed that Waterland is well known for its specific landscape and natural characteristics, such as the mosaic of water and land pockets, small-scaled grasslands, farms, wooden houses and regional colours. They described it as a 'typical Dutch landscape' and this identity was often used by professionals in promotional material. The twelve folders that concentrated solely on Waterland were dominated by environmental and economic-functional representations or by the dimensions concerning how Waterland 'looks' and 'works' (Figure 4). The identities that were constructed focus on characteristics of the landscape, for instance representations of grasslands and meadow-nesting birds. Furthermore, Waterland was portrayed as an agricultural area, mainly with grazing cows in the grassland, with space for recreational activities such as cycling, walking, rowing and attention to nature conservation.

All tourist organisations used these types of representations in their folders. Six of the

folders were produced by this sector, which corresponds with the expectation that tourist agencies are most likely to use representations of regions (Boomars 2001). These folders for tourists and visitors concentrate mostly on characteristics of the landscape. Thus, the landscape of Waterland on its own is seen, and used, as a pull factor for tourists. Actors in the agricultural field and in the field of nature conservation also propagated identities of Waterland in their folders. Most representations concentrated on the dimension 'how Waterland looks'. So again the landscape and the surroundings are the more popular identities used.

When analysing the slogans produced by professionals, again a domination of the functional and environmental dimensions was seen. Of the 115 slogans one-third were about 'how Waterland works' ('Discover Waterland! By cycle, canoe or on foot'). A quarter of the slogans concentrated on the attributes of Waterland ('Waterland as a bird paradise') and 10 per cent focused on Waterland offering a certain lifestyle ('Waterland, less common than you think'). The other slogans could not be categorised in one of the three dimensions.

Professionals in Waterland used logos intensively to promote 'their' region. Eight of the thirteen logos involved representations of Waterland, and comparable with the findings reported by Barke and Harrop (1994) the representations mainly focused on characteristics of the landscape and architecture. A symbol often used was the godwit, a meadow-nesting bird, whose population is so large that the godwit may be seen as 'the' symbol of Waterland. Next to the symbol of the godwit, the Association of Agriculture and Nature Conservancy (*Vereniging Agrarisch Natuurbeheer Waterland*) tried to popularise the farmer in its logo (Figure 5) as its motto is to bind farmers and nature together. Through the use of this logo, attention was drawn to the importance of farmers in the conservation of the landscape. The tourist agency included, next to the patchwork of land parcels and reed, the ubiquitous water surfaces in its logo (Figure 6). These symbols were chosen because they are identifiable and dominant characteristics of the landscape of Waterland, or as a spokesperson of the tourist agency said: 'Waterland is, in a sense,



Figure 5. *The bond between farmers and wildlife.*



## Landschap Waterland

Figure 6. *Characteristics of the landscape.*

constructed by reed, water and grassland'. Others presented Waterland by using images that conveyed nostalgia, familiarity and a rural idyll.

To summarise, representations of Waterland were frequently employed in folders, slogans and logos to promote the products of professionals and especially their region. In this way, professionals reinforce and construct certain identities of Waterland. With respect to the areas bordering Waterland, the representations are dominated by the natural and cultural landscape. Apparently, the landscape of Waterland is such a valued and common identity that neighbouring regional actors use it in the selling of their products.

**Representations of the Noordoostpolder** – A striking aspect in the Noordoostpolder was that most professionals concentrated on the province of Flevoland. Their main focus was to promote Flevoland while the Noordoostpolder was only incidentally included in projects,

activities and promotional material. As such, identities of the Noordoostpolder were little used and not much promotional material focused on the Noordoostpolder as a region itself. Two folders concentrated specifically on the Noordoostpolder: one in the tourist sector and the other in nature and the environment.

Similar to the folders of Waterland, most representations concentrated on characteristics of the landscape; the Noordoostpolder was generally described as open, flat and spacious. Functional characteristics were mentioned as well although representations of agriculture were hardly used, despite the fact that 71 per cent of the agrarian land use is given over to arable farming (Simon 2005). On the other hand, representations of tulip fields were commodified as often as possible to make the region attractive to tourists. Also, more than half of the representations could be related to recreational activities. Thus, characteristics which would appeal to tourists were highlighted. As such, the Noordoostpolder was not only commodified as a purely agricultural area but also as a region which has much to offer to tourists.

Most professionals used logos that included symbols of the province of Flevoland. They did not use specific identity markers of the Noordoostpolder. However, some professionals used so-called spatial circles, for example STEP (which organises activities for both residents and tourists in the Noordoostpolder) and the Federation of Enterprises Noordoostpolder (Figure 7). According to the representatives of these organisations, the circles are a symbol for the Noordoostpolder as the centre of the Netherlands. A more tangible or nostalgic symbol is nevertheless lacking.

It seems that the identities of the Noordoostpolder play a less significant role for professionals. In their perception, the Noordoostpolder features less prominently. This is underlined by the introduction of the name *Noordelijk Flevoland* (Northern Flevoland). In their promotional material, the tourist agency focused on this name instead of the Noordoostpolder, as the former stands for both the Noordoostpolder and Urk. It shows that Noordoostpolder and Urk have completely different tourist identities. Furthermore, the name *Noordelijk Flevoland* was also used in written texts that clearly focused on the Noordoostpolder. The



Figure 7. *Spatial circles as symbol of the Noordoostpolder.*

following sentence taken from a guide on the region is one such example: 'In designing the layout of Northern Flevoland focus was on the provision of agricultural land'. This quote refers clearly to the design of the Noordoostpolder as new reclaimed land, as it was initially created for agricultural production. Also other professionals, for example, the governmental agencies and the business world, used the name Noordelijk Flevoland frequently in their external communication and promoted in this way a 'new' identity. With the continuation of this trend, the name Noordoostpolder may become blurred and incorporated into the larger entity Noordelijk Flevoland.

Another reason for ascribing the Noordoostpolder as less popular is that, at the time of the field study, not many professionals viewed its history as new reclaimed land as a worthwhile investment. They had a strong focus on cultural historical objects from the 'old land', or the elements in the landscape that already existed before the formation of the Noordoostpolder. The two former islands of Schokland and Urk were especially used. Although, both former islands have their own history, culture and identity, professionals used these identities as distinguishing trademarks for the Noordoostpolder. However, these former islands also had their own promotional material. Almost 25 per cent of the written texts and 20 per cent of the photos in the tourist brochure focus on the two former islands. The brochure in the nature and environment sector used the identities of Schokland and Urk to a lesser extent: circa 6 per cent of the written texts and no photos. The commodification of the Noordoostpolder is thus partly based on identities that already existed before the reclamation. Accordingly, the 'old' land is more important in the com-

modification of the Noordoostpolder than the 'new' land. This underlines the fact that regional identities are closely linked to the past (Groote *et al.* 2000) which is presented as nostalgically as possible (Kneafsey 2000).

## CONCLUSION

In this paper, we studied why some regions have stronger identities than others, or why differences occur in the allocation of regional identities. Two methods have been presented that are useful in measuring these differences. First, changes over time have been recognised by counting region names. It was argued that the more a region's name is used, the more popular the region is. This is an indication for a stronger and more established identity (Paasi 2002a). In the period 1950–2000, 480 different regions in the Netherlands have been identified, all of which experienced various trends in popularity. This provided insight into which regions have become more popular (emerging regions), retained their popularity (stable regions) or become less popular (disappearing regions). Overall, the method attempts to convey how firmly a region is embedded in the collective memory of society.

Second, qualitative indepth research at a regional level has shown why differences occur. We argued that regional identities are social constructs; as such they may be used for promotional purposes by different actors. Especially actors in the professional discourse employ regional identities with specific motives. Representations of Waterland, an emerging region, and the Noordoostpolder, a disappearing region, demonstrated how different professionals define and interpret regions, and in doing so, how they allocate different identities.

Professionals in Waterland used similar representations that included references to nature, nostalgia, familiarity and the rural idyll. All professionals agreed that Waterland is well known for its specific landscape and natural characteristics and that these qualities should be maintained. The concentration of nostalgic characteristics in their promotional material conveys an inviting and 'amiable' landscape. The landscape makes the region so special and unique that it is worthwhile for the professionals to invest in it. It facilitates approval for financing of projects in the area and it sharpens the distinction with other regions. As such, the identities ascribed to Waterland can be seen as a 'subsidised nostalgia'. The idea that Waterland has its 'own' identities is encouraged and therefore the identities are unambiguous. Consequently, Waterland has an established identity, which is likely the reason why it is characterised as a region that is gaining popularity.

Representations of the Noordoostpolder were not widely used. In fact, professionals put more emphasis on the province of Flevoland in promotional material, and only incidentally gave attention to the Noordoostpolder. Some professionals noted the lack of tangible and nostalgic symbols to distinguish the Noordoostpolder. Others concentrated on cultural-historical objects that already existed before the reclamation of the region. Our findings show that its history as a newly proclaimed region was not seen as worthwhile investing in. Moreover, through the introduction of the name *Noordelijk Flevoland*, it can be argued that the Noordoostpolder will fade away and will be absorbed by this larger entity. There was little to indicate that the identity markers of the Noordoostpolder as being of major importance for professionals. Their perception of the region appears to be from a distance, one that is equivalent to a 'fleeting' sense of place (Hay 1998). The appreciation of an area is then of a transient nature and this is possibly a reason why the Noordoostpolder seems to be 'less popular'.

Representations of regions employed by professionals show that these actors influence differences in regional identities. Therefore, it can be argued that actors in the professional discourse have a great impact on the strength of

a region's identity. The findings indicate furthermore that if more attention is given to the creation of a region's identity, the growth in interest for this region is influenced by marketing strategies. Simultaneously, regional identities can be seen as products that are employed in marketing and promotion, or in other words 'there is money in regions'.

### Acknowledgements

This paper is based on research which was carried out for a Ph.D. degree at the Faculty of Spatial Sciences, University of Groningen, the Netherlands. We thank the organisations that gave permission to use their logos and Tamara Kaspers-Westra for designing Figure 1. Our thanks also go to the anonymous referees for their comments on an earlier draft of the paper.

### REFERENCES

- BARKE, M. & K. HARROP (1994), Selling the Industrial Town: Identity, Image and Illusion. In: J.R. GOLD & S.V. WARD, eds., *Place Promotion, the Use of Publicity and Marketing to Sell Towns and Regions*, pp. 93–114. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons.
- BOOMARS, L. (2001), De Toeristische Representatie van de Veluwe. In: J. LENGKEEK & L. BOOMARS, eds., *Producten van Verbeelding*, pp. 51–61. Wageningen: Wageningen Universiteit.
- BRACE, C. (2003), Landscape and Identity. In: I. ROBERTSON & P. RICHARDS, eds., *Studying Cultural Landscapes*, pp. 121–140. London: Arnold.
- BROUWER, R. (1999), Toerisme in de Arena. Een Sociologische Reflectie op de Betekenis van Toeristische Attractievorming voor de Sociale en Fysiek-ruimtelijke Omgeving in de Euregio Maas-Rijn (Ph.D. thesis, Landbouwniversiteit Wageningen).
- CLOKE, P. & H.C. PERKINS (1998), Cracking the Canyon with the Awesome Foursome. Representations of Adventure Tourism in New Zealand. *Environmental and Planning D* 16, pp. 185–218.
- COHEN S.B. & N. KLIOT (1992), Place-names in Israel's Ideological Struggle over the Administered Territories. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 82, pp. 653–680.
- ERIKSSON, M. (2008), (Re) Producing a 'Peripheral' Region – Northern Sweden in the News. *Geografiska Annaler B* 90, pp. 369–388.

- GROOTE, P., P.P.P. HUIGEN & T. HAARTSEN (2000), Claiming Rural Identities. In: T. HAARTSEN, P. GROOTE & P.P.P. HUIGEN, eds., *Claiming Rural Identities*, pp. 1–7. Assen: Van Gorcum.
- HANNAM, K. (2002), Coping with Archival and Textual Data. In: P. SHURMER-SMITH, ed., *Doing Cultural Geography*, pp. 188–197. London: Sage.
- HAY, R. (1998), A Rooted Sense of Place in Cross-cultural Perspective. *The Canadian Geographer* 42, pp. 245–266.
- HEMELS, J.M.H.J., A.A. HERPERS & H.D. VAN DE POL, eds., (1997), *Gids Informatiesector*. Den Haag: NBLC.
- HOLLOWAY, L. & P. HUBBARD (2001), People and Place. *The Extraordinary Geographies of Everyday Life*. Harlow: Pearson Education Limited.
- HOPKINS, J. (1998), Signs of the Post-rural: Marketing Myths of a Symbolic Countryside. *Geografiska Annaler B* 80, pp. 65–81.
- JOHNSTON, R.J. (1990), The Challenge for Regional Geography: Some Proposals for Research Frontiers. In: R.J. JOHNSTON, J. HAUER & G.A. HOEKVELD, eds., *Regional Geography: Current Development and Future Prospects*. London: Routledge.
- JONES, O. (1995), Lay Discourses of the Rural: Developments and Implications for Rural Studies. *Journal of rural studies* 11, pp. 35–49.
- KEATING, M. (2001), Rethinking the Region. Culture, Institutions and Economic Development in Catalonia and Galicia. *European Urban and Regional Studies* 8, pp. 217–234.
- KNEAFSEY, M. (2000), Tourism, Place Identities and Social Relations in the European Rural Periphery. *European Urban and Regional Studies* 7, pp. 35–50.
- KNEAFSEY, M. (2001), Rural Cultural Economy. Tourism and Social Relations. *Annals of Tourism Research* 28, pp. 762–783.
- KNOX, P.L. & S.A. MARSTON (2001), *Places and Regions in Global Context: Human Geography*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- MASSEY, D. (1995), The Conceptualisation of Place. In: D. MASSEY & P. JESS, eds., *A Place in the World? Places, Cultures and Globalisation*, pp. 45–85. New York: Oxford University Press.
- PAASI, A. (1986), The Institutionalisation of Regions: A Theoretical Framework for Understanding the Emergence of Regions and the Constitution of Regional Identity. *Fenni*, 164, pp. 105–146.
- PAASI, A. (2001), Europe as a Social Process and Discourse. Considerations of Place, Boundaries and Identity. *European Urban and Regional Studies* 8, pp. 7–28.
- PAASI, A. (2002a), Bounded Spaces in the Mobile World: Deconstructing Regional Identity. *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie* 93, pp. 137–148.
- PAASI, A. (2002b), Place and Region: Regional Worlds and Words. *Progress in Human Geography* 26, pp. 802–811.
- PAASI, A. (2003), Region and Place: Regional Identity in Question. *Progress in Human Geography* 27, pp. 475–485.
- PATER, B. DE & K. TERLOUW (2002), De Geografie van Regio's, Regio's in de Geografie. In: B. DE PATER, P. GROOTE, K. TERLOUW *et al.*, *Denken over Regio's. Geografische Perspectieven*, pp. 9–22. Bussum: Coutinho.
- RAY, C. (1998), Culture, Intellectual Property and Territorial Rural Development. *Sociologia Ruralis* 38, pp. 3–20.
- ROSE, G. (1995), Place and Identity: A Sense of Place. In: D. MASSEY & P. JESS, eds., *A Place in the World? Places, Cultures and Globalisation*, pp. 87–132. New York: Oxford University Press.
- SIMON, C. (2005), Ruimte voor Identiteit. De Productie en Reproductie van Streekidentiteiten in Nederland (Ph.D. thesis, Rijksuniversiteit Groningen).
- SHORTRIDGE, J.R. (1985), The Vernacular Middle West. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 75, pp. 48–57.
- TEMPELMAN, S. (1999), Duiken in het Duister: Een Gematigd Constructivistische Benadering van Culturele Identiteit. *Migrantenstudies* 2, pp. 70–82.
- UNESCO CENTRUM NEDERLAND (2002), Available at <<http://www.unescocentrum.nl/whnl.html>>.
- VAN GINKEL, R. (1999), *Op Zoek naar Eigenheid. Denkbeelden en Discussies over Cultuur en Identiteit in Nederland*. Den Haag: Sdu Uitgevers.
- VOISEY, H. & T. O'RIORDAN (2001), Globalisation and Localisation. In: T. O'RIORDAN, ed., *Globalism, Localism & Identity. Fresh Perspectives on the Transition to Sustainability*, pp. 25–42. London/Sterling: Earthscan.
- WISKERKE, J.S.C. (2007), *Robuuste Regio's: Dynamiek, Samenhang en Diversiteit in het Metropolitane Landschap*. Wageningen: Universiteit van Wageningen.