



A patchwork of hedges

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Small meadows, as far as the eye can see, orderly defined by kilometres of hawthorn hedges: this impressive panorama is awaiting you in the rural reserve of Maasheggen. The green oasis next to the Meuse river lies a stone's throw from Germany and proves how man and nature can elevate one another. UNESCO realised that too and made it the first 'man and biosphere reserve' in the Netherlands.

"Maasheggen's views are almost unique in Europe and, by extension, in the entire world," says Ruben Visser, programme coordinator of Maasheggen UNESCO. "Farmers braid the hedges around their fields to make them impermeable for their livestock. When the razor wire was invented, they stuck with their traditional methods, and still do today." The tradition of these iconic hedges has long roots in the area. Julius Caesar described them in his book *De Bello Gallico*, 2,000 years ago. The Roman road crossing the landscape is

yet another tangible souvenir of this place's long history.

In 2018, UNESCO granted Maasheggen's extraordinary landscape the statute of 'man and biosphere reserve'. "Unlike other UNESCO programmes, this one doesn't aim to create stagnated reservations, but encourages us to develop the area even more. Maasheggen got its current shape because of both natural processes and economic interests. Farmers have been collaborating with nature for centuries and, in villages like Boxmeer and Cuijk, the locals have made businesses by preparing traditional specialties like local beers, Maasheggen tea and delicious cheese for centuries already."

As paradoxical as it might sound, the key to preserving this unique harmony between organic and cultural growth lies in progression and innovation. This can keep the authentic local interaction with nature alive. "We are developing this region in a

number of ways. We are restoring the puzzle of hedges and meadows by reinstalling them, there, where they have vanished throughout the years. We are also boosting the local economy by stimulating agriculture and attracting more tourists. The panoramas here are all a traveller could wish for, yet, there is a demand for more facilities. Together with the local community, we are developing more, and improved, biking and walking trails, and facilitating local entrepreneurs to open restaurants, hotels and recreative hotspots which suit the area and its long history like a glove."



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