

Flemish environmentalist wins praise in EU Parliament

Eco-friendly national park a model of creativity

Martin Banks

The European Parliament has praised a Flemish environmentalist for his efforts in helping to establish Flanders' first national park. It follows the award on 7 May (reported in *Flanders Today*) of the prestigious Goldman Environmental Prize to Ignace Schops, director of Natuurpunt Vlaanderen and the prime mover behind the Hoge Kempen National Park in the province of Limburg.

Schops was presented with his award at a ceremony in the European Parliament attended by Kris Peeters, Minister-President of Flanders, EU environment commissioner Stavros Dimas, the assembly's president, Hans-Gert Pottering, and Belgian MEP Frieda Brepoels.

Schops, a biologist, first began his campaign to create Flanders' first and, to date, only national

park back in 1990. He lobbied the Flemish government and managed to convince the authorities that he was capable of overseeing the ambitious project. "There was just one problem," said MEP Brepoels. "While the authorities told him they would provide some funding, he still had to raise about €60 million through his own efforts. That he was able to do this is a wonderful achievement and testimony to his determination and powers of persuasion."

The park has proved a big hit since it opened in 2006. "Limburg may be a small province in a small country but, as this project shows, there is an awful lot of creativity out there," Brepoels added.

Dimas said Schops had been "instrumental in transforming a region's vision from coal to conservation by bringing together

private industry, regional governments and local stakeholders."

In receiving his award, Schops said the 6,000 hectare reserve, once the site of heavy industry, including coal mining, is now used by 800,000 cyclists a year and provides "substantial" benefits for the local economy. "It has been good for the economy, but the overall aim is to help protect the environment for future generations," he said. "I hope my own daughter and other children can grow up in a more environmentally-friendly world."

The prize is one of several given annually by the San Francisco-based Goldman Fund, and Schops is the 127th winner. Winners are selected by an international jury from confidential nominations submitted by a worldwide network of environmental groups and individuals. The €95,000 prize



money is earmarked for furthering the winner's work in environmental protection.

online

www.nationaalparkhogekempen.be

Minister describes Council of Europe findings as "absurd"

Delegation failed to consider language laws, Keulen says

Rory Watson

The Flemish Interior Minister Marino Keulen strongly rejected the findings of a delegation from the Council of Europe, led by a French local politician, which implicitly criticised him for blocking the appointment of three mayors almost 20 months after their election.

The two-person fact-finding team from the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities met various federal, regional and communal politicians during a two-day visit to Belgium last week.

They will only reveal later this month whether they believe that the decision not to allow the mayors of Wezembeek-Oppem, Linkebeek and Kraainem to take

up office was on the grounds that campaign literature violated language legislation. The mayors-elect distributed election leaflets in French, contravening the European Charter of Local Self-Government (which Belgium signed in 1985 and ratified four years ago).

But comments from the delegation's leader, Breton mayor Michel Guégan, who was accompanied by Serb politician Dobrica Milovanovic, at a packed press conference in Brussels last Wednesday, gave a clear indication of his thinking. Speaking in French, he complained that he had heard "a lot of inaccuracies" about the mission's purpose and maintained that Keulen "appears to have been

ill-informed" by suggesting it had been requested by the three mayors themselves.

It was members of the Belgian delegation to the local authority congress who had raised the matter, he said, adding: "Our mission is on the non-appointment of the three mayors and not on the linguistic problem itself."

Guégan insisted that the mayors had been correctly and democratically elected in October 2006. Their election had not been challenged and, given the importance of local democracy, it was not permissible under the Charter for a commune to be deprived of its mayor.

He also pointed out that, after a similar mission in 2003, Belgium

had been asked to allow all elected mayors to take up their posts without requiring formal appointment – a move which even a centralised state like France has adopted. The recommendation has been partly implemented in Wallonia but not in Flanders or Brussels. "If this had been followed, today's problems would not have arisen, as Keulen would not have needed to nominate the mayors," he said.

Aware of the political sensitivity, Guégan had earlier gone out of his way to emphasise how cordial the various meetings had been and to emphasise that Belgium was not being singled out. Similar fact-finding missions were carried out every year, he said, pointing to recent examples in Turkey, Latvia

and Portugal. He also insisted the team had not come "to give lessons, but to try to reflect", using the local government charter as its compass, and had studiously avoided becoming embroiled in internal Belgian politics. In a final appeal, he called for some flexibility, explaining: "I sometimes feel a little common sense would help".

In an interview on Flemish TV immediately after the press conference, Keulen described the delegation's comments as "absurd". The minister argued that the linguistic laws should be taken into account in any assessment of the situation. Some Belgian newspapers expressed surprise that a French-speaker had been chosen to head the delegation.

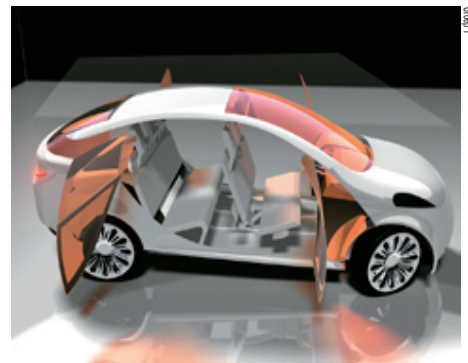


Griffin vultures make a comeback

Four large birds of prey were spotted in the Boskamp area of Oudenaarde last week, leading bird watchers to believe that griffin vultures, last seen in the summer of 2007, are returning to the country. The four birds were described by witnesses as "flying high". "I am about 90% certain these are griffin vultures," said Guido Tack, chair of Natuurpunt Vlaamse Ardennen, who was first to report last year's vulture visit. The birds are thought to come from Spain and Portugal, where their food supplies are dwindling and where local laws make it impossible to feed them by laying out dead animals.

Leuven students develop car of the future

A group of students from the Group T industrial college in Leuven last week unveiled their design for the car of the future. The Vision, which should be ready for production in 2011, consumes 1.5 litres per 100 km, seats six and weighs only 600 kg. Its lifecycle cost – taking into account the materials and energy consumed – are estimated to be 20 times lower than its next-best rival, the Toyota Prius. The Group T students have worked on both the engine and the frame, built out of high-tech composite materials for lightness. The vehicle will be built and sold in India, where the demand for new cars is rising rapidly and where the impact of a clean car is likely to be most felt. The electric engine, equipped with an auxiliary power unit, can be replaced by an engine run on other locally-available fuels, such as biodiesel.



Group T