

## ENVIRONMENT AND HANDICAP - INCREASING THE PARTICIPATION OF HANDICAPPED PEOPLE

### Introduction

In November 1987, the European Year of the Environment, I was one of the speakers at the first European meeting entitled "Environment and Handicap" held at Jouy-en-Josas in France.

I have given my speech today the same title to emphasise the close relationship between the environment and handicapped people. Furthermore, it is important to stress the general conclusion that was reached at the French meeting on the environment and handicap, which was that we must improve the accessibility and facilitate the enjoyment of the environment in all its forms.

My work place, Werkenrode, in Groesbeek, is a vocational training/rehabilitation centre in the Netherlands that gives support and guidance to young people with disabilities.

The centre houses a relatively large model-demonstration garden which is designed to assist other professionals in developing their own gardens for those with disabilities. The garden targets many people with a variety of disabilities, and visitors even have the opportunity to test the variously adapted tools.

At the centre horticulture/gardening-courses are conducted for professional ergotherapists and activity companions. These courses have been held twice a year since 1983. For the first time in September 1987, the course was conducted in German, for the benefit of Germans, Swiss and Austrians.

The centre is also involved in developing and disseminating educational publications and I authored an award-winning book "Handicapped and Elderly in Garden and Horticulture: adapted gardening", published by H Nelissen in Baarn. A former Minister of Agriculture in the Netherlands, wrote in his preface to the book in 1988, concerning government policy "we are giving attention to accessibility and the problem of the easy access of open-air-recreation areas, as well as to the State forestry for these groups.

Others working in this field, in urban settings, may also obtain support from the government if they develop model applications".

## Educational activities

I have designed several model-demonstration gardens of which I will make special mention of the first one which was set up in Germany, called the "garden for everybody". This garden which is about 5,000 square metres in size is situated on the flower island Mainau in the Bodensee near Konstanz. It belongs to Count Lennart Bernadotte and was opened by Queen Silvia of Sweden in 1989. This tourist garden also has some botanical value and is important as a resource for environmental study, to look at the environment and handicap or an environment for learning.

In April I wrote elsewhere of the need for botanic gardens to increase their activities in the field of promotion and teaching of horticultural therapy and while most gardens are adapted to suit an average or ideal human being, we must also consider human limitations. Botanic gardens are leaders in the world of nature, promoting the education of plants to visitors, not only by opening their gates to visitors but also by showing their botanical collections and by the development of thematic gardens along the lines I have discussed. At the botanic gardens of the University of Utrecht, for example, such work is being carried out and I have heard of similar examples from the UK, Canada and the USA of botanic gardens that are already actively involved in education with both disabled and non-disabled people as therapists.

In my experience I know that there are many and significant national differences applied to this subject which means that the social environment of handicapped people differs greatly by country and this is also the case with regard to support and care for the disabled as well as in the availability of technological aids. However, the natural environment and gardening should be enjoyed by everyone. People can chose to gain more knowledge about sowing seeds, cutting flowers, dividing plants, harvesting garden products or simply learn about the interactions of plants and animals with their natural environment. I also include private gardens as part of the natural environment, as well as those gardens surrounding institutions, town or local parks and allotment gardens. Indeed, I believe that one should also consider the scenic elements situated beyond the town limits such as camping areas,

recreation parks and nature reserves, and even agricultural fields and horticultural land.

### **Making the environment more accessible - who needs to be involved ?**

When we consider the target group of this paper, the handicapped, I also include elderly people because they often have certain physical limitations. The paper concerns:

- handicapped people themselves (there are about 1 million handicapped people in The Netherlands and about 30 million in Europe)
- social workers in the field of health care and welfare, and
- the environmental or "green" experts.

Handicapped or elderly people may be confronted with nature in different ways; as therapy, for education or employment or to improve his or her own food supply. Involvement in the environment can be useful for the rehabilitation of handicapped people.

Those who propose difficulties in horticulture and environmental education for handicapped and elderly people are short-sighted. These difficulties can be overcome through the sharing of knowledge and ideas.

We need to consider a number of factors about disabled people - who are they, where do they live, how are they integrated into the community, what sort of disabilities do they have?

If we consider institutions in the Netherlands for disabled people we must include hospitals, psychiatric clinics, nursery and children's homes, day-care centres, day-activity centres, homes for the aged etc. But we would be mistaken if we thought that most of the one and a half million Dutch people with a physical handicap, are living within some kind of institutions. Most of these people live, integrated with the non-disabled population, in the everyday community. This means that in designing access for disabled people we must integrate their needs into designs suitable and applicable to the whole population.

## Conclusions

As a teacher of handicapped people, a social worker and an environmentalist, as well as an author of works on educational tools for gardening by handicapped and elderly people, I would especially like to emphasise the necessity for educational activities. The reason for this is that education in this field stimulates an inclusive policy in the long term and will help to improve environmental design and access, providing a firm basis for development in the future.

If we want to allow handicapped people to share equally in our green areas as full fellow citizens, the future decision makers concerned will have to prepare for this. If they want to pursue an all-inclusive policy either in the training of gardeners and landscape architects, in the training of social workers in healthcare of handicapped people, they will have to be provided with information. It is to be hoped that a more balanced approach to these matters will be taken in the development of future educational tools and also in the way in which they will be used in training programmes.

This will increase the participation of handicapped people in environmental matters as well as in their enjoyment of the countryside and in agriculture and horticulture. In any country that has high agrarian employment this is of even greater importance.

To close, I would like to suggest that readers consider their own working environments and make a check list of the areas, encountered in their daily lives that may prove problematic to handicapped people. By becoming more aware, perhaps it will help us to consider fresh approaches and new ideas to overcoming such problems. We have a moral obligation to ensure that the natural environment for learning is not a human handicap.

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