

Soil science and society in the Dutch context

J. Bouma^{1,*} and A.E. Hartemink²

¹ Scientific Council for Government Policy, The Hague, and Wageningen University and Research Centre. Alterra - Wageningen UR, P.O. Box 47, NL- 6700 AA Wageningen, The Netherlands

² International Soil Reference and Information Centre (ISRIC), P.O. Box 353, NL-6700 AJ Wageningen, The Netherlands

* Corresponding author (tel: +31-317-474215; e-mail: j.bouma@alterra.wag-ur.nl)

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Introduction

In the Netherlands, serious soil investigations were started by W.C.H. Staring in the mid-1800s, followed by J. Van Baren in Wageningen and D.J. Hissink in Groningen in the early 1900s. Soil science rapidly expanded in the mid-1900s with university courses in Amsterdam, Groningen, Utrecht and Wageningen and the establishment of research institutes. After World War II, the number of soil scientists was very large and the knowledge base of Dutch soil science grew enormously. In 1998, there were 23 soil scientists per 100,000 ha agricultural land in the Netherlands compared with 3.0 in France, 2.7 in Denmark and 5.8 in the UK (Van Baren *et al.*, 2000).

Some of the accomplishments and developments in Dutch soil science have been documented (e.g. Buurman & Sevink, 1995; Harmsen, 1990; Knibbe, 2000) and short biographies of some Dutch soil scientists have appeared (e.g. NJAS, 1974; Van Ouwkerk & Boone, 1990). Internationally, some progress has been made in writing soil science history (e.g. Yaalon & Berkowicz, 1997), but an authoritative and comprehensive review of historical developments in this science remains to be written – also for the Netherlands.

This paper aims to contribute to an analysis of the historical developments in soil science, confined to the broad relations between soil science and developments in society in the Dutch or Western European context. Our society has changed dramatically in the past century from an early industrial society with a dominantly rural and agricultural character to a post-industrial society where services play a key role. Soil science has changed but not as dramatic as society and this observation is point of