

Different recreation – different traffic – a different space

Within the research programme 'The value of recreation: Now, and in a completely different future', which is led by Bert van Wee, the researchers are seeking to gain more insight into the needs and choices of travellers concerning recreation and mobility, both now and in the future. In this context they take account of radically changing conditions, such as the rising demand for recreation, and the consequences of climate change and climate change policy. The programme is a collaboration between researchers of Delft University of Technology, VU University Amsterdam and Eindhoven University of Technology.

Recreation is of great social significance. People have more and more leisure time, are living longer and healthier, and have more money to spend. 'Recreation is so important in people's mobility behaviour that many households have a car that is largely geared to that single annual summer holiday,' says Van Wee. 'We still know very little about recreational mobility, and nothing at all about how it may be influenced by radical changes, such as the government imposing restrictions on the number of kilometres that you're allowed to drive in order to reduce oil consumption. What choices will people make then? Will they embrace teleworking so that they needn't sacrifice their family outings in the car? Will people start recreating closer to home on a more daily basis? What consequences will that have for the planning of residential and green areas?'

Combining breadth and depth

Bert van Wee is originally a social geographer and has already spent many years working on explorations of the future and the travel and transport theme, notably at the Future Exploration of the Environment Bureau of the National Institute for Public Health and the Environment. 'Meanwhile I obtained my PhD on the relationship between spatial planning and mobility. I was also an endowed professor in that subject for several years. I have become convinced that many policy-relevant issues only benefit



Bert van Wee, Professor in Transport Policy and Logistics' Organisation, and Caspar Chorus both work at the Faculty of Technology, Policy & Management of Delft University of Technology.

from multidisciplinary research. That fits in well with my own approach. I go for breadth, rather than depth. I try to understand a bit of everything in order to tackle a complex issue - a bit of psychology, a bit of economy, a bit of technology. But you obviously also need in-depth single disciplinary research. We have people like Caspar for that. Clearly, it's the combination that matters.' Caspar Chorus: 'My contribution to this research consists in modelling people's behavioural choices in relation to mobility. Policy-makers need hard data on lots of things, such as the market share of certain transport options or how many euros people are prepared to pay for a time gain of an x number of minutes. Unfortunately, the models that are currently used to supply these data are based on small step-by-step changes. These are not equipped to deal with those extreme scenarios that we are looking at.'

Economic crisis as an example

Van Wee: 'What extreme scenarios we will look at depends largely on the policy-makers. We have to get a clear focus on the challenges they see as quickly as possible. Thankfully we managed to get a PhD student with policy experience to help us do this. And he is also good at thinking 'out of the box', which is necessary too. It will also be interesting to work together with the researchers of the other SAR programmes. TRISTAM looks at the relationship between accessibility and ICT, a subject that also plays a role in our research.' Chorus: 'And we also tap into insights from behavioural economics, a discipline that is very much on the rise. It has been found that people make choices in different ways from what you might think - seemingly less rational and more spur-of-the-moment. On the other hand, factors that appear to be unrelated can suddenly turn out to be strongly interdependent. The price of a trip through New Zealand may cause people to visit an amusement park in their own country more often. In our current economic crisis, for instance, fewer people are travelling to far-flung destinations, but the tailbacks to the Efteling amusement park are getting longer. And State Secretary Heemskerk has also urged people to spend their holidays in their own country.'

Van Wee: 'Another example is the imminent contraction of the population. It may become more attractive to have a second home elsewhere in the country, but how will that take shape? You can live in the Randstad and go to the countryside for the weekends. But the reverse is also possible, with people opting for a pied-à-terre in the Randstad for weekdays. That would result in a different mobility picture.'

The household's recreational agenda

The programme that Van Wee and Chorus are carrying out consists of four sub-projects. 'A PhD student at VU University of Amsterdam is studying the value that should be assigned to recreation and, for instance, green areas in the Randstad. This will make it easier to make informed policy decisions on investments in infrastructure and recreational areas. The PhD student at Eindhoven University of Technology is investigating the recreational behaviour and the household's 'recreational agenda', i.e. people's recreational choices for the whole family. This extends across various different time horizons. When it comes to holidays, people often plan a year ahead and there's also those once-in-a-lifetime trips to take into account. Most families, for instance, will want to visit Disneyland Paris at least once with the children. This is the first-ever study centring on the motives underlying these choices, which is clearly innovative.'

What would you do if...

The third project is mainly devoted to exploring those extreme scenarios, while the fourth project identifies the consequences for infrastructure and spatial planning and development, naturally in the light of the sustainable accessibility issue. Van Wee: 'Our likeliest route of inquiry is to study what people will do if the government seeks to curb individual mobility in one way or other. I don't think we should count on some technological miracle that will allow everyone to travel as much and as far as they want without causing any nasty side effects. Another challenge that awaits us is choosing the right research method. You cannot simply ask everything in questionnaires. We may need to visit people at home and get them thinking out loud over a cup of tea: how would you use your car if you were rationed to 5000 kilometres a year...? In the Netherlands this may give the

bicycle a huge boost. And people may start visiting the nearby countryside more often. How will farmers respond to this, now that agriculture is in such decline? As you see: our research extends well beyond the domain of recreation.'

High level

The SAR-funded research is innovative, of a high scientific standard, multi-disciplinary and internationally-oriented. The research is, of course, relevant in the context of strategic knowledge demands at the participating ministries and other public parties as well as, possibly, private parties. The research meets the NWO requirements of scientific quality and practical applicability and significance.

The SAR programme will run for six years. In the first round (2008) some 3.5 million euros was awarded to research. A similar amount is earmarked for the second round. The total budget consists of contributions from the Ministries of V&W, VROM, EZ and LNV and the NWO. ■