

CLEAN ENOUGH?

ON MEASURING ECOLOGICAL CLEANLINESS IN DUTCH SURFACE WATERS

FENNA
SMITS

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In anthropology, the adage that 'dirt is matter out of place' (Douglas, 1966) helps explain why sand on a floor or shoes on a table violate cultural boundaries. But when synthetic chemicals enter rivers, more is at stake than a disruption of socio-spatial order: such substances disrupt biological functioning and threaten the vitality of aquatic life. How, then, is ecological pollution assessed? Or, put differently, what counts as ecologically clean, healthy water?

In this talk, I take the evaluation of more-than-human health as an empirical conundrum. Drawing on fieldwork with Dutch water practitioners, I explore how different modes of measuring - ranging from bio-indicators and chemical concentrations to field assays - yield different answers to that same question. While ecological flourishing is a shared goal, what to count, and what counts, turns out to be a matter of internal contestation.

Fenna Smits is a postdoctoral researcher in Anthropology at the University of Amsterdam. Her work explores how care for the environment is taken up in practice, with previous ethnographic work in healthcare, experimental wastewater treatment, and saline water management. Her current project examines how Dutch water professionals seek to realise 'cleanliness' in their care for surface water.



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