



## **‘The elephant in the room is that we don’t have an elephant’: using heritage soils as ‘flagship species’ in education and raising soil awareness**

Karen Vancampenhout (1), Jan Bastiaens (2), Bas Van Der Veken (3), and Jozef Deckers (4)

(1) KU Leuven, Campus Geel, Cluster for BioEngineering Technology, Geel, Belgium (karen.vancampenhout@kuleuven.be), (2) Flanders Heritage Agency, Havenlaan 88 bus 5, B-1000 Brussels, Belgium, (3) Regionaal Landschap Kleine en Grote Nete, Lichtaartsebaan 45, 2460 Kasterlee, Belgium, (4) Department of Earth and Environmental Sciences, KU Leuven, Celestijnenlaan 200E, B-3001 Heverlee, Belgium

No matter how difficult or complicated, nearly all scientific disciplines have managed to raise the interest of the general public. You have amateur biologists, climatologists, astronomers, physicists or engineers but – apart from a few garden enthusiasts – very few people who consider soil as one of their hobbies or interests. Paradoxically, albeit it being right below their feet, it is difficult to grasp the attention of today’s general public on subjects relating to soils and their properties and functions. Hence, drawing from the experience of the Flemish ‘Soil Heritage Project’ and ‘ECHO Soil Initiative on Soil Heritage’, we decided to explore the potential of some very typical soil profiles as ‘flagship species’ for a particular area or issue: flagship soils have a story that people can relate to. Analogous to nature conservation efforts using a Giant panda or African elephant to raise awareness on global biodiversity decline, we decided to use ‘iconic soils’ and their stories to illustrate the importance of soil properties and soil health for the past and future of the people who live on them. Wherever possible, we used lacquer profiles, monoliths or high-resolution photographs. With this contribution, we aim to share our experience from 7 incentives, i.e. two exhibitions, an in-situ installation, an education project, a book, story-telling activities and an online blog. These were organized working with the JRC’s ‘Soil Atlas of Africa’ and ISRIC (‘Africa in Profile’ exhibition on the relation between soils, landscapes and livelihoods in Africa); with artists (‘(S)oil on Canvas’ artistic exhibition in ‘De Warande’ Art Centre and museum); with engineers and natural and cultural heritage agencies (in-situ installation ‘De Bodemschuif’, where a soil lacquer profile can literally be drawn up out of the ground to be admired by visitors); with the Flemish government and its centres for nature education (Soil Monolith Education Project for their permanent and travelling exhibitions); with regional conservation and heritage organizations, land planners and architects (‘Kempenatlas’ book that explains the links between a.o. soil, history, water, vegetation, land planning and regional development in the Flemish Campine area, ‘the Fab4 of Sandy Soils’ and ‘Kempenkaravaan’ story-telling activities that aim on informing the general public about the regional heritage in an accessible format, with techniques relating to stand-up comedy); and with soil science societies (the ‘Soil Profile of the Month’ online blog on the website of the Soil Science Society of Belgium). The conclusion of our efforts is first and foremost that the interest of the general public should not be underestimated: they are very open to hear about soils and their functions once the gap between their understanding of soils and their interests and experiences can be bridged. Soil stories should not necessarily be dumbed down, but work best when they build on concrete (local) examples, elements of surprise or the intrinsic beauty of soils and their landscapes. ‘Flagship soils’ definitely provide a valuable avenue to achieve that goal.