

Flanders State of the Art

## Flanders Naturally



#### DEAR FRIENDS OF FLANDERS,

From above, Flanders looks like a natural mosaic, it has the same appeal on the ground too. Our region is rich in forests, parks and agricultural landscapes. It is home to waterways and 41 miles (67 km) of sandy coastline along the North Sea. Flanders has an extensive wealth of natural beauty. There is a lot to develop and experience. We at VISITFLANDERS want to share these attractions with you, under the heading of 'Flanders Naturally.'

Our goal is to create sustainable, meaningful, societybuilding projects that promote the wellbeing of the local population. In the long term, this will ensure residents and business owners are proud of their surroundings as well as nurture a healthy environment where visitors feel at home.

Through clay pits, rolling hills, sand dunes, rivers, meadows and forests, as well as magnificent historic castles and breathtaking parks and gardens, Flanders offers something for everyone. Around every corner there is a cosy pub waiting for you where you can have a taste of our liquid gold; our famous Belgian beers. That's Flanders; within everyone's reach, every day of the year.

In this brochure, we will showcase three special places in Flanders' nature. The Kalmthoutse Heide is a reserve of vast, unspoilt landscapes which can be experienced on foot, by bike or on horseback. Choose one of the 25 hiking trails that suit best, climb the Kalmthout Fire Tower, which is 138 ft (42 m) high and enjoy the 360-degree view. Leave the paths and discover nature in its full glory in RivierPark Maasvallei or the Meuse Valley. The Meuse Lakes offer a unique variety of activities. Feel as free as a bird in the Zwin Nature Park, a unique part of the region by the sea where the beach and polders meet on the border of Flanders and the Netherlands.

We invite you to discover 'Flanders Naturally.'

## Kalmthoutse Heide

Grenspark Kalmthoutse Heide represents infinite enjoyment. Located on the Belgian-Dutch border, this diverse and dynamic nature reserve is made up of heathlands, fens, forests and land dunes.

The diversity of this nature reserve is of considerable cultural, ecological and historical value. Here, vast and unspoilt landscapes alternate with heathlands, forests and meadows. The reserve is an irreplaceable breathing space for people, regardless of how they visit. Rare plants and animals thrive off the peace and quiet. In short, the reserve offers fertile land for the survival of many species. It is therefore not surprising that Grenspark Kalmthoutse Heide is part of the Natura 2000 network. The network was established for the sustainable protection of the most important natural areas in Europe.

Grenspark Kalmthoutse Heide is officially a 'Quiet Area.' The Province of Noord-Brabant (2010) on the Dutch side and the Province of Antwerp on the Flemish side (2015) carried out extensive noise measurements to set it up. The Border Park is now officially a crossborder area of silence; an achievement to

## How to get there / Transport

The Kalmthoutse Heide is a simple 20-minute train ride from Antwerp Central Railway station. Take the train to Heide, Kalmthout or Kijkuit.

From there, it is a short walk to the nature area, or rent a bike to get there even quicker. Blue bikes are available for rental at the railway station or rent your bike <u>here</u>.

There is a cycle highway alongside the railway track and there are high-quality cycling routes which are simple and straightforward to follow. They are a backbone to which other cycle routes connect.

From Antwerp City Centre, it is a 17 mile (28 km) cycling route on the cycle highway F14 Antwerp – Roosendaal.

The Grenspark Kalmthoutse Heide can be accessed by one of the four official entry gates:

- 1. Volksabdij Ossendrecht (NL)
- 2. Hemelrijk Essen (B)
- 3. De Vroente Kalmthout (B)
- 4. Ravenhof Putte/Stabroek (NL/B)





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## Hiking at the Kalmthoutse Heide

Grenspark Kalmthoutse Heide is freely accessible between sunrise and sunset. It is best accessed from one of the four official entry gates.

Choose from no less than 25 trails, varying from a mere 1 mile (1.7 km) for your lunch break to a challenging 15 mile (24 km) day hike. The different trails each show different aspects of the park, so you can explore and discover the nature reserve more than once. For example, you can connect various trails and create your own day tour.

## Some hiking inspiration

Butterfly Hiking trail: This trail has been specially created for those with visual impairments. With the app Viinderpad (Butterfly trail) the blind and visually impaired can follow the trail and enjoy expert information about nature and history.

Visitors can also borrow simulation glasses and white canes from the visitor centre De Vroente to experience the trail for themselves, as those with visual impairments do.



- Website
- Trail length: 1.6 miles (2.7 km)
- Accessibility: suitable for those with visual impairments



Caterpillar Hiking trail: It is important that everyone can experience the silence and beauty of the heath and moorland, including those with physical disabilities. The Caterpillar trail is accessible with a special electric off-road wheelchair or 'Cadweazle' which can be borrowed free of charge upon registration at De Vroente. Enjoy the tranquility and shimmering water as the trail takes you

through the heathland and via the fire watchtower.

- <u>Website</u>
- Trail length: 2.6 miles (4.3km)
- Accessibility: suitable for those with physical disabilities

Squirrel Hiking trail: For visitors who like to combine woods with open spaces, the Squirrel trail is a great fit. The trail takes visitors through forests that grow on sand dunes. Old and young forest can be found as they walk through 'Stoppelbergen.' The 'subbles' or sloping dunes can have an altitude difference of between 16-33 ft (5-10 m) in some places. They are very typical of the Brabantse Wal, a



striking elevation in the landscape. For those that want a longer hike, the Squirrel trail can be combined with the Woodpecker trail which is 2.7 miles (4.3 km) long.

- Website
- Trail length: 4.8 miles (7.8 km)

## Kalmthout Fire Tower

This new <u>fire tower</u> was inaugurated at the beginning of April 2022. The tower is 138 ft (42 m) high and enables volunteer rangers to keep an eye on the heathland.

Visitors can also go up and enjoy the breathtaking 360-degree view of the Kalmhoutse Heide.

#### <mark>CleanWalk Stick</mark>



© Liesje Ribbens

The <u>CleanWalk Stick</u> is a walking stick and waste picker in one, for environmentally conscious walking where you can pick up waste you might see, instead of leaving it behind.

The walking stick can be borrowed from Visit Kalmthout. It is free of charge; you only leave a deposit.

### Arboretum of Kalmthout



With more than 700 plant species, the <u>Arboretum of</u> <u>Kalmthout</u> is worth a visit. Visitors can discover the garden for themselves or enjoy a guided tour. The arboretum's <u>flowering calendar</u> can be found online to help prepare visits in advance.

©Gemeente Kalmthout

#### Willy & Wanda



Prefer a themed walk? Then choose the Willy & Wanda trail. This trail takes visitors to the Willy & Wanda museum, founded in Willy Vandersteen's home, a well-known comic artist in Flanders.

- <u>Website</u>
- Trail length: 5.5 miles (9 km)



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# By night

SOME IDEAS:

©Thomas Geuden

- <u>Hotel Jerom</u>: A boutique hotel situated near the Heathland. Visitors can prepare lunch during breakfast and rent bikes from here.
- <u>Terra nova</u>: If you choose to sleep in the Arboretum, the hanging cocoons available here offer a unique experience.

## Tasting nature

#### SOME IDEAS

- <u>Piknikfabrik</u>: Order a tasty picnic from the Piknikfabrik you choose the location, they deliver.
- <u>Sensi Concept</u>: A food experience with a twist. Fresh ingredients made into original dishes in a unique setting.
- <u>Heide City</u>: Near the heathland, Heide City is a breakfast and lunch spot.
- <u>Rozantiek</u>: Breakfast and lunch near the railway station of Kalmthout.
- <u>Bar Vélo</u>: A cocktail bar next to the cycling highway.
- <u>Huize Alberic</u>: Delicious dining in the former home of artist and blacksmith Alberic.
- <u>'t Voske</u>: Delicious ice cream straight from the farm. Their products can also be found in some local shops and at a vending machine in Wuustwezel.
- <u>Ice cream farm 't Akkerhof</u>: Delicious ice cream straight from the farm.
- The area is known for the cultivation of strawberries. At several locations, look out for strawberry vending machines or use Google Maps to locate them.

## RivierPark Maasvallei

Untamed river landscapes in the heart of Belgian and Dutch Limburg

The Meuse is an impressive river which is mainly supplied by rainwater. It forms the border between Belgium and the Netherlands, stretching for 25 miles (40 km) from Maastricht in the Netherlands to Kessenich in Belgium. <u>RivierPark Maasvallei</u> has a varied landscape with a tangle of old channels, embankments and gravel banks, connected to a few separated residential areas. This is a unique area with several significant historical places.

The RivierPark Maasvalle is known for immersive nature. Leave the paths behind and discover nature in its full glory.

Large grazers, like Konik horses and Galloway cattle play a key role in the development of these new wild nature reserves. Together, these grazers ensure the area is not overgrown with willows in the winter. The combination of using horses and cattle for grazing creates an ever-changing patchwork landscape of open grasslands, wild thickets and bushes.



## Hiking

The Meuse Valley is the perfect place to relax and take a long walk. Six walking routes have been laid out on the Belgian side of the Meuse and one on the Dutch side of the river. Together these walking routes stretch out for more than 124 miles (200 km) and lead along the most beautiful locations in the RivierPark Maasvallei.

All the <u>walking routes</u> on the Belgian side of the river have been signposted with wooden route markers that display coloured symbols which identify each of the routes. All the routes lead to the starting point of the symbol of the selected walking path.

To combine two or more walking routes, it is worth taking note of the route changers. These route changers mark the locations where walking routes connect. These junctions are numbered and marked on route markers and maps. To select the path of another route changer, simply select the coloured symbol for that route changer and follow in your chosen direction. This creates many different route combinations in an extensive network that crosses borders of different walking areas.

### Long distance walking route

<u>The Long Distance Walk</u> has been developed especially for multi-day hiking enthusiasts. This cross-border tour, which is 85 miles (137 km) long connects the 11 municipalities in the RivierPark Maasvallei and weaves past the most beautiful landscapes and charming villages.

The walk was voted as 'the best walking route in Benelux in April 2021.'

The Long Distance Walk is signposted all the way along with hexagonal green plates with the RivierPark Maasvallei logo (see image below). In wet periods, some areas may not be accessible. It is best to follow the adapted signage (hexagonal green plates with a white top edge). From a few starting places (including Maastricht Station and Sittard Station) it is advised to first follow a short approach route leading to the fixed route of the Long Distance Walk. These approach routes are indicated by a hexagonal white plate with the RivierPark Maasvallei logo on it. It is always possible to shorten the route by using the ferries and bridges over the Meuse. Follow the adjusted signage (hexagonal white plates with inkorten' on them).



## Cycling

Experience the uniqueness and charm of our region by cycling through the RivierPark Maasvallei. The car-free winter dykes allow you to cycle undisturbed for several miles and provide an unfettered view of the landscape. In fact, the Meuse Valley is the premier region for cyclists in Belgium.



The starting points are located in villages with good access to the RivierPark Maasvallei. There is ample parking at the starting points with access to maps of the cycle routes together with providing a point to obtain more information about the region at one of the local tourist offices. Charging stations for electric bicycles can be found near the starting points.

### International Meuse Cycle route

From the Langres plateau to the Hook of Holland, the Meuse can be discovered in a completely unique way. It provides a route through three countries (France, Belgium and the Netherlands) which covers 30 stages and 715 miles (1152 km) of signposted roads, with dozens of cities, towns and villages dotted along the way via the RivierPark Maasvallei. Upon reaching the RivierPark, cyclists can choose which bank of the river to cycle on, thanks to the ferry boats available. More information can be found <u>here</u>.

## The Meuse Route through the RivierPark Maasvallei

This is a 39 mile (63 km) long route along a series of historic villages and endless banks and shores. Not a single car can be seen on this dyke. Visitors will be greeted by quaint villages with places to stop, such as the market square of Maaseik and the jewel in the crown of Flemish villages: Oud-Rekem. The River Meuse dominates the landscape here with its powerful flow, an energy that few can navigate through! Enjoy the <u>Meuse route</u>.



©Hasselblad

## Water paradise

### The Meuse Lakes

The residents of central Limburg and regular visitors to the <u>Meuse Lakes</u> will find that the wide variety of activities in the region are fairly unique. It is possible to swim, surf, sail, dive, row, canoe and water ski here. There are many modern marinas, beautiful recreational beaches and excellent fishing spots to be enjoyed, and is a real paradise for water sports. The different boat tours are a must to experience the beauty of the Meuse, its lakes and other waters of central Limburg.

### **Ferries**

Hasselblad

To explore the RivierPark Maasvallei across borders, there are <u>pedestrian and bicycle ferries</u>. There are four ferries in the RivierPark; one large ferry that is also accessible for car traffic and three pedestrian and bicycle ferries.

It is important to note; the Meuse is a capricious rain river which results in regularly changing water levels. During high and low water (drought) ferries are sometimes unable to sail. Whilst this is inconvenient for visitors at times, it's a great natural phenomenon to see. Check out their <u>Facebook</u> page for updates.

#### <mark>Kayaking</mark>

Rent a kayak or a canoe and enjoy the view of the beautiful natural surroundings from the water. Choose one of the routes ranging from 5.5 miles (9 km) to 13 miles (21 km) each with different departure and arrival points.

Information can be find <u>here</u> or on the website of this <u>kayak club</u>, one of the providers of material.

### Silent electric sloops

In Dilsen-Stokkem in Belgium you can hire a <u>silent electric boat</u> for a delightful tour of the Old Meuse and its connecting lakes. This boat tour can be combined with an off trail walk along the Meuse.

The boats can be hired from April to the end of October.

#### Electric sloops

To experience the beauty of RivierPark Maasvallei in the peace and quiet, take a tour on an <u>electric</u> <u>sloop</u>. These electrically powered sloops from Botel Ophoven in Belgium are quiet, easy to operate and you do not need a navigation license. A sloop can carry a maximum of eight passengers.

## Fishing

Enjoy endless hours of fishing in RivierPark Maasvallei on the banks of the Meuse, next to the gravel lakes, and at one of the many fish ponds. The fish stock in the Meuse has markedly increased in the last few years. Currently, more than 30 species of fish including the common carp, common roach, perch, pike, common barbel and eel can be found here.

Several guidelines and rules regulate fishing in the Meuse for the protection of these species. Each area has its own rules and can be requested from the local municipalities. You can check the fishing places berge

## Bird watching

The Meuse Valley is an important part of bird migration routes. Rare species can be seen here, especially during the spring and autumn migration. Some breed here whereas others come just for the winter. There are plenty of species that can be spotted all year round. You don't have to be an expert to bird watch in the Meuse Valley. The bird card, which is available at the site, will help introduce visitors to common and rare species in the area.

## Guided tours with a Meuse Explorer (Maasverkenner)

The RivierPark Maasvallei can be explored with a <u>Meuse Explorer</u> in a very special and interesting way. Meuse Explores are guides who know the area like the back of their hand, they can explain more about the park, its history and the inhabitants in and along the water. A number of excursions have been developed to enable visitors to fully experience the Rivierpark. There are activities available for all ages and target groups.



© Jorgo Kokkinidis

## Nature meets heritage



©Gert Arijs

## Discover the villages along the Meuse

On the Belgian side of RivierPark Maasvallei, there are five villages with access to the park which are designated starting points. From north to south, these five villages are: Kessenich, Aldeneik, Stokkem, Leut and Oud-Rekem. They are also the best point of departure to explore the area. The starting points, signposted from the N78, all have parking available and their own information boards. The boards show information about the area and the walking routes.



#### Art on the Meuse

With <u>Art on the Meuse</u> Z33, House for Contemporary Art, Design & Architecture (Hasselt) and the Regional Landscape Kempen and Maasland (RLKM), art will be brought to the Meuse Valley in Limburg. Between 2022 and 2024, five works of art will appear in Dilsen-Stokem, Kinrooi, Ianaken, Maaseik and Maasmechelen.

The first permanent artwork has been made by the internationally renowned Mark Dion (VS), which makes a statement on both the exceptional ecology of the region and the character of Art on the Meuse as a project.

The project aims to show how the landscape of the Meuse valley has been shaped by human and natural forces. The Meuse River plays an important role in this, but the border with the Netherlands, gravel extraction and locationspecific stories and myths are all possible themes which national and international artists can work with.

Some works will be temporary, others will be (semi)permanent. The artworks will be created in close collaboration between the artist, project partners and the local network.



The history of the village of Leut in Meuse is closely linked to the castle of Vilain XIIII and its history, which dominated the village centre. As early as the Middle Ages, the castle (then a fortress) was inhabited by 'the noblemen of Leut.' Over the centuries, the medieval moated castle, which had two moats and a drawbridge, evolved into an open residential building. The evolution saw a fixed bridge installed over the remaining section of the canal, surrounded by a grand park in the style of the English landscape.

Since October 2021, VISITFLANDERS is the official owner of the castle domain Vilain XIIII in Leut. In the coming years, the organisation will work on the expansion and revival of the site, in cooperation with residents, business owners and visitors.

#### Leut

## By night

#### SOME IDEAS:

- <u>Camping on a raft</u>: Enjoy an overnight stay in RivierPark Maasvallei on a camping raft on the Old Meuse in Dilsen-Stokken, Belgium. The camping raft is a solid wooden structure. Each raft is 270 sq ft (25 m<sup>2</sup>) with a wooden hut built on top. The raft can be reached by Canadian canoe. Overnight stays can be booked from April to the end of October.
- <u>Warredal</u> Enjoy the adventure park and stay overnight in quaint tree houses at the forest camp.
- <u>Sailcentre</u> Sleeping on a boat.
- <u>De Sjeiven Dorpel</u> A family hotel in Maaseik where rest and gastronomy are the key focus areas.
- <u>Au nom de Dieu</u> A hotel and restaurant under the Lanklaar tower.
- B&B Haerlekijn This accommodation is happy to transfer visitors to the starting point

## Tasting nature

#### SOME IDEAS:

- Winery Aldeneyck
- Winery Thilesna
- Winery Vilain XIIII
- <u>Vivendum</u>: nature as inspiration and quality.

The Meuse Valley is one of the driest and sunniest regions of the Low Countries. With its pebble and gravel environment, it provides ideal conditions for wine production, with typical mineral notes from the Meuse.

## Zwin region

Welcome to the <u>Zwin region</u>, a unique region by the sea which is on the border of Flanders and the Netherlands, where beach and polders meet.

The Zwin region stands for expanse, tranquillity, beautiful nature, charming towns and villages and a range of fascinating heritage. An unspoilt place to completely unwind and relax.

Billions of birds also settle in the region every year after a long migration. Just like the nature reserves, creeks and canals, everything and everyone here moves to the rhythm of the tides.

Take some time to enjoy and experience what the region has to offer.

## Welcome to the Zwin Nature Park

Zwin Nature Park is often referred to as an international bird airport. Follow the park's adventure course, then explore the interactive exhibition. Our migratory birds will take visitors on a fascinating journey to an exotic destination, a breathtaking journey of discovery and one that is full of surprises.

Discover and enjoy nature in the beautiful Zwin Park and learn more about the reserve's fascinating world of birds and plants.

The Zwin is worth visiting all year round as there are always plenty of plants and animals to observe regardless of the time of year. Check the calendar <u>here</u>.

The park is an interactive experience for the whole family which consists of different elements:

- Exhibition
- Cabin train
- Panoramic tower
- <u>The Zwin plain</u>
- Observation Centre

## Hiking

### The Zwin hiking route

The Zwin route showcases a great diversity of natural values and landscapes which can be found in and around the Zwin Nature Park. Stroll through the Zwin dunes and polders and explore the Hazegraspolder. Old seawall dykes bear witness to the struggle against the sea. It is also possible to walk through the Koningbos, over club paths and in between Scottish highland cattle, whilst being greeted with a magnificent view over the plain.

The visitor centre has large windows which makes it an ideal place for birdwatching and the perfect place to start a trip along the coast. The building is embedded within the landscape and is equipped with interactive screens.

- Website:
- Trail length: 7.4 miles (12 km)

### Damse Vaart Route

Welcome to the city gates of Bruges. Here in Bruges Ommeland, the area around Bruges, you can find many hidden treasures, historic landscapes and romantic forests. There are three highlights to recommend, some cultural landscape, a bit of heritage and a pinch of nature.

Although the highlights are not clearly divided up, they fall under several categories. The Damse Vaart exudes history, culture and nature, just like Oostkerke Castle and the Verbrand Fort. The proximity to Bruges and its many chocolatiers and brasseries, local breweries and cosy hotels make it the perfect location. The city is easily accessible by train.

- <u>Website:</u>
- Trail length: 7.2 miles (11.7 km)

## Walking Knokke-Heist

- Website
- PDF route
- Trail length 8.3 miles (13.4 km)

### Walking Zwin area

- <u>Website</u>
- PDF-route
- Trail length: 4.1 miles (6.6 km)



## Cycling

Costal Route



## The Lost Zwin ports

For those searching for the perfect combination of nature, maritime history and culture, the Costal Route is the perfect option. Tour along with a view of the sea, cycle through dunes and woods and check out sweeping, flat polder landscapes. On the **COASTAL ROUTE** way, the rich history of coastal life can be encountered.

Bruges and Flanders expanded during the Middle Ages as a result of their sea connection via the Zwin channel. A network of outer ports was established along the channel: a unique system that allowed goods, people and ideas to come and go from Flanders. Unfortunately, the Zwin channel silted up and the outer ports disappeared. At least on the surface...

Based on innovative archaeological research, conducted by the University of Ghent, the lost ports of Zwin channel were brought back to life virtually in 2021 by means of a cycling route with 6 unique VR viewers. It tells the international story of a trading metropolis and the surrounding area, under the influence of water and sand.

The experience takes visitors back in time to Bruges and Zwin in the 14<sup>th</sup>/15<sup>th</sup> century, when international trading ships entered the channel via the North Sea. They passed the ports of Sluis, Muide (Sint-Anna-ter Muiden, Hoeke and Monnikerede, until they reached Damme. Then they transferred their goods into smaller boats to be transported to Bruges.

- Distance: 37 miles (60 km) (or 27 miles (44 km) or 19.2 miles (31 km)) in various stages
- Start points: Zwin Nature Park, Sluis, Damme or Bruges
- Signage: there are indicators along the entire route
- Additional information: There is practical information, location VR viewers and stopping points along the way.

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## Tasting nature

- <u>Tasting the Lost Zwin Ports</u>: An extra experience was added to the cycle route of the Lost Zwin Ports, which is said to bring a taste of the Middle Ages to your plate. Research conducted at the University of Ghent revealed vast information regarding the medieval eating habits of the Zwin region. Together with Foodarcheoloog and entrepreneurs from the Zwin region, new dishes have been created or medieval ingredients have been added to existing dishes. There are at least 30 locations on the cycle route or nearby for people to try the dishes for themselves.
- <u>De Zoete Polder</u>: A farm with cherries, plums and apples where homemade jams, juices and beers can be enjoyed.
- <u>Hoeve Hazegras</u>: A guesthouse offering delicious ice cream. As a partner of the ports, they have created ice cream using medieval herbs.
- Kers & Bes: A cherry vending machine.
- <u>Strawberries Depestel:</u> A strawberry vending machine.
- Steffi Fruit: A vending machine with apples, pears and juices.
- <u>Hoorns Geitenkaasje</u>: A farm with no less than 50 breeds of goats producing goats' cheese.
- <u>Beukenhoeve</u>: A place for picnics, ice cream and dairy products from the farm.
- <u>Bryggia brewery</u>: A microbrewery in Moekerke.
- <u>Siphon brewery</u>: A small Belgian brewery that started on the grounds of a fourgeneration old family restaurant in the town of Damme, West Flanders.
- <u>Viven brewery:</u> Krystle, one of the few female brewers in Belgium, is responsible for the taste of the different beers in the range. She creates the recipes and brews the first test batches in kettles in Damme. When a new beer is tasted and approved by Krystle, the production moves to the Proefbrouwerik in Lochristi to brew in larger quantities.

# Nature by night

- <u>Ryckevelde</u>: the Parkkaffee is the perfect place to rest. In the shade of the castle and in between age-old trees, refreshment can be found in the form of delicious local beers. There are also teas that are homemade, finished with honey from the beers that live next to the farm. Finish with pizzas topped with vegetables from the garden.
- In the heart of Ryckeveldebos, in the shadow of the picturesque historic castle and grounds, a few unique tree houses can be found. From June to September, they are the ideal place to escape the hustle and bustle of everyday life.
- <u>Maisterplan</u>: Staying in a tiny Maister tent in the middle of a cornfield. During your stay you can also enjoy a barbecue and campfire.
- Nomad Knokke: A unique camping site near the Belgian coast.

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#### RESPONSIBLE PUBLISHER

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