

FNP MSc thesis course guide

Forest and Nature Conservation Policy Group
Wageningen University & Research

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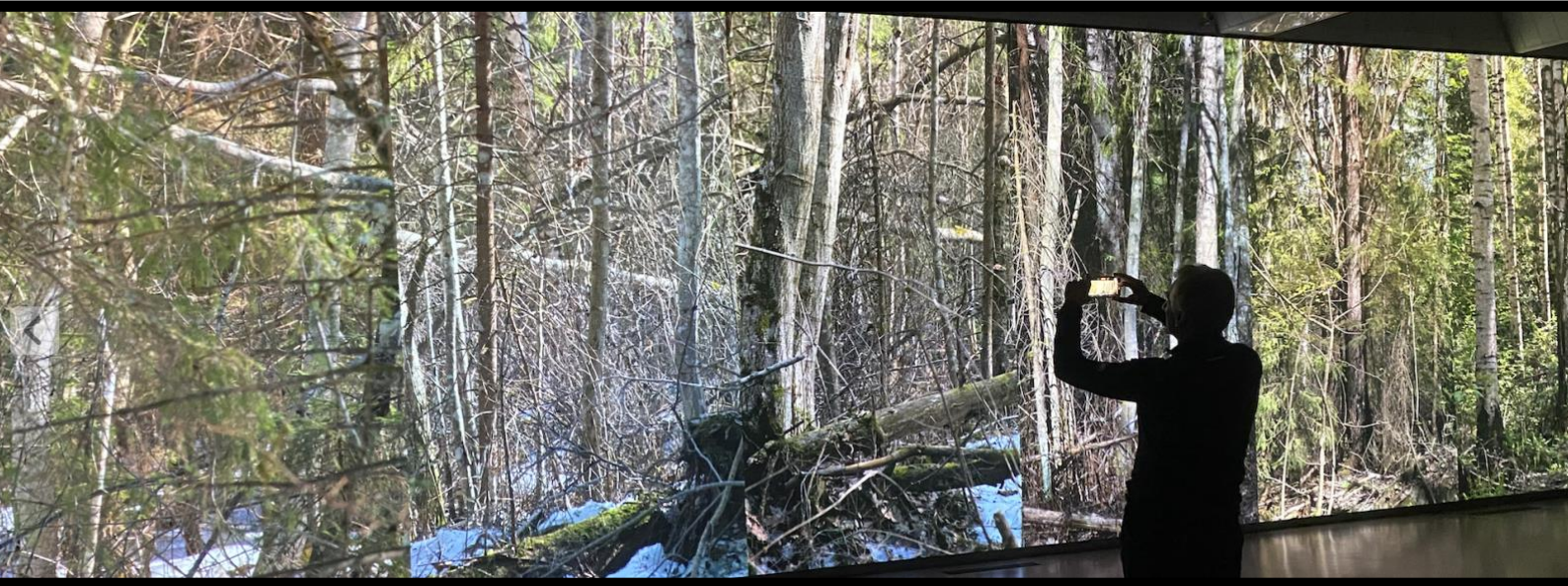


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1. Introduction

The FNP thesis guidelines serve as the primary resource for MSc thesis students in the FNP program. Where applicable, you may refer to the general WUR thesis guidelines, which can be accessed on the [WUR website](#)¹. Section three offers an overview of the thesis process in twelve steps, and section ten offers a checklist of actions and responsibilities during the thesis project.

1.1 Entry requirements for starting a thesis at FNP

If you're interested in completing a thesis at FNP, first check with your study coordinator to ensure you're ready. You should have completed at least two of the following core FNP courses:

- Communities, Conservation and Development - FNP-31306
- Social and Political Theory for Forest and Nature Conservation Research - FNP 31806
- Decision-Making in Forest and Nature Management - FNP 32306

It is expected that you already have a good understanding of data collection and analysis methods and tools before starting the thesis. These topics will not be covered during supervision. Next, follow the steps outlined in Section 3.1 by contacting the FNP thesis coordinator, Jim van Laar (jim.vanlaar@wur.nl) for an intake meeting. This meeting will address any issues related to the requirements, research topic, and FNP supervision of your thesis.

1.2 The MSc thesis: the peak of higher academic education

Writing an MSc thesis is seen as a major achievement for students in higher academic education, and it takes a prominent position within the MSc Forest and Nature Conservation program. After completing the introductory and specific courses to be agreed upon with the study advisor (and if applicable thesis supervisor), the MSc thesis challenges you to design and execute a scientific research project largely independently.

A high degree of independence is expected when preparing your MSc thesis. The supervisor's role is to guide your learning process rather than provide specific knowledge. Consequently, your thesis will be graded not only on the quality of the report but also on your abilities as a researcher in mastering the learning process.

1.3 The MSc thesis: a scientific product

Research often starts with an interest in a certain empirical phenomenon. The questions asked are often of an empirical or descriptive nature: “what conflict resolution mechanisms do forest owners prefer?”, “who is participating in collaborative management approaches?”, “why does a certain practice or policy exist and what are its consequences for nature”? To move this research beyond descriptive and analytic, an additional element is required: a scientific contribution that explains the broader significance of the findings. This is achieved by analysing your findings through a theoretical lens and comparing them with ongoing academic literature and debates on the topic.

As a rule, the thesis should be theory-based. In this context, theories are understood as systems that

¹ <https://www.wur.nl/en/education-programmes/master/msc-programmes/msc-thesis-msc-internship-and-msc-research-practice.htm>

explain observable phenomena in the real world. Your exploration of real-world phenomena must be grounded in existing theoretical literature. You are expected to discuss and reflect on your findings in relation to both theoretical and empirical literature. Theory plays a critical role in three ways:

1. **Theory provides a general epistemological outlook on the world.** Different research approaches and methods start from different epistemological positions, and it is important that a master's thesis clearly articulates and justifies its position.
2. **Theory offers taxonomies to structure your findings and answer your research questions.** For example, if you are researching "What conflict resolution mechanisms do policymakers prefer?", you need to understand what conflicts are and what types of conflict mechanisms exist. A review of relevant literature will help you design an appropriate conceptual framework. However, while this is crucial, it is usually not enough for a scientific contribution.
3. **Theory helps you advance your findings by relating them to current scientific debates.** This is only possible if your research questions go beyond mere empirical description. To achieve this, your objective and problem statement must be of high quality and extend beyond simply identifying a gap in the literature. For example, if you have categorized conflict mechanisms using a suitable framework, you should then consider what your findings contribute to the field. How do they relate to other studies? What implications do they have for conflict management? This is where your thesis begins to make a scientific contribution.

The thesis must meet standards of social science research and consider validity depending on the ontological position taken. This is only possible if a clear line of argumentation through the existing theoretical and empirical literature is given, and the underlying assumptions are made explicit.

2. Supervision and Feedback

During the thesis process, you will receive supervision and feedback from your thesis supervisor as well as from your fellow students during colloquia and thesis ring sessions.

2.1 Supervision

The thesis coordinator will put you in touch with your FNP supervisor. A co-supervisor from another group is an exception and only possible when the FNP supervisor deems this necessary. The primary role of your supervisor is to provide feedback and guide your learning process. The essence of this feedback is that the supervisor does not offer specific knowledge on the thesis topic or solutions to specific problems. Instead, the supervisor identifies issues that need addressing. You are expected to take the initiative to understand this feedback and propose your own solutions. Therefore, you should not expect the supervisor to provide more than background information on the topic and some starting literature. Finding relevant literature, crafting a strong problem statement, defining objectives and research questions, and developing a solid conceptual and methodological framework are tasks you must complete independently.

A maximum of 54.5 hours is allocated for supervision per student for a thesis worth 36 ECTS. Considering time spent by the administrator, thesis ring coordinator, examiner, and the second

assessor, approximately 40 hours remain for the supervisor to spend on individual supervision of your MSc thesis. This results in the following guidelines:

1. In general, you can expect to meet with your supervisor once every two to four weeks, except during fieldwork.
2. Your supervisor will guide you in developing your proposal from start to finish in approximately three meetings.
3. In most meetings, you will discuss draft texts, which you should submit well in advance, adhering to deadlines set together with your supervisor.
4. You will receive written feedback and comments on your thesis, either as a whole or in individual chapters, at least once before submitting your final thesis.

If you require more supervision, and if your supervisor's schedule permits, this will be considered in the 'performance' part of the grading (unless special circumstances, such as unexpected obstacles during empirical work, are involved).

If you encounter issues with your supervision, you should first discuss them with your supervisor. If the issue cannot be resolved, you can contact the FNP thesis coordinator, and if necessary, involve the FNP Chairholder. The program's study advisor may also be consulted. For confidential matters, [WUR confidential counsellors for students](#)² are available. More information on [student guidance](#)³, including student deans, psychologists, online training, and [social safety](#)⁴, is also available.

2.2 FNP Colloquia Sessions

To encourage exchange and learning among MSc thesis students, you are required to attend three colloquia including your start and end colloquia sessions. More information is available on the FNP Thesis Brightspace site.

- The start colloquium involves presenting your thesis proposal and takes place before fieldwork or data collection begins.
- The final colloquium involves presenting the main research results of your thesis to a wider audience of students and staff. This presentation allows you to gather feedback to improve the final version of your thesis.

2.3 FNP Thesis Ring

FNP organizes bi-weekly thesis rings where you learn to give and receive peer feedback. This helps you improve your writing style, the clarity of your proposal, and your final thesis. Your supervisor will enrol you in the FNP Thesis Ring on Brightspace, where you can access all relevant instructions. After registration, you will automatically receive notifications about upcoming thesis rings. To foster an active and supportive peer community, you are required to participate in a minimum of four thesis rings. During one of these sessions, you will submit some of your own work for peer review and

² <https://www.wur.nl/en/education-programmes/current-students/student-guidance/confidential-counsellor.htm>

³ <https://www.wur.nl/en/Education-Programmes/Current-Students/Student-Guidance.htm>

⁴ <https://www.wur.nl/en/education-programmes/current-students/social-safety-students.htm>

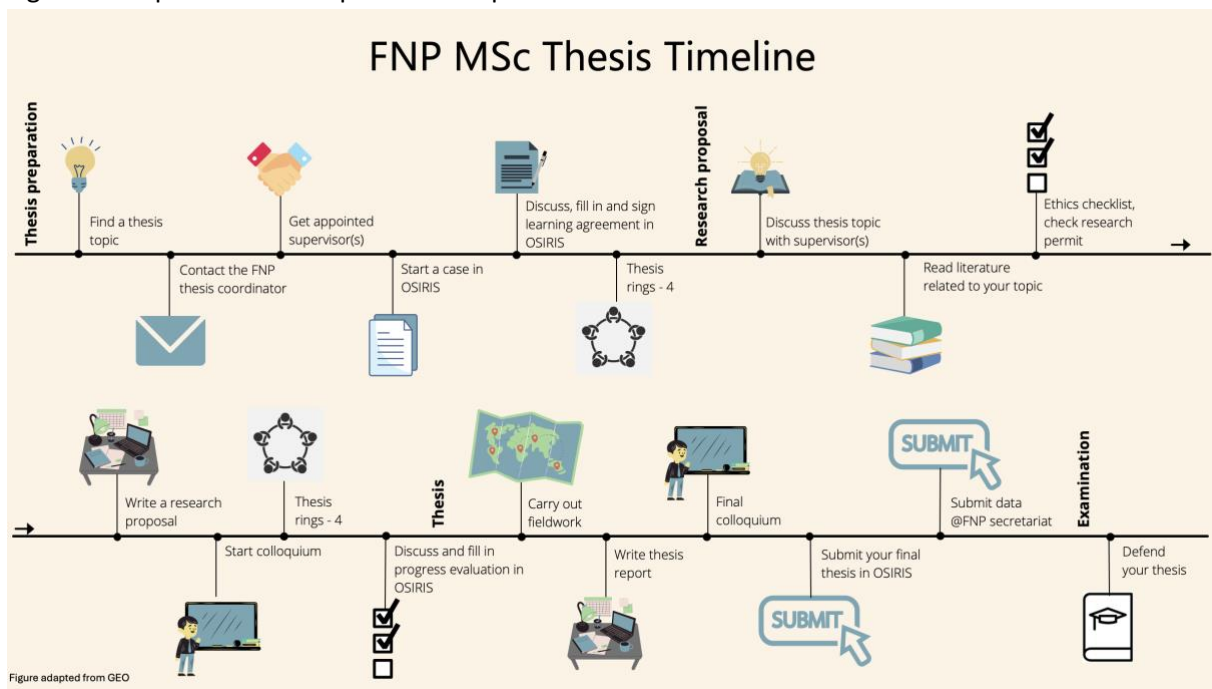
discussion.

2.4 FNP Mailing List

Your supervisor will notify the FNP secretariat to enrol you in the FNP MSc-students mailing list, through which information about colloquia, seminars, and other events will be announced.

3. Steps in preparing your MSc thesis

Figure 1: Steps in the thesis process. Adapted from GEO.



3.1 Intake Meeting with the Thesis Coordinator

Before starting your thesis with FNP, ensure you meet the entry requirements (see Section 1.1). After that, schedule an appointment with the FNP thesis coordinator. In this meeting, you will discuss the thesis topic, the procedures for completing a thesis, and the selection of a potential supervisor. Make sure to contact the thesis coordinator before reaching out to any potential supervisors.

3.2 Selection of Topic

A list of thesis topics and potential supervisors can be found on the FNP website, the FNP Thesis Brightspace site, and at the Thesis Fair, which is held annually around January. These resources will help you explore a variety of topics and identify potential supervisors. You are also welcome to propose your own thesis topic.

Thesis topics may be related to ongoing research projects conducted by FNP, other WUR chair groups, Wageningen Environmental Research (WENR) or Wageningen Economic Research (WECR). FNP also encourages collaboration with external organizations such as environmental NGOs, companies, or development organizations. If you propose a topic from outside FNP, it must be discussed with the thesis coordinator and supervisor before it can be approved.

If you collaborate with an external organization, the organization may suggest a topic, assist during fieldwork, provide data, or support access to research sites or subjects. While you are generally responsible for coordinating details with the external counterpart, the thesis coordinator and supervisor hold the final responsibility for ensuring that your thesis meets FNP's quality standards. The role of external organisations and collaborators are generally mentioned in the acknowledgement, the introduction and/or methodology section of the research, following In all cases, you must determine whether an ethics permit is required for research in your prospective country or research field. Discuss this with your supervisor, as outlined in Section 4.). In some instances, combining your thesis with an internship might be beneficial. Scientific supervision may be shared with a local supervisor from the respective organization or university. However, a local supervisor can only have a formal role in the thesis assessment if they hold a PhD. All arrangements must be finalized before starting your thesis work, and you should inform the FNP thesis coordinator, thesis supervisor, and internship supervisor of your plans to combine the thesis and internship.

3.3 Opening a Case in Osiris & Starting the Learning Agreement

Once you have agreed on your thesis topic with your supervisor, you need to register your thesis in Osiris as a "case." Be sure to enter the correct thesis course code and if unsure about this consult the FNP Thesis Coordinator. For an overview of the topics covered in the learning agreement, you can consult the [checklist for the learning agreement](#)⁵. Detailed information about the process in Osiris, including screenshots, is available in an [interactive visual guide](#)⁶.

Next, discuss the learning agreement with your supervisor. The learning agreement is an official contract between you and your supervisor, and no MSc thesis work can begin without it. The agreement is designed to provide clarity on the supervision process, expectations, and requirements. You will enter all the required information into Osiris.

Once the learning agreement is complete, submit it for your supervisor's approval. The supervisor may approve the agreement or request modifications.

3.4 Preparation of a Research Proposal

The next step in your thesis work is to prepare a consistent and comprehensive research proposal. The research proposal should include the following components:

- **Problem Statement:** Start by explaining why you chose the topic and clearly define the problem area, leading to a concise problem statement. A well-crafted problem statement reflects both the social and scientific relevance of your research topic. To develop this statement, you should conduct a preliminary investigation to build a solid knowledge base

⁵ <file:///Users/basverschuuren/Downloads/Checklist%20learning%20agreement.pdf>

⁶ <https://wur-educationsupport.screenstepslive.com/m/86809/l/1593976-overview-thesis-internship-research-practice-procedure-including-screenshots>

and pose the concrete problems that will be researched. This involves reviewing the most relevant theoretical and empirical literature to ensure that your topic hasn't already been fully explored by other researchers.

- **Problem statement:** giving the motivation for the selection of the topic and a clear delineation of the problem field, finally resulting in a concise problem statement. If done in a sound way, this reflects the social and scientific relevance and contribution of the selected research topic and pose the concrete problems that will be researched. To be able to develop a clear problem statement, a preliminary investigation must be carried out to establish a sufficiently profound knowledge base. This includes a review of the most relevant theoretical and empirical literature, which ensures that the topic has not already been exhausted by other researchers.
- **Research Objective(s) and Research Questions:** Clearly state the scientific objectives of your research and ensure they are closely related to your problem statement. The objectives should strike a balance between deepening your theoretical knowledge, analytical skills, and research methods, while also considering practical constraints like time, research conditions (e.g., availability of resources, seasons, political events), and your budget. These objectives are usually outlined in the first chapter of your thesis or proposal.

Your research objectives should then be translated into research questions that need to be answered to achieve those objectives. These questions help operationalize your research topic but shouldn't be confused with data collection questions (e.g., survey or interview questions). Instead, research questions should be analytically relevant, often focusing on central concepts. They must also be knowledge-based, avoiding interventionist questions like "How can biodiversity conservation be improved?" or normative questions like "How should we manage wild boar in the Veluwe?"

- **Theoretical Framework:** The theoretical framework guides your selection of the phenomena you will study and directs your overall thesis work. It helps you approach your topic by engaging with existing theories and concepts, ultimately leading to your own conceptual framework. Developing this framework is a creative process, not just a descriptive exercise.

When building your theoretical framework, you should argue against and with existing theories, always keeping your research objectives and questions in mind. Although many things may seem interconnected, the research objectives and questions help you determine which theories and concepts are relevant to your thesis and which are not.

The research proposal is not a linear process. The problem statement, objectives, research questions, and theoretical framework are interconnected and will likely evolve as your proposal develops.

- **Methodology:** The methodology explains how the concepts identified in the theoretical framework will be empirically assessed. This section should describe the methods you'll use to collect and analyze data, ensuring they align with the theoretical framework and the research's epistemological position. Review the material from your methodological courses

for guidance. Setting up a solid methodological framework involves addressing several key points:

1. **Identify the nature of your thesis work:** Is it exploratory, comparative, interpretative, analytical, or historical? Will it use a case study approach, or does it aim to be representative of broader phenomena? While your topic selection and problem statement may already hint at these answers, making them explicit allows for a more thorough discussion of your work.
2. **Design your data collection:** This step involves answering questions like:
 - What will you consider as data, and where will it come from? Data can include various sources like pictures, texts, individuals, groups, or academic literature. It can be primary (generated by you) or secondary (re-analysing data from previous research).
 - What criteria will you use to select your information sources? Who will you interview? Which policy documents will you analyse? How many people will you survey? These decisions often depend on whether you're using qualitative or quantitative research methods, and research often relies on multiple data sources to allow for triangulation and validate the analysis.
 - Which methods will you use to collect data from these sources? The methods should be chosen based on the relevant sources needed to answer your research questions. You'll need to justify why a particular method (e.g., observations, interviews, content analysis) is most appropriate for your research topic. Quantitative and qualitative methods stem from different assumptions about data and reflect different epistemological positions in social science research. For instance, you'll need to decide whether your data is accessible in quantifiable terms (e.g., the amount of cut timber) or if it requires interpretative analysis (e.g., understanding the motives behind illegal logging). If you use different methods, ensure theoretical consistency, as data from different methods are not always comparable.
 - Which instruments within these methods will you use? Think of questionnaires, semi-structured interview guidelines, observation manuals.

In addition to data collection, you'll need to analyse the data (moving from data back to theory). While you might be familiar with basic data collection methods, data analysis can be more complex and less codified. Consider how you'll handle large amounts of data, such as transcribed interviews. What will be your results? What statistical tests will you apply based on your data collection methods? Familiarize yourself with various analysis methods and the tools available (e.g., statistical software like R or SPSS, content analysis software like Atlas Ti). You can get more information on available software from your supervisor or the FNP thesis coordinator.

- **Social Safeguards and Consent Form:** You must respect social, cultural, and interpersonal norms, including the privacy of organizations and individuals. Check if a research permit to ethical clearance is required and use the FNP MSc Thesis Ethical Issues Checklist (see Section 4 and FNP Thesis Brightspace site).
- **Working Plan and Timeline:** Include a detailed working plan in your research proposal, outlining all the steps in conducting your research in a logical order. These steps should be

realistically spread over the available time (typically 26 weeks for a 36-credit thesis).

- **Budget (Optional):** For certain types of fieldwork, your supervisor may ask you to prepare a budget. This budget should include costs like travel, field assistance (e.g., translators, guides), equipment (e.g., external hard drive for backups), visa costs, insurance, and daily living expenses. Make sure you have sufficient financial resources to complete your thesis and discuss and agree on the budget with your supervisor during the proposal stage.

3.5 Approval for travel to risk areas

If you plan to conduct fieldwork in a risk area, you must first obtain approval. It is your responsibility to ensure that the area you intend to visit is safe for travel and work. For the most current travel policies, [check the website](#).⁷

If the area is classified as a risk zone (marked yellow or orange), you must complete a "Request Form for Traveling to Risk Area(s)." This form includes a questionnaire, which is needed to gain approval. According to Wageningen University's travel policy, students can only travel to risk areas with official approval from WUR. Traveling to or through red-coded areas is strictly prohibited. If the status of certain areas is unclear, you can consult more resources like the French or British government travel advisories to help guide the approval process.

3.6 Start Colloquium, progress evaluation and go/no-go-decision

Your final research proposal is evaluated during the progress evaluation meeting in order to determine whether you can continue with your thesis research. This meeting involves discussing all aspects of the project so far, including the research proposal, supervision, and your performance. It also offers an opportunity for two-way feedback—if you have any concerns about your supervision, this is the time to address them and agree on improvements.

The evaluation of your research proposal is based on four key criteria:

- A well-grounded and convincing problem statement, supported by theory and empirical evidence.
- Clearly formulated research questions, focused objectives, and/or testable hypotheses.
- A suitable methodological design, including a conceptual framework and suitable methods for data collection and analysis.
- A clear and well-structured presentation at the start colloquium, with the ability to incorporate feedback effectively.

If a 'no-go' decision is made during the progress evaluation, you will have one chance to revise your proposal. You must submit the revised proposal within two weeks, and your supervisor will reassess it. If it meets the required standards, you will receive a "go" decision and can proceed. If it still does not meet the standards, a final "no-go" decision will be made, and your thesis project will be

⁷ <https://www.wur.nl/en/Education-Programmes/Current-Students/Travel-policy-for-students.htm>

stopped. This outcome will be discussed with you and recorded in OSIRIS.

3.7 Execution of the research

You will follow the methods outlined in your proposal to collect data, ensuring adherence to current safety regulations, ethics, and data management guidelines. After data collection, you will analyse the results using the conceptual framework from your proposal.

Researchers often use social research coding, statistical software, or other conventional and innovative methods for analysis. This step provides a structured understanding of the data, which is essential for presenting results and answering the research questions.

When conducting your research, consider potential economic, social, and technical constraints, such as holidays or availability of respondents. If unforeseen circumstances arise, consult with your supervisor to adapt your research plan as needed.

It's crucial to document all research activities thoroughly, including findings and sources, even seemingly minor details. Using a field log can help with this, see the FNP Thesis Brightspace site for an example. Strong analytical skills should be paired with meticulous organization to save time when preparing your thesis report.

During your research, maintain regular contact with your supervisor. Agree on the frequency and method of communication (e.g., email, phone, WhatsApp) before starting fieldwork.

3.8 Writing the thesis

Your research should culminate in a well-organized, clear, and concise thesis report. Typically, the thesis is between 60 and 80 pages long and follows this structure:

- **Title Page:** Include:
 - Your name and registration number
 - Thesis title
 - Supervisor(s) name
 - Chair group and university
 - Month and year of publication
- **Acknowledgements (optional):** Recognize individuals and organizations that supported your research, such as translators, hosts, external partners, sponsors, communities and personal supporters such as friends and family members.
- **Table of content:** Provide an overview of the chapter structure with page numbers, tables, figures, and annexes.
- **Summary or abstract:** Offer a brief, comprehensive summary of the thesis. It should not exceed one A4 page. Consider including a summary in Dutch or the local language of the research area.
- **Introduction:** Present the problem statement, scientific objectives, and research questions (if applicable). Include a brief description of the type of work, and provide an outline and structure for the subsequent chapters.
- **Theoretical Framework:** Review the theoretical and empirical literature and explain the theoretical concepts used. Often, this section includes a conceptual model showing the

relationships between relevant concepts (e.g., behaviour, action, values, community). If the thesis is based primarily on a literature review, a conceptual model or ontological positioning may suffice instead of a detailed theoretical framework.

- **Research methodology:** Describe the overall research design and approach. Include details on information sources, methods and instruments for selecting research locations and respondents, and methods for data collection and analysis. Report on the actual research process, including any problems met. For case studies, provide a description of the case and the circumstances at the time of research. Also, address relevant ethical considerations and data management issues.

Note: These first parts of the thesis will be based on your proposal but may need updating and revising.

- **Results:** Present the findings of your research. This section might be divided into multiple chapters if comparisons are involved. Structure the results to facilitate analysis, address research questions, and discuss objectives. The challenge is to structure the results chapter in such a way that it facilitates the analysis, the answering of the research questions and the discussion of the objective. There is no pre-given way of how to structure the presentation of results but ensure the rationale for structuring the findings is clear and consistently followed.
- **Discussion:** A useful structure is as follows:
 - Analyse the results and relate them to broader scientific debates. Include:
 - A summary of key findings
 - Systematic answers to research questions
 - Discussion of findings in the context of existing literature
 - Contribution to academic debates and addressing of objectives
 - Reflection on study limitations related to methods and theoretical framework
 - A positionality statement

This section should not contain new data and all the ingredients necessary to answer the research questions should have already been presented in the results section.

- **Conclusions:** Summarize the main contributions of the study to academic literature, followed by recommendations for practice and future research.
- **Bibliography:** List all sources cited in the thesis, arranged alphabetically by the author's last name. Ensure the bibliography is complete and accurate, following a consistent citation style (e.g., Harvard or Chicago). For this purpose, distinctive style guides exist, such as the [Harvard style guide](https://www5.open.ac.uk/library/referencing-and-plagiarism/quick-guide-to-harvard-referencing-cite-them-right)⁸ or the [Chicago quick style guide](https://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide/citation-guide-2.html)⁹.
- **Annexes/Appendices:** Include additional information that supports understanding but is not part of the main text, such as original data, lists of interviewed persons, background information, questionnaires, or detailed statistical analysis. Ensure annex pages are numbered consistently with the main text.

⁸ <https://www5.open.ac.uk/library/referencing-and-plagiarism/quick-guide-to-harvard-referencing-cite-them-right>

⁹ https://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide/citation-guide-2.html

The thesis structure follows the standard scientific report format: 'Introduction' as Chapter 1, 'Theoretical Framework' as Chapter 2, and so on. However, different research types (e.g., historical research, method development) may require a different chapter structure.

3.9 Final colloquium

When your thesis is almost ready for submission, you should schedule your final colloquium (presentation). This presentation aims to highlight your main research results to a broader audience of students and staff.

3.10 Upload your thesis to Osiris and send data to the FNP secretary

Once your thesis has been finalized and approved by your supervisor(s), you need to upload the final version of your thesis to Osiris. At the same time, send all your data in a (compressed) folder to the FNP Secretariat and cc your supervisor. To do this, create a folder with your WUR username, and organize it with the following subfolders:

- a) Proposal
- b) Thesis
- c) Raw Data (e.g., interview transcripts)
- d) Processed Data (e.g., SPSS or Atlas.ti files)

Ensure your folder hierarchy is logical and clear, so that both you and the FNP Secretariat can easily locate your files.

3.11 Examination/Oral defence

The final examination, or oral defence, aims to review the entire scientific training process you've undergone while preparing your MSc thesis. It also places your thesis within current scientific debates and the broader context of forest and nature conservation policy. The examination involves you, your supervisor, and an examiner. and is generally in person but can be online or hybrid upon agreement with the supervisor and examiner. It requires the following preparations:

- **Scheduling:** Arrange the date for the final examination at least three weeks in advance with your supervisor.
- **Submission:** Provide a digital copy of your thesis to the supervisor(s) and examiner no later than 10 working days before the examination. Alternatively, agree on a different submission date with them beforehand.
- **Evaluation Sheet:** At least one day before the examination, your supervisor will send you a thesis evaluation sheet (available on the FNP website and FNP Thesis Brightspace site).

The examination lasts about 60 minutes and follows this format:

- **Reaction to Evaluation:** You have 5-10 minutes to respond to the supervisor's evaluation.
- **Examination:** The main part of the examination involves questions and discussion, lasting about 30-40 minutes.
- **Consultation and Grade Announcement:** There will be approximately 10 minutes for the supervisor and examiner to confer, followed by about 5 minutes to announce and explain your final grade.

3.12 Grading

To ensure transparency in grading, the FNP MSc thesis site provides a Thesis Evaluation Sheet and a Thesis Assessment Form with rubrics for evaluating the thesis. The grading considers the following:

- Research performance
- Research report
- Oral presentation
- Results of the oral defence

Both the supervisor and the examiner will assess these elements. Your final grade will be announced and explained immediately after the final examination. However, the MSc thesis grade can only be registered in OSIRIS once all administrative matters related to the thesis are resolved.

If your thesis receives a grade of 5.5 or below, your supervisor may offer you a chance to revise and resubmit your thesis. The highest possible grade after revision is a 6. If the revised thesis still receives a grade of 5.5 or lower, you will need to select a new thesis topic.

Repeated delays or missed deadlines may result in the termination of the thesis process (see the section on the thesis contract). If you anticipate missing deadlines, meetings, or other agreements, notify your supervisor promptly. Depending on the circumstances, the supervisor may grant an extension of up to 2 months. You may also discuss any issues with your study advisor.

4. Research ethics

When conducting research for your MSc thesis, adhering to ethical standards is crucial for maintaining the integrity and reliability of your work. Here are key ethical considerations and practices you must follow for your MSc thesis at FNP:

1. **Adherence to Ethical Standards:** Ensure that your research follows ethical guidelines to uphold the credibility and validity of your findings.
2. **Wageningen Code of Conduct for Scientific Practice**¹⁰: This document provides comprehensive guidelines for ethical behaviour in research. It outlines the standards expected in conducting and reporting research.
3. **Netherlands Code of Conduct for Research Integrity**¹¹: Both students and staff at Wageningen University Research are bound by this code, which is part of the Student Charter. It details principles such as honesty, accuracy, and transparency in research.

¹⁰ <https://www.wur.nl/en/education-programmes/phd-programme/graduate-schools/www.wur.nl/wimek/phd-info/code-of-conduct.htm>

¹¹ https://www.wur.nl/upload_mm/e/8/6/1df70503-8388-4b75-97d2-98f76641f614_Netherlands_Code_of_Conduct_for_Research_Integrity_2018_UK.pdf

4. **The FNP MSc Thesis Ethics Checklist:** Available from the MSc Thesis Brightspace site, this checklist will help you apply ethical best practices to your thesis research project.

By following these guidelines, you contribute to ethical research practices and support the high standards expected in academic work. **Informed Consent:** All data collection must be based on informed consent. This means participants need to fully understand the nature of the research, what their participation entails, and any potential risks. They should voluntarily agree to take part in the study without any pressure.

If you plan to record interviews, workshops, experiments, or observations, you must obtain specific consent for the recordings. Ensure you get prior (written) consent from interviewees to use their information in your thesis. Additionally, discuss and agree on how their contributions can be cited or quoted.

A standard informed consent form is available on the FNP Thesis Brightspace site. You can use and adapt this form for your research.

Data Sensitivity: When designing your research, carefully evaluate whether the information you request is essential to answering your research question. Avoid collecting sensitive data, such as gender, income, education level, or other personal details, unless it is clearly necessary for your research questions or hypotheses. Collecting unnecessary sensitive data not only raises ethical concerns but can also complicate the protection of participants' privacy.

Confidentiality and Anonymity: When reporting your results, ensure that they do not allow for the identification of respondents, unless participants have explicitly consented to being identifiable. This protects participants' privacy and maintains the trust they have placed in you. Here are the key concepts to understand:

- **Confidentiality:** This means that while the researchers know the identity of participants, this information is kept secure and not disclosed to others. Your study might collect personal identifiers (e.g., names, job titles, contact details), but strict measures should be in place to prevent this information from being shared in publications or with unauthorized individuals. You can use codes or pseudonyms instead of personal identifiers to maintain confidentiality.
- **Anonymity:** This means that the identity of participants is unknown to everyone, including the researchers. In an anonymous study, no personal identifiers (such as names, addresses, or specific demographic details) are collected, making it impossible to link participants to their responses or data.

Consideration for Humans, Animals, and Environment & ethical approval: Consider the interests of all humans and animals involved in your research, including test subjects, and assess any risks to researchers and the environment. Adhere to relevant statutory regulations and codes of conduct to ensure ethical compliance. This includes verifying if ethical approval from the WUR Research Ethical Committee is required.

To help you make this decision, please use the checklist provided on the FNP Thesis Brightspace site. If ethical approval is required, consult the WUR Research Ethics Committee (REC) well in advance, in coordination with your supervisor. If your thesis is part of a larger WUR research project, check with

your supervisor if the existing REC approval can be used for your ethical approval. Note that the REC typically does not review stand-alone MSc thesis projects, and a formal application will need to be prepared by yourself before it can be checked and submitted by your supervisor.

Research permit: Check if research permits are needed, especially if your research is conducted abroad. If your thesis is part of a larger WUR research project, or facilitated by a host organisation in the country of study, check if your research falls under an exciting research application. Your supervisor or contact person abroad may be able to help. An application for a research permit often requires formal ethics approval and may take considerable time which could affect the feasibility of your research. Examples of countries which require research permits including ethical approval are Kenya and Indonesia.

Plagiarism, generative AI, and codes of conduct.

Plagiarism: Research directly or indirectly builds on the intellectual work of others—such as theories, models, or findings—which makes scientific writing particularly vulnerable to plagiarism. Plagiarism, or using someone else's work (including your own previous work) without proper acknowledgment, is considered theft of intellectual property. It is essential to cite all sources when quoting, paraphrasing, or summarizing others' work.

A charge of plagiarism can have severe consequences. To avoid plagiarism, staff screen all work carefully and the University has made software available for this purpose. For this reason, you must upload your final thesis, before your defence, to the FNP Thesis Brightspace site (see under assignments) for a plagiarism check. Supervisors may report (suspicions of) plagiarism to the Examining Board and to student(s).

To ensure academic integrity, you must upload your final thesis to the FNP Brightspace site (under assignments) for a plagiarism check before your defense. The university uses specialized software to screen all work for potential plagiarism. If any suspicions of plagiarism arise, supervisors may report these to the Examining Board and the student(s) involved.

Use of Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI): The use of generative artificial intelligence to create ready-made content in assignments is considered fraud, so it is not allowed to copy-and-paste the output of AI. However, you are allowed to use AI as a sparring partner, and as a feedback tool for the quality of your text (e.g. as a spell checker or grammar checker).

Appendix on AI Use: Your thesis report must include an appendix detailing the use of AI. In this appendix, state whether you used AI for your research and report. If you did use AI, describe how you used it, including:

- A list of prompts used
- A link to the AI conversation (e.g., ChatGPT FAQ)
- An explanation of how AI output influenced your text

If you did not use AI, simply include a one-sentence statement confirming that AI was not used.

5. Copyrights of thesis

MSc theses are generally published in the E-articles depot of Wageningen University and are available as open access documents. As the author(s) of the thesis, you keep the copyright to your work. The FNP group holds the copyrights to the data collected and used during your research. This means that FNP can use this data for further research and publications. While FNP may seek your collaboration for these activities, it is not needed to do so. You will, however, be acknowledged for your contribution, either through co-authorship or formal acknowledgment. For any questions about intellectual property, contact info.eship@wur.nl.

In case you consider publishing an article, book chapter, or any other work based on your thesis results, you must get permission from your supervisor. Typically, the supervisor should be invited as a co-author for any publication resulting from your MSc thesis, unless they explicitly allow you to publish without their involvement. Follow the [WUR Guidelines for authorship](#)¹². Reputable Publishers: Sometimes, commercial publishers may contact you to publish parts of your thesis. It is recommended to carefully check whether such offers are from reputable publishers. Your supervisor can help with this assessment.

By adhering to these guidelines, you ensure proper handling of intellectual property and maintain academic integrity in your research and subsequent publications.

6. Data Management

Data Management refers to the organization, structure, storage, and legal care for data used or generated during a research project. The goal of data management is to ensure that data can be traced from its raw form through to its published version. This means documenting and securely storing each step of the research process, including data collection, transformations, final analyses, and reporting. Thesis students should follow these guidelines:

- **FNP Data Management Plan:** MSc thesis students at the FNP group must follow the FNP Data Management Plan guidelines, available on the FNP Thesis Brightspace site. This plan outlines how to manage the storage and traceability of data for FNP research projects.
- **Instructions and Compliance:** Specific instructions have been developed to guide you through the data management process. It is mandatory to follow these instructions, as your thesis grade will not be registered otherwise. Refer to section 3.10 for details on sending your data to the FNP secretary.

¹² <https://www.wur.nl/en/library/researchers/publishing/co-authoring.htm>

7. Costs associated with carrying out the MSc research

Generally, students are responsible for covering all costs related to their Master thesis research. This means you should plan your research to ensure it is financially workable. However, if you expect substantial research costs (e.g., international travel, stays abroad, fieldwork), discuss these early with your supervisor. They can help you explore potential support from ongoing Wageningen University and Research projects or external organizations.

For research conducted abroad in various European countries, the [Erasmus+ Grant Study Program](#) may offer financial support. If you are unable to secure funding, you will need to cover all costs yourself.

8. Workplaces

Student workplaces are located at the A-wing of Gaia A.301 (building 101). You can request a workspace at the FNP secretariat with Keen-Mun Poon (keenmun.poon@wur.nl) for the duration of your thesis research. Working in Gaia and interacting with other students might be more inspiring than working alone.

9. Check list

This checklist below provides an overview of actions and responsibilities during thesis project. Several of these items will align with or complement the 'thesis steps' as described in section three.

Action	Forms	Who
1. Check with your study advisor whether you are allowed to start your thesis, i.e. if you meet the mandatory knowledge requirements of your programme and have followed at least two FNP core courses		Student
2. Contact the thesis coordinator Jim van Laar jim.vanlaar@wur.nl		Student
3. Advise students on available projects/topics and supervisors		Thesis coordinator
4. Contact supervisor; confirm supervision and determine thesis topic		Student
5. Check whether the country of research (if applicable) is a risk area or requires safety or		Student

ethical permission for travelling or doing research on human subjects		
6. Student fills in Master Thesis Learning Agreement in OSIRIS. Supervisor checks, agrees and signs	Osiris - Master thesis learning agreement	Student, supervisor
7. Registration of the MSc student to the FNP Thesis Brightspace site, the FNP Thesis Ring Bright space site and the FNP mailing list.		Supervisor, Secretariat
8. Prepare research proposal, include the completed FNP MSc Thesis Ethical Issues Checklist		Student
9. Discuss the proposal in the progress evaluation and receive a go/no-go-decision	Osiris mid-term evaluation	Student, supervisor
10. Attend your start and end colloquia sessions including the presentations of other students	List the colloquia attended	Student
11. Attend 4 FNP Thesis Ring sessions	List the thesis rings attended	Student
12. Present draft proposal at start colloquia, revise based on feedback and submit definitive version (pdf) to supervisor		Student, supervisor, thesis coordinator
13. Progress evaluation: Evaluate the research proposal and Go/No-go decision	Evaluation registered in OSIRIS	Supervisor (thesis coordinator in case no-go)
14. Conduct thesis work		Student
15. Upon agreement that the thesis is near finalization, arrange date for final colloquium presentation and present thesis		Student, thesis coordinator, supervisor
16. Arrange date for the oral examination with examiner and assign the examiner		Supervisor, examiner
17. Submit final thesis to supervisor and examiner 10 working days in advance of examination by uploading the digital report to OSIRIS. Copies in PDF go directly to supervisor and examiner via email		Student
18. Send digital thesis data to the secretariat	Data folder	Student/ secretariat

19. Check fulfilment of requirements: participation three colloquia including your start and end colloquia sessions and four FNP Thesis Ring sessions	Listing of colloquium and thesis ring attendance	Supervisor
20. Fill in thesis evaluation form, send a copy to student and examiner at least one day in advance of verbal examination	Thesis evaluation form	Supervisor
21. Oral examination		Student, supervisor, examiner
22. Grade thesis	Osiris	First assessor, second assessor, examiner
23. Deleting student from mailing list, Thesis- and Thesis Ring Brightspace sites		Thesis coordinator, Secretariat
24. Complete the thesis evaluation questionnaire		Student