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## **Chapter 7**

### **Nature Conservation And Tourism Development In The Dutch Wadden Sea Region: A Common Future?**

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#### **Future points**

- Nature and landscape of the Wadden Sea are the main pull factors for the tourism development
- Future tourism development requires a clear strategy that is supported by various stakeholders
- Raising awareness about the natural values results in more visitors and public support for nature conservation
- The World Heritage status facilitates cooperation between local entrepreneurs and nature conservation organisations

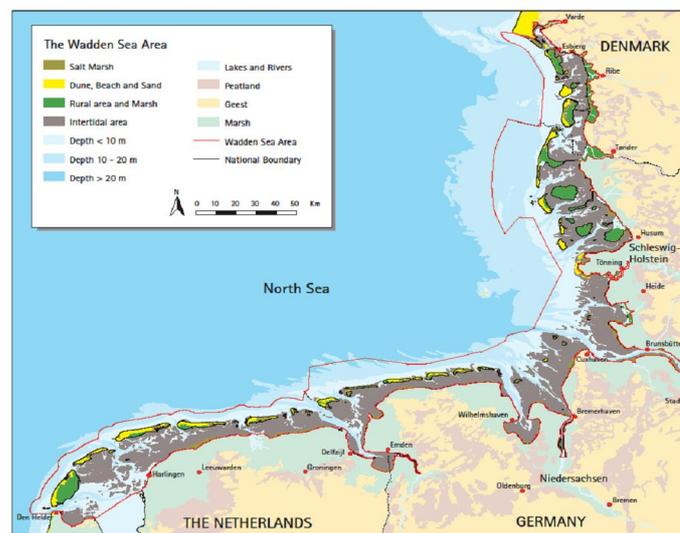
## **Prelude**

‘Occasionally I have the pleasure to travel to one of the islands in the Dutch Wadden Sea region. It is always a nice drive through the open agricultural landscape of the provinces of Friesland and Groningen to the ferry-boat terminal. It is hard to imagine that these fertile green pastures and fields were once conquered on the sea. The first people settled here around 1500 BC attracted by the natural fertility of the marshlands and the rich diversity of (shell) fish, birds and marine mammals. To protect their farms from flooding, the first settlers, who had established themselves on the highest parts of the marsh (marsh bars and natural river levees), from the 6th century BC, started to raise the areas where they lived by erecting artificial dwelling mounds. Around the year 1000 AD the first parts of these marshlands were embanked starting a process of an ongoing struggle against the forces of the sea. In the end resulting in a massive dike protecting the mainland, a sharp distinction between cultural landscape of Groningen and Friesland and the natural seascape of the natural World Heritage site, the Wadden Sea. On my way to the ferry the remnants of this long history of embankments and land-reclamation are still visible in the landscape. An ancient church built on a dwelling mound, the remains of a small dike, a waterway following the course of a former gully. Once on board the ferry it always strikes me how drastically the landscape has changed. The grey-brownish colors of the mudflats and salt marshes dominate, hardly any manmade object is visible on the horizon and on a windless day the silence is only broken by flocks of migrating birds.

The passage to the island is always very enjoyable, especially during low-tide. I love the scenery of mudflats and sandbanks, the foraging waders and, occasionally, a sunbathing seal. When the weather is fine also groups of tourist flock together on the upper deck. Are they aware of the cultural history of the coastal area, they just left, and do they acknowledge the natural values of the Wadden Sea, in many eyes the last wilderness in a country where every part is touched by human hands? Or are they only interested in a pleasant stay at an island, a visit to the beach or a stroll through the dunes? And what will the future bring for the protection of the Wadden Sea, now tourism has become more and more important for the economic development of the north of the Netherlands?’

## The Wadden Sea

The international Wadden Sea is an estuarine tidal area along the North Sea coasts of The Netherlands, Germany and Denmark. It is characteristic for regions with sandy coasts and a medium tidal range. Fifty barrier islands separate the Wadden Sea from the North Sea, and an offshore transition zone to the North Sea. The tidal flats of the Wadden Sea form the largest unbroken stretch of mudflats worldwide. The present form of the Wadden Sea is still mainly the result of natural forces, although since the Middle Ages man has changed the Wadden Sea landscape by building dykes and reclaiming land (Schroor, 2008). The Wadden Sea is an important nursery area for fish, a foraging and resting habitat for seals, and a foraging habitat for migrating waders.



*Figure 7:1: Map of the international Wadden Sea area (source: <http://www.waddensea-worldheritage.org/>)*

The Wadden Sea is a fully nature protected area within the relevant national protection schemes. The Wadden Sea and large parts of the islands are designated as Natura2000 area and listed as natural a World Heritage area (Common Wadden Sea Secretariat, 2008). The landscapes of the adjacent coastal areas of Noord-Holland, Friesland en Groningen are a result of a long and intense interaction between its inhabitants and the sea. In this peripheral rural area agricultural activities dominate although some industry is developed near the ports of the cities of Den Helder, Harlingen en Delfzijl (Schroor, 2008). The area has a rich cultural inheritance, reflecting the struggle of mankind against the forces of nature.

### **Development of tourism**

Already in the 19<sup>th</sup> century tourism developed on the Wadden Sea Islands. On the German Island Nordeneij the first 'bathing' hotel was built in 1797, following a trend developed in the United Kingdom (UK). Later also on other islands hotels were built. After World War Two mass tourism started to develop. Attracted by the spacious beaches and the characteristic culture on the islands the amount of tourists grew rapidly in the fifties and sixties (Raad voor de Wadden, 2008). Nowadays the islands have developed into very popular holiday destinations. Since 1996 the Toerdata Noord monitoring system of Stenden University monitors and analyses the supply and demand of the tourism industry in the northern part of the Netherlands (Huig & de Haas, 2010b). From these data some conclusions can be drawn about the economic importance of tourism in the Dutch Wadden Sea area. In 2010, 1.2 million visitors spent 5.1 million nights on the Wadden islands. Tourists in the Wadden, area arrive mainly from the Netherlands (83% visitors; 76% nights), Germany (14%; 22%) and Belgium (1.5%; 1.2%). The number of nights spent on the islands by Dutch tourists during the period 1998-2009 was approximately four million each year, varying between 3.7 million and 4.2 million (Sijtsma, 2012). As a result traditional economic activities as agriculture and

fisheries are replaced by tourism related activities (Fischer & Waterbolk, 2005). The existing dominant pattern of visitation is a short stay (weekend to full week), in a rented cottage, hotel or camping site. Most of the money spent during visits appears to be on lodging, board and transport; both to the islands as well as on the islands (Stichting Recreatie, 2003).

Tourism development at the mainland is far less developed. Visitors spent about 1 million nights each year. The ferry ports Den Helder, Harlingen, Holwerd and Lauwersoog hardly benefit from visitor streams that cross the Wadden Sea to the islands. Striking is the lack of mobility between the islands and cities on the mainland (Moufakkir & Revier, 2009). From several surveys, conducted by groups of Tourism Management students of Stenden University, it appears that there is no great deal of interest among the ferry passengers to spend some time on the mainland during their holiday. For instance 87 percent of the travellers to Terschelling and Vlieland (n=152) is only interested in the islands. Also 65 percent of the interviewed people in Den Helder (n=172) indicate that their sole reason to visit this part of the Wadden Sea area is the ferry to the island of Texel (Revier & Postma, 2012).

### **Motives of tourists in the Wadden Sea area**

Every five years Toerdata Noord (Huig & de Haas, 2010a) organises a survey among tourists in the northern Dutch provinces to assess their behaviour and appreciation of their stay. These data indicate that walking (26%), cycling (25%), swimming or bathing (14%) are the most popular activities during a holiday on the islands. The last decade participation in nature excursions and seal- and shrimp tours grew in popularity. In 1993 a small survey indicated that most of the visitors highly appreciate the pristine landscape and the natural values but overall conclusions have not been drawn (Stichting Recreatie, 2003). In 2008 the Waddenfederatie (de Rijk & Borger, 2008), a cooperation of the tourist boards on the islands, published the results of a broad inquiry. This report confirms the findings of the research in 1993. Most of the visitors appreciate the tranquillity, the nature and the landscape of the islands. Recently the University of

Groningen developed the Hotspotmonitor to analyse the appreciation of the different natural parts of the Wadden Sea area (Sijtsma, 2012). This web-based monitoring device asks respondents to state which natural areas they find highly attractive and mark this place on a map ([www.hotspotmonitor.eu](http://www.hotspotmonitor.eu)). The natural landscapes on the islands (beaches and dune areas), are appreciated the most. The Wadden Sea itself is less popular. Nevertheless the natural values of the Wadden Sea are of importance for tourism development in the area. During the summer and autumn of 2011, a survey took place among participants of nature excursions in the Wadden Sea area (Folmer, 2011; Folmer et al., 2013). Results demonstrate that compared to other elements of the natural environment, wildlife is the most important factor in shaping visitors' attachment to the Wadden Sea area. Memorable wildlife experiences and visitor's motivation to see wildlife contribute most to place attachment to the Wadden Sea, followed by the level of interest in observing birds and small marine wildlife and an interest in hearing birds sing, experiencing variations in seasons and enjoying nature waking up. Other factors that contribute to attachment to the Wadden Sea area are longer stays and more repeat visits of visitors. These outcomes indicate that participating in nature excursions can be important tools in 'slow' marketing, as visitors get the opportunity to experience small marine wildlife, birds and seals during these excursions. Furthermore, a higher level of attachment to the Wadden Sea area is related to more repeat visits and longer lengths of stay, leading to more revenues for nature and tourist organisations.

### **Nature protection**

In general nature conservation started in the Netherlands in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In a reaction to the visible impact of urbanisation and industrialisation on nature and landscape conservation organisations were established. These organisations consisted in the beginning mainly of scientists, owners of country estates and amateur naturalists. Especially areas with an high botanical or ornithological values and were bought and strictly managed as conservation areas. Most of these nature reserves could not be considered as untouched wilderness. They

were a result of human interference as extensive agriculture or water management in once natural areas (Rientjes, 2002). Also in the Dutch Wadden Sea area national and provincial organisations acquired the ownership of certain areas, mainly breeding colonies of birds situated in dune areas on the islands (Revier, 2012). The protection of the Wadden Sea itself came into focus by the end of the 1960's. Until that time this highly dynamic shallow sea was considered as 'worthless' or as an water management problem. Therefore several plans were made to embank large parts of the Wadden Sea. At the same time tourists, visiting the islands, discovered the beauty and the conservational values of the Wadden Sea. This resulted in two initiatives; a school-boy Kees Wevers founded the Dutch Society for the Preservation of the Wadden Sea (Landelijke Vereniging tot Behoud van de Waddenzee) in 1965 and scientists established in the same year the scientific Wadden Sea Working Group. Supported by the results of the scientific working group, the influence of the Wadden Society grew rapidly, resulting in the abolishment of all reclamation plans and the establishment by the government of a national policy for the protection of the Wadden Sea (Wolff, 2013). Also in Germany and Denmark the natural values of the Wadden Sea were acknowledged and the governments of the three countries started to work together on the protection of the Wadden Sea. In 1978 the first trilateral governmental conference was organised. Since then every three or four years the Ministers responsible for the protection of the Wadden Sea come together. In 1991, during the sixth trilateral conference, the Ministers decide upon the guiding principle for the trilateral policy:

“to achieve, as far as possible, a natural and sustainable ecosystem in which natural processes proceed in an undisturbed way” (Common Wadden Sea Secretariat, 2011).

Policy with regard to tourism development is aimed at minimising adverse effects on the ecosystem (K. Lambers et al., 2003). In 1997 the eighth Trilateral Conference in Stade decides to initiate interregional cooperation to develop and implement policies on sustainable tourism, together with relevant stakeholders, as well as, local and other relevant authorities. In 2000 this trilateral cooperation on a regional level publishes a report on sustainable tourism and recreational use in the international

Wadden Sea. In the report a long term strategy is proposed to safeguard the natural assets of the Wadden Sea and to maintain the Wadden Sea region as a high quality tourist destination (Cooperation, Interregional Wadden Sea, 2000). The ninth trilateral conference in 2001 in Esbjerg, Denmark, welcomes the Netforum report, but doesn't take any initiative to incorporate the recommendations in trilateral policy. Instead the possible nomination of the international Wadden Sea as World Heritage is the main focus of this conference.

### **World Heritage**

In retrospective most stakeholders are very positive about the World Heritage status of the Wadden Sea. Jens Enemark and Harald Marencic of the Common Wadden Sea secretariat state;

“The inscription of the Wadden Sea on the World Heritage list is a major success. It is a global recognition of the outstanding universal value of the Wadden Sea and the efforts of the governments, non-governmental organisations, scientists and the inhabitants of the area to protect its values and use its resources in a sustainable way. In the spirit of the World Heritage Convention, the Wadden Sea World Heritage is now protected and managed on behalf of the World community. The inscription does not introduce new rules and regulations but it underpins the common responsibility for protection and management of the property on a level that concerns governments, organisations and inhabitants. In this sense the inscription reinforces conservation efforts on a national and international level and opens up for new perspectives in terms of regional sustainable development and collaboration opportunities” (J. Enemark & H. Marencic, 2012, p. 94).

Nevertheless it took more than ten years to reach consensus on the nomination of the Wadden Sea as a natural World Heritage site (Revier& Postma, 2012). Already in the early nineties the possible nomination of the Wadden Sea as World Heritage site is discussed in the trilateral cooperation. But at the first proposals meet a lot of criticism. Economic

interest groups fear legal constraints to their activities, local communities are afraid for a loss of autonomy and environmental non-governmental organisations (NGO's) doubt the added value of the nomination (Van der Aa, 2004). Despite this criticism the three governments decide to start the nomination process in 2005. During an intensive consultation process the resistance of the different stakeholders changes into support. Two main causes can be determined for this change in opinion. First the formal agreement between the different governmental bodies responsible for the protection of the Wadden Sea not to derive any new formal regulation from the World Heritage status. And secondly a study from the Dutch UNESCO Centre predicting an increase in tourism and therefore economic benefits in the area (UNESCO Centre Nederland, 2005). The World Heritage Status of the Wadden Sea, as decided upon by the World Heritage Committee of Unesco on 26<sup>th</sup> of June 2009 in Sevilla is in the end supported by every stakeholder in the Dutch and German Wadden Sea. Naturally this decision of UNESCO is welcomed during the 11<sup>th</sup> Ministerial Conference on Sylt (Common Wadden Sea Secretariat, 2010). The Ministers decide to initiate and organise the development of an overall Sustainable Tourism Development Strategy for the Wadden Sea World Heritage Site that will be decided upon during the Ministerial Conference in 2014.

Economic effects from the World Heritage status, and more specific the economic effects deriving from tourism, are difficult to measure. Increases in tourism have been reported in association with the nomination process. Sometimes an increase in visits is associated with areas where the nomination was considered more or less controversial (Buckley, 2004). Nomination of the Dutch-German Wadden Sea was considered to be a bit controversial in a sense that the Danish government withdrew its political support for nomination as did the government of Hamburg. An increase in visits to the Wadden Sea during the (short) period of controversy preceding the actual nomination has not been determined (Revier, 2011). To get more insight into the effects of the World Heritage status of the Wadden Sea quantitative and qualitative research among stakeholders and visitors of the Wadden Sea in the fall of 2008, the spring of 2009 and at the end of the summer of 2013 were carried out. Visitors to the harbour city

Harlingen in the Netherlands were asked about their knowledge and expectations of the World Heritage nomination of the Wadden Sea. Also stakeholders in the Dutch and German Wadden Sea (representatives of the municipalities, restaurant-owners, entrepreneurs), were questioned. The main results of these studies indicate that awareness about the World Heritage status has grown (30% in 2008, 74% in 2009 and 75% in 2014). But only for a small majority (around 50%), the World Heritage status is a reason to visit the area. Due to the nomination, stakeholders in the tourism industry expected an increase of tourism and a positive added value to the image of the Wadden Sea. On the other hand they are not well prepared and are waiting for initiatives by the (local) government. Possible marketing opportunities have not been taken into consideration from most of the tourist facilities and municipalities as well (Revier, 2011).

All this in contrary to Germany where the World Heritage status actively is used in promoting tourism in the coastal areas of Lower Saxony (Prowad, 2012). A logo has been developed, which can be found on all brochures, the homepages and everything else connected with the German side of the Wadden Sea. Moreover, on the German motorways heading towards the coast signs are installed, which raise the awareness of the special site. Furthermore package tours themed around the topic of the Wadden Sea are offered (Nordsee GmbH, 2011). Also qualitative research in the small harbour village Nessmersiel (Lower Saxony), indicated the potential value of the World Heritage Status of the Wadden Sea.



*Figure 7:2: Logo of the World heritage Wadden Sea (source: <http://www.waddensea-worldheritage.org/>)*

Interviews with representatives of the tourist boards and the administration of the National Park (Nationalparkverwaltung Niedersächsisches Wattenmeer), revealed that in this region of the Wadden Sea the status is actively used to attract more and different tourists (Revier et al, 2012). The marketing of the region mainly uses the World Heritage title and programmes are developed to raise the awareness and to educate the visitors. Representatives of the tourism industry are convinced that the World Heritage status creates benefits for tourism and hence the region is present at fairs and started a marketing campaign. Also they believe it has led to a raising awareness for the preservation of the natural values of the Wadden Sea. Moreover, a stronger focus on a nature oriented target group is developed. Also cooperation between the tourism industry, nature conservation organisations has benefitted from the World Heritage status.

Concluding, the UNESCO status of the Wadden Sea is not a label that will attract more tourists automatically. The above mentioned research shows that the UNESCO status can have all kinds of benefits for the region in question, such as conservation, cooperation, local pride, social capital, learning and education, and sponsoring and investments, but the economic effects and tourism impacts usually remain poor. So the UNESCO status has to be regarded as an interesting and challenging opportunity for the region but not as a panacea. A sustainable boost to the Wadden area as a tourism destination requires a clear and focused vision and strategy that is supported by the residents and the various tourism stakeholders.

### **Sustainable development**

The concept of sustainable development enters Wadden Sea policy in the early nineties. At first it is understood as environmental protection,

taking into account the interests of the local population (Lambers et al., 2003). Later on the triple-P approach is also acknowledged as the basis for a sound Wadden Sea policy. In 2009 the Wadden Academy, a board of scientists, proposes a new theoretical framework for the development of the international Wadden Sea; Resilience of the Wadden Sea Region. In this concept the resilience of the Wadden Sea Region is found at the (complex) interface of three domains, that is, ecological resilience, economic resilience and social and cultural resilience. The ecological resilience of a region is an indication of the way that region is able to adapt to changing ecological conditions, such as desiccation and desalination. The economic resilience of a region is an indication of how vulnerable it is to economic phenomena, for example, an economic recession such as the present credit crisis, globalisation and technological innovation. Social resilience relates to the presence of sufficient 'social capital' and is an indication of groups' ability to create meaningful ways of living together (Waddenacademie, 2009).

How to implement a sustainable tourism strategy for the international Wadden Sea Region is the main question that has to be answered, following the request of the UNESCO World Heritage Committee. In the consultation version of the Sustainable Tourism Strategy for the international Wadden Sea, that will be discussed at the coming Trilateral Conference on the protection of the Wadden Sea the following vision statement is formulated ;

“Nature conservation and sustainable tourism development go hand in hand across the Wadden Sea World Heritage Destination. This relationship is characterized by appreciation, understanding, experience and active participation of all committed partners. People who visit, live or work in any part of the Wadden Sea World Heritage Destination are aware of and appreciate the ‘Outstanding Universal Value’ and the unique landscape. They are committed to preserving these assets for the benefit of present and future generations. Local businesses and communities benefit both economically and socially from the high quality offers that support the integrity of the Wadden Sea and the ecological requirements of its World Heritage status” (Task group sustainable tourism strategy, 2013, p. 5).

Although the potential conflicts between tourism and nature conservation are acknowledged in this strategy emphasis is put on their coexistence in the Wadden Sea region. This corresponds with the policies of the different nature conservation involved in the protection of the Wadden Sea. They allow recreational activities in the nature reserves they have responsibility for. And recently the Wadden Society developed a close cooperation with local entrepreneurs in organising guided field trips in the Wadden Sea area. During qualitative research among representatives of the tourism industry (Waddenvereniging, 2012) it became also apparent that most local entrepreneurs believe that high natural values are important requirements for the tourism development in the Wadden Sea region. They also assume that the nature and landscape of the Wadden Sea can be the main pull factor for the tourism development in the coastal regions of Friesland and Groningen.

### **Concluding Thoughts: A common future**

A change in attitude is also noticeable with regard to the Wadden Sea protection. At the end of the nineties “Hand off the Wadden Sea” was the common discourse, but in a couple of years this was replaced by the “Human activities within ecological limits” (Runhaar, 2008). This change in discourse has also influenced the strategy with regard to nature conservation and management in the Wadden Sea area. Until the change of the century, due to the ‘Hands off’ discourse, human interference in natural processes in the Wadden Sea area for the purpose of nature conservation was seldom seen. But in 2009 a nature recovery plan was developed “to create a Wadden Sea area of robust nature in combination with sustainable perspectives for the users in the area” (Programma Rijke Waddenzee, 2009). Human interference in the Wadden Sea region is also needed to safeguard the area against the effects of climate change. In general an integrated approach is advocated in the different policy plans for the future coastal defense in the Wadden Sea region (Deltaprogramma, 2013). Also the interests of tourism (infrastructure), and nature (nature development), will taken into account in the design of new dikes.

These developments cannot be separated from a general shift in the attitude of the general public with regard to nature conservation. In an analysis of the Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency (Planbureau voor de leefomgeving), it is concluded that during the last decade the focus of nature policy has been on realising ecological objectives and on the procedures for achieving them. This has led to a situation that only few people are still understanding this policy. Often the complaint is heard that the protection of nature, environment and landscape has become a toy of experts who understand each other in an incomprehensible jargon and takes little pass on the views of residents and users of the areas to be protected (PBL, 2012). Many inhabitants and users of the Wadden Sea region have a great affinity with nature, but also see it as a resource that can be used. Also the great societal changes during the last 50 years in this region should be mentioned in this context. Traditional employment, which was found in the agriculture and fisheries, is replaced by employment in the tourism and recreation sector. The Wadden Sea, which provided income (fishing, seal hunting), but where you had to protect yourself against, has become an icon of nature protection. In general inhabitants and users are in favor of the conservation and restoration of nature, but they want a guarantee of employment and income. Therefore, the nomination of the Wadden Sea as natural World Heritage was received with so much suspicion. The need to protect the unique natural values of the Wadden Sea area as such is not subject to debate. But at the same time it raised the question to what extent the values of nature and landscape can contribute to the socio-economic development of the area. The recent collaboration between local entrepreneurs and nature conservation organisations is a first answer to this question. Knowledge about the conservation of the Wadden Sea is shared, resulting in guided tours in the Wadden Sea area and courses for employees in the tourism branch. In this way one can start to bridge the existing gap between the inhabitants of the Wadden Sea region and the nature conservationists.

Overall the conclusion can be drawn that, stimulated by the World Heritage status of the Wadden Sea and facilitated by a trilateral Sustainable Tourism Strategy, tourism development and nature

conservation and can mutually benefit. Raising awareness about the natural values of the Wadden Sea will result in more visitors to the region and contributes to an emotional attachment to the protected area and public support for the conservation programs.

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