

Nature excursions in the Dutch Wadden Sea: tools to integrate tourism, outdoor recreation and nature protection in a natural World Heritage site.

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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. The Wadden Sea is an important nursery area for fish, a foraging and resting habitat for seals, and a foraging habitat for migrating waders. The Wadden Sea, including large parts of the islands, is a fully nature protected area and designated as a natural World Heritage site in 2009 (Wolff, 2013). The research group Marine Wetlands Studies at Stenden University is focusing on the sustainable development of tourism in the area. Current research has the purpose to get insight in to the effects of the World Heritage Status, in particular the natural values of the area, on future tourism development.



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

It took more than 10 years to reach the necessary consensus to nominate the Wadden Sea as a World Heritage site. Especially local communities and economic interest groups feared a loss of

autonomy and legal constraints for their activities (van der Aa, et al., 2004). 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, was replaced by employment in the tourism and recreation sector (Sijtsma, *et al.*, 2012). The Wadden Sea, which provided income (fishing, seal hunting), which also threatened local communities (floods), became an icon of nature protection. 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 raises the question to what extent the values of nature and landscape can contribute to the socio-economic development of the area (Revier, 2013).

The World Heritage Status of the Wadden Sea, as decided upon by the World Heritage Committee of UNESCO on 26th of June 2009 in Sevilla, was in the end supported by most stakeholders in the Dutch and German Wadden Sea. Many local entrepreneurs believed that high natural values are important requirements for the tourism development in the Wadden Sea region. They also assumed 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. During the 14th Governmental Conference on the protection of the Wadden Sea the responsible Ministers adopted a strategy for the sustainable development of tourism. Developing and promoting authentic nature experiences to maintain current visitors and attract new target groups are one of the challenges in this strategy.

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 (Revier, *et al.*, 2012). 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 either (Revier, 2013).

Several authors underline that visitors to the Dutch Wadden Sea area appreciate the natural landscapes on the islands (beaches and dune areas) the most. The Wadden Sea itself is of lesser importance (Sijtsma, *et al.*, 2012). Nevertheless the ecological values of the Wadden Sea can play a role in the tourism development. The results of a survey among participants of nature excursions demonstrated that wildlife was an important factor in shaping visitors' attachment to the Wadden Sea area (Folmer *et al.*, 2013). Seeing birds contributed most to visitors' attachment, while seeing seals and small marine wildlife mattered most for participants of respectively seal excursions and educational Wad excursions. Nature excursions can therefore be regarded as important tools to foster and increase visitor attachment to protected areas, by facilitating encounters with wildlife in its natural habitat (Folmer *et al.*, 2013). A smaller survey among participants of excursions, especially aimed at the values that qualify the Wadden Sea as natural heritage area and organised in close cooperation with local entrepreneurs, confirm these outcomes.

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 can mutually benefit. Nature excursions raise awareness about the natural values of the Wadden Sea, resulting in more visitors to the region and contributing to an emotional attachment to the protected area and more public support for the conservation programs.

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