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## Nature boundaries for daily use

### summary

#### **Optimal interplay between ecology and economy still our job**

In its report, 'Ruimte voor de Wadden' (Room for the Wadden Sea Area), the Meijer Commission proposes the idea of introducing *Nature Boundaries* for the Wadden Sea area. The commission motivates the importance of that interest with the argument that nature boundaries can provide a clear answer with respect to questions as to which activities are and which are not permissible in the Wadden Sea area. Meijer proposes that, in the future, all activities in the Wadden Sea area be described and executed in the following order: determining nature boundaries, monitoring, executing and adapting the activity.

The Cabinet promised that it would map out the advantages and disadvantages of nature boundaries halfway through the period of the current *Planologische Kernbeslissing* (Key Planning Decision) on the Wadden Sea (PKB). The Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality (Ministerie LNV) has asked the Wadden Sea Council (*Raad voor de Wadden*) to compile a recommendation on the implementation and use of nature boundaries in the Wadden Sea area.

#### **Seeking clear boundaries remains a fine balancing act**

It is important to state in advance that nature boundaries are boundaries that are determined *by nature itself*, and not boundaries that are *set for nature*. Partly for that reason, the creation of hard and fast nature boundaries is seen as a difficult issue to resolve. In effect, the real issue is finding the optimal balance. Finding the upper and lower boundaries of permissible human activities in the Wadden Sea area takes central stage in the approach that has been adopted by the *Wadden Sea Council*.

The Wadden Sea Council has investigated several possible approaches to the determination of nature boundaries: the legal aspects, the social framework, nature boundaries seen from an ecological perspective and from an economic perspective, and, finally, also the trilateral context. The Wadden Sea Council also explored the question of the knowledge and model development that would be needed to be able to determine nature boundaries in the Wadden Sea area and how it would be possible to monitor the elaboration and development of such boundaries. The exploration of all the aforementioned aspects was elaborated in the recommendation paper, 'Nature boundaries for daily use'.

#### **In dialogue with business**

In the elaboration of the recommendation, the Wadden Sea Council assumes that the introduction of nature boundaries would be meaningful if the interest groups in the Wadden Sea area could see the (potential) added value of those boundaries. For that reason, the so-called 'utilized space' concept, i.e. the field within which both ecological and economical interests need to play a role, formed a central point on the agenda for the exchange of thoughts with the business community. In the context of such a 'utilized space', it is critical to consider what constitutes a nature boundary that would do justice to both the economy and the ecology.

Two clear lines are identifiable in the dialogue: In the first place, the business community is asking for clear and unambiguous legislation for the Wadden Sea area that would enhance the security and continuity of local business. The local community considers the current permit system too selective and subjective. In the second place, there is the ecological perspective, which is characterized by the search for a cautious, yet safe character for dealing with vulnerable natural values, both in the 'utilized space' and in the Wadden Sea area as a whole.

### **Nature boundaries have a provisional character**

Economy and ecology do not need to collide: It is possible to avoid conflict by accepting, from both perspectives, that there is always a certain level of insecurity attached to the notion of nature boundaries. The insecurity is caused by insufficient knowledge and the dynamics of nature and society. Nature boundaries are determined by the most optimal choices: they express various different interests. In the view of the Wadden Sea Council, the prevailing insecurity about the exact delineation of the 'utilized space' should not, in principle, be an obstacle to the concrete formulation of the boundaries. However, nature boundaries do have a provisional character: It must be possible to review them periodically based on new insights or based on changing circumstances. It is however necessary to be able to formulate a system of guidelines with solid reasons based on which nature boundaries can be adjusted.

### **Legal foundation and framework for nature boundaries**

A first step towards the creation of such guidelines consists of the formulation of a legal foundation for the nature boundaries.

European directives, and therefore the Nature Protection Act (Naturebeschermingswet), will, at all times, form the legal and judicial framework for a system of nature boundaries. The Wadden Sea Council sees a number of options for fitting a system of nature boundaries into the existing frameworks without the need for adding new rules to the existing body of rules and regulations. By doing so, it will be possible to take the next step towards the formulation and establishment of the actual nature boundaries.

### **Social debate on a nature boundary system**

Popular attitudes to the Wadden Sea are in a state of flux: They are moving from utility, modernization and quantity towards experience, authenticity and quality. In short: from production space to consumer space. Interested parties, users, nature conservationists and ecologists rarely share the same vision of the earth and the role of nature and landscape. This is often translated into differing attitudes with regard to what should serve as a nature boundary.

The social component may therefore not be absent from a system of nature boundaries. The subjects that need to be dealt with include the view of nature that forms the foundation of the formation of the nature boundaries, the translation of the conservation objectives in the management plan, questions concerning the usefulness and need for the various activities in the Wadden Sea area and the 'utilized space', and the question as to whether the space within the nature boundaries should necessarily be filled up completely.

In the future, ongoing feedback would have to be given to the community about both the fundamental science and the knowledge obtained from the actual management of the Wadden Sea area. It is possible, based on the availability of both the knowledge and the experience, for social considerations to play an important role in the decision-making process.

### **Support through interaction**

Social and economic systems play simultaneous roles in the Wadden Sea area and they also influence one another. The Wadden Sea Council therefore considers it preferable to refer to a *'hybrid system'*, rather than to a purely natural system. This approach leaves room for considerations based on ecology, the business community and society. The choice in favour of a transparent and interactive process, based on this point of departure, contributes towards increasing support for political considerations and decisions. The political powers can accommodate the common interest groups by clearly explaining the policy on the economic co-utilization of the Wadden Sea area and act as a reliable authority in the execution and upkeep of the laws and regulations.

### **Action plan needed for the ecological model**

It is important to know what kind of knowledge is needed to determine the advantages and disadvantages of a system of nature boundaries from the perspective of nature values.

The present uncertainties about the functioning of the ecosystem of the Wadden Sea area can be seen as an assignment for the design of an ecological (conceptual and calculation) model that could play a role in the formulation of the nature boundaries. Conversely, the elaboration of nature boundaries could also be influential in the formulation and priority of research issues. An action plan is needed for the development of such an ecological (conceptual) model for the Wadden Sea ecosystem, including strategies for the targeted deepening of the related ecological knowledge.

### **Monitoring with quality**

Much of the knowledge on the basic functions of the Wadden Sea ecosystem must derive from a basic monitor for the (trilateral) Wadden Sea. Such a basic monitor must be prepared scientifically to form the foundation for what is needed to be able to effectively monitor the basic functions of the Wadden Sea ecosystem.

Monitoring the Wadden Sea would also demand clear and unambiguous direction. It must be possible for all proposed plans for new activities to rely on the knowledge and data derived from the basic monitor. For that reason, the results yielded by the monitor must be widely available; which is also the reason why everyone should work with the same basic data. This would require strict agreements with respect to the quality of the monitor.

### **Nature boundaries and economic development**

Entrepreneurs are generally oriented towards maintaining business continuity and therefore need a clear and unambiguous permit system. That need is legitimate; however, implementing such a system is not that simple a task. The predictability of the outcome of permit applications is and remains highly dependent on the nature and scope of the effects of the economic activity for which the permit is sought. A system of nature boundaries could present opportunities for improvement.

Formulating the 'utilized space' as such opens the possibility of avoiding abrupt turning points (receiving or not receiving a permit) to the greatest extent possible. Not fully utilizing the 'utilized space' for economic activities creates margins that gives entrepreneurs room to temporarily deviate from the (permit) standard. By also setting upper and lower limits to nature boundaries, it is possible to create margins for economic activity. That, in turn, would make it easier to control and direct the activities in the area; for example, by creating space for innovations and experiments.

### **Dutch choices harmonized with German and Danish partners?**

Because the Wadden Sea, as a whole, constitutes a single ecosystem, it is justifiable to question whether a system of nature boundaries would also be applicable to the German and Danish Wadden Sea. In view of the fact that the nature conservation legislation in the three countries derive from the same European rules and regulations, it should certainly be judicially possible. It is however a question of political urgency whether it would, in fact, happen. It would be essential to persuade both of the other Wadden Sea countries of the importance and added value of such a system, as an instrument for the harmonization of the Wadden Sea policy.

The Wadden Sea Council recommends that an investigation be launched to determine the possibility of implementing a system of nature boundaries with the German and Danish authorities from this point on.

**Target image needed to determine boundaries**

The Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality would have to assume a leading position in canvassing support for the determination of nature boundaries. The relevant interest groups would, in turn, have to work out their expectations, wishes and requirements with respect to nature boundaries. To be able to do so, it will be necessary to develop guidelines based on a target image: What do we want and what don't we want for the Wadden Sea?