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'Natural fishing in the Wadden Sea'

summary

Why this advice?

The Wadden Sea key planning decision (Third Wadden Sea Memorandum) and the Policy Decision on Shellfish Fishery 2005-2020 (*Ruimte voor een zilte oogst*) ['Space for a Briny Harvest'] sets out the government policy on fishery in Wadden Sea. The purpose of the policy is to bring about an ecological and economic development in the Dutch fishing industry aimed at bringing about sustainable activity in the Wadden Region. It also addresses the extent to which sustainable and economically viable fishing in the Wadden Sea is feasible within the set terms and within the parameters laid down in the policy. For that reason the Minister of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality has asked the Wadden Sea Council to advise on whether sustainable fishery in the Wadden Sea - in the perspective of the policy being pursued – can be achieved in good time and which improvements will have to be made in that regard.

What does it cover?

The Wadden Sea is a location for various fishery activities, each of which in their own way has (potential) effects on the region's natural values. A distinction is made between:

- seabed disturbance (seed mussel fishery, manual cockle fishery and shrimp fishery)
- effects on the food chain (the removal of food for shellfish-eating birds that forage in the region)
- effects on the ecosystem (because shellfish temporarily hold onto floating matter)
- by-catches and discards
- and disruption.

Finally, reference is made to the possible impact of not fishing in the region: the (further) spread of the Japanese oyster in the Wadden Sea, which will have a negative (forcing out other species, but does not serve as food for birds) and a positive (formation of new banks) impact.

What is the current government policy?

The policy previously focused mainly on the protection of fish stocks. Since the nineteen-eighties more and more parameters have been set on the basis of other policy areas (mainly nature policy).

The Structure Document on marine and Inshore Fisheries (1992), which covers all forms of shellfish fishing, sets out to achieve spatial interweaving of the fishery and nature functions. In the most extreme case (if the desired effect is not achieved through other measures) areas can be closed off (as was done for the eastern Wadden Sea). The policy document holds the national government responsible for the policy framework and the sector for implementation. The required food reserve for birds and the fishing quota are set by carrying out annual stock inspections. The fishers then draw up fishing plans. Since 1998 those plans have been tested annually against the Dutch Nature Conservation Act. Since recently the plans have also been assessed in the light of the "Maintenance Objectives" as a result of the Wadden Sea being designated as a Natura 2000 area.

The policy decisions '*Ruimte voor een zilte oogst*' for shellfish fishery in the coastal waters and Northern Sea Coastal Zone and '*Vast en Zeker*' ('Without a Doubt') for fishing with fixed fishing gear (such as traps and upright nets) in the Wadden Sea and the Zeeuw coastal waters were adopted in 2004. The policy set out in this documents is aimed at improving the sustainability of both sectors. Mechanical cockle fishing was discontinued in response to the first policy document, and that also brought the food reserve policy to an end. The mussel sector is expected to meet the sustainability targets by 2020, possibly by means of seed mussel collection systems (MZIs) and the optimisation of cultivation plots. The document makes reference to the possibility of harvesting Japanese oysters manually. Finally, mainly as a result of the agreements made with Germany and Denmark, what are known as 'ecoplots' have been set up with which a clearer image can be gained of the effects of shrimp fishing. The policy is reflected in the Third Wadden Sea Memorandum. Additionally, most forms of fishing are now forbidden in the Wadden shallows.

What is the government doing?

As well as formulating policy the government initiates studies into the ecological effects of fishing activities, sets firm parameters and promotes innovations (through fish innovation platforms, for instance) aimed at sustainability. By way of example, a study is currently being conducted in the mussel sector into the optimisation of cultivation plots and experiments with MZIs, and research is being carried out into the natural values of sublittoral mussel banks.

A specific ecoplot has been set up for shrimp fishery. This ecoplot will (in due course) make it possible to mutually compare fished and unfished parts of the Wadden Sea in terms of the impact of shrimp fishing on the seabed and benthic life. Also, more information is needed about by-catches, the survival of by-catches in the processing equipment and the survival of discards after being returned to the sea. This study is also important for the certification under the terms of the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) of shrimp fishery and is expected to be integrated in the certification procedure.

For the fixed-gear-fishery, research is being performed into the by-catches in fishery using traps and upright nets. The results of this study will eventually be the determining factor as to whether fishing using upright nets on the tidal flats can continue.

Finally, a pilot project on the subject of integrated fishery is due to commence in 2008. The experiment with manually fishing for Japanese oysters has not yet begun.

What is the sector itself doing?

Groups of entrepreneurs in the Wadden Sea fishery sector and social organisations have in recent years launched various initiatives aimed at securing a sustainable future and/or more social and economic security for the branch of industry.

United in the ODUS Foundation, the Dutch shellfish sector presented its vision in 2004 in the policy documents '*Uit de Schulp*' ('out of the shell' and '*Het roer moet om*' ('time to change course')). The primary objective of the vision is to achieve ecologically responsible shellfish fishery with broad social acceptance. For the mussel fishing sector, the ODUS vision addresses:

- seed mussel collection systems (MZIs)
- hatcheries/nurseries
- plot optimisation and optimising the use of seed mussels
- fishery plans.

Developing alternative sources for seed mussels makes the sector less dependent on natural conditions and could serve to reduce the pressure on the Wadden ecosystem.

Working in partnership with the North Sea Foundation and the Wadden Sea Council, the shrimp fishery sector has collectively decided to enter the MSC certification procedure. The first assessment results are expected at the end of 2008. The most important points of attention are the spread of fishery, fish by-catches and possible effects of the shrimp trawling on seabed fauna and flora.

In partnership with the regional product hallmark *Waddengoud* a group of Wadden Sea fishers is placing fish on the market with a sustainability label. The main product of this initiative up to now is the smoked grey mullet sold in shops for biological products and at markets for farmhouse products.

Council: More action is needed...

The Council does not believe that the current fishery policy and how it is being implemented will lead to the policy objectives being met in 2020. Its arguments are as follows:

- innovations aimed at sustainability arise from acute and current issues; there is no set final objective for the innovations as a whole.
- the sustainability projects concentrate only on one or a few parts of the overall operation rather than all parts that have to be adapted to meet the policy objective;
- a number of fishery sectors – which have not yet been established as being sustainable – are not addressing the sustainability issue at all.

These arguments underline the fact that the fishery policy lacks a guiding definition of sustainable fishery. Moreover, the policy lacks a general vision of the measures needed for that purpose.

From reactive to proactive

The Council concludes in its advice that the existing policy must be supplemented with a concrete future perspective (with a target image in which the final objectives of the policy are formulated). A future perspective is needed to improve the management of the innovation process. The Minister of Agriculture, Nature and Food Safety needs to take the initiative for the development of a future perspective that in all cases:

- presents options for socially—economically sustainable fishery activities within a safe usage area (with opportunities for a 'Rijke Zee', in particular the conservation-, restoration and development objectives for the Wadden Sea;
- sets the direction for innovations needed to achieve ecologically sustainable fishery activities;
- contains instruments for close integration with the regional, economic and social functions;
- encourages the fishery sector to work on achieving greater social acceptance and new forms of entrepreneurship.

An integrated research plan, including long-term experiments and monitoring, must be part of this future perspective.

In chapter 4 of its advice the Council gives an onset for the future perspective that meets the criteria set out above.

A future perspective calls for a coordinated and structured change process

Achieving an economically and ecologically sustainable Wadden fishery sector will call for drastic changes in several policy areas. That can only be achieved through a coordinated and structured transition process. The national, regional and local authorities and the principal lobby groups must be involved in the implementation of the transition process.

The Council makes a number of concrete recommendations in its advice, which must be covered in the transition process.

First of all the Council recommends placing Wadden Sea fishery under the regional policy. The Council believes that that is the best way to facilitate good integration and coordination within the integral Wadden Sea Policy.

The Council also recommends the creation of fishery boundaries for the Wadden Sea fishery sector (preferably in a trilateral context) with a view to the management and development of the Wadden ecosystem. That implies that both the ecologically and the economically sustainable nature of the Wadden Sea fishery sector will to a significant extent have to be based on measures argued from the perspective of the Nature Conservation Act and, more specifically, on the maintenance, restoration and development objectives for the Wadden Sea.

The Council also takes the view that the current system of marketable licences and fishing rights with limited availability is frustrating the ability to introduce more flexibility. For that reason research will have to be conducted into other ways of managing and issuing licences and fishing rights. The research will at least have to cover the legal and financial implications of buying up and reissuing (parts of) licences and fishing rights; the latter being necessary to offer prospects for low-scale mixed coastal fishery in the Wadden Sea.

The Council also advocates the adoption of a programme-based approach to innovative entrepreneurship in the fishery sectors operating in the Wadden Sea.