

Summary of 'Identity as trumps: Wadden Sea landscape full of surprises' (2008/05)

The Dutch House of Representatives has asked the Council to indicate on the basis of a maximally complete overview of tourism and recreation in and around the Wadden Sea where the economic opportunities for this sector are found, and what their economic effects will be. The developmental opportunities could consist of an increase or reduction in the size and economic significance of the recreation sector and of making it more sustainable. In view of the relationship between this and the objectives of the Wadden Sea Fund, it has been decided also to send this advice, unsolicited, to the Minister of Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment.

The advice is based on the meeting of policy objectives for the Wadden Sea and the Wadden Sea area as laid down in the Key Planning Decision 'Third Wadden Sea Memorandum (*Derde Nota Waddenzee*).

The advice is based on the study into the current significance and developmental opportunities of the recreation sector in the Wadden Sea Area implemented by the Council in partnership with Groningen University. That study involved collecting the available economic data and analysing it on the basis of interviews and surveys among the entrepreneurs and charting the threats and opportunities identified or experienced by the recreation sector itself.

The set policy objectives for the area are translated in the advice into a target situation for recreation and tourism for 2025. That has clarified – in outline form – how the developments wanted by the sector relate to the direction the government believes the development should take (policy objectives).

Economic research

The research shows that the traditional visitor to the Wadden Sea islands and the Wadden Sea is mainly looking for qualities such as peace, space, nature and landscape. In the much less developed (in terms of tourism) coastal area of the mainland, visits based on cultural-historical motives form an important addition to the landscape and space.

The Wadden Sea area has a large group of loyal visitors who visit the region more than once, which does not otherwise alter the fact that today's tourist has different wishes and requirements from those of some time ago.

The research also shows that the Wadden Sea region has not succeeded in keeping pace with the national economy in terms of the recent growth in jobs. With growth of 11.8% (compared to the national average of 19.4%), the islands have done relatively well in relation to the mainland coast at 4.5%.

Islands

The Wadden Sea islands are a popular holiday destination. More than half of all Dutch nationals have visited an island at least once, in many cases during a family holiday. It is still the case that most visitors arrive for a long holiday. None the less, the average length of holiday is being reduced owing to a growing number of short holidays outside of the (virtually) fully booked peak season.

Recreation and tourism forms the islands' principal economic sector. With percentages from over 22% to almost 50% of the people working in the catering sector, the islands stand head and shoulders above the coastal municipalities. With percentages between 30% and 60%, the share of jobs in the recreation sector is even greater. Of all the islands, Schiermonnikoog has the biggest share of catering and leisure jobs; Texel the lowest. Other than the recreation sector, Schiermonnikoog does not have any economic activities of any magnitude. The islands have a rich supply of facilities, activities, nature conservation areas and culturally attractive locations. The utilisation level of the bed capacity is high in peak season.

Mainland coastal area

The economic significance of recreation and tourism in the mainland coastal region is modest as compared with the islands. Employment in the leisure sector is much lower than on the islands, in both absolute and percentage terms. The recreation sector in the mainland coastal area is however undergoing above average growth compared to other sectors. The coastal municipalities with the biggest catering sector share are Wieringen in Noord-Holland, Wûnseradiel in Fryslân and De Marne and Reiderland in Groningen.

Wadden Sea

The annual number of recreational sailing movements in the Wadden Sea has doubled in the past 25 years to 126,000 lock passages. The majority of these are accounted for by sailing vessels. There is also a shift towards more luxurious, larger yachts, which mainly sail from harbour to harbour in the large channels in the western part of the Wadden Sea. Another category is formed by the flat-bottomed *wadvaarder* vessels and other boats with smaller draughts, and canoeists, who are more likely to use the peaceful but vulnerable east-westerly channels. They frequently sail outside of the buoys and settle on the mud flats at low tide. A third category covers the almost 400 vessels of the charter fleet (the 'bruine vloot'), which make sailing trips with groups of holiday-makers, and also regularly settle on the mud flats.

Another distinctive form of recreational use that remains stable in terms of scope is what is known as '*wadlopen*', or walking on the mud flats at low tide, which is mainly done in the eastern part of the Wadden Sea.

Result of interviews and surveys among recreation entrepreneurs

A notable result of the survey is the clear choice of recreation entrepreneurs to retain and strengthen the identity of the Wadden Sea area. Within that choice the preference (on the islands) is for continued growth in the number of visitors with the aim of keeping a 'Wadden Sea holiday' accessible to all.

The most important general trends that offer opportunities for recreation and tourism in the Wadden Sea area are the increasing ageing population and ongoing rise in prosperity and the increasing demand for short, well-organised holidays and the growing demand for sustainable (eco) tourism.

In view of the trends and the desired policy developments, there are a number of strategic choices that need to be made. The issues to which this applies are set out for each area in the form of future dilemmas.

Islands

Dilemma 1: can the autonomous trend towards fewer but more well-off people be combined or reconciled with the wish for permanent or even increasing accessibility for many people?

The recreation entrepreneurs work towards the biggest possible target group, but also make the economic decision to cater to the demand for more luxurious (in this case more space-consuming) accommodation. Combined with a surface area that remains about the same, this will result in higher prices per overnight stay.

Dilemma 2: can the growth in the number of visitors be combined with retaining the island feeling?

If the increase in the number of visitors is to be found mainly in growth in day tourism and improving the accessibility of the islands this will call for, this might take place at the expense of the 'island feeling'. The extent to which the island feeling is a determining identifying feature for island visitors is not entirely clear; the information available shows that some of the visitors feel called to the islands in part by that feeling, whereas others regard the limited accessibility as an adverse feature.

Dilemma 3: can the growth in the number of visitors be brought about by sustainably improving accessibility?

Intensifying the connections between the islands and the coastal mainland region is likely to increase the environmental burden. The challenge is to ascertain how this increase can be limited or compensated for by putting additional measures or facilities (e.g. the use of biofuels) in place.

Mainland coast

Dilemma 1: does plentiful space also mean space for recreation and tourism?

Economic activity plays a modest role in the coastal mainland region, also regarding the region's recreational potential. That could have something to do with the relatively large physical distance between the various elements that are of interest to tourists and/or their accessibility (ability to find them). The attractiveness of the coastal mainland region is found in aspects such as the open space, the scenic characteristics that reflect the region's origins, and in the (cultural) historical value of using and living in the region. The challenge is to bring about developments in the coastal mainland region that add tourism-recreation facilities whilst retaining the region's spatial quality and identity.

Dilemma 2: how can the recreation sector grow without 'strong branding'?

Other than the landscape, which does of course have an overall presence, the infrastructure is short on places of interest and is aimed primarily at small-scale tourism. Recreational accommodation facilities are thin on the ground and are also generally small-scale. New developments such as Esonstad show that there are indeed possibilities for (more large-scale) recreational developments, and the seal sanctuary at Pieterburen has demonstrated for many years that there can be a place for large-scale day-trip attractions, too. The economic research mentions a lack of cooperation as the reason (or one of the reasons) for the lack of development. This could however be a chicken or egg scenario: initiatives fail to get off the ground because there is too much uncertainty about the number of tourists attracted and, conversely, tourists stay away because the supply of tourism-recreation is not up to the mark owing to the area's bleak and windswept image.

Wadden Sea

Dilemma 1: how can everyone enjoy the qualities of the Wadden Sea?

The various forms of recreation in the Wadden Sea are generally regulated by law or in the form of agreements. That is certainly the case regarding activities such as walking on and allowing vessels to settle on the mud flats and chartered shipping. The mooring standard for yacht marinas was dropped when the Key Planning Decision 'Third Wadden Sea Memorandum' came into effect. The relevant public authorities entered into a Water Sport Recreation Agreement (*Convenant Vaarrecreatie*), which is intended to put in place an integral, quality-based policy. The key points involve improving the monitoring, improving the information supply, providing training courses and developing reservation and information systems and hotlines for reporting faults.

Dilemma 2: safety and sufficient capacity in yacht marinas

Water sport recreation is subdivided into a number of groups, each of which has its own wishes and requirements concerning tourism-recreation facilities and - accordingly - has varying degrees of dependence on recreation entrepreneurs. The group least dependent on facilities is the group that sails individually with a flat-bottomed boat or boat with a raising keel and settles on the mud flats at low tide. Pleasure sailors with a sharp keel yacht are generally less independent, and prefer to spend the nights at a yacht marina.

Finally, in chartered shipping recreation entrepreneurs play an important role in the supply of charters. There are clear differences in the wishes and requirements regarding quality and facilities both within and between these groups of recreational Wadden Sea users.

The challenge in the agreement is to find the right balance between the supply and demand for moorings within economically and ecologically acceptable constraints.

Identity of the Wadden Sea area

The Wadden Sea area is a physical region that extends along the southeast coasts of the North Sea, around the edges of the Northwest European mainland. Around the shallow coastal sea of the same name a Wadden landscape has come about which stands out from its surroundings for its specific association with forms of both a physical and a social-cultural nature.

The Wadden Sea has formed the bordering clay area. Up until around 1500 there was a situation where the land and sea went up and down. Land gain took place in the period prior to the building of the dikes and the cultivation of the inland peat fringe (until roughly 800). That gain was possible because up until that time the peat colonies had been left virtually untouched and the sea still held free reign over the dike-free salt marshes. On the other hand, land loss and major flooding took place between 800 and 1500. It was during this period that the inhabitants of the Wadden Sea region began to build dikes and drainage systems. The building of dikes literally and figuratively shut out the Wadden Sea. In Groningen, but especially in Friesland and Oost-Friesland, the link between land and sea increasingly weakened. The sea came increasingly to be regarded as a problem and a threat.

Strong links with the sea did however remain in the coastal zones where shipping and fishery remained important, such as the Frisian Zuiderzee towns, Harlingen, Wierum, Zoutkamp, Delfzijl, Emden, Tönning, etc. The living environment of the islanders had already been characterised for centuries by a field of tension between the external (deep-sea trade, whaling, herring fishing) and the internal (agriculture, beachcombing, coastal fishing) dynamics.

In the New, Early Modern Era (1500-1850), when the inhabitants of the Wadden Sea area were prospering, its natural beauty was weighed up against the outstanding suitability for human usage.

As early as in the second half of the eighteenth century there was a turnaround in that image, especially regarding the actual Wadden Sea, and it was not until the middle of the nineteenth century that it was rediscovered, particularly on the islands, by a reposing elite.

The clay area (the salt marshes with dikes) with its terps, dikes and sluices, salt marshes and levees, farms, medieval mounds and village churches, creeks, canals and decoys vanished from the picture after 1850 not only economically, but socially and culturally too.

It is clear that the clay area, the salt marshes with dikes, form an integral part of the Wadden Sea area both landscape-genetically and culture-historically and are an example of at least two millennia of ancient interaction between man and his physical environment. The marshland was for centuries the 'theatre of war' between man and nature. The fact that despite that it did not generally become and is not becoming recognised as a cohesive whole certainly has something to do with its decentralised, insular nature.

Changing views about nature and the environment in the nineteen-seventies made it possible to give the Wadden Sea and its natural surroundings special status as a nature conservation area. Viewed from a cultural-historical perspective, this should also hold true comparatively for the Wadden Sea area, including the clay area. That clay area ultimately forms, both scenically and culturally, part of the Wadden Sea region, a cohesive area consisting of sea, islands and the clay areas.

Measures towards achieving the target situation for 2025

The Council has decided to tailor its recommendations mainly to the measures that could contribute to the creation of attractive future prospects. The measures are as follows:

a. possible swap areas

One of the possibilities for enlarging the scope of recreational accommodation facilities and enhancing the ecological values on the islands is to explore the options for swapping areas. This mainly concerns areas with potentially high ecological values, such as the inner dune fringe region being swapped with Natura 2000 areas with more general ecological values, or areas which in principle offer greater capacity for shared recreational use. The options for this will have to be considered if there is sufficient support among nature conservation organisations, the local population and recreation entrepreneurs.

b. protection of ecological values against the potential impact of extending the season

Potentially adverse effects of extending the season on ecological values must be prevented by making sure that the relevant ecological values are given sufficient protection (e.g. by means of zoning, landscaping measures). Combining this with effective monitoring could produce a clearer image of the capacity of the various areas.

c. development of cultural events and packages

The development of cultural events and packages contributes both to the specific qualities of the Wadden Sea area and to an economic boost, especially regarding activities that are organised outside of peak season. The Council recommends creating space in the policy for the development of periodically recurring (cultural) activities that strengthen the identity of the Wadden Sea area. This is however subject to the condition that these activities are carefully incorporated within the ecological and scenic preconditions from the word go.

d. strengthening of the cooperation between the islands and the coastal mainland region.

The solution to the lack of space for the continued growth of recreational accommodation on the islands and the space needed for the growth of day tourism can be found in the coastal mainland region. There are abundant options for the responsible development of the recreation sector in that area. Conversely, this also appears to offer a solution to the most significant obstacle to the continued expansion of the development of recreation and tourism in the coastal mainland region (too few visitors combined with a lack of initiatives in the development of accommodation and attractions). Getting a development of that nature off the ground will call for substantial intensification of the cooperation between the islands and the coastal mainland region. This is only expected to have a chance of success if the public transport connections between the islands and the coast are greatly intensified. That way the government could encourage the use of public transport in the region and also contribute to the image of the Wadden Sea region as an environmentally-friendly setting.

e. development of strong branding for the coastal mainland region

There are opportunities for the development of strong branding in the coastal mainland region. This already exists diffusely in the form of the rich cultural-historical and scenic values of the coastal mainland region. The Council recommends the development of other attractions that will draw many visitors and increase the visibility of the existing qualities. It is important to ensure that the nature and theme of the attractions are in keeping with the identity of the Wadden Sea area. Recreationally attractive themes include the Afsluitdijk, energy, climate change (combined with the elaboration of the Delta Committee report), the transition of fishery, mobility and of course nature. Giving these themes a prominent position throughout the Wadden Sea area could result in considerable pulling power for recreation and tourism. Locations such as Appingedam, Dokkum and Harlingen and the old university city of Franeker, which reflect the former richness and cultural-historical significance of the Wadden Sea area, could also present opportunities.

Making use of World Heritage status

World Heritage status for the conservation area Wadden Sea is expected also to attract recreation and tourism. However, if the region succeeds in making a connection between the value of the nature conservation area Wadden Sea and the World Heritage status-worthy cultural-historical values and the cultural values of the Wadden Sea area as a whole, this status will also create opportunities for the adjacent coastal area. Making and stressing the logical connections between the Wadden Sea and the Wadden Sea area could enable the entire coastal region to benefit from the high profile and image of World Heritage status.

World Heritage Status also lends itself well to promoting the Trilateral Wadden Sea region abroad. It is important in that context that the campaign promotes not only the German or the Dutch Wadden Sea area, but the entire Trilateral Wadden Sea area. Having World Heritage Status make an actual contribution to the further development of the recreation sector in the Wadden Sea region will also involve putting in place the tourism infrastructure, including visitor centres, which are needed for that purpose.

Effects on ecological values

New recreational activities generally form an addition to existing activities and can increase the pressure on an area. There may also be activities that draw tourists to areas that were previously undisturbed. There is only limited knowledge of the impact of recreation and tourism on ecological values, especially when it comes to dose-effect relationships. The advice assumes the principal conclusions published by the National Institute for Coastal and Marine Management (*RIKZ*) in an overview study on this subject.

The developments outlined in the target situation are not necessarily expected to be at odds with the value of nature and landscape and the flora and fauna provided that the necessary caution is exercised in the further development of the recreation sector. The implementation of the intended developments must take extremely conscious and explicit account of the recommendations concerning zoning, management and supervision and the setting up and implementation of targeted monitoring and long-term research in order to keep an administrative 'finger on the pulse' regarding new development.

Raad voor de Wadden/Wadden Sea Council
P.O. Box 392, NL-8901 BD Leeuwarden
Lange Marktstraat 5, NL-8911 AD Leeuwarden
T 0031 58 212 60 15
F 0031 58 212 01 58
M info@raadvoordewadden.nl
W www.raadvoordewadden.nl