

## **Waddenland Outstanding. Symposium on the History, Landscape and Cultural Heritage of the Wadden Sea Region**

Wrap up by Jos Bazelmans (Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands, Amersfoort), moderator of the symposium

### *Introduction*

In the last two and a half days we had 32 high level papers written by some 40 authors. The papers are an expression of the enormous progress in scientific research in the last decade. During the symposium we made a long journey through space and especially time, from the Iron Age up until today. Sometimes we even ventured into the (far off) future. We moved from theoretically and conceptual issues on Thursday to more pragmatic ones this Saturday morning. It's not possible to give a real overview here that does justice to all individual contributions. I will try to give a broad summary in which I take the five session themes as a red line. I want to conclude with some observations on how to proceed onwards from this symposium.

### *1. Natural and cultural heritage*

In different papers the Wadden Sea or the Wadden Sea region was either called a *natural* landscape, a *bureaucratic natural* landscape, a *half natural* or *half cultural* landscape, a *maritime cultural* landscape or a *maritime agricultural* landscape. Possibly, as one participant to the conference explicitly said to me, you could see a discussion among researchers on the defining characteristics of the area as a waste of time. However, I think, this is not the case. In one way or another we have to deal with the fact that, as for Unesco for example, the area is designated officially as *natural* heritage. This is in marked contrast with what seems to be self-evident for most of us (it was a red line through most contributions to the symposium): the area is – as of old, i.e. from late prehistory onwards – highly influenced by man; partly or largely given shape by man and always intensively used by man. The ability to put an exclusive label on something is always an expression of a successful claim by a certain group on the object being labelled, in the case of the Wadden Sea (region) this being a successful claim of the nature conservationists and their supporters, who indeed revolutionised our view on the area since the sixties. For that matter I doubt whether a highly wished for paradigm shift, as advocated during this symposium by Fisher, Enemark and Reise, will come about that easy. The nature – culture divide is deeply ingrained institutionally, in politics, in society, in public discourse and, let's not forget (!) in science itself. And as Linde Egberts has shown, nowadays in the landscape itself (image of a series of wind turbines on a sea dike, just outside the protected Wadden area). Moreover the relationship between nature and culture is, as we have seen in several lectures, not only a pragmatic issue, humans making a living out of it, but it is always, in some way or another, linked to the values regarded most highly by people: core values which guide relationships within society and of society with the outside world. In our highly diversified society there is no consensus on this. On the one hand one could think of people who think of recreating wilderness to re-establish a proper relationship with 'mother nature'. On the other there will be people who think of themselves as age-old and responsible users of what is their *Heimat*. These views are incommensurable.

### *2. Paleogeography and archaeology*

This session was treasure trove as regards new programmatic research in the area. The research is firmly science based and profits from what is called in contemporary archaeology the third science revolution (Kristiansen), the first being the adoption of an evolutionary perspective in archaeology in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the second the radiocarbon dating revolution in the fifties and sixties and now the third with a whole set of new beta techniques: DNA- and isotope analysis, geophysical techniques (like Lidar), Big Data analysis. Without going into detail, some stand out:

- Some areas – drowned landscapes in North Friesland and peat areas in Friesland for example – which were neglected by science altogether, get now the attention they deserve and this leads to quite spectacular new insights as to the history of habitation;
- As of the late Iron Age – so for two and a half millennia now! - the whole southern North Sea marsh area can be considered a densely populated *cultural* landscape under high agricultural pressure;
- In the first millennium AD the area cannot be considered a whole in a socio-political and cultural sense. Instead it should be seen a chain of densely populated and closely interconnected ‘islands’ of habitation;
- During the first millennium AD a development can be seen of close international links ranging from Scandinavia, to England and to Francia. The linkages change over time from an elite-dominated gift exchange to an elite-controlled system of commodity exchange.

### 3. Immaterial heritage

I thought session 3 to be really exiting because the presentations as a whole can be seen as an invitation to very carefully research how people in the area – in the past and nowadays - define themselves in relationship to *significant others* (whether distant or within their own society close by), in relationship to the sea and its inherent dangers or in relationship to nature as defined in the many religious or intellectual traditions of the early modern times onwards up until today. As was shown, no self-definition of a group should be taken for granted. In every instance one should not look only for the dominant perspective but also for subversive opponent ‘voices’. The formation of identities, for example in literary writing, music, myth, ritual or the visual arts, should be studied in the complex interplay of economic, social, political and cultural relationships and processes. In this respect we have to put the question how we as researchers do relate to processes of identity formation ourselves. The Wadden do exist, but does *Waddenland* exist?

### 4. History

The papers of session 4, I think, added up to an nuanced answer to this question. Although the area shares many, sometimes internationally unique, characteristics as regards its physical geography and its millennia-long intermediate and somewhat peripheral position, we should be very cautious to think of the area as a coherent whole in a socio-cultural sense (as expressed for example in the new label ‘Waddenland’). On the one hand the many communities within the area shared of old *common* and comparatively *exceptional* experiences as to living (the building of dwelling mounds being of course the most outstanding and unique example) and making a living in the marshes or as to being a peripheral area in a developing, labour and energy consuming world system (with Amsterdam and later Hamburg at its centre). On the other hand this is possibly not something that makes the area completely special as compared to other peripheral coastal

or wetland areas in (north-western) Europe (as stressed during the symposium: international comparison is much needed in the study of the Wadden Sea Region). Nor should we be blind to the strong variation *within* the trilateral region as regards the economic and societal makeup of the many communities.

### 5. Challenges

Now for the fifth and last session. I will not dwell on what is said for long because this is still on your mind. Just to be short. On the one hand we seem to be confronted with a strong combination of an ever-expanding number of challenges to natural and cultural heritage management, many of which are already visible today, but will be more influential in the future. There is no need to create or raise a sense of urgency as to the issues we should address (sea level rise and climate change adaptation, the *Energiewende*, demographic and economic stagnation or decline, etc.). On the other hand we seem to be in an unsure and unfinished paradigm shift as to organise natural and cultural heritage management: from research-based knowledge driven to 'sense-of-place' and public participation. From institutionalised approaches that involve specialist and professionals only to more informal, networked, interactive approaches that involve stakeholders and society too.

### Conclusion

The symposium has shown us that research on the history, cultural landscape and cultural heritage of Waddenland has made great progress in the last decade. But there is still much to gain. Key issue, I think, is the development of (1) programmatic, (2) interdisciplinary, (3) comparative, (4) long term, (5) participatory research, with an outlook on century or millennia long developments as well as historical and ethnographical detail. In this regard we should applaud the initiative as formulated by the Dutch *Waddenacademie* to develop a (6) *trilateral* research agenda. Just one element to add: research should *always* be critical and partisan *where needed*. How to navigate between a critical and a partisan position is however, especially in an area looked upon by so many stakeholders (in conflict), the most difficult question to be answered by us as *individual* researchers.

I will leave at that, thank you!