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WWF Programme: Protection of the Wadden Sea

National Park and World Heritage Site on the North Sea

The Wadden Sea, with its tidal flats, tidal creeks, estuaries, salt marshes, beaches, dunes and islands is one of the last original unspoilt nature areas in Europe. Ebb and flow determine the pace of life in the Wadden Sea and lead to continuous change. 4,500 square kilometres of its sea bed dry out twice a day and make the Wadden Sea the world's largest continuous mud flats. It extends as a shallow sea from Den Helder in the Netherlands along the entire German North Sea coast to Esbjerg in Denmark.

WWF has already been working since the mid-1970s for the protection of this unique habitat. Meanwhile, it has been designated as a National Park and in 2009 was recognized by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site.

Life from the mud – a hub for bird migration

Millions of tiny algae, thousands of small worms, crabs, snails and shellfish abound on and in each square metre of the mud flats. Not without reason the Wadden Sea is seen as a nursery for many fish species. On the fish, marine mammals such as Harbour Seals feed. The Grey Seal, once extinct in the Wadden Sea, has returned, and is now thriving again in this protected environment. Even Harbour Porpoises are found in the Wadden Sea, although they are less numerous than in historic times.

Particularly characteristic for the Wadden Sea however, are the birds: Oystercatcher, Redshank, Arctic Tern and Herring Gull – these are just the best known coastal birds that nest in the Wadden Sea. In the spring, around one million breeding birds build their nests on the ground on salt marshes, dunes and some of them even on the beaches. And ten times as many, hence about 10 million, waders and water birds such as Brent Goose, Red Knot and Dunlin come from breeding areas in the Arctic to the Danish-German-Dutch Wadden Sea. They are dependent on the area to rest, for fattening, moulting or wintering.



Nature experiences on tidal flats

Grey Seals have returned into the protected Wadden Sea



A multitude of threats

Only a few decades ago, the Wadden Sea was seen by many people as useless. With more and more areas being embanked by large dykes, much of it was converted into farmland. Concern about the loss of an irreplaceable habitat was the initial motivation for WWF to become active for the Wadden Sea. Through the initiative and tenacity of WWF and other conservation organizations more and more public attention has been achieved. Finally, the destructive development could be stopped and since then almost the entire remaining Wadden Sea in Denmark, Germany and the Netherlands has been put under protection. But the Wadden Sea has not yet been saved. More and new dangers threaten the unique area: among them oil and gas production, the laying of cables and pipelines, construction of dams and barrages, deepening of shipping channels, and the extension of harbours in the estuaries. More and more coal power plants are planned on the edge of the Wadden Sea. Far too many nutrients and pollutants continue to find their way into the sea. Shipping accidents, such as that with the “Pallas” in 1998, show the continuing risk of oil spills. Fishing harms the mud flats and does not allow the fish to become mature. Even tourism, if it is not sustainable, may cause great harm to nature.

The biggest threat is climate change. The accelerated sea level rise caused by this threatens the Wadden Sea in its very substance. Thus, the habitats in the transition between land and sea, the mud flats, salt marshes, beaches and dunes, could be eroded and, in the long run, may disappear. At the same time the risk from storm tides will increase for the populated areas on the islands and the mainland.

Model case in Nature Conservation: Three countries for one Wadden Sea

In 1977, WWF launched its international Wadden Sea programme with the aim of protecting the Wadden Sea as a continuous and comprehensive natural area, and at this time the three Wadden Sea countries began their “Trilateral Wadden Sea Cooperation”. At several intergovernmental conferences, protection measures were agreed upon: In 1991 in Esbjerg the countries jointly decided, that “the Guiding Principle of the trilateral Wadden Sea policy is to achieve, as far as possible, a natural and sustainable ecosystem in which natural processes proceed in an undisturbed way”. In 1996, a management plan (the “Wadden Sea Plan”) was adopted. It was decided, in 2001, to nominate the Wadden Sea as a “Particularly Sensitive Sea Area” with the International Maritime Organization and, in 2005, to apply at UNESCO for the designation as a World Heritage Site. WWF, together with partner organizations from Denmark and the Netherlands, brings its conservation experience into the trilateral cooperation, and can thereby promote protection. Even if it often takes a long time to come to decisions and in many cases they are not yet sufficient for protection, on the whole the Trilateral Wadden Sea Cooperation is a unique model for how several states can protect a shared natural environment!

Much has been achieved: Highest protection for tidal flats

In Germany, WWF had strongly committed itself to ensure that all the states – Schleswig-Holstein in 1985, Lower Saxony in 1986 and Hamburg in 1990 – should declare the Wadden areas in their territories as National Parks. With some 7,300 square kilometres, they are the largest protected area of its kind between the North Cape and Sicily. Through the protection the impacts on nature were reduced. Today in the Wadden Sea there are no longer embankments, almost no birds are hunted anymore, many salt marsh plants can flower again and the destructive fishing for cockles has been stopped. But the highlight of our work came on 26 June 2009: On this day the UNESCO World Heritage Committee voted for the inscription of the Wadden Sea as a World Heritage Site for its “outstanding universal values”. The world community has recognized not only a very

special piece of nature, but also the efforts for its preservation. And it has contributed significantly towards permanently securing its protection.

Much to do: The Wadden Sea programme of WWF

WWF is working hard to preserve the Wadden Sea as a whole. The focus of our work is on four areas:

1. Support and development of the National Parks

WWF is committed to strengthening the protected areas in a legal sense, so that impacts and risks for nature can be better avoided. A large proportion of the National Parks must become no-take-zones and the extraction of oil there must be stopped. The National Park authorities need more staff, including more rangers to monitor the compliance with the protection rules. It is most important for a better understanding among the public to provide visitors with an even better supply of information.

2. Sustainable development throughout the Wadden Sea Region

The municipalities and districts along the coast and the adjacent marine areas, together called the “Wadden Sea Region”, are very important also for the protection of the Wadden Sea. WWF therefore campaigns for sustainable development here: Shipping traffic must be safe so that no oil or chemicals from marine accidents can pollute the coast. Many birds not only use the mud flats, but also the hinterland, and this must be taken into account in the protection. The region can become CO₂-neutral earlier than others and thereby set a good example in climate protection. To this end, construction of more coal-fired power plants must be stopped and we must quickly move to renewable energies. At the same time the protection of nature and landscape must be taken into account and wind turbines, for example, be carefully planned.

3. Timely adaptation to climate change

With rising sea levels, mud flats and salt marshes in front of the coastline fortified by dykes and stones are in danger; they might disappear and could give way to a permanently flooded landscape. Still, one can respond to this development, primarily through effective climate protection, but at the same time further strengthening the Wadden Sea’s natural ability to adapt to higher sea levels. This requires not just higher dykes. The Wadden Sea also acts as a natural buffer for the whole coast, as islands and sandbanks protect the dykes on the mainland from strong waves. The promotion of the natural processes in the formation of salt marshes and dunes, and eventually the supply of sand from the North Sea could lead to the Wadden Sea growing and being better able to adapt to the rising sea level. Moreover, new approaches are needed for human settlement and land use behind the dykes. To achieve this, WWF is committed to a broadly supported development of the necessary ideas and concepts.

4. Protection of estuaries

Large and small rivers flow into the Wadden Sea. However, the natural transition between sea and fresh water in the river mouths (estuaries) is now severely impaired: In many cases smaller rivers are separated from the Wadden Sea by dams, sluices, or pumping stations. The larger rivers Elbe and Weser, with their ports of Hamburg and Bremerhaven are increasingly deepened, the ecosystem there being severely damaged. Up till now rivers have been adjusted ruthlessly to the needs of shipping, rather than shipping with regard to the natural conditions. WWF is committed to restoring the environmental quality of estuaries and to returning more space to the water.

“We are a World Heritage Site” – a flag with this statement was shown at the lighthouse of Westerhever on the day when UNESCO decided on the inscription on the Wadden Sea in the World Heritage list

The Wadden Sea is globally important for coastal waterbirds, which find ideal conditions for breeding or to stay before their long travels to the Arctic or further south (Brent Geese above, Dunlins below)





Project-Information

Project: Protection of the Wadden Sea
Time: Since 1977
Headed by: Dr. Hans-Ulrich Rösner
 Beatrice Claus

More information:
www.wwf.de/wattenmeer
husum@wwf.de

Would you like to help the Wadden Sea?
 You can do so by supporting WWF.
 And by behaving sustainably when
 visiting the area.

Experience the Wadden Sea yourself

Not only nature will benefit from the National Parks in the Wadden Sea. People will also gain: Residents and visitors have the assurance that nature remains intact and can be experienced, because National Parks are not closed to the public. As long as protection is not compromised, people can enjoy or learn about nature there. National Parks, therefore, secure the economic future in the tourism-dependent coastal communities. Only if the tourists find unspoiled nature – and the vast majority wants this – will they continue to come to the North Sea coast.

Through information and education the visitors must be supported in their environmentally conscious behaviour. Though there are already many visitor centres, guided tours and also special offers for children in the Wadden Sea, these offers need to be strengthened further.

It is understandable that the recognition of the Wadden Sea as a World Heritage Site has triggered much delight in the tourism industry. Everywhere in the region people think about how the area can become even more attractive for tourists. However, the tourism sector should focus on quality rather than on quantity, for the many visitors can themselves be a burden on the Wadden Sea. Nature has been able to cope up to now, mostly because, in spite of the many troubled areas, there are also major areas in which it remains undisturbed. In the long run, it is important to develop tourism as sustainably as possible: keeping activities out of sensitive areas, refraining from building in protected areas and decreasing air traffic over the mud flats are only examples of this. In the context of building and construction projects – from hotels and marinas to paths and roads – more care must be taken for nature.

Luckily, the Wadden Sea countries together with the tourism industry have begun to take up the initiative of UNESCO to develop a strategy for sustainable tourism. WWF is participating actively in the drafting of this strategy. It is a good example for partnership between tourism and conservation that more and more tourism businesses are applying for the “National Park Partner” certificate and thus confirm to the customer that they work with consideration for the National Park.



Guided tour in the saltmarsh

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WWF is one of the world's largest and most experienced independent conservation organisations, with almost 5 million supporters and a global network active in more than 90 countries.

- WWF's mission is to stop the degradation of the planet's natural environment and to build a future in which humans live in harmony with nature, by
- conserving the world's biological diversity,
 - ensuring that the use of renewable resources is sustainable and
 - promoting the reduction of pollution and wasteful consumption.

WWF Germany
 Rebstöcker Straße 55
 60326 Frankfurt/Main
 Tel.: +49 (0)69/7 91 44-0
 Fax: +49 (0)69/61 72 21
 E-Mail: info@wwf.de
www.wwf.de

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