

Future tourism development in a vulnerable natural area: the case of the Dutch Waddencoast. Stakeholder perceptions on tourism development

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The Waddensea area, which is spread along the sea and the coast of The Netherlands, Germany and Denmark, holds very unique natural values. The Dutch waddencoast is a rural area, which has less employment and less social services than the waddenislands or other parts of the country. Many young people leave the area and buildings stay empty. Only 8,5 % of overall employment at this coast is comprised of tourism and research shows that the area has a very limited attractiveness of its natural resources (Sijtsma, Daams, Farjon & Buijs, 2012). At the same time the UNESCO status of the Waddensea (which was awarded in 2009) gives new opportunities for tourism development along the coastal area. The research group Marine Wetland Studies of Stenden University Leeuwarden has studied the perceptions of different stakeholders with regard to the future tourism development of the Dutch Wadden coast. Different stakeholders in The Netherlands and Germany were asked about their future visions. Besides this, the research group has contributed to two promising projects in which the local community tries to transform empty buildings into small-scale tourism facilities.

Perceptions of stakeholders

Future visions

None of the Dutch respondents thinks that the nature on the Dutch Waddencoast will be harmed by tourism developments. Nature organizations think that allowing visitors in a natural area will create awareness and appreciation for the nature, which is agreed upon by Postma, Yeoman and Oskam (2013). These organizations are willing to cooperate with tourism entrepreneurs. Dutch governmental bodies see the necessity of a bottom up approach. In Germany a more top down approach is being used when it comes to tourism development. Organizations in Germany are less likely to allow visitors in protected areas. This can be regarded as a more vital perspective on nature in which preservation, restoration and development of biodiversity is important (PBL, 2012).

The German Wadden coast is much more developed than the Dutch coast. In Germany, the coastal towns are bigger and more modern accommodations are established. Also signposting, marketing and communication are much more developed and abundant. A tourist can choose between many different companies, which offer the same product.

The vision of the entrepreneurs in The Netherlands is mainly focused on improving the economic situation. Especially in the cities of Harlingen, Den Helder and Delfzijl the entrepreneurs have large ambitions, also compared to the entrepreneurs in the more rural areas.

The City of Harlingen sees possibilities for kitesurfing and cruise tourism. Delfzijl wishes to develop a ferry line to the German island of Borkum. The Waddencoast lacks beaches; according to the interviewees this is the reason why it is not as developed as the western coast of The Netherlands.

Local and regional governmental bodies want to focus on an extension of the season and development of hiking and biking trails. Visitors should enter the area via gateways, which allow larger visitor number and larger developments. Outside the gateways only small scale developments are allowed. In this way vulnerable areas are protected from overuse. The region should make use of its own qualities and should not try to resemble the products of popular tourism destinations. High quality and low impact tourism can be developed by making use of existing facilities such as empty houses, community centres or churches.

Local development of Tourism Products; 2 case studies

The Dutch coastal hiking trail is a long distance hiking trail of 725 kilometres. It starts in the South-west Province of Zeeland and follows the Dutch coast all the way to the North to the Waddensea coast. Although the trail is well developed in terms of signposting and a route description, there is not enough tourism accommodation to cater to larger numbers of visitors. The empty houses provide opportunities for new accommodations. A group of 3 local entrepreneurs wants to establish a cooperative in order to transform these houses into tourism accommodation for hikers. Each house owner (private owners or housing cooperations) will bring in a house into the cooperation. The local society is involved by offering transport of luggage, food, beverages and entertainment. Connections are made with entrepreneurs such as the bakery, restaurants and tourism attractions. The Cooperation takes care of the renovation and maintenance of the houses but also of the marketing and booking system.

In the village of Holwerd, which is nearby the ferry to one of the islands, an empty church will be transformed into a visitor centre. A group of inhabitants have taken the initiative to develop the church into a centre for visitors with a museum. Several studies realized by the research group give insight in the feasibility of a touristic function for the old church; the connection between the village, the dike and the Waddensea gives opportunities for the development of small-scale tourism products.

The local community benefits from these developments in the sense that it generates direct revenue and improves the level of facilities and social cohesion in the area. Both projects are in line with one of the strategic goals in the Waddensea tourism Strategy 2014, which wants “to ensure stakeholders have responsibility for and contribute to the protection of Outstanding Universal Value through involvement in tourism management and product development” (Common Waddensea Secretariat, 2013).

References

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