

Double strategy towards sustainable tourism: Offers for visitors and opportunities for people employed in tourism in the Wadden Sea National Park in Schleswig-Holstein

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Abstract: Schleswig-Holstein's part of the Wadden Sea is a traditional holiday destination. Tourism and leisure activities are the most important regional economic activity. Two million overnight guests and four million day trippers travel to this part of the North Sea coast each year. An area of 4,400 km² has been protected as a National Park "Schleswig-Holstein Wadden Sea" since 1985 and the area was established as a UNESCO biosphere reserve in 1990. A proper strategy for communication, information and visitor guidance is essential to achieve nature conservation goals, and to make them understandable and acceptable to the general public. LIFE Nature has helped to finance information panels, maps, information kiosks, nature trails and observation platforms all of which aim to inform and guide visitors. A number of attractive indoor and outdoor nature experience and nature-compatible offers exist. However external and internal marketing has to be intensified to make these offers better known to both, visitors and locals. A LEADER+ project has been set up to take better advantage of the National Park status as a unique selling proposition and for tourism advertising. A monitoring system evaluates the success of measures and offers.

The Wadden Sea National Park

With an area of 4,400 km² the Schleswig-Holstein Wadden Sea is the largest National Park in Europe, located at the North Sea Coast in the very North of Germany (Figure 1). The unique coastal landscapes of tidal flats, salt marshes, dunes and beaches are inhabited by specialised plant species and populated by large numbers of migratory and breeding birds. Besides these avian visitors, permanent residents like seals and harbour porpoises must not be overlooked. Humans do not live within the area of the National Park, but the imbedded islands and the bordering mainland region have about 300,000 inhabitants.

The objectives of the National Park are

- Protection of the Wadden Sea for future generations
- Undisturbed development – leave nature to its own devices
- Monitoring and research
- Recreation and nature experience

With regard to the latter objective, visitors are explicitly invited to enjoy and experience nature in the Wadden Sea. However, the National Park law, which has been amended in 1999, also refers to the improvement of living and working conditions of the regional population. Protection of nature by means of the National Park ought to have positive effects on

tourism, enhance the prestige of the region and foster sustainable development.

Tourism in the National Park region

Tourism is by far the most important economic sector in this coastal region, it contributes almost 20% of the added value (Figure 2).

About 15 million overnight stays were recorded in 2002. The numbers have been slightly but continuously decreasing in recent years, showing that the traditional holiday resorts at the German North Sea coast are having to compete with other attractive destinations.

People who spend their holidays in the federal state of Schleswig-Holstein show a high affinity to environmental and nature-related features of their holiday destination (Table 1). Their appreciation of opportunities to enjoy and experience nature is higher than average in comparison to all German inland vacationists.

Information and guidance for visitors

Until recently, information for visitors and local inhabitants on protection goals, protection regulations and measures was insufficient, casually leading to unintentional disturbance of the National Park's habitats and species.

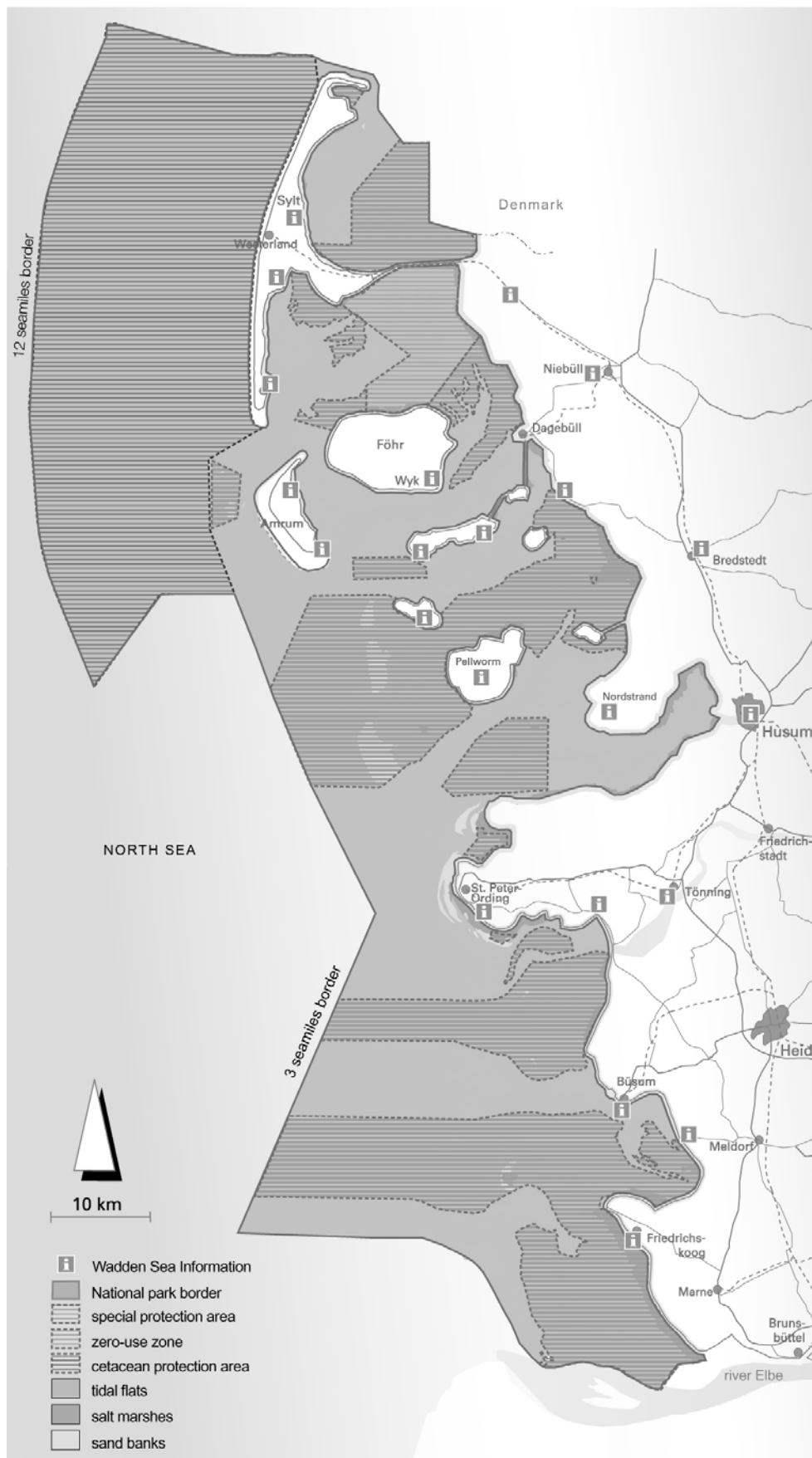


Figure 1. Map of the Schleswig-Holstein Wadden Sea National Park.

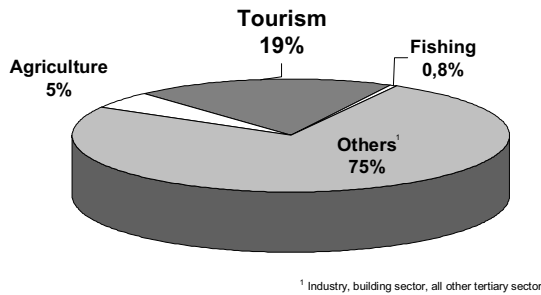


Figure 2. Added value of economic branches in the National Park region (1st and 2nd level of turnover) (Stock et al. 1996).

Table 1. Opinions concerning holidays and environment of vacationists in Schleswig-Holstein (Günther & Münninkhoff 2003).

Opinions concerning holidays and environment (Vacationists in Schleswig-Holstein in 1996, n=240)	"I agree decidedly" / I tend to agree"
Intact environment is very important with respect to contentedness with my holidays	90.7 %
Opportunities to directly experience nature are important for the choice of my holiday destination	65.2 %
Opportunities to observe animals in their natural environment are important for the choice of my holiday destination	39.0 %
Opportunities to visit a Nature/ National Park are important for the choice of my holiday destination	39.0 %

In the period 1998–2001, the EU programme LIFE Nature has helped to finance information panels, maps, information kiosks, nature trails and observation platforms which are to inform and guide visitors (Table 2, Figure 3 and 4). Instead of being restricted in their freedom of movement, people will actually gain extra opportunities in terms of leisure activity. With few exceptions, visitors have free access to the National Park for hiking-tours on tidal flats all along the coastline.

Table 2. Numbers of information elements bordering entrances to the National Park.

Element	Number
Information panels	115
Information maps	57
Information kiosks	17
Nature trails	7
Observation platforms	2
Total	198



Figure 3. Information elements.



Figure 4. Information panel (example).

Planning this visitor information and guidance – concerning the site as well as the matters – was debated, hammered out and implemented through open dialogue with all regional interest groups, in particular the local inhabitants and the representatives of the respective communities.

The measures regarding guidance and information now minimise conflicts, reduce disturbance of birds and seals and damage to habitats, therefore improving nature protection within the National Park. The participatory approach might even have contributed to an increase in the acceptance and appreciation of the National Park.

Nature experience offers for visitors

There are a lot of opportunities to experience nature within the National Park.

- Tidal-flat walks with certified National Park guides: local people with special knowledge of the Wadden Sea, of weather and tidal conditions provide excursions and walking tours. They are well trained in nature interpretation, adhere to high safety standards and keep up with the latest information on the Wadden Sea region during regular

- courses organised by the National Park Office. In 2002, about 116,000 guests participated in nearly 5,000 guided tours throughout the Schleswig-Holstein Wadden Sea (Gätje 2004).
- A boat trip in the National Park – a wonderful opportunity to observe nature: Birds, seals and – with a little bit of luck – Harbour Porpoises can be seen during boat trips in the Wadden Sea. On trips that are certified by the National Park Office, the passengers are provided with interesting information and in some cases with fascinating stories and anecdotes from the captain or a member of the crew.
 - Information centres – tourists and day trippers are interested in the Wadden Sea and want to experience nature and be informed about the area. The information centres of the National Park, with their exhibitions, lectures, slide-shows and souvenir sales, aim to satisfy this need. The most successful facility is 'Multimar Wattforum' which presents the whole diversity of the Wadden Sea. A special attraction are the hands-on experiences of the fauna and fauna in touch-pools and the complete skeleton of a 17 meter sperm whale (*Physeter macrocephalus*). 240,000 visitors per annum make exciting discoveries in the centre and deepen their knowledge on nature in the Wadden Sea.
 - The Rangers from the National Park Service and the nature conservation societies make every effort to personally inform visitors about the Wadden Sea. Tourists and day-trippers can choose between a large variety of guided tours on foot, by bike or by boat to discover Wadden Sea nature.

Regional National Park partner

The National Park Office has established a partnership program with a regional brand – 'National Park Partner'¹. Under specific conditions, tourism enterprises, organisations and individuals can become a partner of the National Park by a voluntary agreement. They have to fulfil basic environmental standards, supplied by Viabono² – the new brand for everyone offering tourist services in Germany that are combined with natural enjoyment.

Furthermore, the partners commit themselves to support and communicate the aims and philosophy of the National Park. The attendance at further education courses once a year is obligatory for employees, to update information and to impart competent knowledge of the National Park. Partners are allowed to use the logo and are supplied with free information material. Cross-marketing via print media and Internet homepages is stipulated in the contract.

- National Park partner can be
- Communities (Figure 5)
 - Hotels, guest houses, vacation rentals
 - Restaurants, cafés
 - Shipping companies
 - Youth hostels
 - Campgrounds
 - Tour guides

Also tour operators and a private railway enterprise are interested in concluding this National Park partner agreement.



Figure 5. Mayor of the first National Park community with the project manager on the island of Nordstrand.

Wadden Sea nature in tourism marketing

National parks can be trademarks for pristine landscape and authentic nature experience, a quality which is one of the most important competition factors in tourism (Hannemann & Job 2003). This conclusion is corroborated by representative surveys on expectations, opinions, motives, interests and activities of vacationers (Günther & Münnekhoff 2003). However, up to now regional tourism organisations, tour operators and facilities operators (accommodation, gastronomy, communities etc.) merely use the attraction value of the Wadden Sea National Park for marketing, although it is even suited to serve as unique selling proposition.

In order to improve this situation, the National Park Office has – in co-operation with the regional tourist information office – installed a LEADER⁺ project called 'Wadden Sea nature experience and tourism'. During the period 2003-2006, it aims to improve the integration of the numerous existing offers to experience the Wadden Sea nature into the choice of tourism products and services. Internal and external marketing is to be enhanced and intensified.

- Within the project, we organise
- marketing-seminars tailored for enterprises offering nature experience,
 - specific excursions for those engaged professionally in tourism where they can experience the attractions of the National Park themselves, so that they can give first-hand recommendations to guests with respect to indoor and outdoor nature experience and nature-compatible activities,
 - conferences and workshops for people employed in tourism and nature interpretation as well as suppliers of nature-tourism packages, to exchange information, to stimulate discussion and co-operation and to enhance the generation of new ideas, products and services.

Evaluation by socio-economic monitoring

The Schleswig-Holstein Wadden Sea National Park implemented socio-economic monitoring (SEM) in 1999. A rising need to know more about National Park visitors, their expectations and opinions in order to better target information and public relations work has been recognised. This led to a monitoring concept which also supplies information for communication strategy and advanced visitor marketing (Gätje 2000a, Gätje et al. 2002).

SEM identifies visitor figures and structures as a measure of the use of the protected area as a site for recreation, leisure activities and environmental education. Furthermore, it also records how satisfied local inhabitants and visitors are with the National Park and the activities it offers.

When looking at the results of the opinion surveys at the Schleswig-Holstein Wadden Sea, the high level of acceptance for protection measures, such as access regulations and restrictions (Gätje 2000b) as well as for its protection status as a National Park are immediately noticeable.

In 2002, a representative survey using computer-aided telephone interviews with people living within the region was commissioned. The results revealed a positive attitude: More than a third of the respondents were proud of the National Park on their doorstep, another 49% classified it as 'important' (Figure 6). Only 5% gave a negative judgement.

Visitors to the Wadden Sea are positive, even very positive, about the National Park, as a facility to protect their holiday region: Of 859 holidaymakers at the North Sea, as many as 81% stated that statutory protection of the Wadden Sea was "very important" to them and for further 16% it was "important". The other categories in this survey were "less important/unimportant" and "don't know".

These survey results are a sort of mood barometer for nature conservation and protected area management in the Schleswig-Holstein Wadden Sea region. They show that the National Park meets with great acceptance not only among visitors, but also among the majority of the regional population.

The Schleswig-Holsteinische Wadden Sea is protected as a National Park.
Which significance do you attach to having a National Park in front of your door?

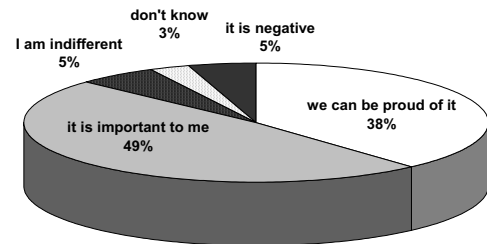


Figure 6. Result of a representative SEM survey in the National Park region (residents in the counties of Dithmarschen and Nordfriesland, n=606, September /October 2002, inspektour GmbH).

Conclusions

In 2005 the National Park will celebrate its 20th anniversary. The National Park authority has gained experience and has undergone a change to become a partner in sustainable regional development. This means that in the future it has to play an active role within the network of regional actors and to integrate nature protection needs and interests especially in the tourism industry. The aim to protect nature and concurrently support regional economy and meet social needs may then be achieved (Gätje 2003a).

Preconditions for sustainable tourism in the Wadden Sea region are:

- zonation (temporal and/or spatial) to avoid or at least minimise disturbance of species and negative impact on habitats,
- an efficient system for visitor information and guidance,
- qualified face-to-face information and support of visitors by competent, regularly trained staff (rangers, tour guides, employees of the tourism industry),
- intensive communication, co-operation and partnership between nature conservation and tourism,
- attractive nature experience, interpretation and edutainment opportunities,
- creation of (more) environment-friendly travel offers,
- professional marketing for nature experience and eco-tourism offers
- a good monitoring database for evaluation of ecological, social and economic development and sustainability (Gätje 2003b)

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¹ www.nationalpark-partner.de

² www.viabono.de

³ EU community initiative "Liaison Entre Actions de Developpement de l'Economie Rurale"