

# The Dutch and German Waddencoast: Similar but different. An entrepreneurial context

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## Background

The Dutch and German Waddencoast belong to the international Waddensea area, which was assigned the status of World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 2009. Cross-border comparison shows both areas have similar natural resources, however show different developments where tourism is concerned. While along the German coast artificial beaches, marinas and campsites are represented, these tourism assets are less matured along the Dutch Waddencoast. Empirical evidence shows that the natural and cultural resources of a destination constitute only a comparative advantage of a tourist area: they are a necessity but not a sufficient condition for being competitive (Cracolici & Nijkamp, 2009). Hence, if these resources do not provide an answer in explaining the difference in tourism development between Germany and the Netherlands, explanations should be sought elsewhere. Moscardo (2014) emphasized on the complex pattern of governments, entrepreneurs and other actors within the process of community development and called for a need to understand the interplay between tourism and other community activities. This research paper focuses on the interplay between tourism entrepreneurs and their environment. The purpose is to understand the difference in tourism development along the Dutch and German Waddencoast by exploring the meanings, feelings and beliefs German and Dutch tourism entrepreneurs attach to their environment.

The concept of social representation is used to explain the shared meanings entrepreneurs attach to their environment and to explain the actions they undertake. Social representation is a concept designed by Moscovici and is understood as the collective elaboration “of a social object by the community for the purpose of behaving and communicating” (Moscovici, 1963, p. 251). It represents a group of people with a common sense and equal thoughts concerning social, cultural or symbolic objects. Social representations are formed by politics, culture or economics and therefore are strongly bound to a certain social structure, social organization or/and social institution. In this light, the difference in tourism development along the Dutch and German Waddencoast is explored by researching the relation between social representations and the action local tourism entrepreneurs undertake, based on these shared perceptions.

## Results

Narrative interviews were conducted with tourism entrepreneurs, both in The Netherlands and in Germany. The results shows that stakeholders in The Netherlands and Germany hold different perceptions on nature and the role of UNESCO, result-

ing in different actions of local interest groups. Dutch tourism entrepreneurs are rather critical towards the Waddencoast being a World Heritage site. They have the opinion tourism development and nature protection are not to be seen as enemies, but they feel the Dutch governance has no clear policies towards the status of the area being a World Heritage Site. As a result, Dutch tourism entrepreneurs feel the need to develop own initiatives within the context of tourism development. On the other hand, their German colleagues experience the actions of the government more as a top-down approach and although they also reported being critical towards governance actions, this results in less initiatives compared to the Dutch entrepreneurs. Another difference was the fact that Dutch entrepreneurs were of the opinion local inhabitants do not show any pride towards their region, while the German entrepreneurs did not report this at all.

## Conclusion

When natural resources will not explain the difference in tourism development, intangible aspects can do. This research focused on meanings and feelings local tourism entrepreneurs attach to community processes. We argue that these different perceptions on nature, the role of networks and interest groups, the attitude towards regional developments, the perception entrepreneurs hold towards the role of the government (bottom up or top-down) are not to be ignored in explaining the difference in tourism development.



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