

RESEARCH

Landscape Imaginaries and the Protection of Dynamic Nature at the Wadden Sea

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Whereas the transgression of nature-culture dichotomies is commonplace in academic discourse, contemporary practices of nature conservation continue, in many cases, to be characterised by the active construction of fixed boundaries between spaces of nature and spaces of culture. In such contexts, nature constitutes a powerful discursive category, albeit one that is manifested differently across space and time. This paper advances a situated understanding of the spatialities and temporalities underlying contemporary practices of nature conservation through an empirical study of the concepts of nature and landscape informing management practices in the case of the Schleswig-Holstein Wadden Sea National Park in northern Germany. Theoretically, the paper draws on and further develops the concept of landscape imaginaries as a means to analytically make sense of diverse situated understandings of landscape and nature-culture relations. The paper thus addresses the implications of essentialist concepts of nature and landscape for protected area management within the context of a rapidly changing world. It is found that in this case, a conservation philosophy focused on the protection of natural processes is constrained by the maintenance of a categorical distinction between natural and cultural landscapes. The paper concludes with a plea for an understanding of nature conservation in terms of place-based situated practices.

Keywords: nature-culture dichotomies; National Park; landscape imaginaries; spatialities; temporalities; conservation; Wadden Sea

1. Introduction: Conservation Practices beyond Nature and Culture

It is increasingly recognised within the social sciences and humanities that the worlds of nature and culture do not represent discrete entities, but should be conceived as entangled and intertwined. Nature-culture dichotomies are proclaimed to be overcome through the deployment of alternative ontologies of more-than-human geographies, assemblages and nature-culture hybrids (e.g. Whatmore 2002, Hinchliffe 2007). In the 'multinatural' era of the Anthropocene and beyond, the scientific claim to a single, universal nature has, it would seem, been finally put to bed (Lorimer 2012). Beyond the academy, within the field of nature conservation, a shift towards more holistic approaches is also evident whereby protected area managers seek to preserve both natural and cultural heritage and, in many cases, act as a catalyst for sustainable regional development (Mose 2007, Hammer et al. 2016). Protected areas, nevertheless, continue to represent key sites whereby nature-culture relations are actively negotiated, discursively articulated and played out in practice. Nature-culture dichotomies continue to

be produced and reproduced through the designation of protected areas and the construction of fixed spatial boundaries between natural and cultural landscapes (Fall 2002, 2005, Wall-Reinius et al. 2019, Walsh 2018). Nature, it would seem, continues to constitute a powerful discursive category, albeit one that is manifested differently across space and time (e.g. Brennan 2018, Demeritt 2002, Gesing 2016, Ritson 2019). Practices of nature conservation are clearly embedded in particular places and may indeed be interpreted as a form of spatial practice or place-making (Williams 2018). Escobar (2001: 139) argued for the centrality of place in the context of prevailing debates on globalisation, claiming that 'culture sits in places'. He called for a nuanced, relational and multi-scalar understanding of place-based 'struggles' or practices of localisation within large-scale processes of globalisation. The point of departure for this paper is that today, a nuanced, relational, place-based and situated perspective on nature and nature conservation practices is equally relevant.

This paper empirically examines the persistence of nature-culture dichotomies in the case of the Schleswig-Holstein Wadden Sea National Park (hereafter SHWS National Park) at the north German coast. Within this context, anthropogenic climate change and sea-level rise require conservation actors to begin to reconsider the influence of society on what is perceived to be a pure

natural ecosystem. New boundary-making practices are required to prevent the collapse of a hard-won separation of nature and culture and to maintain established principles of process-based protection. The paper makes a case for greater attention to the cultural meanings ascribed to the landscape and recognition of multiple ways of knowing and engaging with nature in order to provide a broader basis for conservation decision-making. More specifically, the paper critically examines and deconstructs collective understandings of landscape and nature-culture relations (*landscape imaginaries*) underlying practices of national park management and nature conservation, tracing their development over time, from the 1980s to the present. The paper addresses the implications of essentialist concepts of nature and landscape for protected area management within the context of a rapidly changing world. It is argued that research on protected area management needs to take greater cognisance of the ways in which particular concepts of nature, culture and landscape are mobilised within specific contexts to inform management decision-making.

2. Shifting Practices of Nature Conservation

Environmental historians have made a strong case for a situated, differentiated understanding of national parks as phenomena whose meaning and purpose have varied significantly across space and time (Kupper 2012: 9; Gissibl et al. 2012). The first US-American national parks, established in the late 19th century, were founded on very particular ideas of nature and landscape and differed considerably in their emphasis on recreation and visitor attraction from their European counterparts. In the case of the Swiss National Park established in 1914, conservationists sought to create wilderness in the form of a pure natural landscape within park boundaries through the imposition of a strict, non-interventionist conservation regime (Kupper 2012). The objectives of the park were framed in terms of a strict separation of nature and culture, and rested on an assumption that the nature to be protected would return to a state of balanced equilibrium once human influence was removed. In this process, the cultural history of this formerly inhabited landscape was negated. The Swiss National Park thus served to carve out a 'space for nature' from the surrounding cultural landscape rendering lived spaces as abstract space, a form of *heterotopia* (Foucault 1986) beyond the realm of modern society (Kupper 2012: 14–15). For Kupper and colleagues, national parks are situated, context-specific phenomena with a global history, informed by both transnational conservation discourses and local material practices (Kupper 2012; Gissibl et al. 2012). Wöbse (2017) has traced how the emergence of the Wadden Sea as a transnational conservation space, embedded within global discourses has profoundly transformed the perception of the landscape.

Mels (1999, 2002) in his detailed study of the spatialities underlying Swedish national parks, has similarly critiqued the framing of culturally meaningful places as abstract space through the designation of protected areas. His research highlighted the powerful and performative

role of specific abstract notions of Swedish nature centred around ideas of nature as devoid of humans, a concept of prehistoric national nature and an aesthetic of visual scenery in the official policy discourse (2002: 150). Fall (2005) has examined practices of boundary-construction and territorialisation in five transboundary protected areas in Europe. Her work has also highlighted the role of specific 'myths' of 'boundless nature' within a highly regulated, bounded context (ibid.: Chapter 9). She exposes the contradictions inherent between a binary conservationist discourse of nature as separated from society and the messy hybrid realities of transboundary conservation practice. From these theoretically-informed empirical studies it is evident that protected area management constitutes a power-laden spatial practice whereby nature-culture dichotomies and their material manifestations are reproduced and become taken for granted. As Hughes (2005, in Adams et al. 2014: 575) has argued, protected area management implies a set of boundary-making practices, whereby existing spatialities are reconfigured: 'the work of conservation involves the conceptual and practical placing of nature within specific spatial bounds, making both places and spaces'.

In parallel with these conceptual developments, however, a significant shift towards more inclusive forms of community-based management is evident within the applied academic and policy literatures, with an emphasis on the role of protected areas within a wider context of socio-environmental transformation (e.g. Philips 2003, Mose 2007, Hammer et al. 2016). Whereas early conservation efforts focussed on the protection of 'wild nature' from the destructive influence of modern, industrial civilisation, conservation objectives are increasingly placed within a broader societal framing focussed on sustainable regional development. Both Fall (2002) and Phillips (2003) have examined shifting discourses of nature conservation at an international policy level, focussing in particular on IUCN¹ World Congresses on National Parks, the first of which was held in 1962. Phillips (2003) documents the gradual emergence of a new paradigm of protected area management in the 1990s, in recognition of a need for greater awareness of the traditions, cultural values and rights of local communities, particularly within the Global South. Within what he terms the 'modern paradigm for protected areas' narrowly defined preservationist objectives are replaced by more holistic perspectives, explicitly recognising cultural values and economic objectives or imperatives. Top-down expert-led governance is replaced by inclusive, multi-stakeholder, network and collaborative governance models (2003: 19). Fall (2002: 249) on the other hand, is less optimistic and calls for a more radical departure from established nature-culture dichotomies and their influence on the compartmentalisation of protected area management tasks. At the same time there is heightened attention to the specification of global nature values and increased awareness of ecological interdependencies extending far beyond park boundaries (e.g. Adams et al. 2014; Liburd & Becken 2017). There have, however been few systematic comparative studies of collaborative environmental governance in practice and

Benson et al. (2013, 1696) find that positive and normative arguments are often intertwined within the collaborative governance literature. As a consequence of this, there is a risk that new paradigm collaborative governance arrangements feature more prominently in the literature than they might do in practice. This paper contributes to redressing this imbalance through a study of prevailing practices of protected area management in the German context. Taking a historical perspective, the paper examines the extent to which underlying concepts of landscape and nature-culture relations and associated policy frames have shifted over time, from the establishment of the national park in the 1980s to the present day. What is remarkable in this case is the persistence of very specific, essentialist landscape imaginaries which challenge any notion of a shift in perspectives.

3. Landscape Imaginaries: A Conceptual Framework

Theoretically the paper draws on and further develops the concept of landscape imaginaries as a means to analytically make sense of diverse situated understandings of landscape and nature-culture relations. Adapting Castoriadis' (1985) concept of social imaginaries, Nogue & Wilbrand (2018: 444) suggest that landscape imaginaries are both individual and collective and concerned with 'cognitive and memory-related, but also emotional processes, including material expressions'. They are particularly concerned with dynamic processes of landscape transformation through which collective imaginaries and material manifestations shift over time: 'landscape is culture, and for this very reason it is alive, dynamic, and in constant transformation, in constant mutation' (Nogue & Wilbrand 2010: 640). In this way, they place creative imaginings at the heart of an understanding of landscape as an expression of culture and identity, and seek to explore how landscape imaginaries shift over time in response to material transformations. Working from within a spatial planning research tradition, Davoudi (2018: 101) conceptualises the related concept of 'spatial imaginaries' in terms of 'deeply held, collective understandings of socio-spatial relations that are performed by, give sense to, make possible and change collective socio-spatial practices'. They are understood to be produced through political struggles and to be infused by relations of power (ibid.). Spatial imaginaries are found at multiple scales from that of the home, to cities, regions, nation-states and supra-national bodies (Watkins 2015). Critical attention to spatial imaginaries aids understanding of the ways in which space, place and landscape are articulated, constructed and mobilised within spatial planning and environmental governance processes (Walsh 2014, 2018; Walsh & Döring 2018).

As employed here, the concept of landscape imaginaries refers to collective understandings of landscape and nature-culture relations within specific spatio-temporal contexts of nature conservation and environmental management. This definition is narrower and more selective than that of Nogue & Wilbrand, focussing specifically on collective rather than individual aspects of landscape construction

and perception (also Gailing 2012). Within this context, collective understandings of landscape and nature-culture relations are found at regional or sub-regional scales. They are intrinsically contested and power-laden and may be mobilised by individual actors in the construction of regional identities (also Paasi 2008; Davoudi 2018). In line with a relational, processual understanding of landscape, the concept of landscape imaginaries incorporates elements of both temporality and spatiality. Attention to landscape temporalities implies a concern for how socio-natural changes in the landscape are perceived, experienced and framed within conservation strategies (Brace & Geoghagen 2010; Stenseke et al. 2016). It is contended in this paper that the perpetuation of a landscape imaginary founded on the maintenance of a strict separation of nature and culture in conceptual and spatial terms constrains the scope for an inclusive, societal discussion of the objectives and practices of nature conservation within the SHWS National Park. In Section 4 below, I outline how key concepts of nature and landscape have shifted within German nature conservation. Key developments in German nature conservation have, to date, been given limited attention in the international literature, yet demonstrate clear divergences in current practices internationally. The national policy and socio-cultural context are understood to be instrumental to a situated, embedded understanding of the empirical case study analysis.

4. Shifting Landscape Imaginaries in German Nature Conservation

Since the 1970s, German nature conservation has increasingly distanced itself from its 19th century roots in the protection of traditional, cultural landscapes. Through the emergence of the discipline of ecology, conservationists have sought to place nature protection on firmly scientific, rational and objective grounds. As a consequence, nature and landscape were to be protected primarily for their natural value and the cultural dimensions of landscape appreciation were suppressed or disguised through natural scientific argumentation (Piechocki 2010; Trepl & Voigt 2014). This reformulation of conservation in non-anthropocentric terms constitutes a reification of a particular framing of nature as independent from and separate of society. From this perspective, human intervention in natural ecosystems or landscapes is perceived in negative terms as a 'disturbance' and natural developments as positive irrespective of the impacts of non-intervention on biodiversity or other ecological indicators. Recent attempts to recover the cultural content of nature protection, notwithstanding, contemporary conservation discourse and practice is arguably 'landscape blind and culturally blind' (Haber, 2008: 20; see also Hoheisel et al. 2010; Kangler 2018). The equation of wilderness with an essentialist understanding of areas of pure nature has been critiqued, with academic commentators in particular, pointing to the cultural content of the wilderness discourse (see Kirchhoff & Trepl 2009, also Cronon 1996). Here, the focus has been on the development of a more nuanced understanding of wilderness, informed by cultural studies, rather than a

critique of wilderness as an object of conservation per se. Contemporary conservation discourse is more accurately understood as founded upon a specific landscape imaginary, characterised by a strict and categorical separation of 'natural' and 'cultural' landscapes. This rationale is at odds with that of the European Landscape Convention, with its emphasis on landscape perception and may help to explain why the German government has thus far failed to ratify the convention (COE 2000; Jorgensen et al. 2016). As discussed below, this practice of separating nature out from the sphere of society has found its most prominent material manifestation in the establishment of national parks and their associated non-interventionist philosophy of 'letting nature be nature' (Piechocki et al. 2003; Biebelriether 2017).

Since the early 1990s the protection of natural processes (*Prozessschutz*) or the 'free development' of nature has played a prominent role in the articulation of a non-anthropocentric rationale for nature conservation (also Mels 1999). Protecting natural processes was understood as a means of allowing the restorative power of nature to self-regulate the natural environment (e.g. Remmert 1988). Process-based protection constituted a shift away from the protection of individual species and a concern for ecosystemic dynamics at the landscape scale, in line with a processual understanding of landscape (Scherzinger 1997; Piechocki 2010). For many, a focus on the protection of natural processes implied recognition of a shift in ecological theory whereby non-linear dynamics and the complexity of ecological processes began to influence conservation thinking. This, in turn, implied a departure from previous concepts of static equilibrium (Clements 1936) and related assumptions concerning the 'balance of nature' and the linear, successive development of ecosystems (Piechocki et al. 2003, cf. Williams 2018). Key characteristics of static and dynamic conceptualisations of nature conservation, as formulated within this literature, are outlined in **Table 1** below. Although the dynamic conceptualisation of process-based conservation places emphasis on properties of contingency, disequilibrium and disturbance, natural processes it would seem, are understood to occur within closed ecological systems with clearly defined boundaries. Indeed, the concept of process-based protection and the call to 'let nature be nature' has drawn on a particular understanding of nature as separate and distinct from the human world. Natural processes are assumed to be virtuous; human

interventions, on the other hand, are classified as negative and inherently disturbing (Piechocki et al. 2003: 35). As a consequence, a conceptual dichotomy between humans and nature is reproduced and reinforced and large-scale areas of 'undisturbed nature' or pure natural landscapes became the primary or ideal focus of nature conservation efforts (Scherzinger 1997).

Indeed, the concept of protecting natural processes went hand-in-hand with an idealisation of 'wilderness', a concept borrowed from the North American context and believed to have been put on a scientific footing in German nature conservation (Schuster 2010). Rather than understood as a cultural construct or interpretative frame, wilderness was constructed as an objectively determined category of pure, natural landscapes, undisturbed by human influence. Critics argued, however, that the application of the concept of the wilderness to the anthropogenically formed (cultural) landscapes of Europe was flawed, as with minor exceptions, there were no areas of undisturbed nature to be found in western Europe (Scherzinger 1997: 34). The concept of wilderness thus came to be applied to the core zones of German national parks, areas deemed to be representative of an original, primordial or even pristine nature or to have the capacity to be returned to such a state. A focus on dynamic, contingent and unpredictable change was thus coupled with an idealisation of a particular natural state, dated to some unspecified time in the past. This call to preserve elements of primordial nature through national parks, reflected in no small way the thinking of previous decades. In 1926, Walter Schoenichen, one of the leading thinkers in NS-era and post-war nature conservation, called for the protection of the residual elements of the German 'original landscape' through the establishment of protected areas (in Fischer 2014: 102). His conservation philosophy was formulated in explicitly nationalist and racist ideological terms, founded on an exclusive and deterministic understanding of the relationship between the German people and German landscapes. Against this background, it is striking that the objectives and rationale of contemporary national parks continue to be framed in terms of the protection of primordial, original landscapes, as discussed below.

In practice, the philosophy of letting nature be nature has been implemented through the application of a principled objective of non-intervention to the core areas of German national parks. As a consequence, process-based

Table 1: Static and Dynamic Conceptualisations of Nature Conservation (adapted from Schuster 2010: 39).

	Static Conceptualisation	Dynamic Conceptualisation
Ecosystem	Ecosystems as super-organism	Ecosystems as functional units
Equilibrium	Ecosystems in natural equilibrium, 'balance of nature'	Ecosystems in disequilibrium
Disturbances	Serious disturbances can disrupt the state of equilibrium	Disturbances are immanent and necessary for 'healthy' ecosystems
Species Range	Specific constellations of species characterise an ecosystem and define its limits	The species found within an ecosystem shift substantially over time
Processes	Predictable within an ecosystem	Unpredictable and contingent
Understanding of Nature	Cultural landscape	Wilderness

protection has come to imply the protection of natural processes within well-defined and externally imposed spatial boundaries. The protection of natural dynamics is incorporated within the legal definition of national parks at the federal level (BNSchG 2009: §24). In the case of the Bavarian Forest National Park, the first to be established in Germany in 1970, it is stated that in national parks, 'nature should develop without human intervention according to its own native, primordial dynamics' (National Park Bayerischen Wald 2010: 4). The core objective of the national park is formulated in terms of the creation of possibilities to once again experience native, primordial nature (ibid.: 21). All subsequent national parks established to date have adopted the management principle of minimal intervention within their core areas. A distinction may be made, however, between those which seek to protect existing (residual) areas of primordial nature or wilderness and those where the primary concern is with letting areas of land return to a state of wilderness. In both cases, however, wilderness is associated with an idealised, imagined and pristine past. The rationale of the Lower Oder Valley National Park founded in 1995, for example, is explicitly framed in terms of a 'return to nature': 'In Brandenburg's only national park, an attempt is underway to return the centuries-old cultural landscape

to a close-to-natural meadow landscape' (National Park Unteres Odertal 2014: 22). In the same document, the 'wilderness development zones' of the national park are described in terms of their 'regained originality' (ibid.: 23). As we will see below, the objectives of the SHWS National Park, established in 1986 have been framed in terms of the protection of dynamic natural processes and the preservation of the originality of the landscape. German national parks thus prioritise the preservation a primordial nature, nature in its original, natural state, undisturbed by human presence. Perhaps paradoxically, original nature can not only be proclaimed through the construction of park boundaries but also created through the deliberate cessation of human activities. A highly cultural vocabulary is employed to legitimise the protection of nature as fundamentally separate from society.

5. Methodological Approach and Case Study Context

The Wadden Sea is an intertidal coastal landscape, comprising mudflats salt meadows, barrier islands and sea areas, extending from Den Helder in the Netherlands along the full length of the German North Sea coast to Blavands Huk in southwestern Denmark (Figure 1 below). The origins of the Wadden Sea are relatively recent,

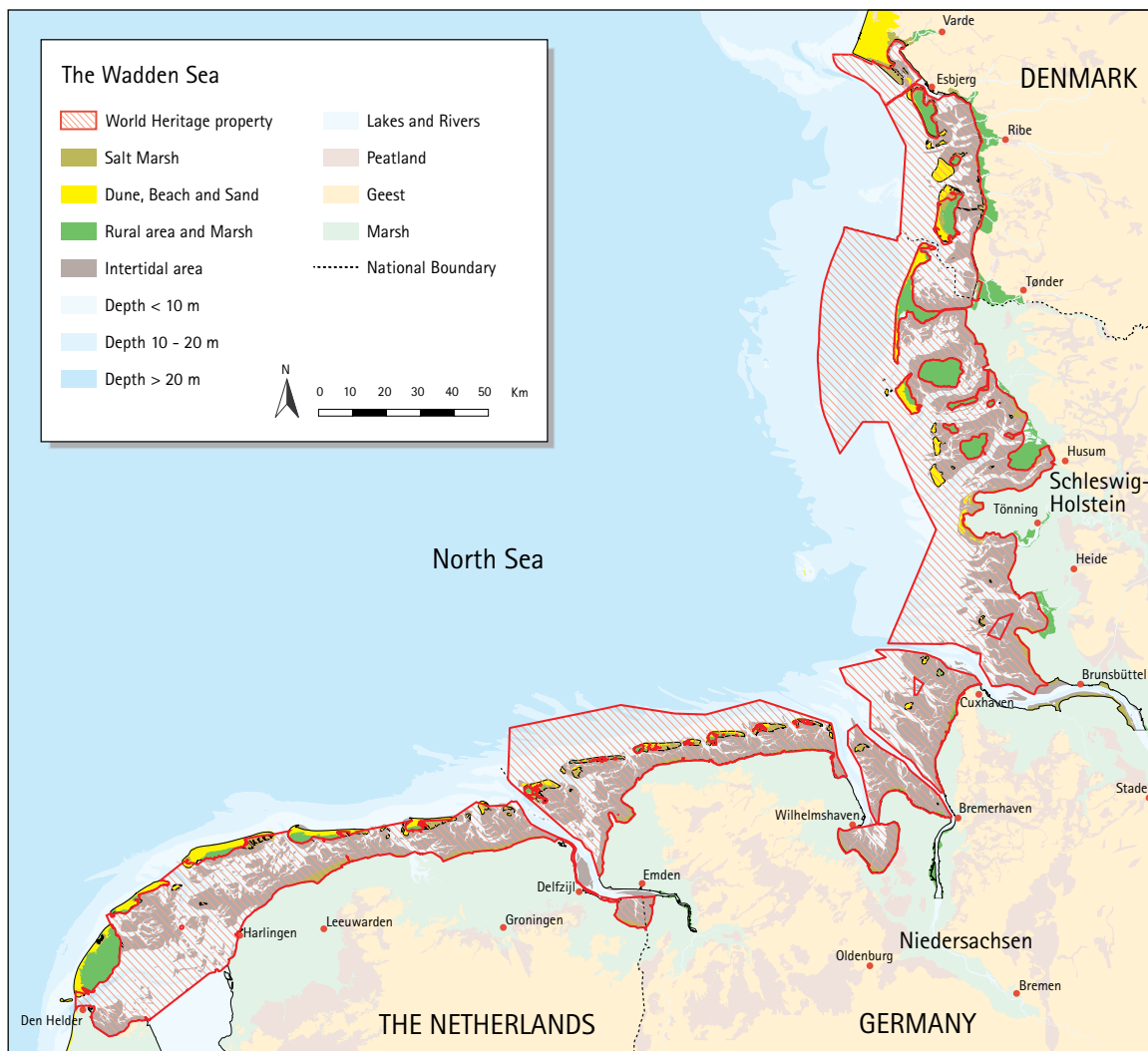


Figure 1: The trilateral Wadden Sea Area and World Heritage Site (© Common Wadden Sea Secretariat).

dating from a period of comparatively slow sea level rise, following the last glaciation, approximately 8,000 years before the present (Reise 2013: 37). Today, the Wadden Sea is recognised as a unique and highly diverse ecosystem of outstanding natural value at the global scale, with the status of a UNESCO World Heritage Site (Enemark 2016).

Acknowledging this historical background and contemporary context, this paper follows an in-depth case study approach, drawing on both grey literature in the form of policy documents, minutes of meetings and non-academic journal articles as well as qualitative interviews with key actors from the national park administration, NGOs, coastal protection officials, scientists and representatives of the Wadden Sea islands. The analysis focuses on three key episodes as follows 1) the establishment of the national park and preceding discussions in the 1970s and 1980s; 2) the publication of a synthesis report and preparation of a national park plan in the mid-1990s; and 3) the preparation of a climate adaptation strategy for the Wadden Sea between 2012 and 2015. Each episode is characterised by tensions between opposing worldviews and perspectives on the Wadden Sea, in short contrasting landscape imaginaries. The chronological perspective adopted here serves to place recent debates within their historical context and reveals significant elements of continuity over time.

The interviews were conducted between 2016 and 2018 and relate primarily but not exclusively to the most recent episode whereby a number of interviewees were directly involved in the process of preparing the Wadden Sea 2100 climate adaptation strategy. Thirteen semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted at the Schleswig-Holstein Wadden Sea. The analysis is furthermore informed by a broader set of approximately 30 interviews conducted with actors and stakeholders in coastal management and nature conservation at the Wadden Sea coast of the Germany, Denmark and the Netherlands between 2016 and 2019 (see also Walsh 2018, 2019, Walsh & Kannen 2019). This broader set of interviews was invaluable for situating the analysis for this paper in its international context and providing a comparative perspective (Walsh forthcoming). Interviews were conducted by the author in German, and were subsequently transcribed, annotated and coded following a constructivist (non-hierarchical), grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss 2015). The interview quotes and extracts from written texts cited below were translated by the author. The process of annotation and coding was an important step in organising and making sense of the data. The coded interviews were analysed together with the selected policy documents and other primary materials within an interpretative policy analysis framework (see Hajer & Fischer 1999, Hajer 2003, Wagenaar 2014). The Dutch school of interpretative policy analysis has been particularly influential in its focus on the implicit meanings and frames of reference underpinning practices of environmental politics. A critical, close reading of the material allowed for an in-depth focus on the construction of meaning and discursive framing of specific themes within the context of specific policy-making episodes. The interviews with actors directly involved in the process of preparing the Wadden Sea

2100 strategy (and to a lesser extent earlier episodes) provided for a nuanced understanding of the strategy-making process itself (see Walsh 2019 for further details) and the provided a point of departure for a discussion of how nature-culture relations and spatial boundaries are negotiated and reconfigured against the background of anthropogenic sea-level rise.

The journal *Nordfriesland* provided a valuable source of primary material with respect to the national park debates of the 1970s and 1980s in particular. The journal is published by the *Nordfriisk Instituut*, an independent organisation established with the objective of researching, cultivating and fostering the Frisian language and culture in Northern Friesland. The journal *Nordfriesland* has provided a platform for informed discussion and debate on a wide range of issues of concern to the region, including the question of the protection of the Wadden Sea. The contributors to the journal have represented a broad spectrum of opinion. Minutes of meetings of the national park boards in Northern Friesland and Dithmarschen provided a further source of primary material with respect to the debates around the Synthesis Report in the 1990s (episode 2). Many of these meetings were not open to the public and the minutes were made available for the first time in the context of this research.

6. Protecting Natural Processes and Uncovering Contingent Nature-Culture Relations at the Wadden Sea

Policy-makers, government officials and scientists from Germany, the Netherlands and Denmark have worked together since the 1970s to coordinate efforts to protect the Wadden Sea. The shared guiding principle of this trilateral conservation effort has a strong process orientation: 'to achieve as far as possible, a natural and sustainable ecosystem in which natural processes proceed in an undisturbed way' (11th Trilateral Governmental Conference on the Protection of the Wadden Sea, 2010: 59). The interpretation of this guiding principle, would, however, appear to vary significantly between the three countries. Forty years of international transboundary cooperation among policy-makers and scientists notwithstanding, nature conservation practices differ substantially across the Wadden Sea Area, reflecting differences in governance culture, and underlying concepts of nature and landscape.

As long-standing director of a research station of the Alfred-Wegener Institute Helmholtz Centre for Polar and Marine Research on the island of Sylt in North Friesland, biologist Karsten Reise has been a leading figure in advancing scientific understanding of the ecology of the Wadden Sea. He has been instrumental in raising awareness for its complex natural history, confounding conservationist myths of primordial, undisturbed nature. In particular, he has shown the Wadden Sea ecosystem to be the product of complex, contingent path-dependent interactions between natural and social processes over a period of thousands of years (Reise 2013). In a conscious effort to move away from universalising narratives of natural development, Reise details the influence of chance events and place-specific interactions in the

history of the landscape. This perspective presents a profound challenge to any notion of the Wadden Sea as a 'pure natural ecosystem' and highlights the need for an appreciation of non-linear dynamics of change. Extensive dike building, land reclamation and drainage activity, as well as periodic catastrophic storm flood events have, over the last one thousand years, created a hard physical, and symbolically powerful boundary between the land and the sea, in the place of a more gradual transition (also Allemeyer 2006; Egberts 2018; Walsh 2018; **Figure 2** below). Species composition has also shifted substantially over time with a marked decline in larger organisms due to hunting and fishing and an increase in smaller organisms, in part due to maritime globalisation over a period of centuries. Anthropogenic climate change may lead to an increase in biodiversity due to increased migration from southern latitudes (Reise 2013: 65). Within this context, the boundaries between native and alien or invasive species become irretrievably blurred to the extent that the categories no longer have meaning. As a soft, low-lying coast, the Wadden Sea is furthermore, particularly vulnerable to climate change and anthropogenic sea-level rise (Hofstede & Stock 2016). Perceptions of the Wadden Sea have also shifted fundamentally over a period of thirty years: 'a dreary, useless, and lost land, or a waterway that was too shallow to be safely navigated, now came to be seen as a unique nature area worthy of protection' (Reise 2013: 59; Wöbse 2017). Within the wider context of the environmental movement, concern to protect the Wadden Sea from the negative impacts of modern, industrial society grew and gained popular support in the 1960s and 1970s with nature conservation and environmental NGOs becoming increasingly vocal in their demands for the nature of the Wadden Sea to be protected (see Abrahamse

et al. 1976; Wöbse 2017). As noted above, this paper focuses on the Schleswig-Holstein Wadden Sea National Park, one of six national parks,² located within the trilateral Wadden Sea Area.

6.1. When 'Place becomes Space': Establishing a Wadden Sea National Park

At a conference organised by the WWF in Husum at the Wadden Sea coast in 1991, Hans Biebelriether, a leading figure in nature protection in Germany and at the European scale, called for conservationists to 'let nature, be nature' and thus ushered in a new paradigm and rallying call for German nature conservation (Vieth 1991; Piechochi et al. 2003). Biebelriether criticised the influence of socio-cultural values on practices of nature conservation and argued for a more 'natural' or ecocentric form of nature protection, particularly for areas such as the Wadden Sea which were viewed as intact or undisturbed natural spaces (Vieth 1991). At the same conference, Karsten Reise challenged this interpretation of the Wadden Sea, arguing that there is no 'undisturbed nature' at the Wadden Sea. Two years previously in 1989, approximately one thousand protestors gathered in Husum to protest against the national park. Speakers at this event, framed their rhetoric in terms of an essentialised Frisian identity and sought to claim their right to self-determination within what were perceived as their own lands:

'We Northern Frisians... have lived in this land for more than a thousand years... much longer than anyone else... We Northern Frisians and people from Dithmarschen can more than any others rightly claim: this is our own, native land' (in Steensen 1989: 2).



Figure 2: The west coast of Schleswig-Holstein in the present day (left) and prior to the storm flood of 1362 (right inset), indicating the extent of lands 'lost to the sea' in North Friesland. Maps produced by T. Böge, University of Hamburg, Institute for Geography, following the historical map of Johannes Mejer (1652).³

This claim, to represent and speak for the Northern Frisian people, was however, strongly contested from within the Frisian community (ibid.). The events outlined above, highlight the tensions between essentialist and relational and 'natural' and 'cultural' perspectives which have characterised struggles over the framing of nature and landscape at the Wadden Sea coast of Schleswig-Holstein, over a period of more than forty years. The first episode examined here, the debates surrounding the establishment of the SHWS National Park, may be read as an attempt to displace local, place-based imaginaries of the Wadden Sea as a cultural coastal landscape with abstract, universal concepts of the Wadden Sea as a natural ecosystem of national, if not global importance. In short, local place was reframed as abstract space (see also Mels 2002).

Although the nature conservation efforts at the Wadden Sea date from the early years of the twentieth century it was with the beginnings of mass tourism in the 1960s that the awareness of the need for large-scale protection emerged. In this context, a dedicated conservation organisation was established in 1962, the *Schutzstation Wattenmeer*. This organisation, influenced by the nascent environmental movement sought to increase awareness of the need for protection of the Wadden Sea, among local communities and summer visitors. Significantly, the founders of this organisation sought to 'bring the mudflats to the people'. In place of 'no entry' signs, it was argued that the landscape should be open for visitors under the guidance of experts (Oetken 1971, in Ziemek 2014: 152–3). In 1969, the hunting association of Schleswig-Holstein subsequently proposed the establishment of a national park for the northern Frisian Wadden Sea. Their proposal envisaged a cessation of bird hunting but that seal-hunting should continue, the latter justified through the absence of 'natural predators'. This proposal was decisive in leading the Schleswig-Holstein Ministry for Agriculture to formally examine the possibility of establishing a national park. In the early 1970s, the proposed national park concept was supported at the political level within the district of Northern Friesland and also received support from the federal level of government. The national park would protect the nature of the Wadden Sea 'in its entirety' with relatively strict restrictions on hunting and other forms of human intervention. Fishing nevertheless was permitted and the park boundaries were drawn, so as to exclude the inhabited islands, Halligs and coastal marshlands (Der Spiegel 1974). Opposition, however came from the organised Frisian community on the islands and Halligs, who viewed the project as an imposition from outside and a threat to their regional identity and their traditional practices of hunting, fishing and egg collecting. The framing of the Wadden Sea as a natural landscape and national park was challenged and opposed by local communities and organisations on the coast and islands of Northern Friesland. For many, the imposition of a national park represented a denial of the rights of the Frisian community to their own lands which had been lost to the sea in former centuries. In 1974, Frederik Paulsen a pharmaceuticals entrepreneur and long-time supporter of Frisian culture argued as follows:

'the Wadden Sea is not an original natural landscape but a cultural landscape lost to the sea. So, in one form or another, the Frisian inhabitants have paid for the Wadden Sea. That is why they primarily are entitled to decide about the Wadden Sea' (Husumer Nachrichten 4th January 1974, in Steensen 2018: 102–3).

He further contended that those who had lost land to the sea must have a stronger right to it than the state or national or international conservation NGOs (ibid.). The concept of an inherent Frisian right to the Wadden Sea, reflects ideas concerning the relationship between a people or folk and 'their landscape' associated with the *Heimatschutz*⁴ movement but also prevalent in geographical and anthropological writings prior to the 1970s (see Schulz 2014). This counter-narrative of a historical or 'natural' relationship between the Frisians and their lost cultural landscape was articulated in deliberate contrast to the claiming of the Wadden Sea as a space for nature by NGOs, experts and state authorities from beyond the region (Krauß 2005). The framing of the Wadden Sea as a pure natural landscape continued to be challenged, particularly by those with an active interest in the cultural history of the region. Although a large-scale nature protection area for the Northern Friesland Wadden Sea was established in 1974, the government of Schleswig-Holstein decided in 1976 to put the plans for a national park on hold. Six years later, however, a new state government decided to resurrect the plans for a Wadden Sea national park. Indeed, the national park concept was now extended to include the full length of the Schleswig-Holstein west coast. Within the context of increased importance attributed to environmental concerns worldwide and the plans of the government of the neighbouring state of Lower Saxony to also establish a Wadden Sea national park, the project had become a political prestige object at the federal state level (Ziemek 2014: 157). In 1976, the national park concept had become inscribed within German law. Significantly, this German legal formulation was interpreted as permitting human uses within park boundaries and thus less strict than the IUCN definition (Andresen 1990). Despite considerable opposition from affected municipalities and organisations at the local level, the national park was formally established in 1985. Indeed, consultation was kept to a minimum and the nature protection NGOs active at the Wadden Sea were not informed of the plans developed by the Ministry. This top-down approach with minimal local involvement led to an enduring antagonistic relationship between the national park authorities and the local communities, as detailed below. In an insightful contribution to this debate, Reimer Kay Holander of the *Nordfriisk Instituut*, presented an alternative perspective arguing that the Wadden Sea of Northern Friesland is not a 'free space for nature' but a 'living-space for people' (Holander, 1984, 34). He reflected that the state government and nature protection NGOs should help the local people in developing ways to manage and take responsibility for their environment rather than 'chasing large-scale projects with fancy names' (ibid.).

Holander called for recognition of the lay knowledge and, what he saw as, the innate or vital interest of the people living at the Wadden Sea in protecting their environment. He also however, acknowledged the need for a long-term learning process with involvement from NGOs and state actors.

Under the national park law, the rationale for the national park was defined in terms of the protection of the Wadden Sea and the 'preservation of its unique character, beauty and originality' (Schleswig-Holsteinisches Landtag 1985, §2). Although not further elaborated on within the text of the national park law, this concept of originality refers to an interpretation of the Wadden Sea as a 'pure' natural landscape (*Urlandschaft*), the 'original' character of which remains intact, unspoilt by the influence of modern human society (see Section 4 above). Thirty years later, the newsletter of the national park administration reflects on this concept of originality and its meaning for the national park: 'But how much original nature does mankind need, and how much is "tolerated"? Is originality, is wilderness, a value for itself? These questions have since, time immemorial, occupied not just nature conservation but the whole of society' (SHWS National Park 2015). Here the concept of originality is explicitly linked to that of wilderness. It is inferred that the protection of pure, 'original' or primordial nature is a fundamental and timeless issue of societal importance. In the same issue of the newsletter the then head of the national park administration (in 2015) reflected that 'National Parks serve the Creation, not the creation of added value' (*ibid.*). Here a biblical and static concept of pure, primordial Edenic nature is employed and contrasted with a modern, economic concept of added value, emphasising a desire to protect nature in its pristine state. It is noteworthy, that nature conservation at the Bavarian Forest national park was similarly framed in terms of the protection of 'part of the Creation for its own sake' in a ceremonial speech by a Bavarian State Minister in 1986 (in Biebelriether 2017, 108). Indeed, this specific theological interpretation of natural landscapes or wilderness as an Edenic paradise has a long history, aligned with an interpretation of wilderness as a 'counter-world to human culture' (Kirchhoff & Vicenzotti 2014, 445, see also Kangler 2018, 246–7).

The protection of, 'as far as possible undisturbed natural processes', is identified as a further objective of the national park (Schleswig-Holsteinisches Landtag 1985, §2), an early formulation of the process-based nature protection concept in a legal text. The significance of this was interpreted by the first director of the national park in pragmatic terms as absolving the national park from the requirement to provide evidence in support of individual protection measures, as now for the first time, undisturbed natural processes were valued for their own sake (Andresen 1990, 26). A former official of the national park administration commented that the phrase 'as far as possible' was introduced to reflect the specific circumstances of the national park: 'it was clear that the traditional uses should stay.... and that coastal protection cannot be affected, that body and soul of the people cannot be affected, that is the protection of the cultural

landscape' (I_N3). From this formulation, it is evident that protection of the people and lands behind the dikes through coastal engineering measures was a necessary precondition for the protection of nature in front of the dikes. The powerful imagery of natural and cultural landscapes separated by a highly visible, fortress-like dike-line had historical resonance and continues to act as a key framing device for policy discourses concerned with nature conservation and coastal management (see also Walsh 2018, 2019). Indeed, the boundaries of the national park were demarcated so as to exclude all areas of human habitation, thus maintaining a sharp separation between natural and cultural spaces (see **Figure 3** below). The national park law, required the administration to find a balance between conservation interests and the interests of the local communities: 'unreasonable restrictions of the interests of and traditional uses (of the Wadden Sea) by of the native population are to be avoided' (Schleswig-Holsteinisches Landtag 1985, §2). As a consequence, many nature conservationists viewed the law as providing insufficient protection while local protestors objected to the framing of the Wadden Sea as a natural landscape, and the imposition of regulations from 'outside' the region.

6.2. The Wadden Sea as a Natural Landscape: A Scientific Foundation for the National Park

The conflict between the conservationists and local population culminated in the 1990s with the publication of a scientific report by the national park administration in 1996. Known as the 'Synthesis Report', the published document was over 600 pages long and provided a comprehensive assessment of the Wadden Sea ecosystem and its human uses (Stock et al. 1996). Indeed, the report followed a five-year large-scale research programme focussed on the Wadden Sea ecosystem which brought together natural scientists and economists tasked with analysing socio-economic aspects. The Synthesis Report, however, also set out recommendations for the future development of the national park, intended to inform a revision of the park legislation. The report thus sought to place the policies of the national park on a rational, scientific foundation, based on ecological principles. As a consequence, the question of the nature of the Wadden Sea was abstracted from the realm of public debate. Under the guise of objective, scientific analysis, nature conservation was reformulated as applied ecology; 'nature was written with a capital N, backed up by science with a capital S' (Krauß 2010, 198). Through the course of the discussions which followed the publication of the Synthesis Report, the relationship between science and conservation policy was the subject of intense discussion. The Minister for the Environment (in Schleswig-Holstein) stressed that the report was not a policy paper of the state government and was intended to provide an informed basis for discussion leading to a revision of the national park law (Northern Friesland 11.09.1996). The 32-page summary to the report, however, opened with the following advice to the reader, 'the summary cannot replace the study of the Synthesis Report. In order to comprehensively understand the principles and the recommendations



Figure 3: Official map of the Schleswig-Holstein Wadden Sea National Park, depicting current boundaries and zonation (source: © LKN-SH National Park administration).

which follow from them, the report should be read in parallel to the summary' (Stock et al., I-1). This advice is repeated in the margin on each page of the summary text. Evidently the foreseen discussion was limited to those with the resources and scientific training required to understand and make sense of the report in its full length. This approach effectively served to consolidate the previously established perception that the national park was an imposition from outside the region, unaware or

disregarding of the cultural meanings and values ascribed to this landscape by the local population.

In the course of a public meeting on the subject of fisheries, the scientific rationale for the designation of no-fishing zones was questioned. In response, the head of the national park administration argued that in fact, 'nature conservation, taken as a whole is not a scientific act... it should be seen as a societal valuation, which takes a piece of land/sea from human hands to preserve it for

its own self-organisation' (Dithmarschen 13.03 1997). The argument here was that the establishment of the national park itself entailed the decision to protect a space, where nature could be nature, undisturbed by human activities and that this decision should be understood as a societal one rather than a scientific one. At another meeting, it was claimed that the proposed inclusion of beach areas within the proposed national park boundaries was 'ideologically rather than ecologically justified'. The inclusion of beach areas with a primary tourism and recreational function within the national park boundaries was contrasted with the exclusion of Beltringharder Koog, a protected area, located outside but adjoining park boundaries (Northern Friesland 21.05.1997). In practice, the proposals did not seek to impose substantial additional restrictions on existing activities on the beaches in question. The national park administration, however, argued from a natural system rather than societal use perspective. Thus, despite assurances from the national park administration to the effect that existing uses within the park should be managed and not excluded, the categorical framing of the national park as a natural landscape led other actors to think, and present their arguments in either/or categories of use/protection and outside/inside park boundaries (Northern Friesland 12.06.1997). In the second part of the report, a policy vision for the protection of the Wadden Sea within the boundaries of the national park is formulated:

'The policy vision (*Leitbild*) for the protection of the national park is oriented towards a historic scenario; the Wadden Sea as a natural landscape... The comparison of the ecosystem of today with a real natural condition makes current deviations visible' (Stock et al. 1996, 360).

It was further argued that many of the human influences on the Wadden Sea today have severe, but in principle, reversible impacts. (ibid, 361). The concept of a historical, natural landscape as a reference scenario is acknowledged to represent a fictional, or ideal condition. It nevertheless reflects a static interpretation of natural ecosystems, founded on a sharp distinction between natural and societal processes. This interpretation follows directly from the framing of the Wadden Sea as an original, natural landscape, discussed above. The publication of the Synthesis Report led to an escalation of protest actions. An interviewee describes the situation in dramatic language: 'And then the coast burned. We held over three hundred local discussion meetings, some I did myself where we were almost beaten out of the room' (I_N3). The conservation philosophy of non-intervention clashed with existing approaches to interacting with and managing nature on the Wadden Sea islands in particular. One interview explained how the islanders on Amrum gathered seagulls' eggs which traditionally formed an important part of their diet. By custom, eggs were gathered until mid-June. After this date, the seagulls were given space to breed and care for their young. He observes that today many of the young birds do not survive as they are born much earlier

in the season than was previously the case and the gulls do not breed a second time. He describes the approach to nature conservation on the island as pragmatic rather than ideological, drawing on local knowledge, 'we on the island, we see nature protection pragmatically, we know our nature here, we know what is good and not good... independently of... the regulations' (I_N4). Significantly, reference to 'our nature' here, implies an understanding of nature, as local and place-based rather than global and universal in character. The nature of the island is perceived to belong to the island, reflecting centuries of interaction and meaning-making between the island community and their environment. When the national park administration sought to erect signs along the island shoreline, advertising the national park, the response from the island municipalities was to dig up the signs and send them back to the national park office. The municipalities argued that the boundary of the national park was 300 metres offshore not on the shoreline, 'sure there is a national park, but not there where the signs stood... you can put your signs there, 300 metres from the coast!' (I_N4). The island of Amrum and neighbouring 'Kniepsand' illustrates the dynamic nature of Wadden Sea coastal landscapes. The Kniepsand, today a 10 sq km area of strand extending along the coast of the island, comprises a slowly wandering sandbank (Figures 4 and 5). Historical maps from the 16th century indicate that the sandbank extended out to sea, perpendicular to the coast. In the first half of the twentieth century, it was still possible for ships to moor at the west coast in the shelter of the sand bank. This harbour was finally abandoned in the 1960s. Today, the Kniepsand 'wanders' approximately 50 meters north per year (LKN 2017: 6–7).

Discussions on the nomination of the Wadden Sea as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in subsequent years provided a further platform for acrimonious debates and heated discussion. Specifically, a designation as world *natural* heritage site was perceived as further denial of the rich cultural heritage of the region (Krauß 2005). In the following years, however, the national park administration introduced a number of measures to increase the involvement of local communities in the activities of the park, including the establishment of an interpretative centre managed jointly between the administration and the regional districts of Dithmarschen and Northern Friesland and the recruitment of national park rangers from the local population through an employment scheme. The national park today attracts millions of tourists each year and has thus provided a significant boost to economic activity in the region. Reflecting this, regular surveys among the local population indicate a very high level of acceptance of the national park (Nationalpark Schleswig-Holsteinisches Wattenmeer 2019). Significantly, however, the nature conservation philosophy and ethos of the park have remained largely unchanged. Specifically, the philosophy of 'letting nature be nature' through the protection of natural processes is at the forefront of a recent management strategy aimed at protecting the Wadden Sea landscape from the impacts of climate-change induced sea-level rise, as discussed below.

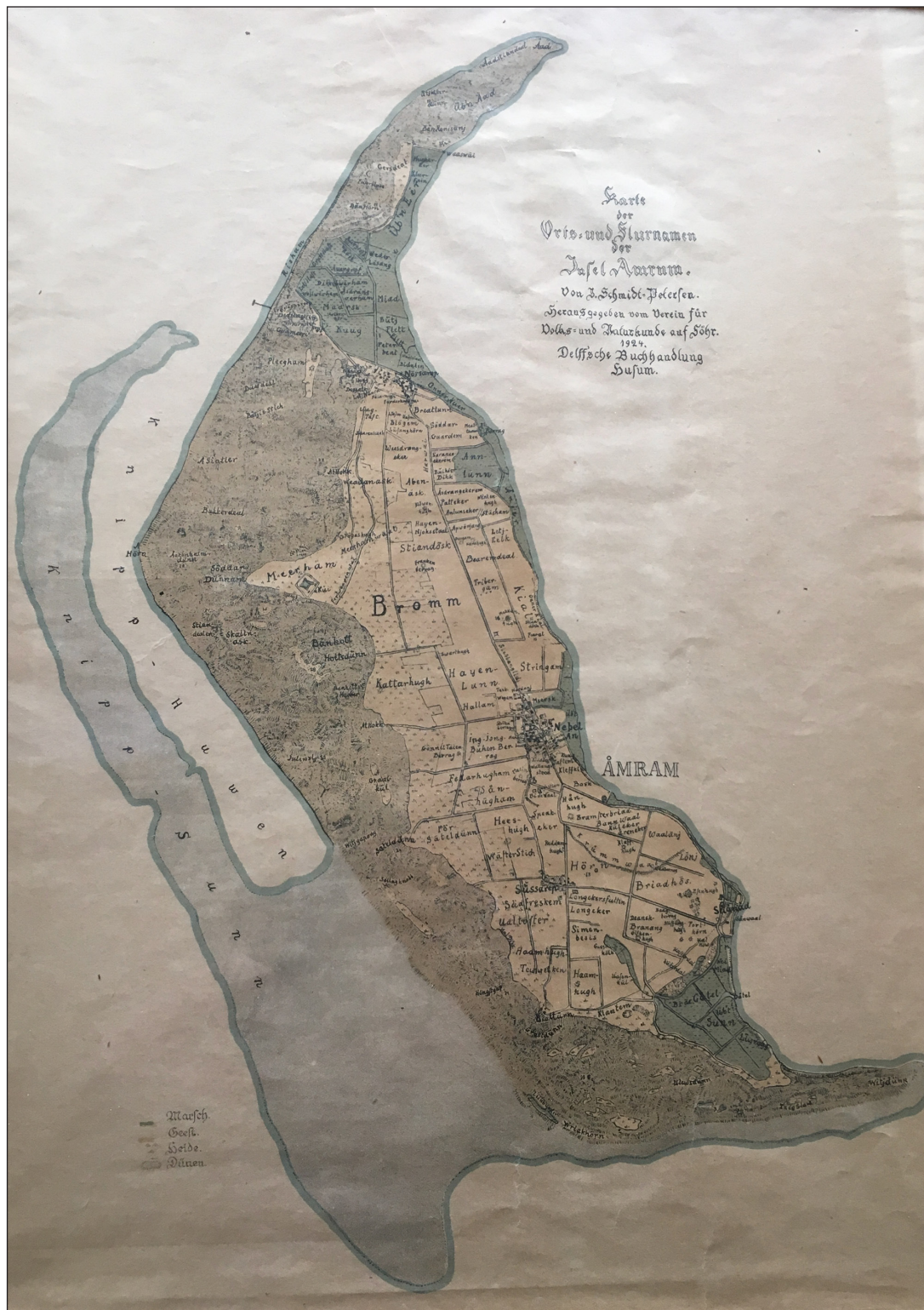


Figure 4: Historical map of the island of Amrum, dating from 1924, depicting the then-current location of the Kniepsand (source: map produced by B. Schmidt-Petersen, 1924, courtesy of Sven Tougaard, Ribe).

6.3. When is an Intervention not an Intervention? Protecting Nature in the Face of Climate Change

In 2015, the Ministry of Environment in Schleswig-Holstein adopted a climate change adaptation strategy for the Wadden Sea in 2015 (MELUR, 2015, hereafter WS2100). The publication of the strategy with a time horizon of 2100 followed an extensive preparation process, involving public sector officials, nature conservation NGOs, scientific

experts and representatives of the Wadden Sea islands. The WS2100 strategy is significant in incorporating coastal protection and nature conservation objectives in a single document. It is also the most substantial statement of policy concerning the Schleswig-Holstein Wadden Sea to emerge in the period since the publication of the Synthesis Report and subsequent revision of national park legislation in the 1990s. Public officials saw the

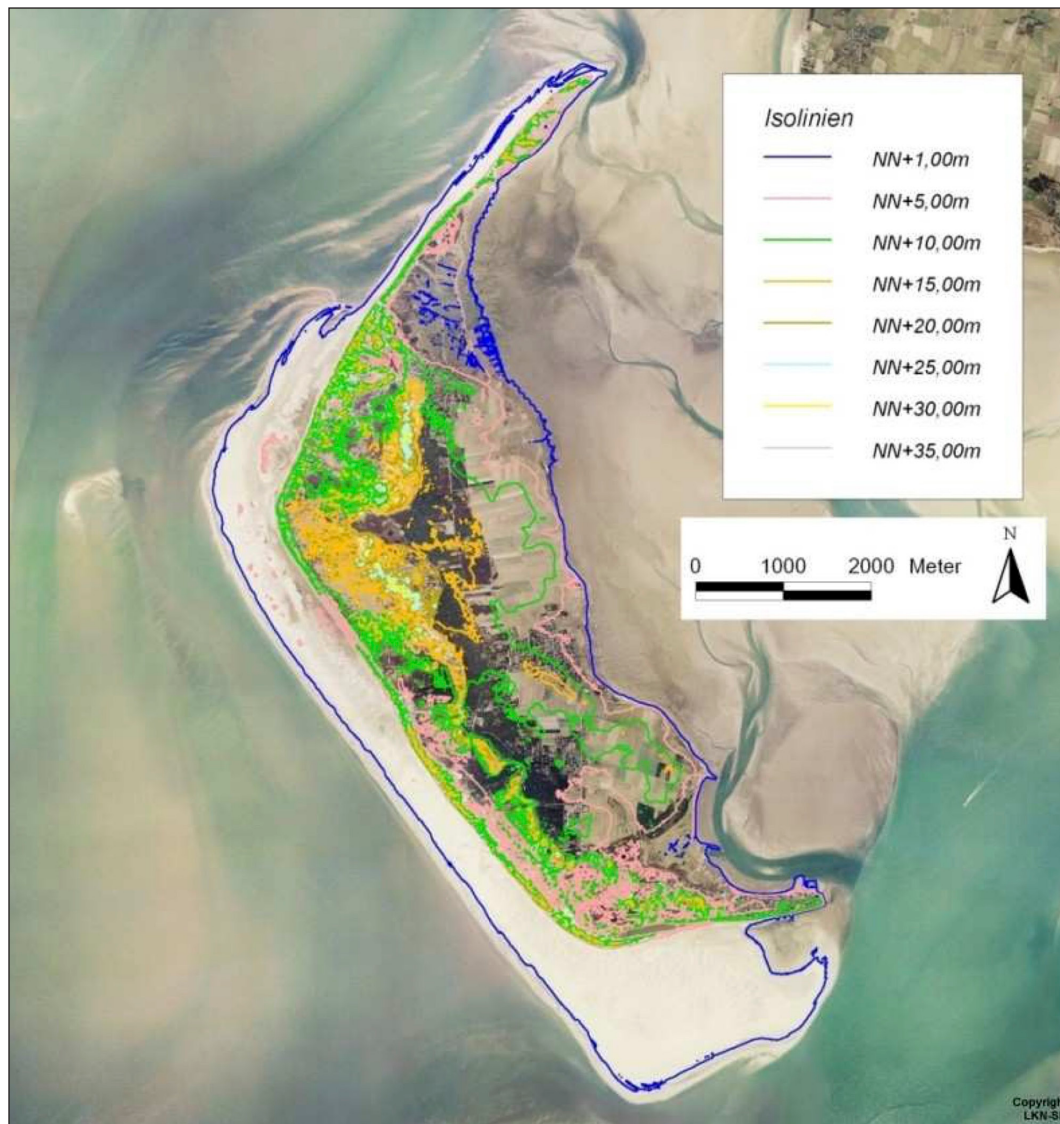


Figure 5: Contemporary map of the island of Amrum with contour isolines, showing the current location of the Kniepsand (source: © Landesbetrieb für Küstenschutz, Nationalpark und Meereschutz Schleswig-Holstein).

opportunity presented by climate change to develop a new policy frame for the future protection of the Wadden Sea, recognising the challenges posed by rising sea levels to both coastal defence and the ecological integrity of the coastal ecosystem. The objectives of coastal protection and nature conservation could be at least rhetorically subsumed within a broader objective of 'protecting the Wadden Sea' (Walsh 2019). This process of reframing required engagement with existing landscape imaginaries of the Wadden Sea coast (Walsh 2018).

In a carefully formulated core statement of the WS2100 strategy, the Wadden Sea region is defined as: 'a unique coastal landscape, an ecosystem characterised by natural dynamics and biological diversity and a unique area of human settlement with a long and varied history... to be protected on a sustainable basis as our *Heimat* (home-place) and as a unique natural space' (MELUR 2015: 12). Thus, in the context of this strategy, multiple framings of the Wadden Sea are explicitly acknowledged. It is framed as a 'space for nature' but also as a landscape inscribed with cultural values. A clear, binary separation

of natural and cultural spheres is nevertheless maintained with cultural values effectively ascribed to the coastal hinterland behind the dikes and inhabited islands only (Walsh 2018). Despite acknowledgment of the potentially calamitous implications of anthropogenic climate change and sea-level rise for the Wadden Sea ecosystem, the conservationists maintained their non-interventionist stance and reliance on natural processes to the greatest extent possible. In a clear statement of process-based protection principles, it is argued that nature should decide:

It is for nature to 'decide' where tidal channels flow, where a sand bank lies or does not lie, if a primary dune grows on the beach... where and how a new island develops' (MELUR 2015, 63).

One interviewee remarks however, that anthropogenic climate change and the identified sediment deficit would require intervention and did pose a challenge to the principles of the national park. 'It was clear there would be

a foundational conflict with the national park idea... And it was clear, when there is a sand deficit, we can only work against the sea level rise when we bring sediment into the whole system... and that of course is a problem when you are super ideologue, a problem with the natural development' (I_N3). Another interviewee, a nature conservationist employed by the national park administration presented an alternative argument: 'Giving up on the idea of letting nature be nature would be when we would say we bring sediment there and heap it up, because we think that is good. That is not the option. The option is the to give the Wadden Sea the possibility to that' (I_N1). Thus, rather than actively bringing additional sediment into the system, the strategy is to rely on natural dynamics to bring sediment to where it is needed. He explains further, 'To put it into pictures, that would maybe mean that a sand depot would be brought to the edge of the Wadden Sea so that it comes into the area where the waves start to carry it and then it is like before' (I_N1). This strategy of depositing sediment 'at the edge of the Wadden Sea' is only possible if one assumes the boundaries of 'the system' are clearly defined and pre-given. In this case, there is clearly a space external to the area of protected nature where sediment deposition is deemed to be non-problematic. A third interviewee, working for a conservation NGO, further specifies the scope for permissible intervention: 'It must only be to compensate that what is caused by sea level rise and nothing more... that what is absolutely necessary and not that what might be "nice to have"' (I_N5). He asserts that it is necessary to stay within the limits of 'letting nature be nature' so as to prevent other actors from using sediment management as a way into a more 'hands on' management of the Wadden Sea. If decisions are made in accordance with objectively determined criteria such as that of the free development of natural processes to the greatest possible extent, then there is no question of negotiation among competing objectives.

By 'letting nature decide', the decision is made outside the realm of societal discourse: 'It is much easier, let's say, to objectivise nature conservation goals when I don't have to make them arbitrarily. Instead when I say... I let nature decide. With all other protection areas, you have the situation that you more or less make decisions arbitrarily.... That should look like how nature at the site was hundred years ago, or 1000 years ago?... That can all be justified, but is still arbitrary and difficult to objectivise' (I_N5). More explicitly, it is argued that the advantage to a national park 'with the guiding principle of natural development' is that discussions on which nature to protect can be avoided: 'We can avoid very many of these debates on whether one would prefer a forest and the other no forest or one would like more oystercatchers and the other black-head gulls. Instead I let the oystercatchers and black-headed gulls have the possibility to 'decide for themselves' how many of them are there' (I_N5).

The conservationists interviewed are nevertheless keen to stress that science alone cannot determine nature conservation objectives: 'Nature protection is normative... we can decide things differently tomorrow. Society decided that in the Wadden Sea area natural processes

should have precedence... that is the reason why society decided to designate [the Wadden Sea] as a National Park and then on top as a World Heritage site' (I_N1). Here it is argued that a societal decision to protect natural dynamics at the Wadden Sea was made in the 1980s with the establishment of the national park and reaffirmed with the WHS designation and that this status must be respected. The fact that this decision was made in a top-down manner against the outspoken opposition of local communities does not feature in this narrative. Protected nature, constructed as external to society is not considered as a legitimate subject of societal debate. Indeed, in this case, the national park administration and conservation NGOs are clearly concerned not to open the discussion to other knowledge claims and ways of knowing Wadden Sea nature. It is noteworthy that although the WS2100 climate adaptation strategy includes a chapter on 'the people in the Wadden Sea region', the text is concerned almost exclusively with the past, detailing aspects of the region's settlement history and experience with periodic storm floods and struggle against the sea (MELUR 2015: 44–47). The absence of any discussion of or reference to future societal changes in a strategy with a time horizon of 2100 further indicates the extent to which issues of nature conservation were treated as external to society (see also Walsh 2018). Indeed, one interviewee, a coastal scientist involved in the process, argued that it was necessary and reasonable to assume for the purposes of the strategy that the legal and regulatory context would not change over the coming century (I_C2).

7. Discussion: On the Implications of Letting Nature Decide

The nature conservation philosophy of the Schleswig-Holstein Wadden Sea National Park centres on the protection of natural dynamics and the free development of nature. Indeed, the national park represents a classic case of a particular tradition of 'letting nature be nature' influenced by ideas of wilderness and non-equilibrium thinking in ecology. Rather than setting defined goals or objectives, it is argued that natural processes should to the greatest extent possible follow their own course, undisturbed by management intervention. The apparent dynamism and openness of this approach is constrained, however by the preservation of a strict separation of nature and culture in conceptual and spatial terms and the insistence on an essentialist categorical interpretation of 'pure nature'. Recognition of the dynamic character of natural processes stands in marked contrast to a stated objective concerned with protection of the 'originality' or primordial character of Wadden Sea nature.

This concept of primordial nature is explained with reference to a fictitious, idealised historical scenario of the Wadden Sea as pure natural landscape, as stated explicitly in the Synthesis Report of 1996. By direct implication, the cultural history of the Wadden Sea as a lived space of interaction between people and the sea is denied. At a more fundamental level, this line of thinking portrays the history of the Wadden Sea landscape and ecosystem as a deviation from a predetermined natural course of

development, governed by natural laws intrinsic to the system, in short, a balanced or at least virtuous state of pure nature, undisturbed by human intervention. In practice, the history of Wadden Sea nature reveals the indeterminacy and contingency characteristic of path-dependent relations between a large range of natural and human factors over a period of thousands of years or more, confounding clear distinctions between natural and non-natural (Reise 2013).

The landscape imaginary underlying conservation efforts at the national park is that of a 'space for nature' set apart from human society and outside the historical narrative of societal development, a heterotopic space, with clearly-defined, fixed geographical boundaries. The coherence and endurance of this landscape imaginary is remarkable, in particular given the extent of opposition to the establishment of the national park in the 1980s and the articulation of alternative ways of knowing and interacting with the nature of the Wadden Sea. The vocal opposition of the local people on the coast and islands and the long-standing need to defend the interests of nature protection in face of efforts to control, manage and tame the destructive impact of 'wild nature' at the coast has led conservationists to adapt a more fundamentalist, ideological stance. It is noteworthy that alternative proposals founded on community engagement and landscape stewardship predate the establishment of the national park, yet have only to a limited extent influenced park management practices to date.

The most recent episode, described above, reveals the degree of continuity in the approach adopted by the conservationists within the national park administration and leading NGOs over a period of more than thirty years. Their complex efforts to frame sediment management required to offset anthropogenic sea-level rise as in accordance with long-held principles of non-intervention rest on an artificial construct, the arbitrary definition of the spatial boundaries of the 'natural system' and on an assumption, or perhaps ideological belief, in the inherent capacity of the Wadden Sea ecosystem to self-regulate, restoring a state of natural balance. In this case, the necessity for climate change adaptation required management intervention. The projected sediment deficit was ascribed to non-natural anthropogenic climate change, thus legitimising the decision to provide external inputs of sediment to the system. The envisaged management scenario, however, entails the fine calibration of quantities of sediment to ensure it compensates for the anthropogenic climate change component of sea-level rise and does not go beyond this. Significant effort is invested here in legitimising conservation actions as 'natural', relying on precise measurements and calibration which may in practice be very difficult to operationalise (see also Walsh 2019).

The claim to 'let nature decide' reflects a desire to maintain a strict separation between nature and society and a desire to minimise or deflect any critique that decisions might be made on a subjective or arbitrary nature. Through the categorical framing of nature protection in ecocentric terms, any rationale for societal discussion

of conservation objectives and practices is dismissed outright. This stance serves to prevent a situation where a compromise might be required between conservation and other societal interests. From this perspective, it may be understood as a form 'strategic essentialism', the mobilisation of essentialist categories for particular ends (Fuss 1990; Spivak 1988). The high level of acceptance of the national park among the local population furthermore must be understood against the background of an absence of meaningful discussion of alternative ways of doing nature protection and managing the Wadden Sea. Nature conservation continues to be framed as a technical activity undertaken by the national park administration under the direction of the state ministry, with limited scope for political debate.

The endurance of a top-down, expert driven approach and essentialist discourse contrasts sharply with the experience of the neighbouring Danish Wadden Sea National Park. In the Danish case, a national park was first established in 2010 following an extensive open-ended consultation process. The work of the national park since its establishment is furthermore characterised by continuous active discussion among a wide group of stakeholders and a partnership-based approach to national park management and implementation (see Jensen & Hansen 2008; Walsh forthcoming).⁵ Although the Schleswig-Holstein National Park is embedded within an institutionalised transboundary cooperation framework, national conservation discourses and policy framings have evidently had a decisive influence on conservation practices within the national park.

8. Conclusions

The case study presented here highlights the persistence of a powerful landscape imaginary of timeless nature, placed outside the realm of society within the context of a modern, north-western European National Park. This static interpretation contrasts sharply with the dynamic nature of the Wadden Sea landscape and the objective of the protecting natural processes. In the context of increasing awareness of the extent of the alarming human influence on planetary ecosystems and biodiversity in the era of the Anthropocene, arguments for strict conservation measures to protect 'what little remaining nature we have left', have increasing appeal (Lorimer 2015). Yet, the act of constructing the object of nature conservation as 'pure, natural landscapes' with a minimum of human disturbance brings with it a denial of the cultural heritage of and diverse socio-cultural meanings ascribed to such places (also Enemark et al. 2018, Walsh & Döring 2018). Placing the how and the why of nature conservation outside of the realm of public debate forecloses the potential for a pluralist, inclusive dialogue on the future of nature-culture relations within and beyond the boundaries of protected areas. There is considerable scope for greater recognition of the multiple reasons why protected landscapes are meaningful to and valued by both local communities and visitors whether as spaces for recreation, sites of aesthetic appreciation or as a source of individual well-being. Acknowledging societal benefits and rationales for conservation need not lead to

a reductionist or monetised anthropocentric perspective. Moving beyond strategic essentialisms may, however, require a greater level of negotiation among competing claims to the landscape, potentially opening the door to environmentally harmful practices. On the other hand, opportunities for improving natural values (however defined) and promoting sustainable practices within and beyond the protected area boundary may increase. Indeed it is increasingly recognised that resource users are more likely to support conservation efforts when their concerns are met and they are included within management and planning processes (e.g. Aswani et al. 2017; Ferse et al. 2010). Classifying human intervention as inherently problematic precludes the development of community-based stewardship, based on a relational ethics of care (Liburd & Becken 2017, West et al. 2018). Indeed, it may be argued that large-scale protected areas have a pivotal role and responsibility in fostering constructive dialogue and the emergence of alternative paradigms of society-environment relations. Within the context of prevailing universalising narratives of the Anthropocene, it is imperative to recognise that nature conservation practices are culturally and historically situated, embedded within the evolving context of dynamic land and seascapes. The severity, urgency and interconnectedness of global environmental challenges notwithstanding, it may be argued that at a fundamental level, nature continues to sit in places.

Notes

- ¹ International Union for the Conservation of Nature, established in 1948.
- ² The other four national parks (NPs) are as follows: Lower Saxony Wadden Sea NP (DE), Hamburg Wadden Sea NP (DE), Schiermonnikoog (NL), Dunes of Texel NP (NL), and Danish Wadden Sea NP (DK). The Hamburg, Schiermonnikoog and Texel NPs are very small scale, comprising individual islands only.
- ³ The 1652 map of the medieval cartographer Johannes Mejer is not regarded to provide a precise depiction of the coastline. His and related historical maps have nevertheless played a significant role in the construction of a spatial imaginary of the Wadden Sea as a drowned cultural landscape.
- ⁴ A conservative movement originating in the nineteenth century focused on the preservation of idyllic cultural landscapes as a manifestation of a particular cultural identity (Piechocki 2010: 157–159). Landscape was understood in this context as representing an idealised, harmonious and organic relationship between people and their land, the physical manifestation of a way of life under threat from industrialisation, urbanisation and materialism (Trepl & Voigt 2014: 217).
- ⁵ A more detailed discussion of the Danish Wadden Sea National Park is beyond the scope of this paper.

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Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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