

Linde Egberts and Meindert Schroor (eds.). *Waddenland Outstanding. History, landscape and cultural heritage of the Wadden Sea Region*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018, 340p.

David Koren¹

¹ University of Leiden, Leiden, Netherlands

Corresponding author: David Koren (david020koren@yahoo.co.uk)

Received 3 October 2019 | Accepted 30 December 2019 | Published 8 May 2020

'Waddenland Outstanding' is a book about a region that doesn't actually exist and neither does it have a generally accepted name. Nevertheless, the Wadden Sea region is the largest area of embanked coastal marshes anywhere in the world, belonging to three European countries: Denmark, Germany and the Netherlands. This vast and unbroken system of intertidal sand and mud flats with natural processes undisturbed throughout most of its area, is perhaps only comparable to the Banc d'Arguin area in Mauretania (which is much smaller).

No integrated studies about the various aspects of this extensive wetland region have appeared for a long time. You could, however, also view this book as a second synthesis, some twenty years after Ludwig Fischer (Hrsg.).¹ Both research and policy were directed to the national territories – of which the Wadden Sea region in all three countries – nowadays - belong to the absolute periphery.

But things slowly started to change with the nomination process and actual placement of the area in 2009 as *natural* heritage on the World Heritage List of UNESCO. At first, the site comprised solely the Dutch and German part of the area, by far the biggest part, but the remaining Danish part was added in 2014. This designation of the area changed the perspective on the Wadden Sea and triggered awareness about the interconnectedness of the entire region. However, the actual delimitation is solely based on the sea territory and stops at the dykes of the mainland and at the shore of the islands. Although the initial registration of the Wadden Sea region as natural heritage seemingly makes sense, it leaves the clearly visible cultural aspects undisturbed. Editors Linde Egberts and Meindert Schroor address this imperfection in their introductory chapter, and it is actually one of the key issues in this book.

The book stems from the first international conference on the Wadden Sea that only took place in 2016 (!) in Husum, Germany. The 23 chapters are based upon the papers of scientists who participated in this conference. It brings together an interdisciplinary and transboundary ongoing research, by researchers from a wide span of disciplines and from all three countries. Schroor states that the lack of historical and geographical knowledge causes the undervaluation of the area by the separate populations. He sees a shared identity as a precondition for conserving, developing and enhancing the World Heritage label. Historical geographer Hans Renes questions the artificial border between the nature and culture and argues that the present registration is hindering an integral management of the area. He pleads for a redefinition of the Wadden Sea region as a *cultural* landscape including the islands *and* the coastal areas. In his opinion, this is a necessary step towards an integral approach that incorporates the many challenges the region is facing.

Hans-Ulrich Rösner even nuances that some cultural landscapes can be found *within* the natural landscape of the actual Wadden Sea and that - vice versa - some cultural landscapes, like old grasslands, are very rich in natural values. This author also calls for greater cooperation between the sectors of nature and culture. Challenges faced by both sectors include, for example, climate change and the rising sea level. A possible solution for one sector could be found within the other, for instance the allocation of retention areas in cultural landscapes. Simple one-sided solutions like raising the dikes are no longer suitable options.

The subdivision of the book into 5 themes may seem a bit artificial, but it provides some distinctive angles to analyze the region. For instance, the section about 'Mem-

ory, mentality and landscape' offers interesting perspectives on Dutch diking techniques, living in the marshes of the Danish-German border region, but also on the mythological Frisian past that is actually most 'recognizable' in the partially surviving language. Besides the Dutch province of Fryslân (Fryisia) where Frisian is recognized as the (official) prime language, it is still spoken within small pockets of eastern Fryisia (Saterland) and northern Fryisia, making Frisian a unique and potentially unifying cultural property of this region.

Significantly, this section also makes a reference to a dark page in the cultural history of the area. Nina Hinrichs examines the interpretations of art work depicting the Wadden Sea during the period of National Socialism, but leaves - surprisingly - the dark past of the German and 'Jew-free' island of Borkum unmentioned. The island actually had one of the highest percentages of voters for the Nazi party, not surprising when one takes into account the long history and tradition of anti-Semitism on the island. This was symbolized for instance by the 'Borkum-song' that was sung every day and stated that Jews were not welcome at the beach and had to leave the island (a use that was imitated on Wangerooze).²

The position of the region in broader historical context is analyzed in the section about 'history and archaeology'. Demographic developments, insularity, shipping, maritime history and its traces in the landscape are setting the stage for the final papers on the political, economic and social challenges for management of cultural heritage. Martin Döring and Beate Ratter insightfully offer a more humanistic approach in order to grasp the cultural identity of the area, but also indicating a holistic approach towards the landscape. The cultural landscape and the sense

of place and belonging are (also) based on rather abstract properties instead of the physical or material heritage.

So far, so good. Aren't there any downsides with respect to this volume? Because there are more than 20 contributors, there is sometimes a slight overlap in information concerning basic facts. Some chapters are a bit descriptive due to the necessity to outline certain developments. The cartographic support is basic but adequate. Therefore, the book is best read in conjunction with "De Bosatlas van de Wadden", which was also published in 2018.³ Although sadly only available in Dutch, many maps and pieces of information speak for themselves. Another drawback of this book is the lack of attention to the influence of thousands (and growing numbers) of tourists who visit the region each year. Attention to the human factor only takes account of the fixed population without considering tourists or other temporary visitors.

But these are minor quibbles. The key issue nature-culture is addressed spot on and approached from different angles. Most contributions don't exceed 15 pages and are therefore easy to read. The different sections and chapters offer a wide variety of topics that sometimes ask for further exploration or more research. This makes the book a worthwhile purchase for both scientists, policy makers and other people with a keen interest in this dynamic and special region. In the concluding chapter Egberts argues that this book offers an integrative counterweight to the dominant nature conservation discourse and this proves to be correct. But for Egberts this book is rather a step to trigger interest among natural scientists for the human aspect of the Wadden area and to lay a solid basis for research projects, reflections and case studies that approach the interrelated natural and cultural qualities of the Wadden Sea region as mutually reinforcing.

Endnotes

1. Ludwig Fischer, Hrsg., *Kulturlandschaft Nordseemarschen* (Hever 1997).
2. Yad Vashem Studies Vol. XXVIII, Jerusalem 2000, pp. 7–50.
3. *De Bosatlas van de Wadden* (Groningen 2018).