The first steps have been taken

Sytze Braaksma (in the middle) has been working for the Ministry of Economic Affairs, Agriculture and Innovation (formerly Ministry of Agriculture, Nature Conservation and Fishery) for years, trying to ensure that factual information about the Wadden Sea area forms the basis for new policies.

I got this job as a policy advisor on the one hand because of my expertise in the field and because I impart this expertise in the policy-making process, and on the other hand because I made the right choices at the right moments and had a bit of luck. Before I got this job, I worked for Staatsbosbeheer (Dutch Forestry Commission) for ten years, carrying out survey work in their conservation areas, such as vegetation and bird surveys, mammals catching (using live traps!), butterfly surveys etc.

In the early 1990s, I switched to policy-making, especially in the field of nature conservation and water-related fields. When the Wadden Dossier was passed from the North directorate of the Ministry of Agriculture to the environmental directorate, this important field required more staff and I became more and more involved in this policy area.

It is, of course, quite a challenge to be working in a field as unique as the Wadden Sea area. At the time, tensions between conservation associations and fishermen were rising. This was not the main reason for me to decide to devote my time to Wadden Sea policies, but it did increase my awareness of the importance of making policies based on factual information. I had noticed before that although people were constantly collecting data and doing research, whenever you asked a question, there was always someone who felt that the data were unsuitable or insufficient for answering your question.

And yet, you cannot do without data, even if it is only to reflect the current state of the Wadden Sea. Although some trilateral action was taken to protect mudflats, birds and the environment, new questions kept coming up that could not be answered. Many of these questions were about the relation between developments in the fields of flora and fauna and changes in the marine environment.

These questions also came up while drawing up a conservation plan as part of the Natura 2000 project, which required data for setting realistic objectives. In brief, as soon as I heard about plans to find possible gaps in our data and improve the way these data are collected, I was keen to get involved. Now, several institutes have set up a plan, named WaLTER (Wadden Sea Long-Term Ecosystem Research) and their request for funding has been granted by the Waddenfonds.

We must now start by answering the following questions: what basic data are required (for example for process studies but also in the social sphere); what kinds of experiments are required (in combination with current or new research projects); on what scale should these data be collected, and how can they be linked to existing monitoring projects and to other long-term projects at home or abroad. In addition to all this, it is essential that the data collected are made available to all parties in a uniform way. This is only a short summary of what has happened and of what is going to happen, and it is good that the first steps have now been taken. Now we must make every effort to carry out this project so that we will benefit from it in the future.

Sytze Braaksma, policy advisor

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