Unique monitoring in the Eemshaven

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At a rapid rate, the Eemshaven is being developed into an Energy Harbour by Groningen Seaports. On the eastern side, two centres are under construction (Nuon and RWE), and plans for a third centre are on the table (Eemsmond Energy). On the western side, a terminal is being built for strategic oil storage. Sites for the support of marine windfarm construction are also being set up. To enable these developments, the enlargement of the harbour is essential and includes an extension and deepening of the harbour basins; a deepening and broadening of the access channel is also necessary.

Because of the close vicinity to the vulnerable Wadden Sea, it is of great importance that any effects of these new projects on the surrounding area are brought to light. To complete the licensing process, nature that occurs in and around the Eemshaven has been compensated. Together with other companies, Groningen Seaports has facilitated the addition of more than 50 hectares of nature reserve in the western part of the Emma polder north of Uithuizen, adjoining the existing Ruidhorn nature reserve. This is intended for the nesting and foraging of wading birds. Nearby, an additional 20 hectares of outer-dike salt marsh have been reopened to grazing with the aim of increasing biodiversity. Finally, as marine compensation for the loss of seabed area, an agreement has been reached to end shrimp fisheries in the Dollart.

In addition, as a result of the going through the permit procedures, it has become apparent that for the Wadden Sea area, despite much directed research many gaps in knowledge remain. Moreover, for both entrepreneurs and authorities, it is still unclear what knowledge is lacking, where it is to be found, and what the value of it would be. The Dutch Law on Environmental Protection requires relevant licensing authorities to prescribe a monitoring programme that measures resulting impacts of a project. This sometimes includes guidelines to monitor aspects that cannot be measured and legal considerations often result in monitoring that is set up in such a way that the results support the licensing requirements. Such judicial monitoring programmes are not aimed at a broadening of knowledge but at the maintaining of permits.

To the environment, it would be more beneficial in the realisation of any licensed project to prescribe new research obligations, which, based on previously conducted research, augment the general knowledge of the area and benefit future projects. This could then be considered 'environmentally-led' monitoring. It is important that the (numerous) managers of the area recognise that with an environmentally-led monitoring programme, every effort should be made to maximise the efficient use of resources.

Groningen Seaports has, together with a number of companies in the Ems estuary, initiated a unique monitoring programme in the Ems delta. It includes intensive bird counts, research into the effects of construction on marine mammals, research into the development of the seabed following the cessation of fisheries, and a comprehensive programme to measure the effects resulting from the redistribution of dredged aggregate.

The effort will only have been worthwhile once gleaned information has been submitted and can serve as a basis for the gathering of further knowledge on the unique Wadden Sea system. It is absolutely necessary that existing knowledge is built on, by making monitoring aimed at increasing worthwhile research a requirement for new permits. Improved knowledge will result in a better steering of management. WalTER could play an important roll herein.