World Tourism Day – How sustainable tourism in the Wadden Sea brings income and conserves vital wetlands

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Denmark (Greenland)
Germany
Netherlands

The Wadden Sea extends over three countries, the Netherlands, Germany and Denmark and is one of the largest tourist destinations in Europe.

The potential of tourism to support the conservation of wetlands has long been underestimated. With increasing trend for nature-based tourism, World Tourism Day offers an opportunity to underline the importance of the Ramsar Convention’s mission to protect the world’s most important wetlands and consider how sustainable tourism can support it.

International tourism is expected to rise to 1.8 billion by 2030. Domestic tourism is even more significant with estimates pointing to 4 billion domestic tourists worldwide.

Economic activity generated by travel and tourism creates around 5% of global GDP and supports an estimated 6-7% of the world’s jobs.

With half of all international tourists travelling to wetlands, especially to beaches in coastal areas, and the additional value of domestic tourism and recreational day trips, the economic value of wetland tourism is enormous.

Wetlands are amongst the most productive of the world’s ecosystems, providing a range of services that sustain our lives. These include ‘cultural’ services, such as the aesthetic, recreational and spiritual values found in many wetlands. It is these services, in part, that explain why wetlands are such popular tourist destinations, attracting millions of visitors each year.

The Wadden Sea is an example that well-managed, sustainable tourism generates an important income for local populations and at the same time contributes to wetland conservation and sustainable use.

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It is one of the largest unbroken systems of intertidal sand
This outstanding wetland ecosystem is the largest Transboundary Ramsar Site and it consists of 13 sites:

- **In Denmark - Vadehavet**
- **In Germany - Hamburgisches Wattenmeer, Schleswig-Holstein Wadden Sea and adjacent areas, Wattenmeer, Elbe-Weser-Dreieck, Wattenmeer, Jadebusen & westliche Wesermundung and Wattenmeer, Ostfriesisches Wattenmeer & Dollart**
- **In the Netherlands - North Sea Coastal Area, Waddenzee, Duinen en Lage land Texel, Duinen Vlieland, Duinen Terschelling, Duinen Ameland and Duinen Schiermonnikoog**

For more than 30 years the governments of the Wadden Sea countries work together on trans-boundary nature conservation to the benefits of present and future generation. The Wadden Sea area has been at the centre of the [Trilateral Wadden Sea Cooperation](#) since 1982.

**Key statistics**

The Wadden Sea boasts some impressive statistics in terms of tourism, wildlife and environment.

- **10 million tourists** visit the Wadden Sea per year with about 50 million overnight stays and **30-10 million day-trippers** every year
- **€ 3-5 billion** estimated yearly turnover of tourism in the Wadden Sea region
- **6 million migratory birds** can be present at the same time in the Wadden Sea, and an average of **10-12 million** pass through it autumn and spring every year

Tourism benefits from conservation policies as visitors expect intact nature and conservation measures. The Wadden Sea is protected and managed as one ecological entity and there is a consistent approach to tourism operations within the area. Tourism is the main source of income and contributes significantly to sustaining local employment.

The cooperation between tourism and conservation has been strengthened through voluntary agreements and by participating in partnership programmes. In order to avoid negative impacts of tourism specific management...
The Wadden Sea area has been at the centre of the Trilateral Wadden Sea Cooperation since 1982. Frameworks are in place in all three states to regulate recreational activities; for example visitor information and guidance, zoning, closure of sensitive areas, and guided walks.

The Wadden Sea would not have achieved its current protection status, including 13 Ramsar Sites, national parks and World Heritage Site status, if millions of tourists had not been educated over time in the information centres and guided tours about its significant natural values. For centuries, the value of the Wadden Sea was mainly seen as potential agriculture land, which needed to be reclaimed. Significant parts of the Netherlands and Northern Germany are former mudflats and saltmarshes which were embanked. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, conservation organizations campaigned against the last embankment plans in Northern Germany. Once politicians realized the value of the Wadden Sea for both nature and tourism, plans were changed and protected areas established.

The Wadden Sea example has a potential to be reproduced in the Yellow Sea of Korea and China where internationally important tidal flats for the East Asian-Australasian Flyway of coastal birds are under severe pressure. It is an example to inspire other countries around the world.

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**Linking Tourism & Conservation (LT&C)** Tourism is a worldwide economic driver and in particular in coastal regions. This implies a major societal responsibility for the protection of nature and protected areas. LT&C is an important initiative to demonstrate examples from around the world regarding how tourism is meeting this responsibility. And it can illustrate the win-win potential of partnerships between conservation and tourism