Towards Sustainable Development: The Cultural Dynamics of the Wadden Sea

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My article addresses the cultural dynamics of the Wadden Sea coastal region as a central feature of planning and managing sustainable development. My intention is to convey a number of insights and perspectives garnered in the course of my anthropological enquiry for the on-going research project 'Nature in Conflict: Nature Protection, the Concept of Nature, and Coastal Images' (1). In the following I shall attempt

- to develop an adequate concept of culture
- to bring to light the cultural dimension of the implementation of nature protection strategies in Schleswig-Holstein's Wadden Sea region
- to advance a number of proposals on 'sustainable best practice'

Culture as Practice

Culture plays only a marginal role in the elaboration of nature protection strategies and sustainable development initiatives in the sphere of coastal research. In general, the term 'culture' is used as a heading under which archaeological and historical monuments seen as worthy of conservation and as possible listed sites tend to be grouped together. In favourable circumstances, so-called traditional practices of coastal populations are added to such a classification, all of which are understood in terms of classical folklore and local history. This often leads to the emergence of a somewhat historicist or folkloric representation of locals, which tends to demote such populations to the status of pre-modern 'indigenous people' or else to mere objects of state bureaucracy.

In contrast to this approach, the anthropological notion of culture is neither conservationist nor static; rather, culture is conceived of as a practice, and indeed as a continual process. Historically speaking, culture in coastal regions has always tended to be marked by co-operative or antagonistic relationships to nature. At the same time, it has always been characterised by the interplay of (trans)national, regional and local forces, between autonomy and dependence - whether in the form of reclaiming land from the sea, coastal protection or today's nature protection drive. As such, it is impossible to speak of *the* culture of the coastal area in general, but

rather of a set of cultural dynamics in a continually changing web of power relations, with permanent transformation as the sole constant.

Anthropological research investigates how cultural identities emerge, how given groupings manage to demarcate themselves externally and to establish coherent inner profiles, and how nodal points in the network of power relations which shape and administer the coastal region evolve over time. We are currently experiencing an enormous societal shift in this region, which is characterised by a 'Europeanisation' and the growing primacy of the nature protection lobby. While our present state of knowledge of the dynamics of Wadden Sea's ecosystems is fairly broad, we remain largely ignorant of societal processes under way in the coastal realm which have been triggered by this paradigm change. In order to protect Wadden Sea and to ensure sustainable development, it is indispensable to extend knowledge and improve awareness of these cultural dynamics. This is of particular import, because in the relationship between man and nature a cultural dimension is always evident.

Nature in Conflict

The founding of the 'Schleswig Holstein Wadden Sea National Park' typifies the whole transformation of the coastal region, with nature conservation attaining a new high profile besides that already established by coastal protection. New networks and institutions are emerging in the slipstream of the powerful ecological discourse, with European rulings and their national implementation replacing this coastal region within the hub of transnational flows and power relations. The clichés of globalisation and Europeanisation are assuming concrete form in specific locales, often in economically and geographically peripheral regions, and frequently via nature protection (s. Krauss 2001). The same is true of coastal municipalities, where the whole pattern of social organisation is changing before our very eyes: local dyke and coastal protection agencies have lost influence, the use of the Wadden Sea has become increasingly subject to administrative dictate, hunting rights have been restricted, and the role of dyke and sluice associations is expected to shift. In sum, the existence of institutions committed to the organisation of social life has been called into question. Dealing with such far-reaching change is proving to be a massive challenge for local municipalities.

The conflicts inevitably emerging on the back of such transformation are especially visible - often in stereotypical form - in the confrontations surrounding the national

park, which has polarised opinion among the coastal population. A protest poster still visible in Eiderstedt is a reminder of this turbulent period of the most recent past:

(Picture protest poster)(2) 'Eco-Dictatorship – No thanks. God created the sea and the Friesians the coast'.

From today's vantage point, a somewhat ironical reading of such a slogan tends towards the conclusion that both sides in this confrontation made use of fundamentalist arguments. It is of course easy to demonstrate that it was not only the Friesians who created the coast, but a complex conglomerate of (trans)national economic and political interests and local endeavours. It is nonetheless just as easy to prove that while the nature protection lobby is certainly very well informed on matters concerning the Wadden Sea, it is far from being privy to God's building plans - even if conservationists and scientists do often succumb to the temptation of deriving immediate blueprints and templates for social action from the matrix of nature. The explosive force of such fundamentalist methods of argumentation ought not to be underestimated: conflicts surrounding the actual definition of nature at the supposed virgin state and uses to be made thereof initially tend to lead to the formation of groupings that subsequently play up their differences at public hearings so as to better demarcate their own respective identities. By such a stage, nature itself has long ceased to be the central concern of such discourse; at stake, rather, is the legitimacy of the various institutions involved and their respective demands.

Aside from the plethora of rulings, scenarios and plans that tend to pile up on mayoral bed-side tables, the much-hyped notion of a 'Europe of Regions' remains something of a faceless phantom, devoid of any palpable symbolism. Europe styles itself as a form of anti-politics machine (Ferguson 1990) - and in this way actually generates the conflicting discourses and camps. Yet beyond the frequently populist public outpourings in reaction to a process of unpredictable social change, a surprising degree of common ground is in evidence. In fact, a real concern about the future of the Wadden Sea area is uppermost on everyone's agenda; in other words, there exists a genuine desire for sustainable development that can benefit all parties involved.

Conflict Strategies

Amongst other things anthropological fieldwork focuses on the difference between public discourse and the actual actions of those involved. In everyday practice,

political and conflict management strategies obviously contradict official public posturing and propaganda. In the so-called '1000 metre talks', agreements were concluded between individual municipalities and the national park authorities that were acceptable to both parties. Discussing a concrete individual case, an exception to the rule was able to be established and sensible practice allotted a higher role than respect for general principles. Traditional use of protected areas was partially sanctioned, and beaches put aside for the use of tourists in order to conserve the social and economic infrastructure of the municipalities, etc. Striking compromises in this way is not always such an easy business, but where it is able to be achieved, it is creating a basis for trust between the various actors.

In other cases, working groups have been set up allowing all parties to a conflict to meet on a regular basis and to negotiate related problems. Necessary decisions are here made via consensus, majority decision-making being excluded. Such a practice requires a willingness on the part of all those involved to move beyond entrenched prejudices and to accommodate others, while exchanging and listening to opposing viewpoints. In this way, participants are able to gain an insight into the constraints and obligations with which their opposite numbers are faced. The advantage of such working groups is that they allow for concrete everyday factors to be taken into account, and for more informal solutions to be sought and agreements to be reached. The anonymity of administrative measures is thus able to be sidelined for a short span and, in the place of official representatives, actors with personal attributes begin to take shape. In other words, individuals emerge who enter into diverse relationships and learn to size one another up over the course of time; specific rituals arise whose significance ought not to be underestimated. During the working groups which I was able to attend, tea and cake had become a veritable institution and at the end of the meetings there was the obligatory round of *Pharisäer*.

Summary

As shown by the above examples, beneath the surface of the polarising discourses, a political practice has evolved which offers lines of approach for 'sustainable best practice' in regard to the future shaping of the coastal region. Relations among individuals and human-nature relations are inextricably linked together. Omitting this fact would be a clear-cut shortcoming of future plans and scenarios for the sustainable development of the coastal region.

Administrations make use of scientific scenarios and models, which themselves are of course cultural artefacts. However, this coalition also conceals a certain danger: both science and public bureaucracies are systems which are forever extending their sway over the objects of their enquiry. Yet the goal of sustainable development is not synonymous with total control over human and non-human processes, but rather aimed at the well-being of given individuals in specific environments. Incorporating the cultural dimension into scenarios would, above all, thus signify that such scenarios reflect their very own cultural drafting and societal characteristics - an admittedly difficult undertaking. In the interim, it might be worthwhile bearing in mind the following policy prescriptions:

- Where transformation appears to be the only constant, conflict is unavoidable. Conflicts are not mere anomalies in societal processes - quite the contrary. Conflicts are necessary and, as such, the point is not to seek to quell them, but to shape them in a productive manner.

- It is preferable to negotiate individual phenomena rather than the 'whole package', that is, rather than nature or culture as supposedly global qualities. Specific human and non-human phenomena will need to be placed in relation on each separate occasion.

- Culture and nature are not opposing units; rather, they are always bound up in a relationship of mutuality. There exist metaphorical coastal images, scientific models or planning scenarios that are more exact or capable of eliciting consensus than others - there are simply no absolute truths outside of dialogic processes.

- Distrust is occasionally also something of a virtue and always an appropriate stance whenever policies or decisions are to be made 'in the name of nature' or of an essentialist culture.

- It always makes sense to develop and re-evaluate common goals on an on-going basis so as to make full use of the available potential for agreement in any given situation. At the same time of course, one should never lose sight of one's own interests - no one behaves in a purely altruistic fashion, be it in academia, economy or politics.

- Pride, honour and respect are basic human traits, and politics is always produced by individual human beings. Scenarios, models and plans will, in the final analysis, need to pass the test of practice. Even if cultural dynamics are difficult to forecast,

they cannot simply be overlooked: drinking tea and eating cake together is by no means the least promising way of exploring the basis for 'sustainable best practice'.

Literature:

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