

Coastal Environment Made Public

Notes from the Field

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The environment of my fieldwork site consists of a tidal flat, plants, animals, people and other things. It's a coastal environment, and a contested one. Contested among locals, conservationists and nonhuman actors, too. I have conducted my fieldwork on environmental conflicts in the district of Northern Friesland since at least 1986, when it was declared a national park, called the National Park Schleswig-Holstein Wadden Sea.

My main fieldwork site is called the Hamburger Hallig. A *Hallig* is a very small island with a minimum of coastal protection. *Halligs* are leftovers from the horrible storm tides of former centuries, when large parts of the mainland were washed into the sea and disappeared. There are only a few houses on a *Hallig*, if there are any at all. They are built on dwelling mounds – small artificial hills maybe 5 meters above sea level, surrounded by land. The Hamburger Hallig is completely flooded up to 60 times a year. You can bet that climate change and the forecasted rise of the sea level is bad news here, as it is all along the North Sea's coast.

The Hamburger Hallig is a special case because it is connected to the mainland by a bank or dam built in the nineteenth century. Through morphological processes, sediments were deposited along the bank, which led to the evolution of salt meadows. You can walk, ride your bike or even drive your car along this bank, through the salt meadows to the *Hallig* with its two houses – except when a stormy tide is coming: Then the water rushes towards the mainland, flooding everything on the *Hallig* but the houses on the dwelling mound. You never know exactly where the land begins and the sea ends, or vice versa, not to mention where nature begins and culture ends.

As part of my fieldwork, I used to take a walk from the mainland to the *Hallig*. Coming from the hinterland, you have first to drive through seem-

ingly endless marshlands to the dike. Standing on the dike, you see Hallig House on the horizon, 5 kilometers away, between the bank and the salt meadows. It's only at the end of the walk that you finally reach the sea.

Endless skies. Cloud formations. And wind, most of the time. Strong winds. Salty air. Constructed landscape: You see historical trenches for sedimentation. Where sheep are allowed to graze, you see short green grass. The rest is pure, wild, salt meadow; in summer it's made colorful by flowers.

Birds, lots of them. Flocking birds, flying geometrical formations, as if created by mad scientists. In spring and autumn you see thousands of wild geese, resting and feeding on their journey from Africa to Siberia and back. Thousands of them.

At the beginning of your walk you might meet the shepherd. An angry young man, always in conflict with conservationists, who have forced him out of two-thirds of the salt meadows. He nearly drowned some years ago, rescuing some lambs in a rising storm tide.

Halfway to the *Hallig* there is a dwelling mound bearing a small log cabin maintained by bird conservationists. They were here long before the national park, since the 1930s. Volunteers live here during summer, monitoring bird life for the national park, explaining birds to the visitors, living a life without electricity in no man's land.

Walking on, you have a lot of time to exercise some Heidegger, to think about dwelling and the coming into being of "things" such as an environment, or else about your lousy financial situation. It's only you and the sky and the wind, and maybe some tourists, too. But shortly before getting tired or reaching a higher state of consciousness about the environment, you might run into a sign post that conservationists have installed



"The Wadden Sea is a livelihood for the fishermen and not a playground for researchers," demonstration in Buesum, Dithmarschen, photo: Hendrik Brunckhorst, 1996

"Eco-Dictatorship - No thanks! 'God created the sea, the Friesian the coast'," permanent sign of protest in the marshlands, near Westerhever, photo: Martin Doering, 2001

in the middle of the way: This is a nature trail with information panels reminding you that you are walking through a unique ecosystem of global value.

Maybe you will meet the biologist from the national park administration. He is famous for being able to read nature like a book, and he is good at telling stories. Once he tried to approach a herd of wild geese, which are very shy. As he was stealing through the mud, they suddenly sensed his presence; thousands rose to the sky and covered him in their excrement.

His career is closely linked to the geese; he and his colleagues have followed them to Siberia, where conservationists helped to establish another national park. Farmers here and in Siberia used to kill the geese, which are competitors for pasture land on one hand and food for hungry people on the other. Thanks to the ecologists, the wild geese recovered and are today numerous. But the geese are not very grateful: Some of them discovered the fields on the land side of the dike and prefer the plants of the industrial monocultures to the natural plants of wild salt meadows, thus destroying farmers' fields.

Finally, after passing the houses on the *Hallig* and reaching the sea, maybe you will run into the farmer's wife. She takes a swim there almost every day, three seasons of the year. She climbs down

the small dike to get into the water and complains about having to take care not to step on goose excrement. To take a swim here you have to be in good condition – this is, after all, the North Sea. Both tourists and locals like this place and defend it not only for sentimental reasons but also because of its importance for coastal protection. They defend it against the ecologists and other thoughtless researchers.

The traditional house on the *Hallig* has been carefully restored; a local landlord runs the restaurant. He is obliged by the government to provide information about the national park. The *Hallig House* is an important symbol for all the conflicting parties; here I attended many meetings, reunions, workshops, public festivities. If it is a public event, the representatives go outside and fly the flags. They need three flagpoles for this: one for the flag of the national park, one for that of the district, and one for that of the federal state. Flag fittings jangling in the strong wind, great sound, sublime feelings. Mocking seagulls.

After everything is said and done, a traditional drink is served: a shot of whiskey in coffee, topped with cream and called a *Pharisee*. You could translate the word as "hypocrite"; after all, this is a Protestant region. Somebody pronounces a toast, and the anthropologist strolls home, his notebook full of field notes.

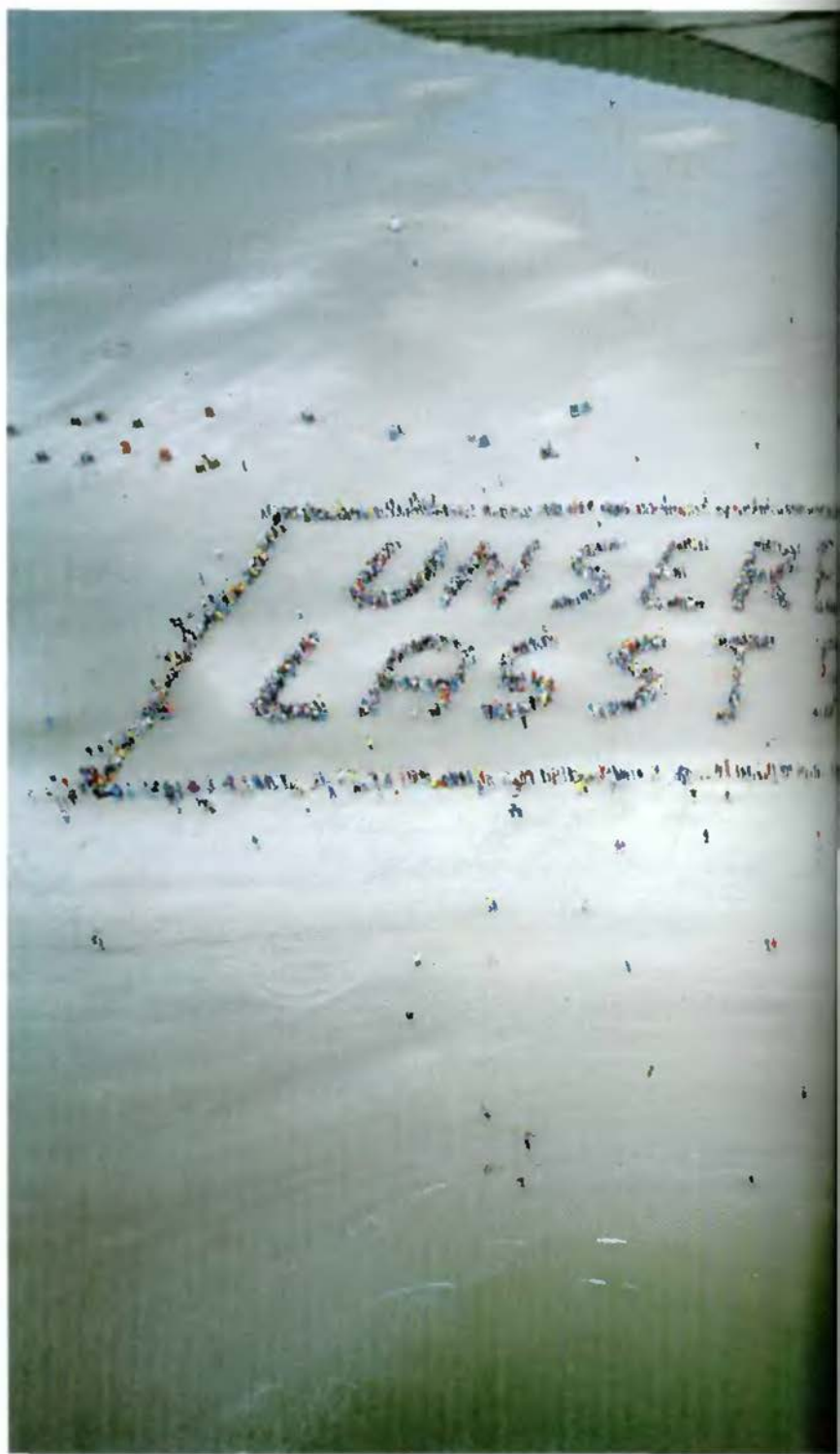




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■ "Our North Sea let her live," protest in Amrum, 1988