

Speech by the Minister of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality, Dr Cees Veerman on receiving the Wadden Forum's final report on 10 February 2005 in Leeuwarden.

'On Texel, two colliding cyclists are front page news.' This analogy is one reputedly used by one of the Netherlands' most popular authors, Jan Wolkers to describe the tranquillity of the island of Texel. He has lived there for many years and enjoys life on the island tremendously.

But it is easy for Wolkers to talk. He is a popular author and artist. Both are professions that you can practise just about anywhere. He does not experience the daily dilemma of many other inhabitants of the Wadden Sea islands. Like Wolkers, they cherish the calm and beauty of their surroundings. But, without any diminishment of their love for the culture and nature of the Wadden Sea, they also want to move ahead with the times.

I am quite sure that there must be a solution to this dilemma. There must be a sustainable way of balancing ecology and economic development in the Wadden Sea region. Good intentions or more regulation will not get us very far. The way forward is through dialogue; through consultations with and among all stakeholders.

And I really do mean all stakeholders. It is vital that all those concerned with the Wadden Sea region have organised themselves into a kind of platform. A platform where differences can be discussed and mutual agreement can be reached. I am pleased that the Wadden Sea Forum has realised such a platform.

The governments of the trilateral cooperation welcome the existence of the Wadden Sea Forum - and for good reason. For politicians nothing is better than for stakeholders to resolve their differences themselves. It alters the nature of the dialogue between decision-makers and those who are affected by their decisions. The best governance is that which builds public confidence. This is the core business of politicians. Public confidence enables politicians to make well-grounded, broadly supported decisions, which address effectively the issues of real life.

Thanks to the Wadden Sea Forum this dialogue is now possible in the Wadden Sea region. It is good to see that in a region as unique and special as this one, it is possible to get everyone to join forces to achieve a common objective. This region is close to my heart and I am happy therefore that the Dutch Government has set aside 500 million euros to be spent over the next few years to stimulate developments in the Dutch Wadden Sea region.

I also think we can call ourselves fortunate that the trilateral Wadden Sea cooperation between the governments of Denmark, Germany and the Netherlands exists, and for 25 years now. I am looking forward to the Wadden Sea Conference on Schiermonnikoog this autumn. I cannot imagine a more beautiful setting for a meeting.

Back to today, now. I would like to praise the Wadden Sea Forum for its courage and its competence. Courage was needed to start up the Forum despite participants' seemingly irreconcilable positions. It is a unique experiment, one that pays no heed to the boundaries between nations and organisations. The Forum is a good cross-section of stakeholders from all three countries in the Wadden Sea region: local and regional authorities, entrepreneurs and conservationists. In fact, just about everyone is on the Forum. And the company is clearly competent, for you have developed a perspective for economic development in the region, while taking account of the need to protect and preserve its natural and cultural heritage.

The Forum has timed the presentation of its report well. Plenty of time remains for the Forum and the trilateral collaboration to work together on proposals for the November conference. This is an invitation to that dialogue.

The Forum also deserves praise for the substance of its final report. It is a good piece of work. The conclusions are based on in-depth, independent research. In your recommendations, you clearly state that it is not only government that has a responsibility here. Others must bear their share. Surely, this is evidence of good sense. For indeed, the time that government solved everyone's problems is over. As you stated, others have responsibilities too. I would like to see these respective responsibilities identified more concretely in the dialogue between the Forum and the trilateral cooperation. Perhaps the Forum could make a start on this already: formulating, for example, five points of action for the various parties that sit on the Forum.

The report contains several other points that contribute to the discussion. I will not name them all here today, but will limit my discourse to a few of the more important ones.

Such as the safety of shipping. This is a very important consideration and it will also be discussed at the November conference. I hope that you have seen the good progress already made on the development of the Automatic Identification System. With this system, we will be able to track and monitor shipping more closely and be better prepared to deal with contingencies. We are also negotiating more detailed agreements to help each other with shipping accidents and oil spills. Effectively, this will mean a merging of the pertinent Danish-German and Dutch-German cooperation agreements.

The Forum makes a number of sound suggestions, too, such as the adoption of the Wadden Sea label for regional products. An excellent idea! A label would also combine well with a regional distinction like that of UNESCO World Heritage Site.

I know that not everyone will agree with me on this, but I still think it would be a good idea to nominate the Wadden Sea for the list of World Heritage Sites. I think that designation would go a long way to raising recognition for the area. Recognition that the way we have managed the region until now has been good. That it is possible for a trans-national ecosystem such as the Wadden Sea to be managed effectively by multi-lateral cooperation. And recognition of course, of the region's unique natural beauty.

I hope that the inhabitants of the Wadden Sea region will support this idea. It might help if I said that the designation of World Heritage Site in no way poses restrictions on economic development. There are no strings attached. In fact, UNESCO has no authority to impose rules or restrictions. An area can only be designated as a World Heritage Site if it is already adequately protected. Its value is of the same order as an Oscar nomination or a Michelin star. It is a strong brand, which the Wadden Sea region - in particular the tourism sector - can use to its advantage.

As far as management and governance are concerned, the governments of the three countries involved will continue to be responsible for the Wadden Sea. It is not my intention -- and I think that I can safely speak for my Danish and German colleagues as well -- to use the designation of World Heritage Site to impose new regulations on the region. I would like to allay your concerns on this point. I don't think that recognition of the Wadden Sea as a World Heritage Site is something you should be worrying about; it is something to be proud of.

Well, it should be clear by now that the trilateral partners and the Forum have got plenty to talk about. The Forum has proven itself a worthy discussion partner, one that no competent authority with any sense would pass by. And so I express my hope for a constructive collaboration in the future. Perhaps, in the months to come we can start thinking about a good follow-up to this dialogue. As far as I am concerned the question is not: will we continue our dialogue, but how will we do so? It is in the interests of the region that our policy is well-grounded and broadly supported. To achieve this, your voice needs to be heard.

Who knows, we might yet convince Jan Wolkers that the real news in the region is not a collision of individuals but the avoidance of a collision between people from different walks of life.

Thank you.