



Making the Trilateral Conference on the Protection of the Wadden Sea in Wilhelmshaven a success:

The 2022 Call for Action for the Wadden Sea

Presented by the Nature NGOs of the Wadden Sea Region, February 2022

The Wadden Sea is a unique coastal area for which Denmark, Germany and the Netherlands share a common responsibility. For 44 years the three countries have worked together as the „Trilateral Cooperation on the Protection of the Wadden Sea“ and are fully committed to its long-term preservation. At the end of this year, the 14th Trilateral Conference on the Protection of the Wadden Sea will take place from 28 November to 01 December 2022 in Wilhelmshaven, Germany. It will also conclude the German presidency of the Trilateral Cooperation.

We, the Nature NGOs of the Wadden Sea Region, working together as a „Wadden Sea Team“, have been committed to protecting the Wadden Sea for decades. We are proud of what has been achieved for the protection of this unique area. This is based on the hard work of many people, administrations, institutions, communities, academia, and private sector on all levels – locally, regionally, nationally, trilaterally and internationally.

Over the years **very important milestones** in Wadden Sea protection have been reached. Three of them are highlighted here:

- The designation of almost the entire Wadden Sea as **protected areas** in all three countries already many years ago. In recent years the enlargement of the protected areas has continued and in some cases their legal status has improved.
- The adoption by the three countries of the **Guiding Principle** for the Wadden Sea, which „*is to achieve, as far as possible, a natural and sustainable ecosystem in which natural processes proceed in an undisturbed way.*“
- The UNESCO’s decision to inscribe the Wadden Sea as a **World Heritage Site** for its Outstanding Universal Value („OUV“). While this is a recognition of the Wadden Sea’s nature values and the protection efforts, it also represents an explicit commitment of the three governments to safeguard the OUV by jointly protecting the Wadden Sea.

These milestones have triggered enhanced awareness and protection on the ground, as well as numerous initiatives to implement and further Wadden Sea protection.

Unfortunately, despite all the achievements, major threats and challenges still exist. Gaps in the implementation remain large. Some challenges have not yet been properly addressed and remain unresolved to date, some have become increasingly problematic, and others have newly appeared on the agenda. Therefore, the three countries need to recalibrate their Wadden Sea management

and focus on measures for effective protection and continued implementation. In our view, the governments must adopt ambitious decisions for the future of the Wadden Sea at the forthcoming trilateral conference in order to meet the rapidly growing demands for nature conservation and sustainability in Europe and worldwide. The World Heritage status mandates dedicated action to protect the area for the world community. We also appeal to the regional and local public bodies, all those who live in the region as well as all other stakeholders to support the ambitious protection and conservation measures proposed in this “Call for Action”.

These decisions must target the most urgent problems with high ambition (see 1). They must also safeguard the continuation of those fields of work which already run rather successfully (see 2). Besides this, structural and governance decisions are required, allowing the Trilateral Cooperation and its partners to better fulfil their tasks (see 3). In the following, we structure our Call for Action along these lines.

We would like to remind governments of those commitments made at past trilateral ministerial conferences, such as the goal to achieve climate neutrality by 2030 (Sylt Declaration in 2010). Every effort must be made to honour these commitments and time schedules, where the identified challenges persist.

1 Tackling the most urgent deficiencies with high ambition

To achieve urgently needed progress in the protection of the Wadden Sea we suggest focusing on the following issues at the conference:

1.1 Protect and connect nature in and under water

Despite the legal protection status of the Wadden Sea and the long-standing knowledge that **no-take zones** are the primary most effective measure to restore our seas, fishing remains intense across most of the trilateral Wadden Sea. The designation of no-take zones is needed at a large scale where this has not yet been done, particularly in light of the EU's 10% strict protection target of the EU's 2030 Biodiversity Strategy, and the contribution of this measure towards it. The EU target is referring to the entire land and sea area, and must therefore to be translated into a high proportion of the Wadden Sea becoming strictly protected.

Today, almost all fisheries in the Wadden Sea are **MSC-certified**. Unfortunately, carrying this ecolabel does not mean that these fisheries comply with the overall conservation goals for the Wadden Sea. For example, high bycatch rates and trawling with bottom contacting gear are common in the vulnerable and protected Wadden Sea. This highlights the flaws in current legislation and its implementation, such as missing impact assessments for fisheries in some countries. The current MSC certification standards are not comprehensive enough to ensure that fishing is sustainable in protected areas or even in a World Heritage site. To maintain and improve natural habitats, and therewith to allow for recovery of the biodiversity, human activities in the area need to be further reduced. The Wadden Sea's Guiding Principle mandates nature to develop as undisturbed as possible and therefore many of the tidal basins must be closed to fisheries.

While the implementation of large no-take-zones might effectively serve as a passive **restoration** of lost nature values, there might be cases where a „hands-off“ approach to protection would not be sufficient to restore former habitats and species biodiversity. When natural processes alone cannot reverse the impacts of human action in the medium-term, active restoration measures should be considered to restore former natural processes, habitats, and threatened or lost species.

To support the Wadden Sea „**Swimway**“ for fish it is of particular importance to modify or manage obstacles in rivers in such a way that fish can migrate easily between the Wadden Sea and

upstream habitats. The estuaries in the Wadden Sea Region must be restored as intact and healthy ecosystems, also to avoid negative impacts on the entire Wadden Sea. Attention needs to be paid to making sediment management fish-friendly in such a way that all fish can undergo their entire life cycle. Better understanding of the function of the Wadden Sea as a habitat for fish is needed.

Another major impact on the underwater life of the Wadden Sea is the **dredging and dumping of sediment**, particularly in the area from Holwerd to Elbe and also regarding the access channels to the islands. It is crucial to reduce dredging and dumping considerably across the entire system. Where it is unavoidable, it may only be allowed with the lowest possible impact and may not negatively impact the adaptation to climate change. Closer dialogue and planning between those involved in sediment management in the estuaries and those responsible for coastal protection is critical.

Old **military munitions**, including chemical weapons, dumped on the seabed in the southern North Sea after World War I and World War II continue to be a major concern. A program to remove these munitions without damaging sensitive species must be developed and implemented without delay particularly in Germany. Priorities for action and the areas in which to begin must be identified.

1.2 Make energy production sustainable and environmentally sound

Oil and gas production still occurs locally in the Wadden Sea. This endangers nature and undermines climate protection efforts in the Wadden Sea and beyond. How should climate neutrality be achieved in our countries when we allow fossil energy production within valuable protected areas such as the Wadden Sea? So, in the light of climate neutrality an important message of the conference should be: *„End all fossil fuel exploration and production in the Wadden Sea by 2030 at the latest.“*

At the same time, the Wadden Sea Region with the land and sea areas adjacent to the Wadden Sea is important for **renewable energy production** in order to achieve climate neutrality. While the existing ban for wind farms within the protected Wadden Sea, on the islands and within the adjacent marine protected areas is vital, we do support the use of wind energy in the wider areas of land and sea in locations where they cause the least damage to nature and landscape and as long as the ecological carrying capacity is not exceeded. It must also be ensured that the outstanding global value of the Wadden Sea for international flyways and swimways is not put at risk. Across the trilateral Wadden Sea and the wider North Sea system solid transboundary planning of cumulative ecological impact is a critical requirement for the expansion of offshore wind, given that the North Sea is one of the most industrialised ocean basins globally. Emphasis needs to be placed on achieving Good Environmental Status. Overall, the ecological impact during the energy production and at installation needs to be kept to a minimum, using best available environmental practices and following the mitigation hierarchy principles. However, we should also be inspired by the many positive examples across the Wadden Sea Region for good environmental practice with regards to renewables.

We see the necessity of a limited number of **grid connections** across the Wadden Sea related in particular to offshore wind production. However, given the high impact of these large-scale constructions on the Wadden Sea wilderness, such cables must be bundled and have the highest possible capacity and longevity in order to reduce their number and thus their overall impact. This requires a close coordination across the North Sea countries and new technical developments. Further, cable lines must avoid the most sensitive areas and disturbance must be minimised during construction and operation. The repeated wash-out, reburial of cables or fixing of cables with stones from outside the area must be avoided.

It is important to recognise that the Wadden Sea may act as a relevant **carbon sink**, a function which should be assisted by a proper protection of saltmarshes, seagrass beds, reefs as well as by a sea bottom left as undisturbed as possible.

1.3 Shipping and ports to improve the ecological and climate footprint

Shipping and all the related aspects – ports, access channels, boats, ferries and large ships – undoubtedly have a **major environmental impact** on the Wadden Sea. This includes the destruction of habitats, harmful emissions and associated health and climate impacts, disturbance of birds, underwater noise as well as heavy pollution risks caused by ship accidents. The recent cases of the bulk carrier „Glory Amsterdam” in 2017, the container vessel „MSC ZOE“ in 2019 and the „Mumbai Maersk” in 2022 have dramatically shown that precautionary measures against ship accidents must be improved. Safety measures including piloting and speed restrictions must adjust to ever longer, wider and taller ships. Clearly shipping practices within or impacting a marine World Heritage site should be held to much higher standards than the minimum set by the International Maritime Organization (IMO). While voluntary certification schemes (e.g. Blue Angel) and certain subsidies have helped, it is evident that regulation is required to reach climate neutrality by 2030 and reduce the ecological impact of ports and the shipping sector.

A concrete example of how regulation should be improved is to fill the designation of the Wadden Sea as a „**Particularly Sensitive Sea Area**“ (PSSA; established in 2003) with life. While this overall decision was certainly progressive, no „Associated Protective Measures“ (APMs) were linked to this PSSA, which deprives the designation of its desired impact. We therefore recommend that a list of specific APMs e.g. concerning management, traffic lanes for particularly hazardous cargo, emergency reaction, safety on board and pilotage are urgently developed, discussed and adopted at the IMO level.

A fundamental problem is the inadequate protection of **sensitive estuarine habitats**, in particular in the southern Wadden Sea. The main threat is extensive dredging to achieve extreme depths multiple times that of the natural depths of the Ems, Weser and Elbe in order for ever larger ships to pass. It is critical for both the nature protection and sustainable development stakeholders of the coastal regions to work together and agree about a water depth-dependent division of labor among the major ports. Under such a system vessels with particularly large draught remain at North Sea deep-water ports and only smaller vessels enter the estuaries, not least to improve the ecological management and tidal surge of these.

In our view, the long-standing problems, challenges and stagnancy in making shipping and ports activities environmentally friendly and climate neutral should be approached through a **trilateral dialogue process** aiming at building trust and confidence. This has not been achieved yet, though there are positive local examples. Therefore, we propose to the Wadden Sea conference to make this dialogue a core activity of the Partnership Hub, which should substantially support the recently started dialogue processes with the shipping and port sector by the Wadden Sea Team and the Wadden Sea Forum.

Such a new **dialogue** should seek solutions by agreeing on ways towards making shipping and ports greener: for example, by reducing the footprint on Wadden Sea habitats (dredging and other), transforming the boat- and ferry traffic towards only fossil-free electric drives (given the rather short distances in the Wadden Sea, their energy efficiency is much better compared to hydrogen and all other alternative fuels), regulating the traffic in a way that nature disturbance is minimised, and improving shipping safety through associated protective measures for the PSSA.

2 Safeguard and support successful work areas

Put climate adaptation into action: A strong increase in temperature and in sea level rise are resulting from climate change and will have major impacts on the Wadden Sea. While global climate protection is obviously by far the most important way to tackle these impacts, we should place stronger emphasis on resilience of the ecosystem (e.g. by reducing the human footprint) and thereby support adaptation. Measures to compensate for the increase in sea level rise need to be studied, piloted and implemented in line with the „*Trilateral Climate Change Adaptation Strategy*“ from 2014. In light of the ever increasing speed of climate change, it is vital to make ecologically sound climate adaptation and restoration in the Wadden Sea a top priority. We advise an update of the 2014 strategy after 10 years, based on best available knowledge and lessons learnt from pilot projects, and also considering the influence of reducing other pressures. It is of particular importance, that coastal protection and nature protection work hand-in-hand and create win-win-situations. Given the potential of saltmarshes to sequester carbon, even the potential for win-win-situations is high. The mutual sharing of more concrete regional strategies and first local pilot projects should be continued and deepened. We call for more ambition in stimulating practical „on the ground“ adaptation measures and policy dialogue in the Wadden Sea states. In general, the philosophy and experience with „nature-based solutions“ must guide the work on coastal protection to the utmost extent possible.

Continue to make tourism sustainable: The strategy on „*Sustainable Tourism in the Wadden Sea World Heritage Destination*“ was agreed on by the ministers and signed by the relevant stakeholders in 2014. It must be implemented with greater ambition into daily practice and with more respect for nature protection, especially when it comes to new activities with potentially high impact. We advise to prepare an update of the strategy after 10 years to consider topics such as the reduction of light pollution, and limits to the growth of tourism in the Wadden Sea Region. Where thresholds are reached and before the harm becomes too severe, capacities should not be expanded any further. To achieve this, also tools which help local destinations to make sustainable decisions should be supported.

Protect birds locally and along their Flyway: We support the further development of the „Wadden Sea Flyway Initiative“, which is designed to protect the Wadden Sea birds along their entire flyway. There must be a good cooperation with partners from the South where most of the Wadden Sea birds overwinter, as well as with partners from the Arctic where most of them breed. Monitoring of migratory birds along the entire flyway, and the development of capacities to protect key sites used by them in other countries along the flyway, should be maintained and, whenever possible, reinforced.

Equally, the understanding of drivers of population dynamics and consequently the protection of birds and their habitats in the Wadden Sea itself and in adjacent areas of the mainland need to be improved as – for many of them – numbers are declining. For the breeding birds, the artificial invasion of land predators on the islands as well as the loss of natural dynamics in formerly sandy habitats must be avoided and reversed. The local and regional implementation of the trilateral „Breeding Bird Action Plan“ should be improved. Where bird hunting within the protected areas of the Wadden Sea still occurs this must be stopped. A number of roosting areas without bird hunting is also important in the mainland polders and along the river valleys. Agricultural practice in polder areas must better comply with nature protection.

Protect marine mammals: The successful protection of Harbour Seals and Grey Seals should be continued. To keep the populations wild, efforts in the Netherlands and Germany to limit the extent of human care for these animals must be continued. There is a concern whether the status of harbour porpoises in the Wadden Sea and adjacent North Sea is as good as it should be, requiring precautionary action such as the reduction of underwater noise. It is evident that dredging and poor sediment management have triggered local fish collapses in several estuaries, which have resulted in an additional loss of suitable habitat for harbour porpoises that feed on these.

Reduce the growing impact of alien species: The continuous introduction of alien species, and in particular invasive alien species, is a major risk for the natural biodiversity of the Wadden Sea. There must be a clear preference for precautionary measures to minimise risks. However, there should also be measures to eradicate invasive alien species. This may be most promising in the early phase of establishment. On land, particularly on islands, measures to eradicate alien species in a later stage could also be successful. Eradication measures should be tested in pilot cases for alien species, which threaten protected species, severely alter habitat structures or which impede natural processes.

3 Structural decisions to strengthen the trilateral work for the Wadden Sea

Adopt an ambitious SIMP: There is a „Single Integrated Management Plan“ (SIMP) for the Wadden Sea under preparation, to be agreed at the Wadden Sea conference. We support the SIMP and share the view that it is necessary to summarise the many decisions and strategies in order for these to become integrated and clearly understood by the general public. It is vital that the ambition of the SIMP chapters on the key topics (Fisheries / Tourism / Shipping & Ports / Renewable Energy & Energy from Oil and Gas / Coastal Flood Defence & Protection) remains high and that success can be effectively measured.

Build and strengthen partnerships: As a fundamental basis for a successful protection of the Wadden Sea, the cooperation and partnerships both within the different Wadden Sea regions and across the regional and national borders need to be strengthened. It is crucial to have the support of society at large and to enhance the collaboration with the stakeholders in the region. The already existing networks, such as the National Park partnerships, must be consolidated, and innovative partnerships must be created. The trilateral „Partnership Hub“ has the potential to assist new and existing networks, and must therefore be firmly established in this role. While partners need to be supported and enabled to fulfil complementary functions to the governmental tasks in protection, the Trilateral Wadden Sea Cooperation needs to continue and reinforce its work for the protection of the Wadden Sea and the implementation of the obligations associated with it.

Establish a Wadden Sea Foundation: The preparations between the partners to set up a „*Trilateral Wadden Sea World Heritage Foundation*“ are almost completed. The foundation should be established now and appropriately supported by the Wadden Sea states. The Foundation should make joint conservation projects happen and support building networks. It should not only enhance visibility of the World Heritage, but ultimately support the protection of the OUV.

Wadden Sea literacy - support education and outreach: Successful protection needs public support. The „*Wadden Sea Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development and World Heritage Interpretation*“ – agreed on by the ministers in 2018 – sets out a common framework for national and trilateral Wadden Sea information and education activities. The strategy must be further implemented to provide support for the visitor centres, strengthen guided tours, as well as school programs. Regional networks as well as the „*International Wadden Sea School*“ as network and service platform for the trilateral Wadden Sea World Heritage interpretation must be supported.

Integrate and strengthen monitoring: Joint conservation requires reliable and comparable information about how nature develops and responds. Therefore, the start of the „*Trilateral Monitoring and Assessment Programme*“ in 1997 was an important achievement. Today, the program requires a powerful support from the partners, a new Kick Off, adapting or adding monitoring parameters (e.g. benthic life, tourism, climate effects) as well as improving the data handling.

Promote Trilateral Wadden Sea Research: Successful protection depends also on sound scientific knowledge. The Trilateral Cooperation decided to develop and implement a „Trilateral Research Program“ – meanwhile according “Trilateral Research Priorities” are at hand. Now everything depends on the decision on financing. The Trilateral Cooperation should make sure that its intention is realised.

Support International Collaboration: The Trilateral Cooperation, with the support of the Nature NGOs, has engaged at the global scale to share their knowledge with related areas worldwide. The international collaboration should be continued and where possible enhanced with a focus on the flyway of waterbirds and on intertidal mudflat ecosystems.

We, the Nature NGOs of the three countries are convinced that, based on the previous proposals and advice, considerable progress can be achieved. We urge the Wadden Sea states to rise to the challenge and offer our cooperation and partnership to help achieve better protection of the Wadden Sea.

The following organisations support this Call for Action:

Denmark:

- Danmarks Naturfredningsforening (DN)
- Dansk Ornitologisk Forening (DOF)
- Verdensnaturfonden (WWF-DK)

Germany:

- Bürgerinitiative „Rettet das Cux-Watt“
- Bürgerinitiative „Saubere Luft Ostfriesland“
- Bund für Umwelt und Naturschutz Deutschland (BUND)
- Landesverband Bürgerinitiativen Umweltschutz Niedersachsen (LBU)
- Mellumrat
- NABU
- NaturFreunde Niedersachsen
- Naturschutzverband Niedersachsen (NVN)
- Niedersächsischer Heimatbund (NHB)
- Schutzstation Wattenmeer
- Verein Jordsand zum Schutz der Seevögel und der Natur
- Wissenschaftliche Arbeitsgemeinschaft für Natur- und Umweltschutz (WAU)
- WWF Deutschland

Netherlands:

The Coalitie Wadden Natuurlijk, consisting of

- It Fryske Gea
- Landschap Noord-Holland
- Sportvisserij Nederland
- Stichting Het Groninger Landschap
- Stichting WAD
- Vereniging Natuurmonumenten
- Vogelbescherming Nederland
- Waddenvereniging

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