

20 Senses of place in the North Frisian Wadden Sea

Local consciousness and knowledge for place-based heritage development

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Abstract

Inhabitants of the North Frisian Wadden Sea coast have been living with and struggling against the sea for centuries. This relationship has been portrayed in the familiar Frisian saying ‘God created the sea, the Frisians the coast’, which expresses an emotional nexus and a sense of place with the coastal landscape and the sea. Both are permeated by historical features, traditions, intangible values, social practices and local knowledge about the coastal environment. This kind of local knowledge and engagement with different pasts often conflict with the well-established and evidence-based planning cultures that zone different users’ interests, protect habitats or handlee and present heritage. Against this background, the challenge is not only how to acknowledge local knowledge but, even more, how it could be used to establish more symmetric and place-based development strategies to be integrated into landscape and heritage management in the Wadden Sea. For this to be done, the chapter theoretically reflects on current approaches in heritage management and pledges for a practice-oriented approach highlighting local and regional engagements with past presents and present presents. The conceptual issues raised are empirically explained against the backdrop of walking interviews conducted with coastal dwellers on the North Frisian coast. The authors explore the ways in which so-called lay perspectives on landscape heritage and heritage in general could enrich heritage management.

Keywords: Sense of place, landscape, heritage, walking interviews, North Frisia Germany

The coastal region of North Frisia: A contested littoral landscape

In this contribution, we would like to emphasise that acknowledging regional and local consciousness about or in relation to a certain stretch of land or landscape is a basic ingredient in any consultation process. Such an approach might contribute to not only developing a better understanding of the local appraisal of any natural or cultural feature but also to raising awareness about these issues among policymakers and environmental managers. It is therefore imperative to reflect on the aspect of how local knowledge and regional consciousness about the littoral landscape and cultural relicts could contribute to developing awareness among policymakers and environmental managers for establishing place-based development strategies. For this to be done, it is important to investigate how local people engage with the landscapes, places and objects they care about and how they form a sense of coast.

These aspects will be empirically analysed against the backdrop of the North Frisian Wadden Sea, which is part of the Wadden Sea region, one of the most intensively researched natural areas in the world. Best described as a wetland site with tidal flats, it stretches 500 kilometres from Den Helder in the Netherlands to Skållinge north of Esbjerg in Denmark. Characterised by a unique flora and fauna, the Wadden Sea coast is a key resting place for migratory birds and was inscribed on the UNESCO World Natural Heritage List in 2009. Although the Wadden Sea area is mainly profiled as a unique natural habitat, it also represents a place with rich cultural diversity (Vollmer et al. 2001). This is also apparent in the coastal landscape of North Frisia (Fischer 1997), which has undergone constant modification by coastal inhabitants throughout the centuries and exhibits a rich variety of dike structures, drainage systems and traces of land reclamation. The German Wadden Sea area is the most northern district of Germany, with a population of 162,200 inhabitants on the mainland and its islands and Halligen (Statistisches Amt für Hamburg und Schleswig-Holstein 2014). Alongside a declining agricultural sector and an emerging wind energy sector, its most important economic factor is tourism.

At the end of the 1980s, the aforementioned uniqueness of this natural ecosystem triggered an intensive scientific research programme. Brought together under the conceptual umbrella of ecosystem research, this programme had scientists from the national park authorities and other research institutions in Germany study and analyse the many biological and other natural processes of this intertidal coastal zone. Driven by a conservationist agenda, the establishment of the Nationalpark Schleswig-Holsteinisches Wattenmeer in 1985 and its considerable enlargement in 1999 led to concerted and sometimes fierce local resistance, with the local population particularly

critical of the process of implementation (Jakubowski-Tiessen 2007; Jeß 2014; Steensen in this volume). Based on a scientific rationale, the synthesis report (Stock et al. 1996) almost exclusively investigated the natural side of the North Frisian Wadden Sea and only vaguely touched upon socio-cultural aspects or elements of cultural heritage. The situation spiralled out of control when the synthesis report was publicly presented during a hearing in Tönning in 1998, because participatory processes acknowledging local opinions and alternatives had been blatantly left out in favour of a scientific, evidence-based assessment of the natural landscape.

The cultural heritage dimensions of the North Frisian landscape were addressed later and documented in the LANCEWAD project while — once again — local resistance arose when attempts were made to apply for world cultural heritage status (Krauß & Döring 2003). In the course of the usual consultation process, which was undertaken by Peter Burbridge (2000), representatives of the Environmental Administration of Schleswig-Holstein, regional politicians of all parties and representatives of UNESCO met local people from different North Frisian municipalities and parishes. These were mainly represented by regional and local activists gathering under the well-known banner of the 'Initiative for the Cultural Landscape of Eiderstedt' (Krauß 2006). The problem with the UNESCO assessment process was that it almost exclusively addressed the North Frisian Wadden Sea in terms of a cultural landscape highlighting its natural features in aesthetical terms while at the same time using material objects such as historical monuments, archaeological sites or museum artefacts as cultural evidence. All these objects were 'stripped of their actual cultural, social and political meanings and neatly placed into an already existing administrative context' (Krauß 2006: 42) before public consultation began in the first place, not acknowledging the historically and coevally grounded topophilia (Tuan 1974) enmeshed in people's lifescapes (Convery et al. 2009) and essential for an integrated and symmetric (Latour 1993) management process.

Littoral landscapes and places: Theoretical and methodological aspects

The littoral landscape of Northern Frisia is ontologically not only constructed as a material landscape but has also been conceived in the past as an intangible entity embodying social, cultural and political processes. Kenneth Olwig (2002: 17) has emphasised different dimensions of this aspect by showing that 'custom and culture defined a Land, not physical geographical

characteristics — it was a social entity that found physical expression in the area under its laws'. Even nowadays, coastal dwellers refer to these aspects by using the familiar Frisian saying 'God created the sea, the Frisians created the coast', expressing what Olwig (2002: 10) calls 'the place of a Frisian polity'. Such a contemporary and identity-related immersion into the littoral landscape raises the question of how this intangible sense for the North Frisian coast could be considered and productively used in the context of landscape heritage. Its nonmaterial dimensions are challenging, as most heritage-related activities on the German North Sea coast are concerned with the 'materiality of the past and associated imperatives of conservation' (Waterton & Watson 2013: 546), displaying a management-oriented rationale in terms of emerging cultural tourism. Concern about materiality and its conservation intermingles with scientific and business activities at the expense of a variety of local and regional engagements with the past. Hence, its reading is often characterised by dominant conservation discourses and ascriptions of meaning that suppress the multiple and local significances nestling in landscapes and in heritage sites (Smith 2006).

To theoretically symmetrise this imbalance, a more practice-oriented approach in heritage is needed to emphasise the relevance of personal and everyday interaction with heritage and heritage landscapes in terms of the physical, the discursive and the emotional. Furthermore, it should not be forgotten that these processes and practices happen in spatial settings that go beyond representation and call for an inclusion of the 'sensual, haptic, corporeal, kinaesthetic' (Cromby 2007: 96) and affective. These aspects productively 'de-ontologise' heritage and refer to a relational understanding that questions the idea of heritage as a past or historicised thing barred from all sorts of contemporary engagements and experiences. On the contrary, it brings it back into human livelihoods (Ingold 2000) and day-to-day encounters of people, places and objects. Such affordances (Gibson 1977) contribute considerably to creating meaning and refer to the fact that 'heritage is a social and cultural process' (Waterton & Watson 2013: 555). It is therefore necessary to combine a conservational and representational understanding of heritage with a more relational and process-oriented approach, which might help to tease out the multiple human articulations of and engagements with heritage.

Engagements with the landscape

A good starting point for refashioning the relationship between representation and experience is the concept of landscape (Wylie 2007) as it

conceptually meanders between the obvious materiality of the land and its manifold socio-cultural connotations (Crouch 2010). Especially the analysis of intangible associations might help to uncover aspects of identity, elements of an economic and social history and a sense of place or coast, which grows 'dense with a social imaginary — a fabulation of place contingent on precise modes of sociality [...] that give place a tactile, sensate force' (Stewart 1996: 137). It is exactly these aspects of landscape that are of vital interest in the present context because they offer an opportunity to analyse the impalpable cultural meanings ascribed to and social experiences made in the North Frisian coastscapes (Döring & Ratter, in press). Hence, landscapes are theoretically conceived as the material and intangible outcome of social processes exhibiting 'values through a community's knowledge of [and immersion into] the past' (Waterton 2005: 314). These aspects also apply to the convergent concept of place (Casey 2002), as it represents an analytical category aimed at disentangling the dimensions of the 'human experience of space and place' (Buttimer & Seamon 1980) in terms of a place-attachment (Manzo & Devine-Wright 2014) that helps to unravel and systematise the representations and experiential dimensions made in places and landscapes. The methodological question, however, remains what approach might be able to meet the theoretical requirements outlined above, even if only in part?

Acknowledging the representational and experiential requirements of our theoretical approach, we decided to apply the mobile method of walking or go-along interviews (Kusenbach 2003). This method enabled us to gather data for analysing a place-based perspective of the North Frisia coastscapes on site and while moving through it. It is theoretically based on a philosophy of walking that puts emphasis on the walker who 'inhabits the landscape and dwells within it for the duration of his or her journey' (Gros 2015: 147). This dwelling perspective highlights the relational engagements and experiences the interviewees build with their surroundings (Ingold 2000: 186) during the interview stroll in the coastal landscape. In doing so, go-along interviews offer a substantial insight into experiences tied to places and engagements with landscapes, and they also situate the interaction between research subjects in concrete places and locate the interviewer in the spatial experience of the interviewee (Macpherson 2016: 429-431). In practical terms, eleven walking interviews were conducted on the islands of Sylt, Amrum and Helgoland, and these were preceded by in-depth sedentary interviews to get into contact with local people. Once interviewees agreed to give a walking interview, an appointment was made and they were asked to take a route or path of their choice or one they would like to show the interviewer. Interviews lasted between 68 and 147 minutes and were structured by an

interview guide with questions revolving around people's sense of place. They were taped by a mobile tape recorder, transcribed verbatim and analysed according to the requirements as outlined in Grounded Theory (Charmaz 2014; Corbin & Strauss 2015). This approach was chosen because it places emphasis on the inductive development of analytical categories from data to avoid preconceptions and problems resulting from a vicious circle. Once main themes or topics emerged during the process of analysis, text segments were grouped under headings. Data was separately analysed, coded and discussed by the two authors of this chapter. This procedure offered the opportunity to empirically disclose a thematic structure engendering each interview in order to develop a coherent interpretative basis and to unveil representative convergences among all interviews conducted.

Senses of place in the North Frisian Wadden Sea

As we outlined in the previous section, to theoretically conceptualise heritage and landscapes purely from a material or representational point of view would be to miss the dynamic and experiential dimensions of the senses of place on the North Frisian coast. A more inclusive approach would carefully consider the relational intermingling of human beings with the pasts and presents nestling in coastal landscapes, and this became apparent in the interviews. All in all, the four categories of aesthetic visual elements, genealogy, identity and spirituality emerged in the course of the grounded analysis. Sentiments expressed frequently, such as in the following quote, display an aesthetic appraisal of the North Frisian Wadden Sea coast:

Now, here I'd like to stop for a moment, ok? I tell you something, ah, this landscape with all its colours and these smells, so typical for the mudflats. Especially during a storm, that is really breathtaking. And this vast expanse of the Wadden Sea, that makes me feel free and, yeah, I am really free ah, I can think freely. Very much feels like Nolde and the Skagen School of painting doesn't it? They really got a feel for the beauty here. (I6)

What we can see here and in other examples of this category is an aestheticised encounter with the North Frisian coastscape as seen through the eyes of the interviewee. The subject blends visual aspects of colours and endless sky with non-visual aspects such as smells that characterise the atmosphere of the place and alludes in art-historical terms to a long-standing fascination for this type of landscape. The reference to the storm, furthermore,

implicitly refers to aspects of the sublime and the beauty well-known in artistic theory since the nineteenth century. These reflections reveal an emotional excitement, while the experience of extensiveness is explained in terms of the feeling of freedom. Emotional interjections such as 'ah' or 'oh' exhibit a non-verbal emotional immersion and appreciation of the very spot and the surrounding littoral landscape.

Comparable aspects also hold true for the differently structured category of genealogy. It is mainly based on concepts of a backward lineage and forward-oriented insinuations in terms of family ties. These are in many cases combined with ritualised practices blending the material and temporal dimensions through the lens of place, and by doing so merging past and future into the present:

My father and I, we used to walk along this way and he did the same with his grandchildren, my son and my brother's son and daughter. I think that the environment has changed a lot since then but we used these stones to get 'out to the sea', as we said. I remember in winter with all the whiteness and the icicles hanging about. That was some sort of a magical place to all of us. (14)

Furthermore, in the quote a genealogical position is constructed that is explicitly tied to the place through spiritual experiences. These blend nature and culture into one and provide a socio-spatial connection between family and landscape: it becomes a material anchor and a place to reflect and structure family-related temporalities.

Coastal places are also used for relating a personal identity to a locally or regionally constructed one. In these cases, certain places or stretches of the coastal land are used as a medium through which the self is constructed or reasoned about. A prominent and overarching example is the often articulated Frisian struggle against the sea, which materially more or less produced the current shape of the North Frisian coast. Although land reclamation came to a halt in the 1970s, such thinking is still contained in the collective memory of local people and represents a repertoire for characterising oneself as a Frisian as opposed to the regional or national identities:

But back to your question, yes that is Heimat for me, to live here on the coast with all this nature around [...]? Resistant as we have been here for centuries, we made this coastal stretch of land arable and it is the right place for me as a Frisian, as someone living on this coastal island. Look down there. 26 years ago we went there with the pram and my

daughter. New parents, my husband and me at that time [...] There are some historical places as well. They have found pearls and other things. Viking stuff, so we were a trading post. (I11)

Besides the mythologised framing of the North Frisian coast as the place of a continuous battle between the Frisians and the sea, a strong historicised connection is expressed by 'we were a trading post' and enriched with aspects of the family history. A specific emplacement on the coast is used for merging historical and biographical elements and illustrating this with family practices. This displays a landscaped identity showing that coastal dwellers 'are just as much part of the landscape they live in as are so-called "natural" features' (van Dommelen 1999: 279).

Finally, the North Frisian coast becomes a material and intangible place for reflections on spiritual aspects. Here, specific sites in or elements of the landscape are often used as a link for reflecting on the meaning of life and the question of what comes afterwards. Such aspects can be seen in the following example where the rocks of Helgolandian upland become a projection surface for the relationship between man and nature:

Yeah, this is a place I very much like. Do you see the rocks there, yeah the ones over there, that steeply go uphill? Ah, there you can see the full power of nature. [...] They will still be here when I have found my peace [...] when I am gone. Sometimes I ask myself what that might feel like and what state of being that might be. (I5)

Here, the encounter with the geological forces that triggered the rising of the rocky uplands introduces spiritual contemplations about the position of man in the context of the long-standing forces of nature. This process is reflected upon in terms of transience and the question of where one goes in life and what happens after one dies — an aspect that can be found, though not exclusively rocky-coast-related, in all our interview data.

In conclusion, one can say that the North Frisian Wadden Sea coast is engendered through multiple socio-spatial constructions such as aesthetic visual elements, genealogy, identity and spirituality. These not only provide a multi-layered insight into the different dimensions of a sense of coast or conceptualise the littoral landscape as a cultural passage point but, in fact, all these intangible aspects are embodied in the physical land, which alludes to different ways of currently experiencing the coast in terms of an era of a Frisian landscape polity, Viking remains or one's own family history. Seen from a theoretical standpoint, the physical and the

discursive dimensions represent acts of ‘mindscaping’ (Olwig 2002: XXXI) that interact with relational experiences made and practices performed along and with the North Frisian coastscape: they are one important way of knowing, experiencing and engaging with the coast’s present pasts and present presents productively complementing concepts of mapping and conserving cultural and landscape heritage.

Whose senses of coast? The need for a more humanistic approach

This chapter has investigated the multiple ways in which people relate to the present pasts and present presents of the North Frisian coast. This revealed multiple forms of how people make sense of and personally engage with their littoral landscapes, including the intermingling with material places, historical facts and intangible values implicated in the littoral landscapes. Although concrete community aspirations did not materialise in the course of our interviews, the analysis provides food for thought about a more symmetric way for seeing landscape heritage and heritage in general because landscape holds the potential to ‘gather experiences, histories, memories and thoughts, and figures in the way of life’ (Waterton 2005: 317) of coastal communities. Our analysis indeed suggests that society, landscape and heritage — which apparently identifies and defines the identities of communities — belong together and should be included in management processes. This aspect, however, holds consequences for the status of ‘stakeholders’: their role might be transformed from that of a person to be informed or educated to that of active involvement and participation in terms of citizen stewardship. This would not only mean that additional epistemologies should be included in cultural heritage but also that the role of the expert would undergo considerable change. Heritage managers might then become facilitators of representing different communities in different situations and enable processes of negotiation in which more meanings and connected values might enter the management arena to enrich debates. Finally, the more humanistic approach, as sketched out here, holds the advantage of being more contextual and dynamic because socio-cultural engagements with the North Frisian coast and its pasts pave the way towards the question of whose sense of coast is to be represented. Looking back on the disputes revolving around the implementation of National Park Schleswig-Holsteinisches Wattenmeer and the tedious process of overcoming controversies by using different kinds of participative strategies, we believe that there would be no region better suited for such a real-world experiment as the North Frisian coast.

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