

Dutch Shellfish Fisheries Policies

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The Dutch shellfish policy for the years 1994-2003 has been laid down in the "Nota Zee en Kustvisserij".

According to this document, 25% (five areas) of the eulittoral area in the Dutch part of the Wadden Sea Conservation Area is permanently closed for mussel seed and cockle fisheries. In addition, in years with limited food availability for birds, 60% of the average food demand of birds will be reserved for them.

The fisheries sector itself elaborated a management plan for the implementation of the "Nota Zee en Kustvisserij".

In 1997, an intermediate evaluation of this policy was carried out and a comprehensive evaluation Report submitted to Parliament in March 1998. The Report had been drafted in consultation with the relevant stakeholders. Its conclusions would form the basis for the policies for the years 1999-2003, and important matters to be discussed were whether or not to maintain, extend or disband the closed areas. The main conclusion of the evaluation was that the period under consideration had been too short for recovery of mussel beds in the closed areas. It was also concluded that the Fisheries Management Plan had functioned well.

Shortly before the general elections in May 1998, the then Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Nature Management, van Aartsen, formulated his intentions for the period 1999-2003. He announced that current policies would be continued, meaning that the closed area would, in principle, be maintained and that it would be the aim to achieve an area of 2,000-4,000 ha stable mussel banks. To this end, so-called ecologically sensitive areas would have to be excluded from fisheries. The RIKZ, RIVO and IBN were instructed to elaborate scientific criteria for such areas.

It was obvious, however, that the final decision would be taken by a new government and discussions continued in the second half of 1998. In the autumn, a group of 51 biologists submitted an open letter to the standing Parliamentary Commission for Agriculture, Fisheries and Nature Management, in which they expressed their concern about the deterioration of the Wadden Sea. An English translation of this letter is published in this issue of the Wadden Sea Newsletter.

In March 1999, the new State Secretary for Nature Conservation, Faber, issued a policy deci-

sion based upon the Evaluation Report from 1997, the guidelines of Minister van Aartsen, discussions within the Parliamentary Commission, an advice from the National Commission on the Rural Area, the proposals for ecologically sensitive areas and comments of stakeholders.

The Policy Decision states that policies for the years 1999-2003 will be directed towards maintaining bird population sizes as they were in the 1980s and achieving optimal conditions for the development of stable mussel banks and seagrass meadows.

Policies regarding food situation for birds will remain unchanged. This implies that restrictions on fisheries will be imposed if cockle stocks are fewer than 12.6 million tons of meat and mussel stocks fewer than 4.2 million tons of meat. The target for stable mussel banks is an area of 2,000-4,000 ha. In order to achieve this goal, the closed areas will remain closed and outside the closed areas fisheries must be carried out according to a management plan on the basis of the principle that seed mussel fisheries will not be carried out in the eulittoral. Only when sublittoral stocks are fewer than 400,000 tons, fisheries in the eulittoral are allowed, with the exception of areas which have a good potential for the development of stable beds (10% of the eulittoral, including the already closed areas).

For the cockle fishery, a limit of 10,000 tons of meat has been fixed for total yearly landings. According to the Decisions paper, the area with the highest chances of development of stable mussel beds (5% of the eulittoral) will be closed for cockle fisheries. Should cockle stocks outside this area be fewer than 3,000 tons of meat then part of this area may be fished.

The Decision paper was discussed in the Parliamentary Commission on 14 March 1999. The discussions will be continued in a second meeting.

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