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# Protected area management in a post-natural world: negotiated governance at the Danish Wadden Sea

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## Abstract

National parks and other large protected areas play an increasingly important role in the context of global social and environmental challenges. Nevertheless, they continue to be rooted in local places and cannot be separated out from their socio-cultural and historical context. Protected areas furthermore are increasingly understood to constitute critical sites of struggle whereby the very meanings of nature, landscape, and nature-society relations are up for debate. This paper examines governance arrangements and discursive practices pertaining to the management of the Danish Wadden Sea National Park and reflects on the relationship between pluralist institutional structures and pluralist, relational understandings of nature and landscape.

**Keywords** Conservation · Critical pluralism · Democracy · Nature-culture relations · Anthropocene

## Introduction: conservation and nature-society relations

In recent decades, there has been increased emphasis on the actual and potential role of large protected areas in the context of global social and environmental challenges. For some authors, this shift in orientation is framed in terms of the contribution of protected areas to sustainable regional development (e.g. Mose 2007, Hammer et al. 2016, Weber et al. 2018). Protected areas are increasingly considered to play a critical role in processes of socio-ecological transformation, responding to major socio-environmental trends such as uneven globalisation, individualisation, climate change, and biodiversity loss (Hammer et al. 2016, 14ff). For rural areas facing challenges associated with agricultural restructuring, demographic change, and peripherality, national parks may represent opportunities for sustainable economic development in sectors such as eco-tourism, outdoor education, recreation, and adventure sports (Bell and Stockdale 2019, Hidle 2019). The international discourse on national parks has thus shifted substantially from one of protecting nature from the destructive influence of modern industrial society to an emphasis on working with local

communities and integrating traditional practices of landscape management within nature conservation objectives (Philipps 2003). Static, preservationist approaches to protected area management are, in many cases, giving way to ‘dynamic innovation’ perspectives, characterised by greater community and stakeholder participation (e.g. Hammer 2003, Locke and Dearden 2005, Mose and Weixlbaumer, 2007). Whereas the former approach sought a strict separation between protected and non-protected areas, the dynamic innovation paradigm emphasises the embeddedness of protected areas within their surrounding regional hinterlands (see also Walsh 2020).

Against this background, it is possible to speak of a ‘new generation’ of national parks in Europe, characterised by a strong emphasis on community participation and a sustainable development ethos (see Dinnie et al. 2012, Michel and Backhaus 2019). Increasingly, the boundaries of protected areas are viewed as soft and porous, as interstitial zones of connectivity and interaction rather than sharp lines of demarcation between ‘natural’ and ‘societal’ spaces (cf. Fall 2002, 2005, Williams 2018). This paradigm shift has substantial implications for how protected areas and their management are understood. New-generation national parks have the potential to act as catalysts for broader processes of sustainable transformation at the regional scale (Hammer et al. 2016).

More recently, academic and popular debates on the Anthropocene as an era of human-driven environmental change have had a profound influence on the philosophy and practice of nature conservation and protected area

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management. For Büscher and Fletcher (2020), conservation is (once again) at a crossroads, requiring radical alternatives to established mainstream nature protection strategies and eclipsing earlier ‘parks versus people’ debates. Whereas advocates of a ‘new’ Anthropocene conservation welcome the possibilities current global changes bring with them, embracing new natures and novel ecosystems, ‘neo-protectionists’ call for a return to protected area expansion and enforcement (ibid. 2). Lorimer (2015, 1ff.) stresses that the Anthropocene challenges the core foundational principles of nature-society relations in Western societies. In particular, ‘nature’ is no longer to be understood as a ‘singular, timeless, and pure domain untouched by society, or at least the actions of modern humans’. Protected areas constitute a key site where the status of ‘nature’ is the subject of discussion and established nature-culture dichotomies are variously reinforced and given material expression in the landscape or challenged and re-negotiated (see also Wall-Reinius et al. 2019, Walsh 2020).

Against this conceptual and empirical background, the present paper examines a particular case of a ‘new-generation’ protected area, the Danish Wadden Sea National Park (*National Park Vadehavet*, hereafter DWSNP), founded in 2010. In contrast to the longer established Wadden Sea national parks in Germany, the management ethos of the DWSNP has, from the beginning, been framed in terms of sustainable regional development, explicitly combining conservation with sustainable use and outdoor recreation objectives, linking natural and cultural heritage. In this paper, I examine in detail the governance practices underlying the management of the DWSNP and how nature-culture relations are articulated and negotiated within this context. The paper draws on theoretical work on critical pluralism in protected area management and qualitative case study analysis.

## Conservation in a post-natural world: beyond essentialist nature

Since the 1980s, social theorists have challenged the idea of nature as an unproblematic, essentialist category. Key publications by Donna Haraway (1991) and Bruno Latour (1993) served to blur the boundaries between nature and humans in a fundamental sense. They pointed to the historical and cultural specificity of the categories of nature and society and focussed attention on hybrid forms of nature-society relations. It was William Cronon’s (1996) critique of the concept of wilderness, however, which instigated a discussion of the implications of these debates for the philosophy and practice of nature conservation. His essay exposed the cultural roots of the concept of wilderness as applied to protected areas in the American context and demonstrated the problems inherent in dualistic approaches which seek to set natural areas apart from human societies. At the same time, a number of

prominent conservation biologists were deeply sceptical of ‘postmodernist deconstructionism’: they asserted the independence of ‘the world, including its living components’ from our perceptions of it and that the natural world was knowable in an objective, scientific manner (Soule and Lease 1995, xv). In contrast, Lorimer (2012, 2015) following Latour (2004) declares the Anthropocene to be ‘multi-natural’ as there is no longer a singular environmental knowledge from which conservationists can draw legitimacy for their essentialised understanding of nature. The idea of a multi-natural world emphasises the constructed and relational character of what we perceive and value as nature, and calls for a situated, place-specific understanding of conservation practices (also Walsh 2020, 1, 16).

For many academic commentators and conservation practitioners, both the degree and pervasiveness of global environmental challenges and postmodern critiques of nature-cultural dichotomies necessitated the need to move beyond ‘naturalness’ as a criterion for protected area and wilderness management (e.g. Cole and Yung 2010). Recent critical studies have focussed on the forms conservation ‘beyond nature’ could take (e.g. Lorimer 2015, Williams 2018, Büscher and Fletcher 2020) and, to a lesser extent, on the ways in which nature-culture relations are articulated and reconfigured or reproduced in contemporary conservation practices (e.g. Kupper 2012, Brennan 2018, Walsh 2020a, b). Similar to Lorimer (2012, 2015), Williams emphasises the value of a situated, geographical perspective on conservation practices. He is particularly interested in how protected area management may constitute a form of place-making in both an imaginative and material sense (2018, 286). His concept of conservation as place-making (see also Mehnen et al. 2013, Hilde 2019) draws on critical pluralist thinking and seeks to respond to the ‘manifest heterogeneity’ characteristic of complex society-environment relations (ibid. 286). In this way, questions concerning the status of nature and landscape as material entities or social constructs (*ontological pluralism*) are explicitly related to questions concerning the status of scientific and lay knowledge (*epistemological pluralism*) and modes of politics and governance (*axiological pluralism*) (ibid. see also Williams 2014). In his understanding, these three issues are intertwined and inseparable.

Issues of epistemological pluralism raise questions concerning the validity of diverse expert and lay knowledge and the weight accorded to different stakeholder perspectives. A critical pluralist approach draws attention to how the status and meaning of the nature (and landscape) to be protected are not fixed or predetermined but subject to contestation and deliberation through discursive interaction intrinsic to the practice of conservation (see also Hajer 1995, 2003). Although the ontological status of nature is increasingly questioned, it is nevertheless important to continue to recognise nature as a powerful discursive category (see also

Brennan 2018, Walsh 2020). Protected area management, from this perspective, is as much concerned with the articulation, negotiation, and contestation of ideas of nature as it is with the management of objectively defined ecosystems, landscapes, or habitats. This paper draws inspiration from Williams' critical pluralism in its analysis of the relationship between modes of governance and questions concerning the ontological status of nature at the Wadden Sea.

Other studies have, furthermore, noted a broad shift in emphasis from substantive to procedural legitimacy in nature conservation policy in Europe (see Engelen et al. 2008). The conservation philosophy and ethos of national parks in Europe have traditionally been informed by substantive objectives and often idealized imaginaries of pristine nature, wilderness, and natural processes unconstrained by human intervention (see Mels 2002, Gissibl et al. 2012, Kupper 2012). Nevertheless, examples of more integrated approaches with specific reference to cultural heritage and cultural landscape conservation are also found, such as the Hohe Tauern National Park, established in Austria in 1981 (Mose 2007). Indeed, the conservation practices and management of national parks have variously been legitimized through recourse to a combination of scientific expertise, internationally agreed normative frameworks, and an ecocentric worldview. A shift towards procedural legitimacy implies acknowledgement of multiple, local and non-local perspectives, and a willingness to engage with 'user' perspectives and their respective interest groups. It implies that the question of what a national park 'does' for whom and for what purpose is open for debate and negotiation, usually within the context of framework legislation and/or policy set out at the national level. Nevertheless, many critical questions remain concerning the selection of stakeholders, the capacity for communicative processes to work against underlying relations of power, and the risk of a neglect or misinterpretation of relevant scientific perspectives (see, for example, Brand and Gaffikin 2007, Blackstock et al. 2017, Hansen et al., 2016).

## Methods

The analysis presented below draws primarily on in-depth case study research including both semi-structured qualitative interviews and a close reading of relevant policy documents and grey literature. Twelve interviews were conducted between 2016 and 2018 with interviewees actively engaged in the management of the DWSNP through membership of the Board of Directors (*Bestyrelsen*), National Park Council (*Rådet*, Wadden Sea Advisory Committee (*Rådgivende Udvalg for Vadehavet*), or national park secretariat. The analysis is furthermore informed by a broader set of approximately 30 interviews conducted with actors and stakeholders in

coastal management and nature conservation at the Wadden Sea coast of Germany, Denmark, and the Netherlands between 2016 and 2019 (see also Walsh 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021). This broader set of interviews was invaluable for situating the analysis for this paper in its international context and providing a comparative perspective (see in particular Walsh 2020 and 2021). Interviews were conducted by the author in English and were subsequently transcribed, annotated, and coded following a constructivist (non-hierarchical), grounded theory approach (Corbin and Strauss 2015). Policy documents and other literature were translated by a student assistant as part of the research process. In some instances, translation software was also used. The process of annotation and coding was an important step in organising and making sense of the data. The coded interviews were analysed together with the selected policy documents and other primary materials within an interpretative policy analysis framework (see Hajer and Fischer 1999, Hajer 2003, Wagenaar 2014). This approach allows for an in-depth study of the implicit meanings underlying policy-making practices as well as providing insights into the process dimension of policy-making. In this case, the combination of document and interview analysis helped to tease out how nature-culture relations are constructed in practice within this particular case of protected area management. The discussion of the establishment of a nature reserve and subsequently a national park at the Danish Wadden Sea, in the '[Protected area management and nature-culture relations at the Wadden Sea](#)' section below, draws on material previously published in Danish only and translated for the purposes of this study. A critical, close reading of the material allowed for an in-depth focus on the construction of meaning and discursive framing of specific themes within the context of specific policy-making episodes. Preliminary thematic categories emerging from the analysis included the following: understanding of nature and landscape, issues of democracy and participation, culture of interactive discussion among stakeholders, and the embedding of the national park within its regional context. Of particular interest within the context of this paper was the relationship between how nature and nature-culture relations were articulated and framed (*ontology and epistemology of nature*) and the issues of democratic legitimacy, participation, and discursive interaction (*axiology*).

The '[Protected area management and nature-culture relations at the Wadden Sea](#)' section below places the DWSNP within the wider context of protected area management in the international Wadden Sea region. The historical development of conservation efforts at the Danish Wadden Sea is compared with parallel developments in Germany and the Netherlands, with emphasis placed on specific points of commonality and divergence. The 'prehistory' of the DWSNP helps to explain the emergence of a particular epistemology of nature-culture relations and culture of discursive interaction at the Danish Wadden Sea.

## Protected area management and nature-culture relations at the Wadden Sea

Despite a long history of successful trilateral cooperation, the institutionalisation of nature conservation in the Netherlands, Germany, and Denmark has followed very different trajectories. In Germany, longstanding protests on the part of the affected coastal communities, notwithstanding the first Wadden Sea national parks, were established in Lower Saxony and Schleswig-Holstein in Germany, in 1985 and 1986 respectively. In the Netherlands, by contrast, the protection and use of the Wadden Sea have been the subject of legal battles and negotiations among multiple interest groups (van der Linde 2008, Freriks 2015).<sup>1</sup> The different approaches have been influenced by the specificities of national governance cultures as well as diverging underlying ideas about nature, landscape, and protected area-hinterland relations (Walsh 2021). The German national parks have followed a traditional protectionist approach, founded on an essentialist understanding of nature as primordial wilderness, and a strict separation of natural and cultural landscapes at the dyke-line (Walsh 2018, 2020). A top-down governance regime, founded on scientific expertise and an ideological framing of nature as fundamentally separate from people and their values, has combined to reinforce nature-culture dichotomies at the coast. Despite recent efforts to strengthen the relationship between the Wadden Sea and its regional hinterland in both the Netherlands and Lower Saxony, the dyke-reinforced coastline continues to constitute a hard boundary, in material and symbolic terms (also Egberts 2016, 2018).

The DWSNP was established significantly later than its German counterparts, in 2010, and, as discussed below, has a markedly different ethos and governance structure. It is designated a Category V national park under the IUCN classification implying an emphasis on protecting and valuing traditional interactions between people and landscape (IUCN 2020). The Danish Wadden Sea has, however, enjoyed a relatively high degree of protection over a longer period and the national park designation followed on from pre-existing regulations stemming from the EU Habitats Directive. Over the course of the twentieth century, hunting of seals, ducks, and seabirds became gradually more restricted and areas of sea and land under state ownership were designated as nature reserves. A shift towards larger-scale area-based protection occurred in the 1970s with the designation of a nature and game reserve for the Wadden Sea in 1979. Tensions between hunting and conservation interests remained unresolved, however, and due to the vocal protests from hunting organisations, the 1979 regulation did not lead to further hunting restrictions

(Jepsen 2000, 125). In an attempt to find a way forward, a local informal coalition was initiated in 1976 by biologist Svend Tougaard to find common ground among nature conservation, hunting, and other interest groups. The coalition, known as the Danish Wadden Sea Group (hereafter DWSG), included representatives of 15 local organisations. Their objectives were framed in terms of the sustainable management of the resources of the region. They worked from the assumption that it was better to discuss differences internally and face-to-face rather than in public or through the media. Where it was possible to find a common position, the DWSG would speak with one voice, and where there was no consensus, the individual organisations were free to voice their own opinions. A former member of the Group described it thus in an interview:

Because a hunter was interested in hunting the birds and ornithologist was interested in looking at the birds... So, saving the birds was one thing that both parts could say, "Yes, we have to do it, we have to have a good sound population of birds in the Wadden Sea and then afterwards we can discuss if we should shoot them or look at them." (I\_N6<sup>2</sup>).

As discussed below, this dialogue-based approach to conflict mitigation at the local scale has become an enduring characteristic of the Danish approach to the management of the Wadden Sea. In 1990, the DWSG submitted a locally agreed proposal for a hunting regulation to the Danish Minister for the Environment in the lead up to an intergovernmental governmental conference of the trilateral Wadden Sea cooperation, held in Esbjerg in 1991 (Uhd Jepsen 2000). This proposal was, however, rejected by the Minister, who supported the Dutch and German delegations in their call for a total ban on hunting of migratory birds across the Wadden Sea. This decision led to a situation of increased distrust among local interest groups who concluded that local knowledge, values, and perspectives were of no interest to the political decision-makers in Copenhagen (Jensen and Hansen 2008). A complete ban on hunting did not materialise in practice but the trust of the local population had been lost. This episode provided an indication of key differences in approaches to nature conservation across the Wadden Sea. Whereas ideological and essentialist perspectives prevail in Germany and the Netherlands, a more pragmatic approach founded on sustainable use and protection was in evidence in the Danish context (see also Husum Marboe 2010).

The early 1990s also saw the introduction of new and more comprehensive legislation concerning the conservation of the Wadden Sea (Ministry of the Environment and Food 1992).

<sup>1</sup> A small-scale national park (IUCN Category II) was established on the Dutch Wadden Sea island of Schiermonnikoog in 1989.

<sup>2</sup> Interviews are coded as follows: N = Nature conservationist / national park representative, L = elected political Leader, R = Regional development official / municipal coordinator.



The objectives of this legislation were framed in terms of the ‘sustainable management of the Wadden Sea’, an early example of the application of the sustainable development discourse in national policy. It is further stated that the protection of the area’s ‘natural, environmental, and cultural historical values’ should be weighed against the use of the area for business and recreation purposes (1992, §1 a) and b)). The societal context of the Wadden Sea and the need for negotiation among multiple interests and uses were thus explicitly recognised. The work of the DWSG laid the foundation for the establishment of a formal Advisory Committee for the Wadden Sea, initially under the chairmanship of the National Forest and Nature Agency. This advisory committee brought together local organisations in an open and transparent manner to discuss the wide range of activities and policy developments bearing on the area. The committee which is still active today is now led by councillors of the four Wadden Sea municipalities and has maintained its independence from the national park bodies (See empirical section below).

The comparatively accommodating language of the 1992 legislation and establishment of the Advisory Committee notwithstanding, distrust in national environmental policy did not abate and culminated in a mass protest with thousands of people gathering on the dam between Jutland and the island of Römö in June 1995. The protestors sought recognition of traditional uses of the Wadden Sea and hinterland, including fishing, farming, and hunting, and called for a voice in decision-making on nature management (Jensen, 2007, Jensen and Hansen 2008). This protest action had resonance throughout Denmark and led subsequent ministers of the environment to treat the management of the Wadden Sea as a politically sensitive area, best steered clear of where possible. As a consequence, the Wadden Sea was not included in a list of proposed sites for national parks recommended by the Wilhelms Committee, an advisory committee commissioned by the Danish government in 2001. Following a change of government and the appointment of an Environment Minister from South Jutland, however, a pilot process concerning the establishment of a national park at the Wadden Sea was initiated in 2003 (Jensen and Hansen 2008). Significantly, local farmers were given assurances from the outset that they would not be negatively impacted by stricter environmental regulations due to the establishment of a national park. Through the process of negotiating the establishment of a set of national parks across Denmark, nature policy was transformed from a national to a local issue, due to a strong focus on local ownership and support across a wide range of stakeholders. It has been argued that the national park process reframed rural development and the rural landscape as a legitimate issue of debate ‘not only by farmers, but by all local people’ (Boon et al. 2012, 98). From the outset, nature conservation was one issue among many and use-based perspectives focussed around outdoor recreation, tourism

development, and agriculture were prominent. The potential for a decentralisation of nature politics to ‘facilitate a more equal and active participation’ was recognised, however (ibid. 103). This approach reflected a long tradition of active local democracy in Denmark and a prevailing understanding of nature, land, and the sea as resources (see also Husum Marboe 2010). The strong emphasis on local participation, notwithstanding the process of establishing national parks, was steered centrally and coordinated by a secretariat of the National Environment Agency (Jensen and Hansen 2008, Lund 2009). Indeed, in the opening article of a publication on ‘modern nature management at the Wadden Sea’ produced by the DWSNP together with the Wadden Sea Interpreters Forum, Jorgen Primdahl, professor of landscape and planning at Copenhagen University, reflects on the question of ‘democracy or dictatorship in national parks’ (Primdahl 2018, 4). Local democratic deliberation rather than scientific or professional expertise is viewed as providing the main source of legitimacy for park decision-making. This focus on procedural legitimacy at the local scale reflected developments in environmental governance across northern and western Europe but stood in marked contrast to the prevailing emphasis on substantive legitimacy founded on scientific expertise, characteristic of the Wadden Sea national parks in neighbouring Germany (see Krauss 2010, Walsh 2020).

In the following section, the institutional arrangements and governance culture of the DWSNP are examined in more detail, with a specific focus on the relationship between the park structures and the local community, and the negotiation and articulation of nature-culture relations. The next section below discusses the relational embedding of the DWSNP within both a local and national context. The current institutional arrangements, including the need for parallel structures, are interpreted in terms of a negotiated positioning between the local and the global. This is followed by an analysis of the issue of democratic legitimacy and the practical implications of fostering and maintaining a governance culture, founded on interactive and inclusive participation. Subsequently, the question of how nature-culture relations are discussed in practice is examined, providing insights into how a relational ontology of nature is cultivated through pluralist governance (axiology). These issues are brought together and discussed in more depth in the final concluding section of the paper.

### **A ‘frame put down on this area’: negotiating a space for action between the local and the global**

The DWSNP was founded in 2010 with all four Wadden Sea municipalities (Esbjerg, Tønder, Varde, and the island of Fanø) voting in favour of it. In marked contrast to the German Wadden Sea national parks, the Danish national parks were not invested with decision-making authority

and have limited financial resources. As a consequence, there is a strong reliance on partnership working and joint project development involving multiple local government and civil society stakeholders. A member of the National Park Secretariat described it thus: ‘The role for the national parks in Denmark is more to facilitate, to coordinate, to bring people together, to...all the stakeholders and local people, to try to make them work together and make it happen. That’s the whole idea about it’ (I\_N9). This emphasis on inclusive participation is reflected in a key statement of the current National Park Plan (2019–2024): ‘The National Park Plan is consequently not just the plan of the committee, council and secretariat – it is the plan of the whole National Park’ (DWSNP 2019, 11). Within this document, the DWSNP describes itself as ‘a network organization, project organization, and initiator’, noting that the Danish national park law requires that activities and developments of national parks ‘rest on principles of voluntary participation and inclusion’ (ibid.). In a carefully worded statement, the shared objectives for the Wadden Sea are formulated as follows: ‘The DWSNP incorporates many interests. We are passionate about a common goal: to use, protect and develop the area with respect for the past, present and future’ (DWSNP 2019, 24). This statement seeks to combine multiple potentially conflicting interests to form a ‘common goal’ incorporating protection, use, and developmental aspects. Rather than seeking to preserve or restore an ideal past state of nature, the Wadden Sea landscape is positioned on a developmental trajectory, acknowledging the shifting current and future socio-economic and environmental context (see also Walsh 2020, 2021). The Management Plan, furthermore, positions the national park as embedded within both international and local contexts. It is Denmark’s ‘international national park’ (DWSNP 2019, 15). The designation of the Wadden Sea as a World Heritage Site is interpreted to imply shared values and a common responsibility to ‘the whole world’:

The Wadden Sea national park’s values are about the way we work and what we are. We are based on the same values that the world heritage work with the Netherlands and Germany have defined, because it is our common Wadden Sea and it is our common values that we must take care of for the whole world (DWSNP 2019, 24).

At the same time, considerable care has been taken to ensure a high level of active engagement and identification with the national park on the part of the local community. An employee of the DWSNP secretariat described the national park in terms of a form of spatial and institutional frame: ‘a *frame* put down on this area.... and also, the neighbouring area’ (I\_N9), emphasis added). Here it is significant that the coastal

hinterland is also included within the ‘frame’. This is explained by the fact that some partners may live or work within the four municipalities but beyond the park boundaries but also indicates the porous nature of those boundaries. As further detailed below, the NP boundaries have not in any sense created or reinforced a divide between a natural and a cultural landscape. Rather, emphasis has been placed on strengthening the relationship between the coastal hinterland and the Wadden Sea. A local politician in the municipality of Varde expressed his pride in having the national park so close to the town centre:

You can stand... where we have our church and our old city hall... and you can walk 200 metres and then you are in the national park. That’s, of course, something we would like people to know in this municipality... that we are proud of having the national park so close to our [town]... (I\_L1)

Rather than following the dyke-line, the NP boundary includes coastal marshlands, near Ribe, Tønder, and Varde (Fig. 1). For the secretariat employee, it was ‘natural’ to include the marshlands within the park boundary:

All this...the Tønder marsh used to be a...when you go back to medieval times, it was a part of the Wadden Sea. And it has become land by building dikes and so on. And the bird life and nature are so closely connected with the Wadden Sea... It would be natural to include them within the national park. (I\_N9)

Whereas the dyke-line has become a symbolically powerful ‘hard boundary’ in both Germany and the Netherlands, separating the natural landscape of the Wadden Sea from the settled cultivated lands behind the dykes, the decision to include coastal marshlands within the park boundary in Denmark indicates a greater emphasis on connectivity, hybridity, and perhaps liminality at the boundary between nature and culture (see also Leyshon 2017).

The idea of a close connection between the Wadden Sea and its regional hinterland is also reflected in current governance arrangements. The National Park Board constitutes the primary decision-making body for the national park. Its fifteen members are selected for a term of 4 years by the Minister for the Environment on the recommendation of relevant authorities, the Wadden Sea municipalities and non-governmental organisations. It is currently chaired by a professor of tourism from the University of Southern Denmark and vice-chaired by an elected member of Varde municipality. Key sectoral interests including nature conservation, hunting, fishing, outdoor recreation, and agriculture are represented on the Board. The work of the Board is supported by the National Park Council,



**Fig. 1** Map of the Danish Wadden Sea National Park© DWSNP 2012

an advisory forum where a larger group of primarily local and regional stakeholders are represented. Twelve of the thirty seats on the National Park Council are reserved for representatives of local areas (islands and marshes) within the national

park. The particular, place-based interests of local communities across the Wadden Sea area, from the Tønder marshes in the South to the Skallingen peninsula in the North, are thus given a voice in the management of the park. Significantly, the



topics for discussion by the National Park Council are set by the National Park Board, which, by this means, maintains control of the agenda. The National Park Council nevertheless provides an important forum for fostering broad-based discussion on key management issues prior to decision-making at the Board level. The Council was chaired until December 2018 by former Director of the Fisheries and Maritime Museum in Esbjerg, Svend Tougaard. The work of the national park is furthermore supported by a number of committees focussed on specific topics, including research, culture, and the selection of national park partners. The governance arrangements for the national park allow for, but are also reliant on, a high level of voluntary participation. Decisions made by the National Park Board are open for public scrutiny and require a certain level of consensus across interest groups. In practice, this means that initiatives which seek to challenge the status quo and existing power relations are inherently risky and require substantial effort to prepare the ground in advance.

### **‘Dealing with the democratic issue’: critical pluralism in practice**

The broad-based and inclusive governance arrangements for the national park notwithstanding, the Wadden Sea Advisory Committee (WSAC), founded in 1992, continues to play an active role as an independent advisory forum and merits further attention here as a key example of pluralist governance structures. Unlike the National Park Board, the WSAC is led by the municipalities to provide policy advice to the municipalities. A leading local elected representative, active on Wadden Sea issues both locally and internationally, emphasised the independent status of the WSAC:

The difference is that the national park is controlled and paid for mostly by the ministry, the national level. The advisory committee of the Wadden Sea area for the four municipalities is paid for alone by the four municipalities. (I\_L1)

From his perspective, the decision-making ‘sovereignty’ of the municipalities was threatened by the national park structures: ‘For some it is a little overkill and for others it maintains the sovereignty of the municipalities’ (I\_L1). He argued that the WSAC, with minor modifications to its membership, could have taken on the role of the National Park Council, on the condition that it was ‘double-headed’ politically—with a representative of the municipalities as co-chair. The governance of the Wadden Sea is clearly an important issue of political sensitivity for the municipalities with an enduring wariness of national-level control simmering below the surface.

An evaluation of the WSAC conducted in 2014 to assess the need for its continued existence in parallel to the DWSNP structures concluded that, despite overlaps in membership, it performed a distinct role to the National Park Board and Council. A local government official with responsibility for the coordination of the WSAC noted a key difference in the geographical remit of the WSAC: ‘we cover the entire area of the four municipalities. So, it’s the entire municipality. So, it’s not only within the borders of the national park. So, that means we can discuss subjects that are beyond these borders’ (I\_R2). The same interviewee stressed that the WSAC meetings are open to members of the public, who can attend as observers. The agendas and minutes of National Park Board and Council meetings are published online but the meetings themselves are not open to attendance from non-members. The agenda of WSAC meetings are furthermore determined by the members themselves, thus allowing for more open discussions. Local politicians valued the role of the WSAC in helping them develop an informed opinion on current issues, considering the broad range of stakeholder issues. This was described in terms of ‘qualifying the political process’ (I\_R2, evaluation report). One participant described the role of the WSAC more graphically in terms of its role in bringing together stakeholder groups with adversarial positions:

He said it’s like a steam boiler where you take out the steam... You can laugh together. You drink coffee together. You have a lunch together. And, of course, they still disagree when they leave the meeting. But, they also... get an understanding of why the farmers... or the fisherman... or the authorities... or the NGOs say as they do. (I\_R2)

This interview quote indicates that individual stakeholders have come to recognise and respect the validity of the perspectives of other interest groups. Ongoing interactive discussion has served to ensure that the boundaries between different positions have not become rigid and hardened and that debate does not become polarised. The tensions and contradictions between nature conservation, farming, hunting, and other interests are thus the subject of active discussion. The establishment of a national park has not closed off these discussions but provided an institutional frame for further and future discussion. Other interviews similarly place emphasis on the role of active critical discussion, and open dialogue. One interviewee, from the Wadden Sea Centre, close to Ribe, relates this to a specifically Danish democratic governance culture:

...we think, in Denmark, that the democratic process is important. And, therefore, we also must get allowance (sic) to be critical, to discuss, as a part of our living. If

you ask me, “What is a Dane?” A Dane, for me, is a person who is allowed to discuss. (I\_N7).

A local ornithologist, wildlife artist, and member of the National Park Board reflected on the necessity of managing many competing interests. He remarks that the national park has ‘no authority at all’ but values the process of bringing different interests together. In fact, the DWSNP may be considered to exercise a form of authority, founded on consensual deliberation rather than legal regulations:

... the Danish national park has no authority at all. It is actually just a table which gathers different interests. And this is very much needed, no matter what... (I\_N8)

He further notes that the DWSNP has learnt from international experience in protected area management, and specifically from the Cairngorms NP in Scotland, an early example of a new-generation national park:

I have come to learn, actually, that also other national parks have to deal with the democratic issue, so to speak. And even though, they have, maybe, a more formal legislation ownership behind it, they still have to cope with many interests. And grow from that. (I\_N8)

From his perspective, no matter what the legislative status is, active negotiation of interests in a democratic manner must form the basis for decision-making. He is nevertheless concerned that the WSNP does not become a ‘false branding’, a national park in name only, which cannot live up to international standards. As detailed below, the cultivation of a pluralist governance culture has implications for the understanding and articulation of the ‘nature’ to be protected at the Danish Wadden Sea.

### **‘Telling nature’s story’: cultivating a relational ontology**

The current national park management plan frames the vision of the WSNP in terms of sustainable development, with reference to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals: ‘The national park is used, protected and developed in a sustainable interaction between nature and people’ (WSNP 2019, 25). For an interviewee from the Wadden Sea Centre, the importance of telling critical stories about nature is central to the work of the interpretative centre. He argues that because their goal is to raise understanding of the nature of the Wadden Sea, it is furthermore politically permissible to ‘make discussion’ and ‘...to tell about the nature - in a critical way’ (I\_N7). In particular, effort is made to draw parallels between natural phenomena and familiar human activities. The Wadden Sea Centre thus focusses on the phenomenon of bird migration

and draws comparisons between the journeys made by the birds and those of tourists at the Wadden Sea:

For many people, it’s nearly maniac to fly so many kilometres only to get one chicken... But, the story is somehow very beautiful. Because in every person, we like to travel. And this bird has travelled so many kilometres, crossing so many countries, so many cultures, so many dangers. And to understand that, and... they have succeeded. They are still there. (I\_N7)

In this way, they deliberately sought to build a bridge between the worlds of experience of people and birds rather than accentuating a nature-society divide: ‘we had to bring the birds near the people... I think it’s very important to understand that you must see and feel the beauty of the Wadden Sea to understand it’ (I\_N7). That Ribe Cathedral is built from seashells provides a further point of connection between the worlds of nature and culture, society and the sea:

... Ribe Cathedral, one of the biggest churches in Denmark, is built... from shells. And then people say, ‘Wow. That’s fantastic’. To tell them that the nature is a part of you... And, then they understand that the [town] is lying quite near to the Wadden Sea. And then it is easier to tell the story. (I\_N7)

The connections between the protected nature of the Wadden Sea and the lifeworlds of the people at the coast feature centre stage rather than downplayed in favour of a categorical construction of pure, pristine nature. In a second interview, an ornithologist and wildlife artist reflects on how questions of nature management are also cultural issues and need to be addressed as such. For him, it is evident that the national park needs to engage with and challenge existing imaginaries of nature-culture relations which have emerged over longer periods of time:

We don’t want sand to move. We are really afraid of sand moving... It’s in our blood in this part of the country... We can set some dunes free, so to speak. And get the sand moving again... But, it’s... a change in our minds that - Uh oh oh oh, sand is moving. (I\_N8)

Securing sand dunes to prevent encroachment on settlements and farming land comprises a form of unquestioned ‘local truth’ that is not easily challenged (see also Fischer 2011, Reise & MacLean 2018). He notes that for many people, the appearance of large and quickly growing dunes or the beach contrasted with their perception of what a beach should be ‘white, flat, and so-called ‘clean’ (I\_N8). Against this background, conservationist arguments concerning the biodiversity value of ‘setting dunes free’ have little chance of

success. Through discussion and engagement with the concerns of the local community, a gradual shift in perceptions is, however, noted:

I can come and talk so much as I want about rare insect species living in these dunes. It doesn't count. But, we have seen the movement also. In people's minds and understanding. And now, at least, we have moved from questioning and kind of hatred to understanding and acceptance. And a certain amount of people also now actually likes the new landscapes. (I\_N8)

In contrast to the 'hands off' minimum intervention approach of the German Wadden Sea national parks, active 'hands on' management strategies focussed on improving nature values are given preference in the Danish context. Projects initiated or supported by the DWSNP include plans for cattle grazing in coastal marshland areas and the enhancement or restoration of habitats for particular species. The specification of conservation objectives and the choices made concerning which nature to protect are explicit and based on a process of developing understanding and generating awareness across a wide group of stakeholders. Interviewees, however, also point to a dearth of relevant scientific expertise informing—but not setting the norms for—park decision-making and the potential pitfalls of an open pluralist approach.

## Discussion and conclusions

This paper critically examined the current institutional arrangements and discursive practices at the DWSNP against the background of current debates on the status of nature and nature conservation in the Anthropocene. The DWSNP has from the outset adopted a pluralist approach to protected area governance, explicitly acknowledging the positioning of the national park both as an intrinsic part of an international ecosystem of global significance and as a landscape of meaning and value to the people living locally on the coast and islands. The implications of this delicate balancing act are reflected in current institutional arrangements where tensions between a desire for local 'ownership' and prerogatives of national and international policy commitments are not fully resolved, but acknowledged and accommodated. An open and inclusive approach to plan-making and agenda-setting for the national park has fostered a pluralist discourse, founded on explicit acknowledgement of multiple knowledge claims and a recognition of protection, use, and development interests as legitimate. Rather than positioning the national park as a 'place apart', current and past interactions between the Wadden Sea and its coastal hinterland are understood to be formative of the contemporary coastal landscape. The nature of the Wadden Sea is thus understood as relational and imbued

with socio-cultural meanings rather than as an essentialist category. Natural and cultural values are brought together under an integrated sustainable development framework and holistic understanding of heritage. Pluralist governance arrangements, a relational discursive framing, and an active culture of critical deliberation have enabled the DWSNP to become a dynamic forum for discussion of nature-society relations within a broad, cross-sectoral, and multi-stakeholder context. This emerging institutional capacity, although largely based on voluntary participation, partnership-based working, and informal commitments, has the potential to provide a catalyst for more broad-ranging dialogue on the future development of the Wadden Sea landscape and coastal hinterland than more formal and authoritative institutional structures might allow. A strong emphasis on local democratic engagement ensures that the legitimization of the DWSNP's activities rests not only on national legislation and international commitments. The case study analysis presented in this paper provides further empirical support for the thesis that axiological, epistemological, and ontological pluralism are in practice mutually supporting. A relational, non-categorical understanding of nature and landscape is fostered by open and inclusive institutional structures and a recognition of diverse and potentially conflicting interests. The DWSNP will always remain, however, a work in progress. The medium- to long-term implications of the current management approach for the Wadden Sea ecosystem, nevertheless, require continuous monitoring and evaluation and the concerns of some stakeholders concerning a lack of scientific expertise within the decision-making and advisory bodies of the national park need to be taken seriously

Within the wider context of the international Wadden Sea region, this case study is of particular interest because the approach to protected area management is radically different from those found within both Germany and the Netherlands. In both Schleswig-Holstein and Denmark, efforts to protect and conserve the nature of the Wadden Sea led to large-scale protests on the part of the local coastal communities in the 1980s and 1990s. In the German context, local opposition contributed to a polarisation of debate and a retreat to essentialist diametrically opposed conceptualisations of pure, pristine nature and traditional Frisian culture (see Krauss 2005, Walsh 2020, 2021). UNESCO Biosphere Reserves have been established at the Wadden Sea coasts of both Lower Saxony and Schleswig-Holstein, with the objective of supporting sustainable regional development at the coast (Lower Saxony) and on the inhabited *Hallig* islands (Schleswig-Holstein) (see Walsh 2021). These developments, notwithstanding a sharp policy distinction, remains between 'spaces for nature' and 'spaces for culture' (Walsh 2018, 2020).

The Schleswig-Holstein National Park was established without the support of the local population, and over 30 years later, its underlying guiding principle continues to be that 'we let nature decide' (Walsh 2020, 13ff). In contrast, the

underlying core principle of the DWSNP is that the people decide. In a deliberate decision to avoid what was perceived as a form of conservationist dictatorship, the DWSNP boasts strong, inclusive, governance structures and, perhaps more importantly, is characterised by an openness to critical, pluralist dialogue on questions of axiology, epistemology, and ontology.

Looking beyond the Wadden Sea, the case study presented in this paper serves as a reminder of the need for awareness of the diversity of protected area management practices. The DWSNP does not, fit neatly into the categories of neo-protectionism or new conservation employed by Büscher and Fletcher (2020). Nor does it radically challenge dominant systems of (capitalist) socio-economic organisation. It does, however, have the potential to act as a catalyst for transformative practices. Protected areas continue to represent sites of struggle, positioned between the local and the global, whereby nature-culture relations are continuously negotiated and re-negotiated through situated socio-spatial practices.

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