Sandpipers and the Art of Letting Go: Narratives of Conservation in the Wadden Sea

Eveline de Smalen

Summary

The history of conservation in the Wadden Sea reserves a starring role for birds. Birds were important in early conservation efforts, are central to its policies today, and contribute to its success as a protected area, but they can also help us think about nature reserves conceptually and critically assess their role in society. Nature reserves are often considered static, unchanging, and ahistorical places. This article provides a reading of Ed Leeflang's poem "The Sanderling" to show how literature about birds can help us think about nature reserves as historical places shaped by a multitude of more-than-human agencies, and marked by loss.

Migrating birds play a starring role in the history of conservation in the Wadden Sea, an intertidal zone stretching along the coasts of the Netherlands, Germany, and Denmark from Den Helder to Esbjerg. Both early, amateur conservation efforts and later, institutionalized ones in the 1960s focused on these birds (Wöbse and Ziemeck 255–56; Wöbse 2017, 207). The most radical measures for conservation taken in the Wadden Sea—namely, excluding people from designated areas—were taken to protect birds (Wöbse 2013, 172). Birds are also part of the reason why the Wadden Sea is beloved and successful as a conservation area: they attract many visitors, especially around the season of the birds' migrations in spring and autumn, which conservation societies encourage by hosting events.



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Aerial photograph of Rottumeroog (right) and Rottumerplaat (left) in the Wadden Sea, 2006.

The Wadden Sea is a unique site, and one that raises particular questions about conservation, partly due to its significance for migrating birds. For much of the year, the Wadden Sea lacks many of the species it is protected for. It is a site in sequential waiting: for the redshank (*Tringa totanus*) to breed in springtime, the red knot (*Calidris canutus*) to feed in autumn, and the sanderling (*Calidris alba*) to overwinter. The Wadden Sea's physical constitution reflects its changing population: it too shifts shape with each coming ebb and tide, as sand and silt are removed from one place and deposited elsewhere, and its islands migrate slowly eastwards. Today, the Wadden Sea's changing nature is exacerbated by rising sea levels and changes in the behavior and distribution of species as a result of climate change.



Common Redshank (*Tringa Totanus*)

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Red knot (*Calidris canutus*)

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Sanderling (*Calidris alba*)

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Contemporary nature conservation in the Wadden Sea consciously and productively engages with the area's dynamic geomorphological processes (Common Wadden Sea Secretariat 35). Still, the public and assessors of conservation management generally "want to hold onto what is" (Loon-Steensma 57).[1] This idea is closely related to the disregard of history that is still prevalent today in human encounters with nature, especially in nature reserves. Dipesh Chakrabarty's characterization of twentieth-century historians' ideas about the environment still applies to the cultural imagination of nature, namely that human relations to the environment are "timeless" (204). In the Wadden Sea, this results in a tension between the perception of a landscape that is essentially stable, if nowadays at risk, and the dynamics of a space that faces stressors because of climate change in addition to its lived reality as a continuously changing space.

The climate crisis and the history of the Wadden Sea force us to reconsider this way of thinking, not just as scholars, but as a society. To accomplish this, we need new narratives and new imaginations of the landscape. One direction to look for these is literature. In Ed Leeflang's Dutch poem "De drieteenstrandloper" (The

Sanderling) , the eponymous sandpiper becomes a symbol for the loss that the Wadden Sea faces. The sanderling, which in Low German is called “Keen Tied” (No time) because it seems to be in a perennial hurry, scuttles along the coast. Between the advancing and retreating waves of the sea, it

> … leaves of his existence
> the fleeting cuneiform,
> in crooked running lines,
> nearly quatrains.
>
> And by her forthright mopping
> they are wiped out.



Sanderling footprints

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The poem exemplifies exactly the nonhuman agencies that traditional histories often ignore by anthropomorphizing the sandpiper and the sea. The bird’s footprints are likened to a poetic device, thus referencing a highly elaborate form of language, as well as the earliest known script. Yet, while cuneiform tablets are strengthened by the destructive forces of fire, meaning many have been well preserved for millennia, the sandpiper’s footprints last for mere seconds under the sea’s influence. The sea, in turn, does not so much wipe

out the footprints as clean the shore, an explicitly intentional act. The fact that the stanza focused on the sea is cut short after only two lines, unlike the other stanzas which all have four, reinforces this destructive agency.

While highlighting the sanderling's agency, the poem continues to put its power into perspective:

> All traces of his scampering
> must disappear, as if his instinct
> to live on, unemphatically
> got it wrong.

The sanderling, then, is bound to disappear, as was always its fate. In speaking about loss in the context of a bird who continually loses the ground beneath its feet and the marks it makes on the soil, this is a particularly resonant poem for the Anthropocene—a time in which we stand to lose so much, not least sandpipers, a family that includes a number of birds on the IUCN red list of threatened species. Still, the internal rhyme of the poem's final two lines conveys a sense that although short lived, the sanderling's fight for existence was not entirely misguided: it hints that there has been harmony, beauty, and a sense of belonging in its being.



Five Sanderlings (*Calidris alba*)

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Literary scholar Bernhard Malkmus has argued that, in the Anthropocene, national parks can be sites that inspire

an "attitude of letting go" (219).[2] He writes that "[t]hey are a window into the (natural historical) past and therefore an important frame of reference for the formation of the future" (220).[3] Much is changing in national parks around the world, including in the Wadden Sea. To face this change, we will not only have to adapt our conservation practices, but also our narratives, and act as much with imaginative force as with humbleness, and who can guide us here better than the humble sandpiper.

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[1] "[wij willen] graag vasthouden aan wat is."

[2] "Haltung des Loslassen-Könnens."

[3] "Sie sind ein Fenster in die (naturgeschichtliche) Vergangenheit und deswegen ein wichtiger Referenzrahmen für die Gestaltung der Zukunft."

Further readings:

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Related links:

- Leeflang, Ed. "The Sanderling." Trans. Ed Leeflang. *Poetry International Archives*. https://www.poetryinternational.org/pi/poem/4179/auto/0/0/Ed-Leeflang/THE-SANDERLING/en/tile

- Bishop, Elizabeth, and John D. Scott, "Sandpiper" (video with poem) https://www.youtube.com/watch
- Heron, S. F., et al. *Workshop Report: Climate Risk Assessment for Wadden Sea World Heritage Property*. https://www.waddensea-worldheritage.org/sites/default/files/2020_CVI%20Workshop%20Report.pdf
- Krulwich, Robert. "Where's My Dinner? It Was Here a Second Ago—The Sandpiper's Dilemma." *NPR*. 8 July 2013. https://www.npr.org/sections/krulwich/2013/07/08/200032179/wheres-my-dinner-it-was-here-a-second-ago-the-sandpiper-s-dilemma

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- http://www.poetryinternational.org/pi/poem/4179/auto/0/0/Ed-Leeflang/THE-SANDERLING/en/tile

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Eveline de Smalen is a literary scholar who works on literatures of coastal and riverine landscapes, with a particular interest in the transformative capacities of the imagination and the interactions between the realm of the imagination and that of policy

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