

Literature and the Wadden Sea: Teaching coastal environments through literature

Coastal Studies & Society
2023, Vol. 2(4) 331–335
© The Author(s) 2023



Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/26349817231179930
journals.sagepub.com/home/cls



Eveline de Smalen¹ and Katie Ritson¹

¹Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society, LMU Munich, Munchen, Germany

Abstract

Literature and the Wadden Sea is a guide for teaching Wadden Sea literature in advanced university courses in Scandinavian, Danish, German or Dutch language and literature or comparative literary studies programmes, and for integrating literature into courses in other disciplines. It can be found at www.waddensealiterature.com. This article lays out the development of this project and the contents and objectives of the Teaching Toolkit. It also suggests how it can be used as a model for teaching that couples literature with other protected places, be they national parks, nature reserves or other places. Finally, it concludes with our initial findings, plans and hopes for the subsequent development of the project.

Keywords

Wadden Sea, literature, teaching, environmental humanities, ecocriticism

Development of the Project

The aims of this project were, broadly, twofold; to develop a resource that could be directly useful to our peers with an interest in the Wadden Sea (whether as humanities scholars or in conservation); and to produce a model that could be developed further in the service of conservation humanities more generally. We hope that the Teaching Toolkit we produced – now available online as an open access resource – will be used by those teaching literature and related humanities fields (such as environmental history) at tertiary level, and also that it can offer an alternative way of thinking and understanding the

Corresponding author:

Eveline de Smalen, Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society, LMU Munich, Leopoldstrasse 11a, Munchen 80802, Germany.

Email: eveline.desmalen@wec-waddenzee.nl

Wadden Sea to those engaged in conservation work (including visitor services) and biological study in the area.

This project, which is an outcome of the AHRC and DFG funded project ‘Corridor Talk: Conservation Humanities and the Future of Europe’s National Parks’, was born of adversity, namely, the fact that we were unable to pursue many of the objectives we had set out to accomplish in the project due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Its development remained continuously influenced by the continuing pandemic, with workshops held online and one in-person workshop even moved online a day before starting due to new restrictions. Some parts of the Teaching Toolkit more than others, in particular those centred on field trips, are heavily influenced by different participants in the project’s experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. As the days of severe restraints to civic life are now seemingly and hopefully behind us, the Teaching Toolkit aims to be useful to educators beyond the pandemic, and include lessons from the pandemic that can be sustained in post-pandemic life.

In order to be able to meet the project aims, we drew on a range of expertise. To add to our own training in comparative literature and environmental humanities, and our pooled knowledge of the main Wadden Sea languages (Dutch, German and Danish), we formed a working group of National Park employees and people working for associated institutions such as visitor centres, lecturers and professors in national philologies, environmental history and heritage.¹ We convened two workshops – both online due to the COVID-19 pandemic – at which we discussed our expertise, contributed and discussed practical and conceptual ideas for the Teaching Toolkit and talked about ways in which it could be implemented. After the workshop, we consolidated the findings on a website where different suggested course themes and more practical suggestions regarding, for example, field trips and assessment can be easily navigated, and from which different items can be chosen and consolidated by users into new or existing syllabi for use in their teaching.

The fact that the Wadden Sea is a conservation site that is spread across three different national areas, involving a number of national and regional languages, was and is an interesting challenge. Conservation policy in the area requires cooperation and the understanding of the biosphere as a connected space without hard borders, across which species such as migratory birds, molluscs, seals and even the silty land itself can move freely; but literary teaching is still dependent on its role as a repository for national languages and identities. Recognising that conservation is about human conflicts and imaginaries as much as it is about the protection of landscapes and species has been an important factor in our research. Developing a resource that could work with both a shared imaginary of the Wadden Sea and the multiple and sometimes overlapping national and regional identities reflected in its literary representations proved to be a difficult but rewarding task.

¹Full list of participants: [NAMES REDACTED]

Contents and Objectives

The overarching goal of all units is to teach students to understand their position in the world around them, to engage with it critically and to reflect on the role of language in their relation with the environment. Educators can select different units to combine into a full course on literature and the Wadden Sea that works in their curriculum, or select a single unit to integrate in an existing or new course on a wider topic. Three key themes form the basis of courses on literature and the Wadden Sea in this resource: first, the dynamic nature of the Wadden Sea landscape and the implications of landscape transformation and loss; second, biodiversity, the question of how our thinking about different species has changed over time, and the role of culture in our understanding of biodiversity; and finally, attachment to place, which is not a given but is produced through experiences, culture and mediations, and has affective, cognitive and behavioural implications.

There are three types of units in the Teaching Toolkit: mini-units, field trip units and thematic units. The Teaching Toolkit has two mini-units: one on literature and one on ecology. These units are designed to fit into a disciplinary course with little room for inter- or transdisciplinary work. A classic biology or ecology course can implement the mini-unit on literature to introduce students to knowledge production in the humanities, and stimulate them to reflect on their position in their environment, while enough room remains for the course's standard content. Conversely, a classic literature course can introduce students to knowledge from biology and ecology. These mini-units both introduce students to the concept of naïve realism, to reflect on different ways of producing knowledge in the sciences and humanities, and encourage them to judge literature by its own criteria.

Three types of field trips are included as units in the Teaching Toolkit: one on physical field trips, one on virtual field trips and one on imaginative field trips. Courses can include one or more of these units. Physical field trips can be classic field trips to sites in the Wadden Sea area, but can also take place elsewhere. If a university where a course is taught is located far away from the Wadden Sea, it might not be feasible, or even desirable (especially with regard to the environmental impact of travel) to visit sites in the area. In this case, educators can opt for a location closer to home that has a connection to the Wadden Sea (e.g. a waterway in a watershed that ends in the Wadden Sea) or speaks to it in some other way (a dyke or salt marsh in another region). Virtual field trips approximate the experience of a physical field trip, but take place remotely. A virtual field trip can include videos of a field site taken for the purpose of the virtual field trip, and soil samples or shells, for example. An imaginative field trip invites students to experience a field site through the medium of art: a film or literary text. These units invite reflection on the production of space or sense of place, and the role of mediation in this, especially if multiple field trip units are incorporated.

Finally, the Teaching Toolkit includes four main thematic units: Language and Text, Place Attachment, Biodiversity, and Dynamism, Change and Loss. The Language and Text unit invites students to reflect explicitly on the role of language in their relation with the environment through creative writing and journaling exercises. The Place Attachment

unit encourages a wider reflection on the relation between people and their environment, and can do this with a historical focus (how perceptions of the Wadden Sea area have changed over time), a focus on media (how the relation or attachment to place is influenced by the way a person encounters it) or the insider/outsider perspective (how perceptions of place are affected by a subject's background as either a resident or a visitor of the Wadden Sea area). The Biodiversity unit touches on the history of science to reflect on how biodiversity, as well as different species have been understood over time. Finally, the Dynamism, Change and Loss unit reflects on the implications of preserving a dynamic system for nature conservation and human habitation, and focuses specifically on lost places in the Wadden Sea, like Rungholt, and hidden, lost or redundant features on land, like priel (tidal creek) courses and dyke lines. This part of the toolkit also provides tips for making these units problem-based and sourcing specific case studies related to these topics in communities.

The Teaching Toolkit is complemented by a full annotated bibliography (available online) that we hope to add to over time.

Future Perspectives

Literature and the Wadden Sea went live in May 2022. Through the engagement of the participants in our two workshops and educators beyond, elements from the Teaching Toolkit have already made their way into courses being taught at the University of Flensburg and the University of Frankfurt in Germany and the University of Groningen in the Netherlands. Upcoming workshops in 2023 with a specific focus on Wadden Sea conservation in the humanities promise to develop future research and cooperations. The syllabus is featured on the official UNESCO Wadden Sea website: <https://www.waddensea-worldheritage.org/resources/teaching-university-course-wadden-sea-literature>

We are delighted that the online availability of the Wadden Sea Teaching Toolkit and the international network of humanities researchers that came about through the process of creating it will be part of teaching practices in 2023 and hopefully well beyond. But we also hope that the Teaching Toolkit will have an impact beyond the Wadden Sea. In developing it, we have created a prototype for how to integrate conservation issues into humanities teaching, and played our part in attuning the humanities to the need to halt biodiversity loss and maintain thriving and inhabitable landscapes. Our project is infinitely scaleable, and, as an open-source website, it can be borrowed all or in part by anyone who wants to profit from our research. We look forward to seeing where it goes next.

Acknowledgements

Full list of participants: Anders Ehlers Dam (Europa-Universität Flensburg), Sander van Dijk (Werelderfgoedcentrum Waddenzee), Linde Egberts (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam), Frederike Felcht (Goethe-Universität Frankfurt) Anat Harel (Werelderfgoedcentrum Waddenzee) Femke Kramer (Rijksuniversiteit Groningen) Anne Husum Marboe (Nationalpark Vadehavet), Katie Ritson

(RCC), Meindert Schroor (Waddenacademie/Varenius), Eveline de Smalen (RCC), Gwenda van der Vaart, Hannah Wilting (Nationalpark Niedersächsisches Wattenmeer) and Anna-Katharina Wöbse (Justus-Liebig-Universität Giessen).

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: Research for this article was funded as part of the project ‘Corridor Talk: Conservation Humanities and the Future of Europe’s National Parks’, funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council and the German Research Foundation (DFG project nr. 429022880).

Author biographies

Eveline de Smalen is a researcher and curator with a background in English and Comparative Literature and a PhD in Environmental Humanities, working at the intersection of nature conservation and arts and culture. In her work, she aims to foster critical thought about the role of humans in the environment and about how we can reshape this role to create a more sustainable future. She is currently working as a curator at the World Heritage Centre Wadden Sea in Lauwersoog and convene the Environmental Humanities Network at the University of Groningen.

Katie Ritson is currently research fellow at the Rachel Carson Center for Environment & Society and affiliated researcher in the Institute for Scandinavian Studies at LMU Munich. From 2020 to 2023 she was Co-Principal Investigator of the project Corridor Talk: Conservation Humanities and the Future of Europe’s National Parks, which was funded jointly by the UK’s Arts and Humanities Research Council and the German Research Council. She is author of the book *The Shifting Sands of the North Sea Lowlands: Literary and Historical Imaginaries* (London: Routledge, 2019).