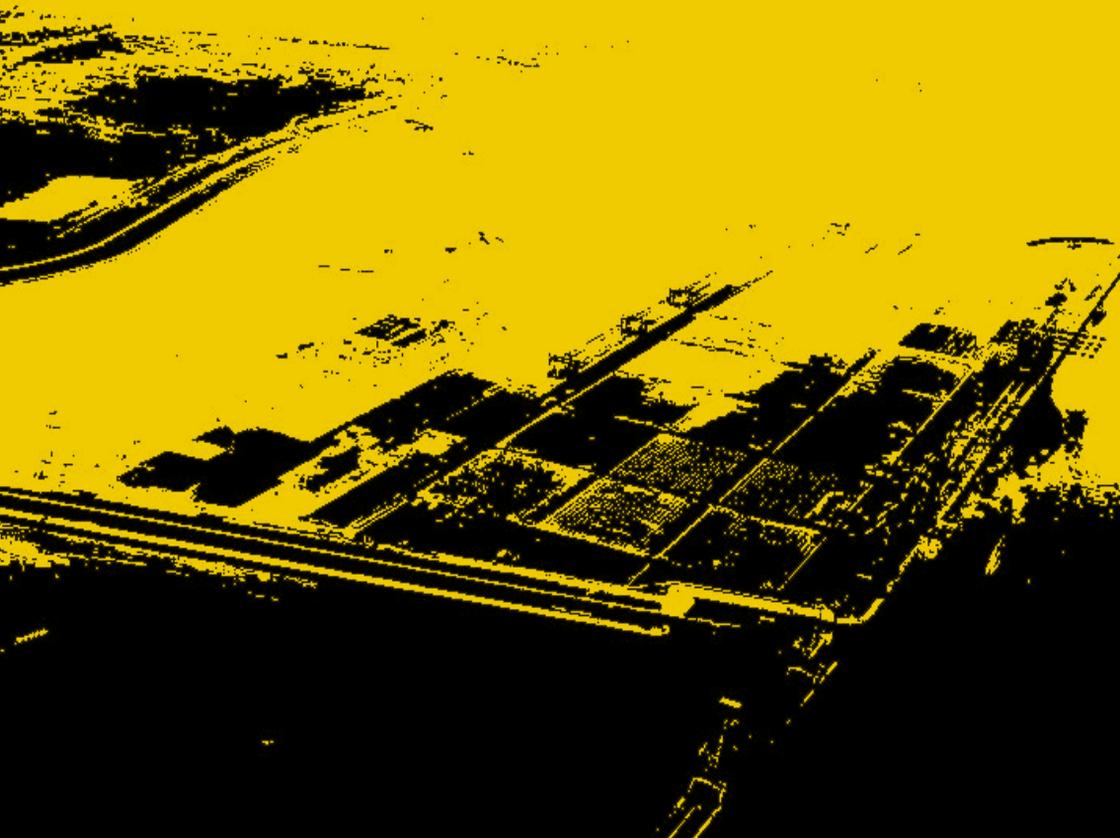


Knechtsand: A Site of Memory in Flux¹

Anna-Katharina Wöbse

This site of memory is almost unreachable. I am standing on the coast of the Weser estuary, in autumn, on the edge of the sea between the Cuxhaven boroughs of Sahlenburg and Berensch, and straining my eyes, looking out across the mudflats. The “Großer Knechtsand” sandbank lies, as evidenced by the map, a good 11 kilometers west of where I am standing. But hardly anybody can get to it.



The sandbank is in the Protection Zone I of the Lower Saxon Wadden Sea National Park. Trespassers prohibited. A desert of alluvial mud as far as the eye can see. The leftovers from the last high tide have formed puddles in the sandy furrows, the lugworms are working away and leaving their little spirals on the surface. It is cold, leaden, and drafty here. Not exactly a place one would associate with the spectacular description *world natural heritage*. Two dots emerge out of the greyness. A pair of common shelducks march into view. The beaks of the two birds are a luminous red, the black heads downcast; the reddish-brown breast feathers, black-and-white wings, and orange legs of the birds make a splash of glorious color against the dreary expanse. The pair are busy, combing the mudflats for mud shrimps and aquatic snails.

A blue metal signpost announcing the national park keeps visitors in their place but the birds are coming nearer as they scavenge for food. It may be hard to get to this site of memory, but its feathered representatives don't hesitate to get out of it. For one of the historical heartlands of the national park is this ephemeral sandbank, Knechtsand, geographically unreliable and almost invisible from the mainland, and the struggle to keep it untouched was won in part by the illustrious birds crossing the mudflats. The success inscribed in this site of memory is what makes it inaccessible here and now. But by approaching it historically and sketching out a topography of memory, one can uncover strands of tradition that are hugely significant for our understanding of the Wadden Sea.² In June 2009, this geologically still very young region was acclaimed by UNESCO, the educational branch of the United Nations, and given the highest consecration that a landscape can have: It became the 181st world natural heritage site. This nomination was accompanied by media

¹ This essay was translated from German by Katie Ritson, including all German-language sources unless otherwise specified.

² The archival records used for the story of the Knechtsand protests are located in the Niedersächsischen Hauptstaatsarchiv [Lower Saxony State Capitol Archive], the Stadtarchiv Cuxhaven [Archive of the city of Cuxhaven, henceforth StaCu] and the Archiv Naturschutzgeschichte [Archive for the History of Nature Conservation] in Königswinter (under "Frels").

pomp and public proclamations, drawing the attention of the entire coastal region. The same can be said for the early phase of the campaign to protect it. What happened in between the early phase of ecological mindfulness and the current one, and how did a peripheral island become the nucleus of today's world natural heritage?

Events Unfold

On 9 September 1952, what was known as the Knechtsand Treaty came into force.³ It codified a barter agreement that the German chancellor Konrad Adenauer had negotiated with the Allies. Before this, the island of Heligoland, which had been evacuated during the Second World War, had served as a bombing range for the British and American air forces stationed in England. The (West) German government was keen to get the inhabitants of Germany's only real offshore island back to their red-cliffed home as soon as possible. The search for an alternative drop area had been difficult. Both Knechtsand and Norderoogsand had been considered as possible replacements. But the latter choice would have endangered the existence of a well-documented site of memory for the German conservation movement: the Norderoog's bird reserve, a popular institution that had been founded in 1909. Following the intervention of the Jordsand Association and the Schutzgemeinschaft Deutsches Wild (Society for the Protection of German Wildlife), both of which were well-connected with the flourishing international conservation community and could call on advocates for the bird-rich island in both Great Britain and Switzerland, the Allies were offered the uninhabited sandbank in the Weser estuary.⁴ The locals were soon confronted with the drastic consequences of this

³ The exact text of the agreement between Great Britain and Germany (Nr. 1997) can be found at www.untreaty.un.org/unts/1_60000/4/25/00007214.pdf (accessed 20 December 2010).

⁴ "Norderoog – die Vogelfreistätte in Gefahr", *Flensburger Tageblatt*, 14 June 1951; correspondence between the Verein Jordsand with the Zentralstelle für Naturschutz und Landschaftspflege, the Tierschutz-Verein Hamburg and the Schutzgemeinschaft Deutsches Wild in June 1951, from the archives of the Verein Jordsand, Ahrensburg, filed under "Diverses".

barter. In the affected area of Wursten opposition quickly solidified.⁵ It wasn't just the shrimp fishers and ferrymen who saw their existence on the line; the spa resorts and tourism industry were also looking at a precarious future. But amidst the opposing viewpoints, an ecological argument also came up, according to which the sand barrier was an important part of the coastal defenses, as it bore the brunt of the raging sea during storms and floods. The local population and their political representatives, though, had a poor hand against the interests of the national government. Adenauer was after a speedy restoration of national sovereignty, military security, and integration into West European politics. Heligoland was a symbol of this newly restored sovereignty, but it was linked to concessions to the Western Allies.⁶ The Allied Forces agreed that, unlike Heligoland, the bank would not make a perfect range. But they gave in. *The Times* reminded its readers – and the Bundestag, which was about to discuss the issue – that the proper training of these air forces served the security of the Western world and not merely British or American interests.⁷ In this context, local political concerns did not seem to be of a significant magnitude.⁸ And in September, when local fishermen began to “agituate against the use of the sandbank” by organizing a “friendly invasion” of the spot, their protest could not stop the procedures.⁹

In November 1952, the first military aircraft flew over the sandbank and pounded practice bombs into the shallow waters. The people living in nearby districts wrongly imagined themselves at war again. In the heated debate that had overtaken the region since the

⁵ Documentation of a “protest meeting”, 9 November 1951, StaCu 467. “Bombenabwürfe auf Knechtsand”.

⁶ “Allied Bombing Practice in Germany”, *The Times*, 7 November 1951, p. 5.

⁷ “Heligoland Returned”, *The Times*, 1 March 1952, p. 7.

⁸ “Bombing Range in Germany”, *The Times*, 8 February 1952. In a letter to the editor of *The Times* the town councillor of Cuxhaven, W. Göhlke, suggested either focusing on the already devastated Heligoland or giving up the bombing altogether. Thus, “the feeling of gratitude in Germany towards Great Britain on account of the generous help accorded in the grim post-war period would be greatly enhanced”.

⁹ “Grosser Knechtsand Protest”, *The Times*, 10 September 1952.

plans had been made known, the cold war fault lines were clearly drawn. The fishermen, traditionally conservative, suddenly found themselves supported by Hamburg communists, who argued in their protest meetings that the Allies were exploring and practicing future flight paths for the war against the Soviet Union.¹⁰ But there were also voices raised in opposition to the *Fremdbestimmung*, Germany's rule by the victorious foreign powers. The local disagreements were bitter and difficult – and didn't alter the fact that Knechtsand was increasingly under fire. Negotiations were underway in Bonn to arrange compensation for shrimp fishers when, in January 1954, the bombing by the Royal Air Force increased in intensity.¹¹ In the course of the year, the fishermen were more and more frequently forced to stay in the harbor. Local inhabitants reported cracks in the walls of their houses, windows were shattered in Cuxhaven, housewives complained that their jars of preserves exploded, master baker Trautmann of Cappel suffered the collapse of his oven.¹² In the summer, stressed holidaymakers broke off their trips.¹³ Sightings of injured and dying seals were reported.¹⁴ But it wasn't until the bomber flights caused the mass annihilation of common shelducks that the protest gained significant political clout and the debate took on an ecological dimension that permanently transformed not just the local, but also the national understanding of nature and landscape.¹⁵

The fact that the Wadden Sea is home to a variety of coastal birds

¹⁰ Conversation with eyewitness K.H. Carstens, 30 May 2001. Admittedly the fishermen's reaction to attempts to win them over was a dismissive "Dat geit nich – wech mit Politik" ("not a chance – no politics"). See also the correspondence of the communist representative of the Lower Saxony Parliament to the president of the parliament, 8 September 1954, StaCu 467.

¹¹ "Entschädigung der Knechtsand-Fischer", *Nordsee-Zeitung*, 22 January 1954; "Bisher stärkster Übungsangriff", *Nordsee-Zeitung*, 23 January 1954.

¹² "Backofen widerstand Luftdruckwellen nicht", *Nordsee-Zeitung*, 11 September 1954; "Knechtsandausschuß: So geht es nicht weiter", *Nordsee-Zeitung*, 14 September 1954.

¹³ "Bombenlärm ist keine Erholung", *Nordsee-Zeitung*, 17 August 1954.

¹⁴ "Verletzte Seehunde angetrieben", *Nordsee-Zeitung*, 8 July 1954.

¹⁵ "Destruction of Birds in Bombing Practice", *The Times*, 20 September 1954.

and seabirds, or indeed that it is one of the most important stop-over habitats for migratory birds crossing the Eastern Atlantic, was well known. But the discovery of the North Sea islands as tourist destinations, the large-scale harvesting of gull's eggs, and the popular leisure activity of shooting seagulls had been accompanied by movements for the explicit protection of "our feathered friends". Since its founding in 1899, the largest association of its kind, the Bund für Vogelschutz (Association for the Protection of Birds), had bought or leased a number of bird reserves along the coast and had equipped them with seasonal wardens who were supposed to ensure that, within a limited area, their charges could raise their young in peace. In the 1920s, the Bund für Vogelschutz had founded one of these reserves on Knechtsand, but had been forced to abandon it. The memory of the Knechtsand's unique ecological setting had to be reactivated. This task fell to Bernhard Freemann, a schoolmaster in the small coastal town of Wremen. Freemann was deeply interested in ornithology and had studied the habits of the common shelducks in particular. It had been known for a long time that large flocks of these birds were present here in summer. In 1952, Freemann began systematically ringing the birds on the nearby Wadden Sea coast to find out where the birds came from and where they were going.¹⁶

The results of his ringing quickly became evident – reports of ring finds came in from Denmark, Great Britain, the Netherlands, and France. Freemann's native turf was evidently a hotspot for the European common shelduck population. The evidence began to mount and indicated that the birds returned to this site in some style every year in late summer for a mass molt.¹⁷ Almost the entire population of up to two hundred thousand birds met there to collectively shed their flight feathers. During this mass molting, the common shelducks are grounded for four weeks, and consequently very vulner-

¹⁶ F. Goethe, "A Survey of Moulting Shelduck on Knechtsand", in *British Birds*, 54, 1961, pp. 106-115.

¹⁷ B. Freemann, *Macht den Knechtsand zum Naturschutzgebiet*, Wremen 1956. Freemann's papers are deposited in the Archiv für Naturschutzgeschichte, Königswinter, under "Frels".

Figure 1. Bernhard Freemann ringing a common shelduck



Source: *Stiftung Naturschutzgeschichte*

able. They spend their days in the shallow and nutrient-rich waters of the flat beach and huddle together at night on the higher reaches of the sands. When the bombs fell into the apparently empty Wadden Sea in August and September 1954, they hit thousands of birds that were unable to flee. The birds seem to have been the victims less of shrapnel than of the shock waves that tore their entrails apart. The schoolmaster Freemann observed the bloody scenes and meticulously collected eyewitness reports by fishermen. He also gave clamorous testimony of the events and publicized his observations.¹⁸

The shelducks lent the protest new momentum. The movement had its icon; pictures of the lifeless shelducks washed inland by the tide became a staple of press reports and were circulated round the world. In contrast to many debates about species protection, the focus was not on the danger to individual birds, but the mass scale of the problem.¹⁹ Hundreds of thousands of the birds that were a defining feature of the region, entrusting themselves to its protection, were suddenly – like the human inhabitants – exposed to a violent assault, and were unable to flee. But in contrast to the Germans, whose right to sovereign self-government was limited following their aggressive expansion in World War II, the birds symbolized a natural innocence and vulnerability, one that the discredited Germans were all too eager to embrace – and to use for political gain.²⁰

The political and ecological experiment worked. Freemann and his initiative, the Schutz- und Forschungsgemeinschaft Knechtsand (Association for Research into and Conservation of Knechtsand), which represented the interests of the common shelduck population, became important political actors. While the protests have

¹⁸ “Unter dem Kreuz vom Großen Knechtsand”, *Nordsee-Zeitung*, 17 September 1954; “Destruction of Birds in Bombing Practice”, *The Times*, 20 September 1954.

¹⁹ “Bomben auf Brandgänse”, *Die Zeit*, 1 July 1954.

²⁰ J.I. Engels, *Naturpolitik in der Bundesrepublik. Ideenwelt und politische Verhaltensstile in Naturschutz und Umweltbewegung 1950-1980*, Schöningh, Paderborn 2006; J. Radkau, F. Uekötter (eds), *Naturschutz und Nationalsozialismus*, Campus-Verlag, Frankfurt 2003; A.-K. Wöbse, “Der kleine Tierfreund – zur Jugend der deutschen Ökobewegung”, in *Jahrbuch Ökologie*, 2007, pp.131-141.

been interpreted as being economically motivated, the foreign press seemed to find it easier to claim solidarity with the common shelduck than with parts of the German population. The migratory nature of the birds meant that they were seen as cosmopolitan, or rather pan-European. Freemann and his association were careful to organize cooperation with overseas societies to avoid even the slightest impression of nationalistic fervor in their campaign. The government, which was in a phase of reconstruction and reorientation following its close alliance with the Nazi regime, was not entirely enthusiastic about these autonomous projects. In designating the site, government authorities state in a report that “if we have to put up with targets for bombs, the designation of a sandbar that is under water at high tide must be seen as the least damaging in terms of nature protection”,²¹ thus legitimizing the site from a conservationist angle. Yet state conservationists found themselves faced with a self-governing, independent coalition under the leadership of the birdwatcher Freemann, who had exploited the dramatic potential of the mass deaths off the shore to ensure media attention.

Staging Protest

One publication that saw the commercial potential of the unfolding wildlife drama was the two-year-old offspring of the publishing giant Axel Springer, the tabloid newspaper *Bildzeitung*. On 19 October 1954, the newspaper printed a photograph showing two dead birds washed up on the beach, accompanied by the headline “Another Hailstorm of Bombs on Germany’s Bird Paradise”. The appeal to the public launched by *Bildzeitung* had a simple message: “*Macht Schluss! Macht Schluss!*” or “Put a stop to it!” The target of the reports, which centered on a girl who took home a baby seal orphaned by the bomb attacks, was unmistakable: the British occupying forces had, as far as the *Bildzeitung* was concerned, lost their

²¹ Communication by the Niedersächsische Landesstelle für Naturschutz und Landschaftspflege to the Schutzgemeinschaft Deutsches Wild e.V., 18 June 1951. Transcript in the archives of the Verein Jordsand, Ahrensburg, filed under “Diverses”.

credibility because of their military practice, whereas the Germans were wearing their hearts on their sleeves and showing sufficient love and empathy to prove their worth as a fully-fledged *Kulturnation*, or civilized society.²² The topic was news across the country. 16 articles appeared concerning the bombing practice on the Wadden Sea in *The Times*, at that time the leading newspaper in Great Britain, between 1951 and 1958. In November 1954, the situation in the Weser estuary was debated in the German lower house, the *Bundestag*, as was the predicament of the common shelducks. But the foreign policy situation didn't seem to allow for any kind of offensive action against British interests, and the government, led by the conservative Christian Democrats (CDU), tried to avoid taking any firm position. Politicians questioned the estimate of more than 70,000 common shelducks killed during the 1954 molting season that the schoolteacher Freemann had introduced into the debate.²³

Shortly afterwards, as the conflict became a matter of international concern and civilian groups demanded the right to participate in foreign policy discussions, the possibilities for action became more concrete. The International Council for Bird Preservation (ICBP) finally organized a delegation of experts from the Netherlands, Great Britain, Denmark, and Germany, who were to make a tour of inspection of the common shelduck population along the Wadden Sea coast from a Royal Air Force plane. They largely confirmed Freeman's observations of the mass-molting season. However, as ornithologists in the employ of their respective governments, they too limited their demands (in line with foreign policy considerations) to calling for a modification to the kinds of bombs dropped, rather than an outright end to the bombing raids: instead of explosives, they asked for smoke bombs to be dropped.²⁴ This proposal to mitigate the bombing was soon adopted by the British House of Lords.²⁵

²² A.-K. Wöbse, "Die Bomber und Brandgans. Zur Geschichte des Kampfes um den 'Knechtsand'", in *Jahrbuch Ökologie*, 2008, pp. 188-199, esp. p. 193.

²³ "Bombing Practice near Cuxhaven", *The Times*, 6 November 1954.

²⁴ "Live Bombing to be Restricted", *The Times*, 2 January 1956.

²⁵ Compare F. Goethe, "Über den Mauserzug der Brandenten (Tadorna tador-

Borne along on the current of public interest, however, the local bird-lovers were not to be contented with this defusing of the bombing flyovers, or even with their ultimate cessation. They had set their sights on an even greater target: They wanted Knechtsand to be declared a nature reserve. When the extension of the Knechtsand Treaty came up for review in 1957, the Schutz- und Forschungsgemeinschaft Knechtsand mobilized all of its allies and contacted the press.²⁶ On 8 September 1957, the association called for a peaceful occupation of the sandbank. And the supporters began to arrive, busload after busload of them. In the early dawn, 20 cutters, festively adorned with bunting and banners and bearing several hundred activists, set off into the Wadden Sea. The cutters were followed by an entourage of journalists and press photographers with film cameras. Neither the site nor its use as a stage for this kind of demonstration was anything new: Both the struggle for Heligoland and the early protests by fishermen on Knechtsand had made use of the protest rituals that were now being reenacted.²⁷ A bonfire was lit, and a flagpole especially put up for the purpose flew not just the green-white flag of Europe, but also the flag of the county of Wursten, flanked by fluttering skull-and-crossbones flags that called to mind the independence of the region in medieval times and its history of resistance.

The horde of rebels, who were now chanting in chorus of the freedom of the sandbank, formed a heterogeneous group; envoys from animal welfare groups, bird-watching associations, and nature conservation movements had travelled to Knechtsand, together with representatives of the local conservation authorities, local politicians, scientists, and members of the regional society for hunting and fish-

na L.) zum Großen Knechtsand”, in *Fünfzig Jahre Seevogelschutz*, W. Meise (ed.), Verein Jordsand, Hamburg 1957, pp. 96-106.

²⁶ “Readiness for New Agreement on Bombing Range”, 17 August 1957.

²⁷ W. Kraushaar, *Die Protest-Chronik 1949-1959*, Vol. I: 1949-1952, Rogner & Bernhard bei Zweitausendeins, Hamburg 1996, p. 343; “Helgolandfeuer für den Großen Knechtsand”, *Nordsee-Zeitung*, 3 January 1952; compare *Der Knechtsand: Mitteilungen der Schutz- und Forschungsgemeinschaft Knechtsand, e. V.*, February 1958.

Figure 2. Flying flags of protest: The peaceful occupation of a sandbank, 1957



Source: *Stiftung Naturschutzgeschichte*

ing. Their petitions, read out from atop a driftwood crate that served as a podium, all centered on one single demand: Knechtsand was to be spared from all further bombardments of any kind and turned into a reserve. This staging of protest was a success: Photographs and newspaper articles covering the peaceful occupation of the sandbank were published in a variety of different media across the young republic, and presented in a positive light.

As the West German government made clear that it did not intend to bow to the pressure and would continue to acquiesce to the Allies' need for military practice areas, supporters looked for a new means of founding the nature reserve within the structure of the federal system. While politicians in Bonn debated the situation and held diplomatic meetings, the federal state of Lower Saxony, in its role as chief conservation authority, was cooperating with the head of the regional gov-

ernment in the city of Stade; on 8 October 1957, without further ado, the “Provision for the Conservation Area ‘Knechtsand Bird Reserve’” was passed.²⁸ With its 244 square kilometers, it was the largest nature reserve in the new Federal Republic of Germany.

The Kingdom of Memory

Thus the battle was won. Once the designated nature reserve was recognized by international experts as a transnational home of the European common shelduck population, the Allies soon discontinued their bombing runs. The campaigns had developed a popular dimension and were effective in the public domain. Thanks to the iconic common shelduck, the humanitarian and ecological branding of the protest was able to win through. Once this goal had been reached, however, new interests began to come to the fore that had little in common with the ones held by Freemann and his comrades. They themselves soon became interlopers and undesirables. For with the preservation order came a prohibition against all trespassers, including Knechtsand’s heroes and defenders. The officials of the local conservation organization were henceforth to decide who would be allowed to enter the kingdom of the common shelducks.²⁹ For those local inhabitants who had taken part in the protests, it was the beginning of a painful new process of estrangement from the site they had fought for. The site and the battle seemed to have been transposed into a self-contained past, one that was remembered very differently by the various groups involved.

²⁸ “Verordnung über das Naturschutzgebiet ‘Vogelfreistätte Knechtsand’ im Wattenmeer nordwestlich des Landes Wursten, Landkreis Wesermünde: Amtsblatt der Regierung” in *Stade*, 9 October 1957, p. 71; “Bombing Range Battle Ends”, *The Times*, 22 February 1958.

²⁹ For example, after 1961 the schoolteacher Freeman was no longer granted permission to enter the nature reserve. When he entered it anyway, a complaint was filed against him by the lower nature conservation authority. Excerpt from the criminal files of the Dorum district court, 1963, filed under “Frels”, Stiftung Naturschutzgeschichte, Königswinter. On the repeated demand to open the sandbank for guided tours, see “Knechtsand-Freunde: Besucher sollen Insel betreten dürfen”, *Nordsee-Zeitung*, 18 April 1977.

**Figure 3. Catching birds in the name of conservation:
a young activist on Knechtsand, undated**



Source: *Stiftung Naturschutzgeschichte*

There were the individual experiences. In oral history interviews in the small harbor town of Wremen, once home to the headquarters of the Schutz- und Forschungsgemeinschaft Knechtsand, the sandbank was recalled as a place of huge freedom. The bird-ringing program, under the leadership of Bernhard Freemann, had played a signifi-

cant role in the development of bonds between human inhabitants and their natural environment. The schoolteacher Freemann had involved his pupils in gathering data. Equipped with sandwiches and crates of fizzy drinks provided by Freemann himself, teams of young volunteers went out on cutters to catch and ring individual birds.³⁰ They were frequently assisted by youth groups who had travelled both from within Germany and from further afield, and thus Knechtsand became a seasonal site of intercultural cooperation. These summer days on the Wadden Sea coast became a crucial part of the identity of these young people. They enjoyed themselves, could prove themselves adept at stalking and catching the flighty birds, were working for an important scientific mission, and returned home covered in sand, exhausted, and full of their experiences.

They were part of something bigger. Their accounts, characterized by their sensual experience of the Wadden Sea, reflect a rite of passage in which the hard physical work for the protection of the colorful duck was just as much a marker as the unique camaraderie of the sea trips.³¹

The accounts of Hans Fricke, an activist in the peace and environmental movements from the city of Bremen, can be considered representative of many of the activists who originally joined the Knechtsand protest for pacifist reasons. The Wadden Sea had hitherto been for him a featureless expanse of mud, his experience of it rather limited. But his meeting with the campaigners for the common shelduck and his engagement with the lives and habitat of these creatures expanded his horizons considerably: the grey nothingness turned out to be teeming with life. It's no coincidence that this veteran campaigner is still an active member of a Greenpeace group.³² While these experiences were critical in the formation of individual attitudes to the

³⁰ The activities were accompanied by extensive photographic documentation. Bildarchiv der Stiftung Naturschutzgeschichte, Königswinter, under "Frels".

³¹ Conversation with eyewitnesses in Wremen, 30 May 2001; "Früher Einsatz für die Natur", *Nordsee-Zeitung*, 31 May 2001.

³² Conversation with H. Fricke, 8 April 2008. P. Willers, another former peace and anti-nuclear activist from Bremen, describes a similar experience in an oral history project on the Wadden Sea, interview on 26 March 2013.

natural world,³³ Knechtsand lost its status as a site of media attention once it became a protected area. However, it was still a milestone in the developing perceptions of the whole Wadden Sea coast.

Meanwhile, local research had become institutionalized. Systematic observation and data collection took place under the auspices of Hans Oelke, Professor of Biology at the Zoological Institute of the University of Göttingen, and it had long lost its exclusive focus on the common shelduck population, with research extended to include the unique botany and also the less conspicuous insect populations of the area. An observation tower and living quarters were constructed and provided accommodation in the summer months for biologists equipped with the necessary authorization.³⁴ But the merciless *Blanker Hans* – the old local name for the hungry, foam-crested sea – swept the building away. The site itself became unstable. The Wadden Sea is an incredibly dynamic habitat, permanently in a state of flux. The few areas of higher ground and vegetation on the sand bar were gradually eroded. The bird conservationists had tried to work against the erosion in the 1950s by planting bushes and constructing sand-trapping fences. Volunteers arrived, along with members of the German Armed Forces and the Federal Agency for Technical Relief, the *Technisches Hilfswerk*, to help with the island defenses, but this proved useless in the long run.³⁵

But the most important change was in the perception of the sandbank. For, since the island's importance as a site of political interest had given way to ethical and moral arguments for its protected status, it became increasingly regarded as a developing habitat and thus the domain of biologists. As early as 1971, with the signing of the Ramsar Convention, large parts of the Lower Saxon

³³ The change in the environmental and ecological perception of the Wadden Sea from a “grey wasteland” to a habitat of highest biodiversity is described in “Erst stirbt der Seehund, dann der Mensch”, *Der Spiegel*, 32, 1983, pp. 34-55.

³⁴ H. Oelke, “Die Brandgans (*Tadorna tadorna*) im Mauseggebiet Großer Knechtsand”, in *Journal of Ornithology*, 110, 2, 1969, pp. 170-175; *Beiträge zur Naturkunde Niedersachsens*, special issue on Knechtsand, 34, 4, 1979.

³⁵ “Immer noch das Paradies der Seevögel”, *Nordsee-Zeitung*, 16 December 1964.

Wadden Sea coast had been designated wetlands of international significance for the protection of migratory birds, thus raising the global profile of the area. At the same time, a final clumsy local attempt was underway to call the exclusively ecological designation of the island into question, and bind Knechtsand more closely into the economies of the coastal communities that could claim ownership. The district branch of the conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU) party, together with the Dorum Tourism Office, proposed a drastic reduction in the size of the protected area and the opening of the remaining space as a tourist site. The other coastal communities on the Weser estuary, which were increasingly coming to depend on tourism, were painfully aware of the fact that Knechtsand had something they did not: white sandy beaches. The first plans drawn up for this future vision of a modern seaside resort showed a dense complex of apartment blocks beside the Dorum Sands and a pillared concrete construction on the sandbank with a restaurant, showers, and toilets. Transport between the docks and the beach dunes was to be provided via an overhead railway, flanked with shuttle services by cutters and motorboats. The costs – the cable-car project alone would have cost investors a projected 2.7 million German marks – didn't seem to put proponents of the project off. According to them, the seaside resort would pose no threat to Knechtsand's conservation area – “quite the opposite, this project would serve to anchor the idea of conserving the natural environment”, in the words of local CDU chief Dr. Döhner.³⁶ But the conservation authorities quickly torpedoed the dazzling projections of a cable car taking holidaymakers to a beach bar on the sandbank. The head of the ornithological research institute “Vogelwarte Helgoland” in Wilhelmshaven was not going to give tourism an inch: The opening up of even just a part of Knechtsand would, in his words, “not just damage the reputation of the Federal Republic of Germany, but also [...] give a signal to sell out of nature conservation”.³⁷ Evidently, the diverse habitats

³⁶ *Nordsee-Zeitung*, 16 April 1971.

³⁷ Goethe, quoted in “Freigabe des Knechtsandes würde den Ausverkauf des Naturschutzes einleiten”, *Wilhelmshavener Zeitung*, 10 July 1971.

on Knechtsand had not succeeded in anchoring themselves as assets in the public mindset. Tourism had awakened vested interests. It promised an income for peripheral and “underdeveloped” regions, yet the national agenda and interests had already shifted towards a new reading of unspoiled areas as hot spots of biological diversity. The early icons of the protection campaign, the common shelducks – themselves uninterested in occupying the higher dunes, preferring the shallow waters at their feet – now became an enemy. One vitriolic newspaper article wrote: “The sands are a protected habitat, and almost no one has seen them with their own eyes. Those who have seen them will have to admit that there can be no justification in this day and age for not allowing the public to access these beaches, which offer a perfect bathing location. Humans cannot be considered less important than common shelducks.” Local political opinion, though, which had played such a key part in the fight to protect the sandbank, could not accept the rebranding of this site as anything different, even to provide the local authorities with a new source of income.³⁸ While memories of the rebellion of the 1950s were fading, there was no doubt that Knechtsand was a site of ecological significance for the nation as a whole.

In light of the ecological revolution that followed, the focus on small-scale protection measures that characterized the 1950s turned out to be increasingly obsolete. Knechtsand was soon absorbed into a larger project that was much discussed on both a regional and national level: the Wadden Sea National Park, which finally became reality in 1986 after several years of planning. In one of history’s small ironies, this was exactly the moment that the research base on Knechtsand had to be abandoned because the sandbank had shifted, leaving it without any foundation in the most literal sense. The local government in Lüneburg not only decided that this site had been sufficiently researched, but also rejected the idea of providing the sandbank with any defenses against the onslaught of the sea. For by now, the idea of the Wadden Sea itself as one of the last bastions of

³⁸ “Zehntausende von Brandgänsen zur Zeit am Großen Knechtsand”, *Nordsee-Zeitung*, 18 August 1971.

German wilderness, one that couldn't be tampered with, had taken root.³⁹ The common shelducks had shown themselves well able to adapt to this dynamic landscape. Since 1978, the number of shelducks returning to Knechtsand in the molting season had been dropping at a steady rate – only for the population of shelducks on nearby Trischen Island to rise.⁴⁰ The shelducks had chosen a new stronghold for their period of seasonal vulnerability and had taken up temporary residence elsewhere.

It wasn't until the 1980s, when the German republic was engaged in a process of ecologization under the influence of Green Party successes, that the chronicles of environmental protests were updated – including the story of Knechtsand. The leftwing German organization that promotes access to and enjoyment of the natural world, *Naturfreunde* (literally “Friends of Nature”), had hitherto been one of the few environmentalist groups on a national level to keep the memory of the aerial bombardment of Greater Knechtsand alive.⁴¹ Within the SPD, the participation of its “friends” in the *Naturfreunde*, who until then had been regarded by Party members as nothing more than hippies and rather wayward stepchildren, had not been utilized. Now, however, with increasing public and political interest in the SPD's green credentials, the Knechtsand campaign was rewritten into the history of the Party.⁴² In 1983, *Spiegel* magazine published a long feature about the threatened “wonder of the world”, the Wadden Sea, maintaining

³⁹ Compare *Cuxhavener Nachrichten*, 2 May 1985; *Nordsee-Zeitung*, 12 August 1985.

⁴⁰ G. Nehls, “Brandentenmauser im Wattenmeer”, in *Umweltatlas Wattenmeer*, Vol. II: *Wattenmeer zwischen Elb- und Emsmündung*, Nationalpark Niedersächsisches Wattenmeer, Umweltbundesamt (eds), Ulmer, Stuttgart 1999, p. 86f.

⁴¹ Compare H. Fricke, “Begegnung mit Tadorna”, in *Naturfreunde Kinderpost*, 41, 5, 1989, pp. 8-11; J. Zimmer, W. Erdmann, *Hundert Jahre Kampf um die freie Natur: Illustrierte Geschichte der Naturfreunde*, Klartext Verlag, Essen 1991; U. Grober, “100 Jahre Rot-Grün”, *Die Zeit*, 4 August 2005. Many documents of the *Naturfreunde* and the Knechtsand campaign were preserved in the Eco-Archiv, which has since been transferred to the Archiv der Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in Bonn.

⁴² “Die ersten Grünen”, *Der Spiegel*, 3, 1985, pp. 39-42; see also J. Zimmer, *Mit uns zieht die neue Zeit: Die Naturfreunde; Zur Geschichte eines alternativen Verbandes in der Arbeiterkulturbewegung*, Pahl-Rugenstein, Cologne 1984.

that society and politicians should protect the sea from increased exposure to chemical residue, waste, and general pollution. The article shows that the fight for Knechtsand had certainly not been forgotten. *Spiegel* was quick to criticize the uninterrupted use the military had made of delicate ecosystems – and Greater Knechtsand served as a case in point. Admittedly, it was no longer used for bombing target practice, as it had been in the 1950s, “but practically everywhere apart from the seaside resorts are subject to the whine of NATO bombers coming in low across the bird breeding sites and seal habitats”. Knechtsand was once again in circulation as the site of memory; it exemplified the misuse of a non-military natural landscape. In 1988 the newspaper *Die Zeit* printed a report by the ornithological warden of Trischen Island, Peter Todt, that dealt with the consequences of weapons testing by the German military and by arms manufacturers in the Meldorf Bay area. Here too the author recalled the successes of the activists in preventing the British government from dropping bombs on Knechtsand, only to conclude bitterly that “today, where we have control of our own territories, and politicians all pay lip service to the idea of nature protection, we are apparently unable to afford to heed the habitats of animals, even though the animal kingdom is recognized on paper by laws on animal protection, nature conservation, and protected natural area law”.

1987 – the year that research on Knechtsand was ended – marked the beginning of a new historicization of the site: An extensive exhibition entitled “Knechtsand – The Story of a Sandbank” opened at the Lower Saxon Wadden Sea Information Center (Informationszentrum Niedersächsisches Wattenmeer) in Dorum. By then, environmental historians had also uncovered the dramatic narrative of this rebellion⁴³ – thanks in no small part to the diverse visual documentation that exists. There is a section on the fight for Knechtsand in the permanent collection of the Museum for the History of Conservation in Königswinter.⁴⁴ This has breathed new life into the

⁴³ J.I. Engels, *Naturpolitik in der Bundesrepublik: Ideenwelt und politische Verhaltensstile in Naturschutz und Umweltbewegung 1950-1980*, Schöningh, Paderborn 2006.

⁴⁴ http://www.naturschutzgeschichte.de/5_museum/museum.html (accessed 9 April 2013).

memory of Knechtsand, in part because it allows a wider public to reinterpret events anew in the wake of the popularizing of peaceful but radical environmental protests by Greenpeace. But it is also because the Knechtsand protests gave us the human figures that were so sorely needed to narrate the story of nature conservation and the environmental movement.

Ducks and World Natural Heritage

A literal test site, Knechtsand also represented a figurative test site for fundamental political, social, and ecological debates. The military practice area served the West German state as a means of gaining access to the ranks of sovereign states. The subsequent protest served as a practice run for social activism in relation to pre-ecological (and in particular ethical) debates about the protection of animals and nature. The transnational nature of the common shelduck highlighted the potential for cooperation between political and civilian actors on a European level, which in turn proved that the broad consensus provided by animal and nature protection could serve to shore up peacetime society. But this case also showed that the German conservation authorities still had to learn to coexist with local and/or autonomous agencies. Greater Knechtsand also tested the structures that bound together the federal government, the *Länder*, and the administrative districts – and Lower Saxony in the end was able to show that, as a *Land*, it was perfectly prepared to promote its conservation expertise even in foreign policy debates. Finally, Greater Knechtsand was a test case for Germany's relationship with its almost entirely vanished wilderness. That first generation's experiences on Knechtsand undoubtedly shaped their ecological awareness and civil engagement, yet they were eventually driven out of their personal site of memory. The many students who spent summers on the island as ornithological wardens were at the mercy not just of the fluctuating tides of the Wadden Sea but also of the new politics of wilderness. Ultimately, they were forced not just to take leave of their private site of nostalgia but to give it up entirely.

The mosaic of protected natural areas, of which the shingle of Knechtsand was by far the largest part, soon proved too fragmented for the burgeoning ecological understanding in the decades from 1970 onwards. People began to think in global contexts. A sandbank was just a sandbank, yet it became a part of a network of internationally important wetlands, then a national park, and ultimately a biosphere reserve. It came to be described in the terms of the Birds Directive and the Habitats Directive laid out by the EU. Knechtsand was one of the historical keystones of the expanding conservation regime and had been in the vanguard of the augmentation of the Wadden Sea ecosystem, but its specific significance became hidden from view, overlaid with an accumulation of other ecological highlights.

The jewel in the crown, at least for now, is the Wadden Sea National Park's integration in the global system of UN World Heritage sites. Its nomination was dependent not just on extensive scientific review, but also on the agreement of people and local authorities in three different countries. More crucially, the conservation scene had in a certain sense to change course, as one active participant in the process, biologist Karsten Reise, described it. For many years, everyone had repeated the litany of threats to the Wadden Sea, but now they had to reconsider its advantages: in what way was the Wadden Sea "still, despite it all, the best of its kind?" For the label *world natural heritage* is in part an award for successful conservation measures: "The recognition of world natural heritage is not just an objective evaluation of a natural site's worth, but also rewards the human effort that has gone into preserving it".⁴⁵ The Wadden Sea's admittance into the conservation aristocracy was accompanied by a historicization of the space, as is indicated by the word "heritage". World natural heritage is most definitely not the expression of nature that has been forgotten and preserved by chance, but of a landscape that is actively remembered, and thus protected.

⁴⁵ K. Reise, "Denkanstösse", in *Weltnaturerbe Wattenmeer*, M. Stock, U. Wilhelmssen (eds), Wachholtz, Neumünster 2009, p. 32.

In this process of historicization, the Knechtsand site of memory is well embedded on many different levels, but is also liable to get lost in diverse meandering narratives. The world natural heritage perspective will perhaps allow a new and more complex memory to surface – one that highlights Knechtsand’s astonishing anticipation of civilian activism, its Europeanization of nature conservation, and the numerous, often very contradictory motives offered for protecting this particular landscape. In the course of this process, the Wadden Sea area was able to acquire a rather more personalized narrative, because it highlights so simply the main crystallizing moments in the web of ecological memories. And because its icon, the common shelduck, is a visible and significant reminder of not just the ecological, but also of the historical process of adaptation.

Shortly before Knechtsand’s UN status was announced, something happened that showed that the security of even a high-ranking UN-decorated conservation area remains fragile. In this age of dwindling natural resources, the energy company RWE Dea AG remembered the putative oil reserves close to Knechtsand, which had already been mentioned in the Knechtsand Treaty of 1952, and pushed forward with projected test drilling. Indeed, in the nomination for world natural heritage status, this projected drilling was even noted and approved. It was however decided that any oil drilling would only take place outside of the borders of the national park. But even this external drilling, which used miles of drilling systems and pipelines, drove the conservationists onto the barricades.⁴⁶ In 2008, the company announced that, apart from the oil platform “Mittelplate”, which had gone into production in 1987 in spite of widespread protests, it would not anchor any further drilling platforms in the Wadden Sea. But this doesn’t mean that these plans have been shelved forever. Who knows – perhaps another alliance

⁴⁶ Greenpeace, “Keine Ölbohrungen im Nationalpark Wattenmeer”, press release 21 January 2008, www.wwf.de/presse/details/news/erster_erfolg_im_streit_mit_der_oelindustrie/printer.html; www.greenpeace.de/themen/meere/nachrichten/artikel/keine_oelbohrungen_im_nationalpark_wattenmeer/ (accessed 5 April 2013).

of activists from the now-global community of conservationists will need to occupy Knechtsand again in the future. If they do, they will be occupying not just a sandbank, but a part of humanity's natural heritage.