

Natura 2000 – Management-Planning for the Elbe Estuary

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The lower reaches of the river Elbe are of outstanding ecological significance. That is why more than 90 % of its waters and floodplains were designed reserves under NATURA 2000. But at the same time, the area is economically of international importance and has been so for centuries.

The Elbe marshes around Hamburg have been cultivated for centuries and thus are of cultural and historical importance. The preservation of this valuable habitat and harmonization of ecological and economical demands in the area is a joint objective of the Federal Waterways Administration and the neighbouring states of Schleswig-Holstein, Lower Saxony and Hamburg.

For this reason a treaty was effected, stipulating that an integrated management plan considered by all relevant stakeholders shall be drawn up by the end of 2010.

Legally, the integrated management plan is based on the first paragraph of article 6 habitats directive, stipulating that member states are to establish measures necessary for creating favourable conditions for habitats and/or species.

The integrated management plan is a directive for the acting state. It is meant to provide clarity and predictability for all actors without having legal binding force towards any current use. It is aimed at voluntary commitment of all stakeholders.

Beyond objectives of nature conservation, economic as well as social, infrastructural and regional aspects have to be taken into account and integrated into the overall concept.

The integrated management plan covers the whole of the river estuary from Geesthacht to the mouth of the river.

The management plan shall outline the objectives of nature conservation, describe measures to achieve these objectives, facilitate permit procedures and establish a common data base and monitoring programme. Legal compliance for maintenance dredging shall also be accomplished.

The planning has begun about two years ago. Two planning groups have been established to cooperate with all stakeholders. They work on specific area-related issues. The planning groups are coordinated by a joint team of all partners. The whole process

itself is directed by a steering group joined by Bremen, Hamburg, Lower Saxony, Schleswig-Holstein, and the Federal Ministries of traffic and environment.

Meanwhile the acquisition of data and the assessment of the conservation status of habitats and species has been finished and measures to achieve the goals of Natura 2000 are being suggested.

In Hamburg and Schleswig-Holstein the discussion of those measures has just begun. The measures are aimed to maintain or restore a favourable conservation status of natural habitats and species of wild fauna and flora of Community interest. Some are also designed to enhance information and knowledge about the processes in the Elbe estuary and to support dissemination.

The management plan shall also include strategies concerning the maintenance of the fairway. It is intended to define goals and priorities such as safety of the ship passages, but also effects on tidal regime, aspects of water quality and ecology or the needs of the protection of species. Moreover a specific monitoring programme shall be established to make sure that chances are taken to minimize the ecological impact of maintenance measures.