Nature-based tourism strategies within a UNESCO world heritage region:

Participation and empowerment challenges for stakeholders on Ameland

Bachelor project

Chelvan Landman - s2765136

Tutor: Arie Stoffelen

Abstract

Involvement of local communities generally has positive influences on the success of place branding strategies. Place branding strategies for nature-based tourism purposes could involve using a heritage label such as the UNESCO world heritage status as a unique selling point. The aim of this research is to critically analyse which nature-based tourism development strategies different stakeholders prefer on Ameland in the Wadden Sea region using that heritage status without harming their sense of self-determination and ability to participate. The first strategy that the stakeholders proposed concerns using the heritage status to attract more responsible tourism and increase place attachment of visitors by informing them about the uniqueness of the Wadden Sea region and its UNESCO status. This should be done through community tourism planning where the most empowered stakeholders is the community itself. The second strategy is to enable local stakeholders on Ameland to interfere more easily within the Wadden Sea by improving stakeholder involvement and communication between different governments scales. This interaction is currently absent due to Ameland not being part of the world heritage and being governed through a bottom-up perspective and the Wadden Sea region being protected by the top-down UNESCO heritage status. Improved communication by diminishing the gap between governing scales enables the local community to be involved with decision making concerning the ferry delay problem due to the silting fairway. Empowering stakeholders improves their ability to use the heritage status more efficiently for place branding purposes.

Contents

1. Introduction

In the current age of globalisation, EU governments and media shift their focus more towards the competitiveness of urban and metropolitan areas and less towards rural areas (Blichfeldt & Halkier, 2014). Since 2007, more than half of the world population resides in cities (United Nations, 2014). Countries in Northern Europe, such as Belgium and the Netherlands, are more than 90% urbanised. Urbanisation and focus on urban regions force rural areas to adopt new strategies to improve their competitive position vis-à-vis other localities and prevent the consequences of marginalisation and peripherality. These rural areas could mobilise local resources and employ policy tools that are believed to foster endogenous and economic development (Blichfeldt & Halkier, 2014).

Such strategies could be useable for place branding purposes. Place branding involves efforts from geographical regions to improve their competitive status and to be more recognisable, often concerning a relationship between tourists and local stakeholders (Blichfeldt & Halkier, 2014). A tool of recognition for place branding that stakeholders can use to achieve this goal is their place identity (de San Eugenio Vela, 2013). A unique identity can help a region to be different from other geographical spaces and can therefore be used to improve the competitive status towards other regions. It should be noted that place branding is a process that cannot be seen as a single technique or set of techniques (Anholt, 2010). It is not a technique, but rather a process that revolves around the previously mentioned efforts to improve competitive status.

This previous description make it seem as if place branding efforts are always local initiatives. However, regions can also utilise a heritage label such as the UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation) world heritage label for place branding purposes. An area that meets the UNESCO criteria, which are the recognition of universal value, integrity and the existence of management plans, can be nominated this status (van der Aa, et al., 2004). It could be used as a unique selling point to attract tourists and new residents (van der Aa, et al., 2004).

The UNESCO label is especially suitable for nature-based tourism strategies as the label focuses on minimising the tourism impact on the environment and preservation of an area for future generations (Pedersen, 2002). Nature-based tourism is mostly concerned with undisturbed phenomena of nature that can be enjoyed by tourists (Betty & Hall, 1992).

Previous researches have provided examples of successful and unsuccessful place branding. According to Blichfeldt & Halkier (2014), who wrote an article about food festivals in Løgstør, Denmark, the town experienced success with its place branding as 'town of Mussels'. The key to this success was the active involvement of the local community. The article by van der Aa et al. (2004) about the UNESCO status of the Wadden Sea area shifted the attention to resistance that had arisen during the process in which the Wadden Sea was nominated for inclusion on the World Heritage List. This seemingly contradicts the statement that using the UNESCO world heritage status as unique selling point can lead to successful place branding efforts. Why would the local community of Jutland respond so positive towards the place branding strategies while the local community of the Wadden Sea area responded negatively towards the UNESCO world heritage status nomination?

The perception of freedom that the local community and stakeholders of Løgstør, who were asked just to ''do something'' for the region within the set theme, is a vital difference between the Wadden Sea case and the Denmark case. (Blichfeldt & Halkier, 2014). The local community of the Wadden Sea region did not experience this freedom, as they felt like the heritage status was a label imposed on them from a top-down perspective with unclear consequences. As a result, they feared to lose their perception of empowerment (van der Aa, et al., 2004). Top-down, in this instance, refers to an approach with an authoritative decision as starting point (Liedl, 2011). The key factor that determined the position of the local community was therefore involvement and empowerment of the local community.

So how can the World Heritage status of the Wadden Sea can be implemented more efficiently so that the nature-based tourism sector will benefit and remain sustainable, but the feeling of autonomy and empowerment of the inhabitants of the region also remains unharmed? Is there a way in which the Wadden Sea is able to achieve the same kind of success like a case such as Løgstør? The research question will be formulated as:

How can the world heritage status of the Wadden Sea be used to be more complementary with the regional self-determination of Ameland and the nature-based tourism within the region?

I will limit this research to one single Wadden Island, namely Ameland. The reason for this is to gain more in-depth insight on what Ameland wants to change. It is, unfortunately not possible to consult every stakeholder on every Wadden Island, but I add more value to an in-depth research of one Island rather than shallow insights of every Island.

Important to note is that Ameland itself is not part of the UNESCO world heritage, only the Wadden Sea region is protected by the heritage status. The Wadden Sea is protected by this status since 2009 (Versluis, 2012). Therefore, throughout this research, the distinction will be made between the Wadden Sea region and its status and the way Ameland uses or wishes to use the status of the Wadden Sea region for their own tourism strategies. Figure 1 shows the boundaries of the world heritage sites near Ameland.

Figure 1. Boundaries of the UNESCO world heritage borders near Ameland. Data by: (World Database on Protected Areas, 2018)

2. Theoretical Framework

A world heritage status cannot successfully be used for place branding efforts without considering several conditions. First, The UNESCO sites are not listed with the objective of increasing tourism potential (da Silva Oliveira, 2016). According to da Silva Oliveira (2016), the goal of the listing of Northern Portugal as UNESCO world heritage was to conserve the region. However, the nomination can be used for place branding purposes by ''selling'' the uniqueness of the UNESCO site (van der Aa, et al., 2004).

Furthermore, the local community has to be willing to accept the UNESCO heritage nomination as potential tourism attractor to enable successful place branding strategies. As stated before, involvement of the local community can lead to successful place branding efforts, such as in Løgstør (Blichfeldt & Halkier, 2014). These stakeholders have experienced a sense of empowerment, as they had much freedom to choose which strategies they preferred. According to Kavaratzis (2012), Place branding should be turned more into a participation-oriented practice. The focus should shift from a governmental top-down approach to a bottom-up approach were local stakeholders and governments have relatively more power (Liedl, 2011). This allows local communities to engage more easily within the place branding efforts.

Lastly, According to Sofield (2013), Non-governmental organizations are generally more successful in promoting community participation and empowerment than governmental agencies. Within tourism, a community participation of interdependent stakeholders through collaboration is called community tourism planning (Jamal & Gets, 1995). This tourism planning variety contradicts the perspective of the UNESCO world heritage label, which is implemented through governmental agencies from a top-down perspective through management plans (Liedl, 2011; van der Aa, et al., 2004). Intertwining bottom-up and top-down perspectives in tourism planning are an example of a lack of coordination and cohesion. These are common issues within the fragmented tourism sector (Jamal & Gets, 1995). It could explain why the UNESCO world heritage label is not received well by the local stakeholders in the Wadden Sea.

The lack of perceived self-determination of the Wadden Sea region following the listing nomination of UNESCO heritage is essential to explain the argument of the local stakeholders. Self-determination is a very broad concept that revolves around the ability of people to determine their political status and steer their own economic, social and cultural development. The independence of a population from foreign intervention or influence is a prerequisite for successful self-determination of a region or country (Hannum, 1990).

According to Freire (2014), who did a research about place branding of UNESCO sites in Africa, not only national politicians should know how to effectively promote their locations. Regional and local agencies need to understand the concept of place branding as well. While this research itself is not applicable to Western Europe or the Netherlands, this statement is still relevant. The reason behind this is that in Western Europe, national governments increasingly offer autonomy to lower scale governments and peripheral regions through secessionist movements (Sorens, 2009). This transferring process of decision-making power from national towards the region or local level is called decentralisation (Bardhan, 2002). The power relations shift from a top-down perspective towards a bottom-up perspective (Liedl, 2011). Therefore, enabling the local governments and local non-governmental stakeholders to actively participate with making place branding efforts using the UNESCO world heritage label should make the efforts more successful. A more active participation of the local community can be achieved by avoiding traditional bureaucratic paternalism and focusing more on voluntary opportunities and responsibilities of citizens that are closer to the members of the community (Tosun, 2000). The described top-down framework of UNESCO world heritage listing possibly resembles a traditional bureaucratic paternalism too much to enable active community participation in place branding efforts using the heritage status. It could also threaten regional self-determination as a foreign intervention within regional policy making (Hannum, 1990).

If the UNESCO heritage status can be successfully used for place branding purposes, it would be most suitable for attracting nature-based tourism strategies. These strategies could revolve around creating an emotional bond with a place. Such an emotional bond to a specific place is an example of place attachment (Hashemnezhad, et al., 2013). Place attachment is a broad concept. Giuliani (2013) describes place attachment as *''an umbrella concept embracing the multiplicity of positive affects that have places as targets''* (p. 150). According to Scannel & Gifford (2010), place attachment can be seen as a three-dimensional framework that distinguishes between the person who is attached, how this person feels attached and what the person is attached to. An overview of these dimensions and their factors is shown in figure 2. These factors contribute to the creation of positive influences of a place on a person, therefore forming an emotional bond with that place.
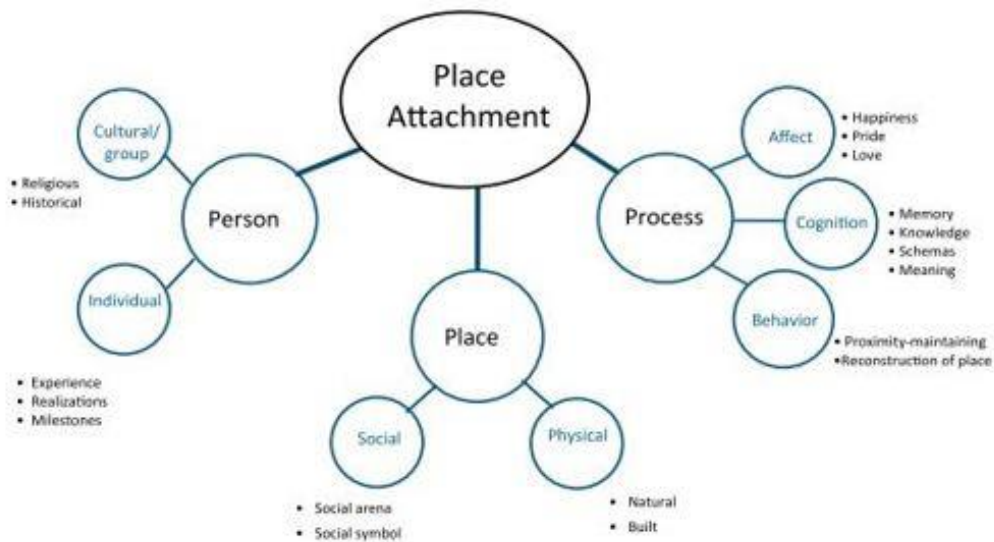
Figure 2. The tripartite model of place attachment (Scannel & Gifford, 2010).

The specific type of tourist that could be attracted using nature-based tourism strategies where a form of place attachment is established is an eco-tourist. Ecotourism generally revolves around sustainability, responsibility and conservation, although the correct and precise definition is disputed by scientists (Diamantis, 2010). In order to maintain Ecotourism, tourists who are attached to a place as well as feel responsible for the place should be attracted. These tourists should attain certain knowledge of the visited region and form an emotional bond (Diamantis, 2010; Scannel & Gifford, 2010). This emotional bond can be establish by making sure that the quality of the tourist's experience during the visit is guaranteed (Burton, 1998). Furthermore, the tourist should be behaving environmentally responsible during the visit (Burton, 1998). The reason why ecotourism is the most suitable form of tourism is that, because it revolves around conservation, it does not collide with the purposes of the UNESCO heritage status (da Silva Oliveira, 2016).

A conclusion that can be made following the previously described concepts concerning nature-based tourism is that they cannot be considered separately. The concepts are holistic (Verschuren, 2001). The factors that determine the way a world heritage status can be used to attract nature-based tourism in a way that is more complementary with self-determination of stakeholders are therefore interdependent. To visualise this, a conceptual model is provided containing the central definitions and their interdependency as well as the concept of Nature-based tourism that combines these elements. This conceptual model is shown in figure 3.

The success of place branding strategies is dependent on the stakeholders participation and empowerment and the regional self-determination. The same principle applies for utilising a world heritage status such as the UNESCO status for place branding purposes. Therefore, the different factors that determine the possible Nature-based tourism strategies are interconnected by lines in figure 3.

The reason that this type of Conceptual model is chosen is to accentuate the different factors and relationships between these factors that together define the specific Nature-based Tourism strategies that are applicable for the Wadden Sea region. Nature-based tourism strategies in this context means the approach that the stakeholders on Ameland believe is the most suitable for the Wadden Sea region.

In order to answer the question what nature-based strategies Ameland prefers for the Wadden Sea region, this interdependency is of utmost importance. Top-down attempts of UNESCO nominations within the Wadden Sea region in 2004 provoked resistance (van der Aa, et al., 2004). As it is 2018, this situation might have changed. The preferred strategies and challenges can be put into perspective by the interdependency of the factors shown in figure 3. They could explain how Ameland can use the UNESCO status to attract a certain type of tourist while the local stakeholders on Ameland and the region itself maintain their independency.
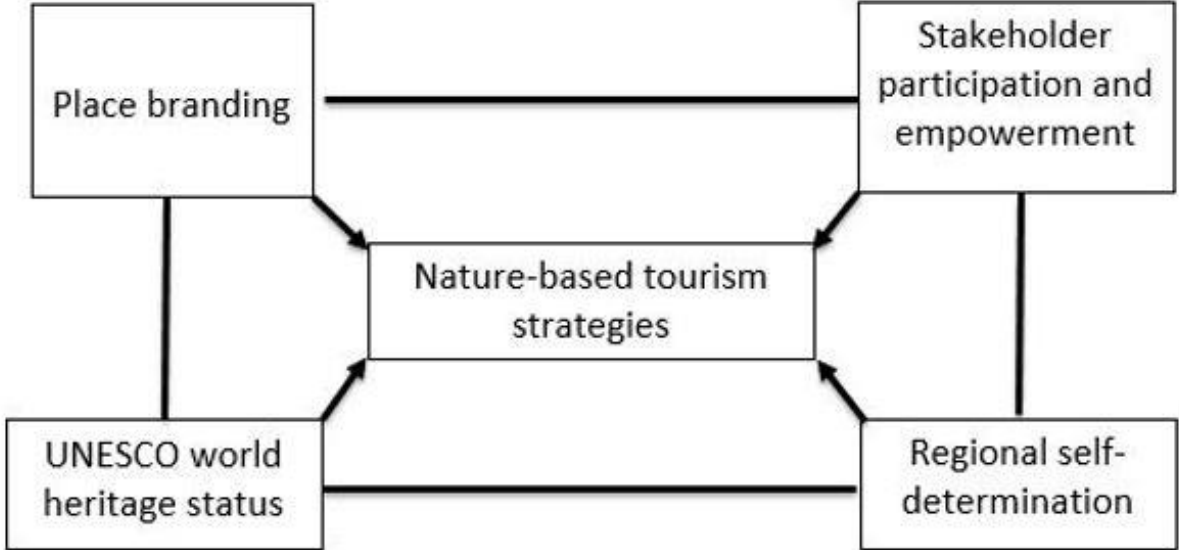

Figure 3. Conceptual model of Nature-based tourism strategies and its determinants.

3. Methodology

This research is qualitative, as the main research question revolves around exploring new insights on the feelings and perceptions of the stakeholders, rather than testing a certain hypothesis (Patton & Cochran, 2002). These insights were obtained through in-depth interviews with different stakeholders on Ameland.

A large dataset was not possible. This was not an issue, because I did not seek to find statistical regularities. However, I have interviewed ten stakeholders to make sure that a sufficient amount of viewpoints could be included to ensure that different interests were represented.

The stakeholders were contacted by e-mail and telephone to enquire if they would like to collaborate with the research or not. Nearly all contacted stakeholders were willing to contribute and share their views. The interviewees represented the tourist sector, inhabitants, the local government and local entrepreneurs. They were directly involved with tourism on Ameland or within the Wadden Sea region and were therefore considered the most suitable. Selecting the stakeholders on their role within tourism made sure that the respondents were able to give detailed information concerning the challenges and chances for nature-based tourism strategies using the UNESCO heritage status. However, generalisation on support for the best strategies become problematic, because of absence of less tourism-centred stakeholders, such as the agricultural sector.

Respondent nr.	Name	Gender	Occupation
1	Adinda	F	Rondvaartbedrijf de Zeehond
2	de Haan	M	Aanjager Waddenerfgoed
3	de Jong	M	Amelander Musea
4	Frits	M	Hotel Nobel
5	van Langen	M	Wagenborg Passagiersdiensten
6	-	M	Dorpsbelangen van Ameland
7	Erlyn	F	Waitress & Manager
8	Oud	M	Gemeente Ameland & Waddencampus
9	Mario	M	Rondvaartbedrijf de Zeehond
10	-	M	VVV Ameland

Table 1. Stakeholders who participated in the interviews

The insights from the data collection were supported by secondary literature research to highlight matters that were important according to interviewed respondents and to reflect back to the theory. The interviewees are listed in table 1. The questions that I asked the participants are shown in appendix a. The interviews were conducted in Dutch. The interview with VVV Ameland was conducted via e-mail. I only used the name or surname of respondents who gave permission or let me decide how I would refer to them.

In-depth interviews were the most suitable for this research as they provided the most insight within the perception and reasoning of the participants. The respondents were asked questions about the place branding strategies they prefer for Ameland within the Wadden Sea area, how they feel about the UNESCO world heritage status, their view on empowerment issues concerning tourism strategies and involvement of UNESCO and their view on self-determination issues concerning tourism strategies in the Wadden Sea region. I addressed topics rather than asking specific questions. The topics mirror the conceptual model, which is provided in figure 3.

With the use of in-depth interviews as method of data collection, ethical considerations had to be taking into account when recruiting participants and when conducting interviews. (Patton & Cochran, 2002). The respondent could freely give advice, commentary and opinions during the interviews. The result of this technique is that interviewees could decide which topics were discussed more in-depth than other topics. Therefore, the topics that were considered the most important were addressed the most.

I, as researcher, functioned as an outsider during the interviews. I visited their workplace to conduct the interview. The respondents were free to determine whether they accepted or not that the interview would be recorded and if their names and occupations could be provided. I made summaries of the provided answers during interviews that could not be recorded. These ethical considerations are included within the interview guide as shown in appendix a.

The interviews were coded and analysed using atlas.ti. The factors provided in the conceptual model were the coding factors when analysing the interviews. After the interviews, the factors themselves were subdivided in different recurring themes that were more elaborate than the original conceptual model factors. These themes enabled for a clear selection of topics during the analysis. However, they are rather abstract and therefore difficult to observe. Table 2 shows a list of all the used codes and the part of the conceptual model that they refer. Recurring themes, advices and strategies were explained and connected to theory using the factors listed in the conceptual model. Consistencies and differences between the participants on every topic were then explored. The analysis of this research is therefore be constructed of observed strategies and challenges within the context of these coding factors.

Factors	Code
Place Branding	Wadden Sea most beautiful
	Place Branding
	Place Attachment
Stakeholder Participation and Empowerment	Stakeholder Participation
	Stakeholder Empowerment
Regional Self-Determination	Regional Self-Determination
UNESCO World Heritage Status	UNESCO pros
	UNESCO cons
Preferred strategies for nature-based tourism	Preferred strategies

Table 2. Codes interviews

4. Results

4.1. Importance of Tourism on Ameland

According to the respondents, Ameland is not solely focusing on Wadden Sea tourism, but also on North Sea tourism and Ameland itself, promoting itself as a sportive, healthy, and family friendly Island. As VVV Ameland explains, promoting Ameland is considered more important than promoting the Wadden Sea region, because tourism is the most important economic sector on Ameland. According to the concept version of the Economic Vision of Gemeente Ameland (2017), tourism is the driving force of the economy of Ameland. With 600000 tourists annually, Ameland is economically dependent on tourism.

According to most respondents, Ameland is currently is currently performing well, attracting sufficient tourists and generating sufficient revenue to sustain the economy. Mr. van Langen and Mr. Oud both explained that if Ameland continues to perform like it is now, that it will not be a bad thing. According to a report by VVV Ameland (2013), a relative increase of German tourists contributed to the growth of the tourism sector of Ameland. However, there is no guarantee that the tourism sector on Ameland will sustain itself without innovation. According to Mr. Oud and Mario, Ameland should focus on the future. They believe that stagnation will cause decline. Communication is very important to keep that focus on the future. As Mr. Oud explains:

''We have had elections and I assume that we will look to the future again soon and finish our Economic Vision. The trajectory of this Economic vision is constructed in such a way that all the stakeholders are involved from the outset''.

According to the concept version of the Economic Vision of Gemeente Ameland (2017), inhabitants, entrepreneurs, partners and the local government should invest together in a sustainable Ameland. Mr. Oud explains that many parties, such as the VVV and marketing organisations are involved within tourism policy on Ameland. According to Dorpsbelangen van Ameland, the municipality demands more collaboration from local stakeholders within tourism policy making. This could be described as a form of community tourism planning (Jamal & Gets, 1995). This increases the regional self-determination as well as stakeholder involvement within tourism policy making on Ameland, which could contribute to better nature-based tourism strategies, as shown in figure 3. Ameland seemingly can steer its own tourism development (Hannum, 1990). This is relevant, because Ameland is economically dependent on tourism.

Decentralisation processes in the Netherlands enable the local municipality to develop strategies such as the Economic Vision and the bottom-up approach of the municipality enables local entrepreneurs and inhabitants to participate (Bardhan, 2002; Liedl, 2011). Mr. de Jong explains that the decentralisation of governments is applauded by the people on Ameland.

A comment that is made several times by interviewed stakeholders is that the interests of stakeholders on Ameland differ. Mr. de Jong explains a case about whether a new Wellness Centre should replace an old swimming pool when I asked about possible changes after the elections:

'' *It could be that the PVDA is in favour and the VVD is opposed. It could be that one representative of a local party is in favour and two others are opposed. For the other local parties the same applies*''

The fact that the interests of stakeholders differ is a logical result of decentralisation. Spatial issues become more complex, because a structural development from top-down perspective is no longer possible due to the different interests and the relative power of local stakeholders (Albrechts, 2004). This complexity is not necessarily a bad thing, as local issues are no longer generalised and, as Mr. de Haan explains, there is not one group who holds all the power. Furthermore, the involvement of local stakeholders increase the attention on the process of plan making rather than the result, possibly improving the quality of the resulting ideas (Albrechts, 2004). The type of tourism planning that is proposed is community tourism, where collaboration between interdependent stakeholders is a central focus (Jamal & Gets, 1995). According to Mr. de Haan, planning discussions should be based on rational thinking rather than emotions. He fears that social media cause people to oppose to certain things without sufficient arguments to back up their claims. According to Kaplan & Haenlein (2010), not all information on the internet is true, even though it is believed to be true. This is a challenge that emerges when all local stakeholders can be involved within decision making, even when they are not fully informed.

4.2. Possible nature-based tourism strategies and the preferred role of UNESCO

According to the respondents, Ameland should be an island for everyone, focusing on specific groups of tourists, but rather a mix of elderly people, families, group travellers and couples. There are, however, preferences for certain tourism characteristics. First, the yearly amount of tourists does not have to increase, according to most interviewed stakeholders. They, however, would like to see the amount of tourists spread more evenly throughout the year. Lowering the tourism impact during the high season could help Ameland become more sustainable, while maintaining the amount of tourists necessary to sustain the economy (Gemeente Ameland, 2017). This would be beneficial for the conservation of the region, which is the goal of UNESCO listing (da Silva Oliveira, 2016).

A second idea is to make sure that tourist return. Mario explains that people should be able to enjoy the Wadden Sea region and Ameland. He explains that people are more demanding than before and that their requirements should be met by experiencing a region more (Burton, 1998). The type of tourism that he is referring to is nature-based tourism, because the focus is on the ability of the tourists to enjoy undisturbed phenomena of nature (Betty & Hall, 1992). The respondents would rather see tourists return for more visits than bucket-list tourists who develop no bond to the region. According to the report by VVV Ameland (2013), this return tourism is under pressure. Therefore, a new approach may be suitable. According to Alegre (2009), satisfaction is the main determinant of the intention to return. It is therefore the most important that visitors on Ameland and within the Wadden Sea leave satisfied to increase the chance of return. By making the tourists experience Ameland and the Wadden Sea, the feeling of satisfaction might increase and therefore the chance that the tourists return. Satisfaction is seen as the cheapest form of promotion, according to the local government on Ameland (Gemeente Ameland, 2017).

VVV Ameland questions whether tourists from far away, who arrive with airplanes and want to see the Wadden Sea region to cross the region off from their bucket-list, are the most relevant group of tourists to focus on. Mr. de Haan and Mr. Oud also expressed that the bucket-list tourists are not the group that should be targeted. These tourists from far away are less able to visit regularly. According to Alegre (2009), the effects of the number of previous visits on satisfaction and the intention to return are, while moderate in strength, significant. Therefore, the chance that these bucket-list tourists return decreases. Furthermore, as these bucket-list tourists often travel by airplane, they collide with the sustainability goals of Ameland (Gemeente Ameland, 2017).

Most respondents propose that Ameland should focus on place attachment for place branding strategies. The effects of place attachment need to be considered when addressing the chance of returning tourists by increased satisfaction. During the interviews, the respondents all described a form of place attachment towards Ameland and the Wadden Sea region when asked about the most beautiful part of Ameland and the Wadden Sea region. These answers mirror the tripartite model of place attachment shown in figure 2 (Scannel & Gifford, 2010). The respondents all described one or more of these three phenomena: They feel attached to the place because of their experiences, they perceive their place to be unique in comparison to other places and they experience certain positive feeling when they think of the place or visit there.

Mr van Langen explains how he experiences a person-based attachment towards the Wadden Sea:

''*When I came here I was overwhelmed by the space and the tranquillity. These are the characteristics that still inspire me every day''*

Frits describes a place-based attachment feature about the uniqueness of Ameland:

''*What makes Ameland different from the others is that for many people it has something of everything. It has decent areas of nature, it has four distinct villages''. If you compare that to Texel or Terschelling, that is cultivated from East to West. Ameland has villages, I think that is what makes it unique''.*

Mr. Oud describes the process that explains his attachment towards Ameland.

''*I think that, because I was raised on Ameland, that you have a connection with a place, in this case an island''.*

In order to successfully promote the uniqueness of the Wadden Sea region and the Wadden islands to make sure that tourists return, two strategies need to be explored. First, the kinds of positive feelings like the ones described by the respondents should be transferred to the tourists. Features that make people feel like a region is unique are most likely the best ''selling'' points of a region concerning place branding using a World heritage status (van der Aa, et al., 2004). Developing tourism where tourists experience similar feelings like the ones describes by the respondents generates an emotional bond with the region, as well as a feeling of responsibility (Burton, 1998; Hashemnezhad, et al., 2013). Second, according to the respondents, the goal should be to introduce the tourists to Ameland and the Wadden Sea region and inform them of the different unique locations and attributes. By informing visitors, an emotional bond with the region and a feeling of responsibility can also be established (Hashemnezhad, et al., 2013). According to VVV Ameland (2013), Ameland thrives to inform potential new tourists about the region and then attract them. The form of tourism that bears close resemblance to the description given by the respondents is ecotourism (Diamantis, 2010). This is a type of tourism that combines tourism with nature conservation and is therefore considered sustainable (PROWAD, 2014). According to the respondents, the UNESCO heritage status could help with place branding efforts through informing. Mr Oud explains:

''It is a status that, in my experience, helps with the profiling and marketing of the entire region''.
This is important, as the main goal of the Economic Vision of Ameland is sustainable economic development (Gemeente Ameland, 2017). Therefore, ecotourism is the type of tourism that complies with the wishes of the interviewees, the goals set by the municipality and the goals of UNESCO listing.

The recognition of the Wadden Sea region as a unique natural site that should be protected is seen as a positive result of the UNESCO world heritage status by the respondents (da Silva Oliveira, 2016). According to most respondents, the preferred role of this status is to attract responsible tourists to Ameland, therefore using the heritage status to attract ecotourism (Diamantis, 2010). Adinda explained that the heritage status is a great way to protect a region and create rules for tourists and entrepreneurs not to harm the region (Burton, 1998). The region is therefore conserved more easily (PROWAD, 2014).

Mr. van Langen explains that the responsibility to protect the Wadden Sea was already present within the island community and with entrepreneurs, but the UNESCO world heritage status helped to underline that responsibility towards visitors as well. Mario notices that people litter less in the Wadden Sea region than before. This makes it seem that the heritage status succeeds as a tool to minimise tourism impact (Pedersen, 2002). The preferred type of place-attached eco-tourist together with the increased responsibility of the tourists due to the heritage status confirms that the UNESCO world heritage status of the Wadden Sea region is most suitable for place branding purposes concerning nature-based tourism. The unique nature of the Wadden Sea that should be protected can be used as the unique ''selling'' point for responsible ecotourism.

The preferred nature-based tourism strategies can be complementary with the goals of the UNESCO listing. Therefore, tourism promotion and nature conservation can be combined.

4.3. Differences between Ameland and the Wadden Sea region

Not all the respondents believe that Ameland is currently promoting the Wadden Sea enough. According to Mr. de Haan, however, there is enough potential and interest from people to visit the Wadden Sea. The reason for this lack of promotion is possibly based upon the fact that the Wadden Sea region and Ameland are being governed at differing scales and through differing perspectives (Liedl, 2011).

There are three the main reasons why the governing scales between Ameland and the Wadden Sea region differ. First, the Wadden Sea regions spreads across three countries. Denmark, Germany and the Netherlands (World Database on Protected Areas, 2018). The protected regions are shown in figure 4. Secondly, The UNESCO world heritage status is an international label implemented from a top-down perspective (Liedl, 2011). Frits explained that the heritage label is implemented on a European scale. The final difference is that Ameland is not included within the UNESCO world heritage site, as shown in figure 1. VVV Ameland explained that the Netherlands have kept the islands themselves out of the UNESCO world heritage, unlike Germany and Denmark. This also means that Ameland itself is not included within the top-down governing of the UNESCO sites (Liedl, 2011). The regional self-determination of Ameland is therefore higher than when it would have been included within the UNESCO world heritage site, as there are no foreign interventions from UNESCO on Ameland (Hannum, 1990).

Figure 4. UNESCO world heritage sites in Wadden Sea region. Data by: (World Database on Protected Areas, 2018)

4.4. Future challenges and the fairway issues

In general, the response towards the UNESCO world heritage status is more positive than in 2004. The respondents do not oppose to the UNESCO status itself (van der Aa, et al., 2004). However, the respondents have points of critique towards the heritage status in its current state. These points of critique also reveal challenges for utilising the UNESCO heritage status for place branding efforts.

Erlyn mentioned that the liveability of the people on Ameland is sometimes hindered by the regulations concerning the protection of nature. She mentioned the delay of the ferryboat and green lights used to stop disturbing nearby birds. Although she believes protection is important, she explains that the green lights and delays have consequences for the safety of people and the liveability of the inhabitants of Ameland. These examples display the under-determination of the empowerment of the local community during tourism developments when nature conservation is concerned (Sofield, 2003). This is remarkable, as the respondents felt like they have more empowerment within the tourism sector.

The reason is the previously described difference of government perspectives between these sectors. As stated before, the tourism and economic sector of Ameland is mostly governed at a lower governance scale and through a bottom-up perspective (Liedl, 2011). However, the protection of the Wadden Sea region is governed through a top-down perspective on a National and International scale (Liedl, 2011). While this enables for a more generalised set of rules and regulations, local initiatives and involvement becomes more difficult (Albrechts, 2004).

The result of these regulations is that inhabitants of Ameland have to obtain permission to interfere within the Wadden Sea region (WaddenZee.nl, 2018). According to Dorpsbelangen van Ameland, licenses are necessary as proof of permission to interfere. Adinda explains that these licenses are difficult to obtain. Licences could be obtained according to the ''Planologische Kern Beslissing'', or PKB for short. The PKB is established to make sure that the nature and environment within the Wadden Sea region are sustainably protected and developed (WaddenZee.nl, 2018). These licenses have a top-down perspective (Liedl, 2011). Stakeholders who want to interfere within the Wadden Sea region need to make sure that their interference does not disturb natural processes (WaddenZee.nl, 2018). Mario adds that protecting the Wadden Sea region against tourist might not be a good idea, as the license he has to travel to a nearby sandbank to show tourists the seals in their natural habitat prevents people to try to find them on their own, which would increase the risk to disturb them. This is a problem, as nature-based tourism revolves around undisturbed phenomena of nature (Betty & Hall, 1992).

Mr. de Haan and Mr. Oud also expressed fear that the top-down perspective of this heritage might be used by the national government to attract foreign tourists from around the globe who arrive with airplanes. As stated before, that is not the preferred type of tourists and not the type of tourist who will likely return (Alegre, 2009).

The collision between top-down rules and regulations and bottom-up involvement and communication remains relevant. In the past, it has led to resistance. Mr. de Jong gave an example where the local community protested against a top-down policy. He explains about a blockade of the ferry in 1976 against more expensive tariffs (Reformatorisch Dagblad, 1976).

While the interviewees generally responded positive towards their ability to participate within the tourism sector, they feel much more negative towards their ability to interfere within this top-down context of UNESCO heritage listing (Liedl, 2011). They feel like the UNESCO heritage label is a foreign intervention that obstructs the self-determination of Ameland (Hannum, 1990). The most important example concerns the fairway that, according to the respondents, started to stipple over the last decades. The current route is shown in figure 5. Furthermore, the movement of sand and the tides often hinder the ferryboat, which is often unable to keep its schedule. Dorpsbelangen van Ameland explained that a ship was stuck into the sand once, and it was not allowed to move the ship away without permission, because the Wadden Sea region is protected by its UNESCO status. The stakeholders expressed that they are unable to obtain the necessary licenses to renew the fairway route. According to Mr. de Jong, the government does not see the need to change two curves to permanently stop the ships from delaying. Furthermore, Frits and Dorpsbelangen van Ameland explain that the restricted dredging that is currently applied is not working. These complaints imply that, unlike Ameland, the Wadden Sea is regulated through a top-down perspective (Liedl, 2011). This top down perspective may resemble a traditional bureaucratic paternalism too much to enable active community participation of stakeholders on Ameland within the Wadden Sea region (Tosun, 2000). Ameland not being part of the UNESCO heritage and therefore more self-determined than the Wadden Sea resulted in the inability to change the fairway to stop the delays. Therefore, the stakeholders on Ameland are unable to prevent the economic losses for Ameland caused by the delays within this complex interaction of possibilities on Ameland and hurdles within the Wadden Sea region. According to Mr. de Jong, people on Ameland have difficulty to understand why they are not allowed to interfere to stop the delays.

The respondents expressed several solutions to minimise the impact of the silting fairway. Mr. Oud explains that stimulating to leave the car on the mainland by offering alternative, sustainable transport for luggage could help to minimise the delays. Frits adds that dredging the fairway so that

regular ships can sail through is a more favourable solution than building special types of boats. In the report by Jager & de Kleuver (2016), possible short-term solutions to the fairway problem include adjusting the current fairway by shortening the route, changing the ferryboat schedule, improving the boarding processes, creating new transport methods or improving on the current dredging regimes under the current licences.

In order to improve the interaction between the islands and the Wadden Sea region concerning the UNESCO world heritage status, communication has to improve. Current participation levels are considered unsatisfactory by the respondents. Satisfaction concerning participation and empowerment are required for successful nature-based tourism strategies as shown in the conceptual model in figure 3. Enabling stakeholders to participate more actively within the processes concerning the UNESCO world heritage will increase the possibility of coming up with solutions to solve the fairway issues as well as maintaining sustainability goals and minimising tourism impacts. Furthermore, enabling non-governmental involvement also increases the chance of local communities to be involved with decision-making (Sofield, 2003). Finally, involving local communities helps to close the gap between governing perspectives between the islands, such as Ameland and the Wadden Sea region (Liedl, 2011). The heritage status of the Wadden Sea region receives a more positive response from the local community when they are more empowered through communication. Therefore, it becomes more suitable for place branding strategies concerning ecotourism.
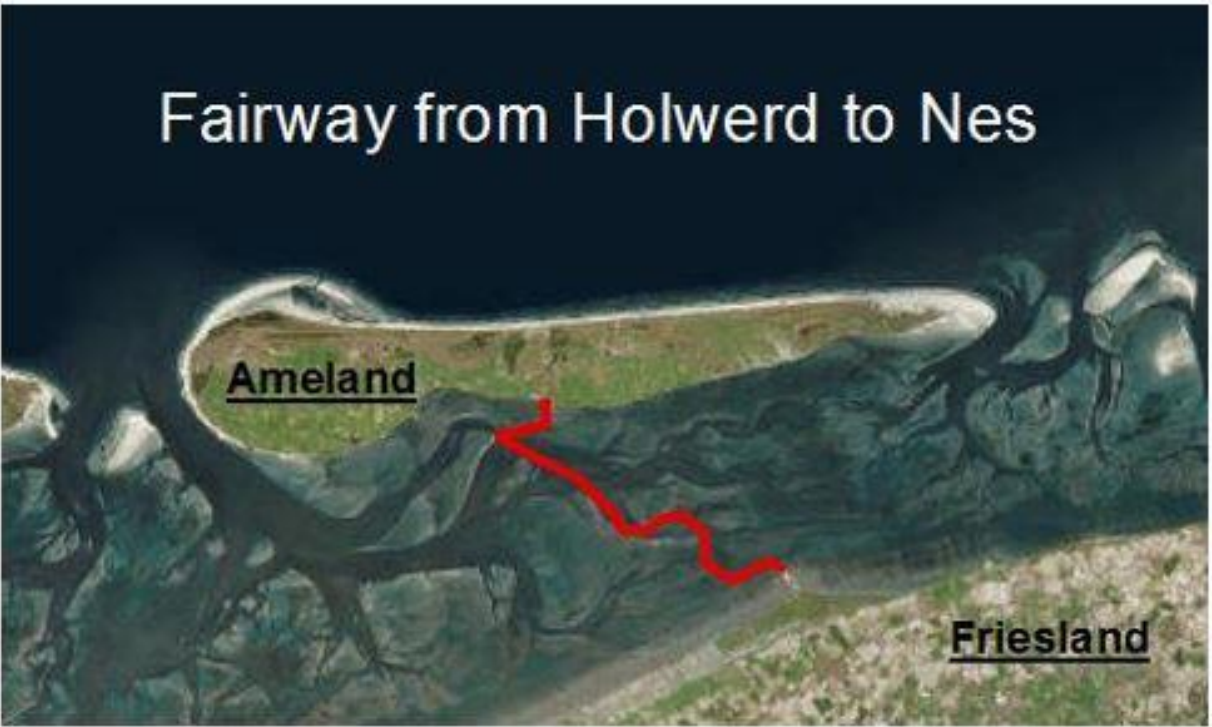

Figure 5. Fairway from Holwerd to Nes

5. Conclusions

The goal of this paper was to explore ways to use the world heritage of the Wadden Sea region for place branding purposes more complementary with the regional self-determination of Ameland and the nature-based tourism within the region. According to the respondents, the world heritage status can be used for nature-based tourism strategies as a tool to attract responsible eco-tourists (Diamantis, 2010). By informing, ecotourism should attract tourists who feel attached to Ameland and the Wadden Sea region and who can experience the uniqueness of the Wadden sea region so that they become satisfied and return for more visits (Alegre, 2009; Hashemnezhad, et al., 2013; Betty & Hall, 1992).

Regional self-determination and stakeholder participation issues are specifically complex challenges within Ameland and the Wadden Sea region, because both regions are governed through two entirely different perspectives. Ameland through a bottom-up perspective, the Wadden Sea region and its UNESCO heritage through a top-down perspective (Liedl, 2011). This causes friction between wanting to use the heritage status as a unique ''selling'' point to attract eco-tourists and not wanting the heritage status to influence the daily life by regulating the Wadden Sea region in such a way that licenses are necessary for any interference (WaddenZee.nl, 2018). The most notable struggle that emerged with the listing of the Wadden Sea Region is the inability of the local community to interfere with the silting fairway, despite having several possible solutions. The silting fairway causes delays, influencing both tourists and inhabitants. The gap between governments and perspectives on Ameland and within the Wadden Sea region needs to be closed by improving the communication between local stakeholders on Ameland and high-scale governments (Liedl, 2011). Involving and empowering stakeholders could contribute with solving frustrations concerning licenses or the fairway and improving the perception of the heritage status. This could help stakeholders to no longer experience the UNESCO heritage as foreign intervention that obstructs self-determination of Ameland within the Wadden Sea region (Hannum, 1990). Therefore, the UNESCO heritage label becomes more suitable for place branding efforts in the Wadden Sea Region involving the stakeholders, preferably through a community tourism planning (Jamal & Gets, 1995). Stakeholder involvement and empowerment are therefore vital for place branding success using a heritage label.

This research provides an overview of the perceptions and wishes from key stakeholders as well as institutional challenges on a qualitative level. Statistics on economic effects of the provided strategies are therefore recommended for future research. Another recommendation is to inquire stakeholders on other Wadden Islands and stakeholders who are not directly involved with tourism. Finally, the interviews are analysed at a highly abstract theoretic level. A more in-depth analysis of defining topics on a lower analytic scale could lead to more useable results in future research.

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Appendix A: stakeholder interview guide

Stakeholder Interview guide

Hartelijk dank dat u de tijd wil nemen om vandaag met mij in gesprek te gaan. Mijn naam is Chelvan Landman en ik zou het graag met u willen hebben over natuurtoerisme op Ameland. Ik ben benieuwd hoe u tegenover toerisme op Ameland staat en in hoeverre u ervaart dat u zelf bepaald hoe u omgaat met toerisme in dit gebied.

Het interview zal ongeveer een half uur in beslag nemen. Met uw toestemming neem ik het interview op zodat ik op een zorgvuldige manier om kan gaan met uw antwoorden. Met al uw antwoorden zal op een vertrouwelijke wijze worden omgegaan. Quotes worden alleen met uw naam of naam van uw bedrijf vermeldt als u daar toestemming voor geeft.

Ten slotte mag u dit interview beëindigen wanneer u wil en hoe hoeft geen antwoord te geven op vragen waar u liever niet over spreekt.

Heeft u nog vragen over deze uitleg?
Bent u bereid om deel te nemen aan dit interview?

Deze thema's worden besproken tijdens het interview en centrale vragen omtrent deze thema's
  1. Mening over Ameland en het Waddenzeegebied
- Wat vind u het mooiste aan Ameland?
- Wat vind u het mooiste aan het Waddenzeegebied?
  2. Mening en suggesties over place branding van het Waddenzeegebied en toerisme in het gebied
- Waar profileert Ameland zich met name mee?
- Heeft u suggesties hoe Ameland de promotie van het eiland en het Waddenzeegebied kan verbeteren?
  3. Perceptie van inspraak binnen het natuurtoerisme van het Waddenzeegebied
- Wie bent u en wat doet u?
- Heeft u het idee dat iedereen voldoende wordt betrokken binnen het natuurtoerisme?
  4. Mening over erfgoedstatus en bescherming natuur
- Hoe staat u tegenover de werelderfgoedstatus van het Waddenzeegebied?
- Hoe staat u tegenover de vaargeulproblematiek?
  5. Heeft u suggesties om het natuurtoerisme te verbeteren?
  6. Is er nog iets wat u graag zou willen toevoegen?

In de eerste twee weken van Mei hoop ik alle antwoorden te hebben verwerkt en getranscribeerd. Als u daar behoefte aan heeft, kan ik u een kopie van de transcripten opsturen.

Nogmaals bedankt dat u de tijd heeft genomen om met mij in gesprek te gaan.