

**Migratory Birds and Migratory Scientists:
Multi-Sited Ethnography of a Contested Coastal Landscape**

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Introduction

First I want to present my project and myself. As a social anthropologist, I am working since a long time on environmental conflicts, especially about those resulting from the implementation of nature protection measures and sustainable development strategies. In the nineties I conducted fieldwork in a Nature Park in Southern Portugal, researching the conflicts between local populations and environmentalists. The resulting monograph is entitled “‘Hang the Greens!’ Environmental conflicts, sustainable development and ecological discourse”¹, and it was intended as a critique of environmentalism in terms of knowledge and power. My recent fieldwork was about a similar case in Northern Germany: The North Sea coastline, the so-called Wadden Sea, is characterised by its tidal flat area, and it is a heavily contested area ever since. It is the result of the interaction between human and natural forces, of a century long process of reclaiming land from the sea, of building dykes and drainage systems, with storm surges as a permanent threat. In the eighties, there occurred a paradigm-like change, the burgeoning eco-movement stopped the process of land reclamation, and the tidal flat area was declared a National Park, followed by the implementation of EU directives such as Natura 2000. Local population from the beginning up to today fought against the establishment of an “Eco-Dictatorship”, complained about restricted access to and use of resources. In the public debate it was nature versus culture, ethnic identity versus foreign rule, and conflict became almost a habit and is partly institutionalised. So my research was not only about protecting “nature” from people, but about the establishment of eco-governance, with participation of all groups involved. Today, the Wadden Sea is the best-researched coastal eco-system in the world, it is maybe one of the best protected, with “global change” as a keyword for its future management.

To sum it up, my research interest shifted from debunking the ecological mis-readings of a landscape to the overall construction of a post-ecological environment under the premises of “global change”. Thus, my interest focuses on the simultaneous or complementary construction of global change AND the environment or landscape that is administered, shaped

¹ Krauss, Werner (2001) ,Haengt die Gruenen!’ Umweltkonflikte, nachhaltige Entwicklung und oekologischer Diskurs. Berlin: Reimer Verlag.

and inhabited by people and my method in doing so is multi-sited ethnography. In terms of the philosopher Peter Sloterdijk, I define my field as a “sphere”:

“Spheres are the spaces where people actually live. I would like to show that human beings have, till today, been misunderstood, because the space where they exist has always been taken for granted, without ever being made conscious and explicit. And this lieu or space I call sphere in order to indicate that we are never in fact naked in totality, in a physical or biological environment of some kind, but that we are ourselves space-creating-beings, and that we cannot exist otherwise than in these self-animated-spaces.”

(<http://www.petersloterdijk.net/>)

In the following I shall take you on my journey in search of my field’s (atmo-) sphere, which already is an important feature of multi-sited research. It is impossible to present the methodological bones of multi-sited ethnography without the narrative flesh. In most parts it is known methodological terrain, derived from the anthropology of landscape and science studies. What is different from “ordinary” ethnographic methodology is the combination of places, spaces and spheres that are researched, and it is the attitude towards it – if it is an overall phenomenon like global change there is no outside, only inside, and there is a certain necessity (and responsibility) to take sides, to intervene. In the following, I start from internal gossip in my research project to show the difference between a geographically defined ethnographic research design and a multi-sited one.

Multi-sited ethnography in an interdisciplinary research project

As a social anthropologist, I was part of an interdisciplinary research project called “Nature in Conflict: Nature Conservation, Nature Concepts and Coastal Images”², with the North Sea coastline and the conflicts about the National Park as its exemplary case. The project consisted of literary- and media studies, history, social anthropology, and (scientific) coastal research. The natural scientist in the project, who was one of its main founders, asked me to take over the natural science part – he was especially interested in the “cultural baggage” inherent in the scientific climate- and coastal research models and practises. Of course, I agreed, but this was considered highly problematic by part of the humanities in the project. As an ethnographer, I was expected to concentrate on a detailed community study, to restrict the research on the actual conflicts between locals and the National Park Bureau, and to deliver interviews and material for my colleagues to be analysed by them in their disciplinary terms, and finally to reduce the scope of my research to the German tradition of perspectives towards “nature” and the respective nature concepts (which, of course, is a highly interesting topic and

² 2001-2003, funded by Volkswagen Foundation.

was handled perfectly by my colleagues). Even though I tried at least partly to fulfil these expectations, I felt uncomfortable with these premises – the restriction to a geographically defined territory turned this into a “terror-tory” for me.

It came to an open conflict, when I was invited to a workshop of the global coastal research community (LOICZ) in Miami, Florida, to do “participant observation” as a discussant – this fieldtrip led to fierce discussions in the project, if it was compatible with the aim of the project or not, and if the project should finance it or not. Finally, the research institute and the global science organisation partly paid my fees, and interdisciplinary project communication had a severe breakdown for some time. Our project entitled “Nature in Conflict” almost turned out to be a “Project in Conflict” – for some time at least, the conflict line was indeed identical with the one “out there”, and it went along nature versus culture, i.e. natural science versus humanities, with me in between. But this is internal gossip (the world of scientists is full of gossip, of course). At least, it was surprising to have conflicts not with the natural sciences, but with my colleagues from the humanities on the question of multi-sited ethnography.

Anyway, these discussions were productive, too, and the project itself was definitively a success: we had a total of more than fifty publications. And, following my academic career patterns and intentions, I am still involved in my multi-sited ethnography of “global change”, writing a monograph about “Climate, Coasts and Catastrophes: The Anthropology of Global Change”.

Multi-sited ethnography means in my case changing places, from a coastal community to the National Park Bureau to the Coastal Research Institute, staying at each maybe three or four months, and in between a lot of travels to conferences and workshops. With bad conscience as a permanent companion – no deep hanging out neither here nor there, but permanent change and mobility. Here it is time to praise an interdisciplinary project: I gained a lot from my colleagues, who did wonderful work on the history of the area, on the concepts of nature, and in terms of a detailed critique of the nature / culture concept that defined public discourse. It took some time and a permanent effort to convince myself that I stayed “in the field” all the time – a field defined as ‘an argument’ by George Marcus (1998:90):

“Multi-sited research is designed around chains, paths, threads, conjunctions, or juxtapositions of locations in which the ethnographer establishes some form of literal, physical presence with an explicit, posited logic of association or connection among sites that in fact defines the argument of the ethnography.”

I read it again and again, I like this definition. It is not a field, it is an argument. Is an argument a field? I went to ask my friends, the landscape people. “Landscape” sometimes is as much a field as it is an argument.

Multi-Sited Ethnography: Landscape

“Landscape” turned out to be one of the lines I was following. In the actual conflicts between local people and environmentalists, there is a permanent (and fruitless) debate if the coastline is to be defined as a natural or a cultural landscape. At least, I wasn’t interested in *this* debate, but in the area as a constructed landscape, or, in allusion to Appadurai’s terminology³, as a techno-scientific-eco-scape. But to define a field, one needs company, theory, and discussion – in a multi-sited research design theory is itself methodology. In the British Landscape-school I found good insights into the critical analysis of landscapes in Foucauldian and Marxist terms, and in parts there is the idea of landscape as an activity, a process⁴. Of similar importance was the geographically and materially oriented Scandinavian school, not at least because of Kenneth Olwig and his book on “Landscape, Nature and Body Politic” (2002), where the historical Wadden Sea area serves as a perfect illustration of his theory: In Northern Germany, “Landschaft” historically was the name of a political institution, where conflicts were decided. Landscape then was a form of practice, an activity, related to communitarian law, inheritance, to the maintenance of the dykes and the relations to the foreign overlords. Here I found a way out of the nature / culture trap in public and in scientific discourse, and a new way of interpretation of the conflicts as a means of constructing the environment, the sphere people live in.

But how to cope with the global system of knowledge, with global change? It was Bruno Latour who showed me the way out and raised my interest in contemporary “Ding-Politik”, by drawing my attention to the question how people and things interact and form ever-new assemblies. What about researching Wadden Sea eco-governance in terms of a “Politique de la Nature”⁵? So back to ethnography:

Migratory Birds and Migratory Scientists

The Wadden Sea is an important resting place for migratory birds such as the brent geese, which stay there twice a year on their way from Africa to Siberia and back. Before the foundation of the National Park, their life was hard and under permanent threat: The farmers on the mainland and the islands used to regard the geese as competitors for meadowland and

³ Appadurai, Arjun (1990) Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy in *Public Culture* n. 2, 2.

⁴ Bender, Barbara (1996) Landscape. In: Barnard, Allen and Jonathan Spencer (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology*; pp.323-324. London, New York

⁵ Latour, Bruno (1999) *Politique de la Nature*. Paris: Éditions La Découverte.

shot them in hecatombs; in Siberia it was no better at all, the geese were also hunted, not as competitors for land but as a source of food, by hungry prisoners of the GULAG camps. Today hunting is prohibited in the National Park. Conservationists from the Wadden Sea section of the WWF and biologists from the National park followed the birds in their migratory flight to Siberia. Thanks to the fall of the 'iron curtain', they actually succeeded in also establishing a National Park there. Thus the population of geese was able to increase rapidly. But the geese have not shown themselves to be overly grateful – many have in the meantime discovered the monocultures of the mainland farmers and scour up the shoots of the delicious 00-rape seed, a new sort. This of course sets off new and endless quarrels – who pays the damages? Negotiations take place at the highest levels; alternative areas are to be made available to the geese.

This is a good example of how people and things interact and form new webs of relations, locals included, who accept subsidies for leaving their fields to the Brent geese and going into the eco-tourism business.

There is more to making things explicit and public than only ecological folklore. I became aware of its global dimension when I was invited by the National Park to join a delegation on a trip to South Korea. There is a tidal flat area almost identical to the Wadden Sea, and Korean government almost finished in closing a dyke to transform it into agricultural land. A concerned science manager from the National Park bureau initiated a solidarity campaign with the Korean protest movement to save the Saemangum tidal flat, raised funds and organised a symposium in Seoul. He was one of my main informants, and he had read some of my articles on the culture of nature, and he invited me to speak there about the conflictuous way towards sustainable development in the Wadden Sea case. In Seoul we met Buddhist monks, catholic nuns, street fighters and scientists, all united in their fight against the destruction of the tidal flat area, praying, singing, lecturing. Here I learnt a lot about my field and the National Park: In interviews with Korean press and TV, the German conservationists simply answered in three points why to save the Saemangum tidal flat: 1) it is a unique ecosystem, 2) nature provides us with free life-supporting services, and 3) we have to save the tidal flat for future generations, for our children. Germans uttering these global ecological key words in South Korean media generate a lot of influence, especially in a former tiger-state on its way to global modernity. Global modernity means ecological standardisation and normalisation. It is not a colonial expansion with ships and cannonballs, but it is scientists in airplanes with manuscripts in their bags, speaking broken English - followed by social

anthropologists, doing multi-sited ethnography to research globalisation as a web of relations between people and things.

Migratory Scientists and Global Change

But isn't ecological globalisation news from yesterday, don't we live already in the post-ecological era of "global change" with its science-based, less romantic and more technocratic discourses? Didn't we show that National Parks are outranged models from the era of colonialism, romanticism, and nationalism? The Wadden Sea is the best-researched coastal eco-system of the world; even science in Germany is becoming a global player, and "Integrated Coastal Zone Management" is highly valued by politicians and science funding in a knowledge- and risk-society. Coastal researchers have become important stakeholders and cultural producers.

With Latours "Laboratory Life" (1986) in mind I started my fieldwork for some weeks in a Coastal Research Institute. I had my own desk, my own computer in one of the many rooms, I tried to find out who is who among the more or less 120 researchers, I participated in coffee and lunch breaks, I conducted interviews and tried to take part in daily gossip.

Fieldwork experiences as usual: I was identified as a spy from the executive board, as member of a management consultancy, or similar paranoid projections in a world of constantly changing science policies. We played the "otherness game" between natural science and humanities, establishing a joking relationship – there is only one real science, guess which... Most of the time I was learning: The scientists liked to explain what they are doing, astonished about so much naïveté; I learnt about simulation and modelling, about bio-optical research and GPS; I never became an expert, but I got an idea. And I learnt about the difference between science as officially producing truth, and its daily practice of experimenting, searching and trying, a work full of uncertainties and sometimes almost esoteric specialisation.

Some of my main informants are travelling a good deal of the year around the world, presenting their organisations and the work done there to the global scientific community. I managed to follow them on some rare occasions. One was my participation at the "Challenges of Global Change" conference 2001 in Amsterdam, where the "Declaration of Amsterdam" was delivered, stating that the earth system is changing and that "global change is real"⁶. The scientific global community is a well-organised and structured; there are four such communities that wrote and signed the declaration of Amsterdam:

⁶ www.sciconf.igbp.kva.se/AMS_DECLARATION.pdf

The IGBP (International Geosphere-Biosphere Programme), IHDP (International Human Development Programme), WCRP (World Climate Research Programme) and Diversitas (International Diversity Programme), each of them representing networks covering many subdivisions. Networking is the key word in describing these organisations. The overall interest of these organisations is research on global change, with concerned scientists alarming and informing the public, and they play an important role in the structure of funding science policies, and their findings serve as a basis for global policies such as the Kyoto process.

It is here where global change is constructed and performed, where individual research findings are summed up to an overall picture of the state of the earth. And it was here where I made friends with the science manager of the coastal subproject LOICZ – he had started his career as a member of the WWF in the Wadden Sea area. This was serendipity in its best sense; I could easily keep on connecting and weaving my web from the global to the local and back.

On another occasion we met again: In Miami, Florida, at a workshop of LOICZ (Land Ocean Interaction in Coastal Zones), the global organisation of coastal research. Here the elite of coastal researchers from all over the world was summing up the first ten years of global research and transformed them into a management plan for the next ten years. This shift from basic to applied research is reflected now in the programmes of the EU and other funding institutions, whose representatives take part in these meetings.

During my fieldwork, I was invited to give papers on conferences of climate and coastal researchers, to speak about the cultural dimension of nature and science, praising ethnography and criticizing their often one-dimensional and deterministic perspective on people. It was my way of ‘going-native’, I performed as a (cultural) coastal researcher myself in this science-based community, and I took sides. It is important to communicate – multi-sited ethnography also in this case means to intervene. There is no outside of the glasshouse. Or, in an allusion to Marx: We make our own environment, but not under the conditions of our own making.

Conclusion

Migratory birds and migratory scientists are thus globalising the world towards ecological and scientific standardisation, as travelling salesmen of knowledge. I guess it is useful that they have anthropologists as their companions, commenting, connecting, and localising – to see people and things not only as objects of scientific and technocratic interest, but as “matters of concern”.

I often go back to the Wadden Sea, which is permanently made explicit in ever-new perspectives, thus emanating new activities. It is good to have a walk at the coast and to have a look at the waves and the heaps of foam. Sloterdijk uses foam as a powerful metaphor – connected bubbles and spheres, isolating and permeable at the same time, forming temporary heaps of foam – temporary as is the argument of multi-sited ethnography. The methodological challenge is not to invent new methods, but to design the field and to trust in the argument under high risk.