



THE ACTIVITIES OF THE SEA ALARM FOUNDATION  
IN THE AFTERMATH OF THE **TRICOLOR** INCIDENT



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Coverphoto: A bucket with syringes, filled with food for birds.

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May 2003

## ■ SUMMARY

Between 25 January and 27 February 2003, Sea Alarm Foundation responded to a request from the Belgian authorities to assist their activities in dealing with the Tricolor oil spill off their coast. This proved to be an incident where an unusually large number of birds were recovered oiled. The Foundation's activities included a number of services to the Head of Operations: general advice, strategy development, day to day management, coordination between parties, link to ITOPF and the P&I Club, assistance with financial management, coordination of international assistance, international transportation of birds and animal welfare. These services are described, and strength and weaknesses of the operation analysed.

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## ■ THE *TRICOLOR* INCIDENT

Following a collision on 14 December 2002, the *Tricolor*, a Norwegian car carrier, sank off the coast of Dunkerque, France, in one of the major shipping routes of the North Sea. After sinking in relatively shallow waters (30 metres deep), the side of the vessel lay only a few metres below the surface of the sea at high tide. The wreck caused an immediate threat to shipping, in what is one of the busiest sea lanes in the world. Within 48 hours of the sinking, the *Nicola* crashed into the wreck. She was, however, pulled clear and appeared to suffer no serious damage. Two weeks later, on 1 January 2003, the *Vicky*, carrying 70,000 tonnes of highly inflammable gas oil also struck the submerged *Tricolor* and some of its dangerous cargo was lost. The *Vicky*, too, was pulled clear and sailed to Rotterdam. On Friday, 23 January, a new serious problem developed when the lid of an oil compartment was damaged during oil pumping operations being undertaken by salvage company Smit International and some 170 tonnes of fuel oil leaked into the sea. Although a relatively small amount, when compared with international records of other oil spill incidents, the effect on wildlife quickly grew



A recovered puffin.

into one of the more serious incidents in Europe for birds.

## ■ CHARACTERISTICS OF THE *TRICOLOR* INCIDENT

Regarding oiled wildlife, the *Tricolor* incident differed in a number of ways from similar occurrences in the past:

- It occurred relatively close inshore, near the Flemish Banks, an extremely shallow area of the North Sea, famous as an important area for overwintering seabirds.
- Relatively little oil was spilled (170 tonnes of fuel). But this oil

immediately affected concentrations of tens of thousands of seabirds on the Flemish Banks.

- Notification of the incident to the oiled wildlife response network was relatively late; almost 24 hours after the oil was first lost. This coincided with the first oiled birds reaching the Belgian coast. Thus, by the time the notification reached key individuals, oiled birds were already being recovered in hundreds from the beaches.
- It was a further 24 hours before a crisis management team was formed and held its first meeting (25 January 2003) to define responsibilities and an operational structure for the wildlife response: by

then, more than 500 casualties had been collected and awaited treatment in a deserted building without basic facilities.

- The number of casualties over the first two days grew to such an extent that it immediately became clear that they could not be dealt with at a single rehabilitation centre and that it had become a serious welfare issue.
- The *Tricolor* episode happened at the end of a two-month period during which time many of the coasts of Western Europe had already been in receipt of large numbers of oiled casualties, and most rehabilitation centres and experts were occupied.



Some of the 536 birds that were the first inhabitants of the rehabilitation centre, 24 hours after the first notification of the spill.

— Eight days after notification, the number of daily casualties approached zero, but then numbers increases again indicating a second oil spill incident ( Figure 1) possibly also caused by the *Tricolor*.

## ■ NOTIFICATION AND INVITATION

The initial notification of the incident resulted from a telephone call from ITOPF (Ian White) to (Sea Alarm Foundation (Hugo Nijkamp) on 24 January. Sea Alarm then contacted the Belgian Royal Society for the Protection of Birds [BRSPB] (Jan Rodts) to see whether the Society were *au fait* with the incident – they were not. BRSPB quickly notified the Belgian oiled wildlife network, including the Bird Rehabilitation Centre at Ostend. In a second telephone call BRSPB requested the assistance of Sea Alarm to help with the response operation. On the afternoon (14.00) of Saturday 25 January, a crisis meeting was held in Bruges to which Sea Alarm was invited by one of the coordinating authorities (Management Unit of the North Sea Mathematical Models - MUMM Brussels). At that meeting, the Foundation was formally requested by the authorities to assist

the appointed Head of Operation (HO, Claude Velter of the Rehabilitation Centre, Ostend) with:

- Advice regarding the organisation of the oiled response operation
- Coordination of the international assistance to the operation

This role was agreed. ITOPF (through Alex Nicolau who was on site) transferred a request by Sea Alarm to the responsible P&I Club regarding whether Sea Alarm's costs would be covered. ITOPF believed that any reasonable costs incurred by Sea Alarm for their involvement in the response activities would potentially be admissible for recovery.

## ■ THE OPERATION: THE FIRST DAYS

### ———— Saturday, 25 January

The crisis team decided to set up a rehabilitation centre at Ostend, in a building identified by the town authorities. When Sea Alarm's Managing Director arrived on Saturday evening and met the Head

of Operations, some 536 live birds had already been brought in and were kept in groups of ca 80 in divided rooms. The building (Victorialaan 3, Ostend) had not been used for several years and although central heating, electricity and water facilities were available, everything had to be reconnected and started up. During the first night, therefore, only some of the birds could be kept under heat lamps, others remained in rooms with no electricity.

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### **Sunday, 26 January**

The first constructive steps of the operation took place on Sunday, starting with organising beach searches and collection teams, in cooperation with the fire brigade departments in the coastal municipalities (and coordinated by the commander of the fire department of Ostend). It was imperative that the building was made operational. Meanwhile there was a mass activity from people volunteering to help, press wanting news and the continuing recovery of birds which increasingly filled the available space. Basic operations, like feeding the birds had to be carried out with what was immediately available. [Being Sunday it was not possible to purchase any equipment commercially.] Sea Alarm contacted its interna-

tional network to identify the options for assistance. Contacts were made with the Royal Society for the Protection of Animals (RSPCA) in the UK, IFAW's International Team, the Dutch oiled wildlife network, German response groups (Blue Sea and Ölvo-gelhilfe). On hearing of the situation, Gerry Dorrestein and Koos Van Donk, the coordinators of the Dutch oiled bird network, immediately offered their assistance in Ostend. They gave advice on veterinary and animal care and assisted with on-scene activities. Sunday's activities were finally completed at 02.00. By then, a further 850 birds had been brought in, and the whole first floor of the building, including the corridors, was occupied with birds in carton boxes.

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### **Monday, 27 January**

Because of the largely primitive and unsustainable situation in the centre, Sea Alarm advised the HO to transfer a large number of birds to other rehabilitation centres in Belgium and Holland and some 700 birds were transported that afternoon to centres in Rotterdam, Haarlem, Opglabbeek, Heusden-Zolder and Brussels. Meanwhile, the Centre received a further 400 birds from the beaches. Arrangements were made for essential equipment to be ordered or pur-

chased and gradually the activities became coordinated. The absence of a hot water supply frustrated the planning of the bird washing facility. The Civil Protection Department of Ostend could provide hot water, but only at a pressure of 160 bar. Although suitable for food preparation, it could not be reduced to a pressure suitable for washing birds (i.e. 3-4 bar). A possible bird washing centre at the Ostend fish auction was visited, but did not offer any overall advantage. The RSPCA announced they could send an emergency relief team on Tuesday. Meanwhile the IFAW's team announced strict conditions for their assistance and the first team members could not be flown in before Friday. The HO decided to invite the RSPCA and to contact the IFAW team at a later stage, to request the support of individual experts.

### ————— **Tuesday, 28 January**

On the afternoon, the Navy in Ostend offered a facility at their base in the Bootsman Johnson. The RSPCA team arrived that evening and, together with the HO, immediately inspected the facility and decided to start building a washing facility there.

### ————— **Wednesday, 29 January**

Jim Conroy (Vice chair of Sea Alarm) arrived in Ostend to assist the HO in the day-to-day management of the centre at the Victorialaan. The RSPCA started to develop the Navy facility into a rehabilitation and washing centre. The main serious obstacle that caused a delay in the development of a washing facility was that the large capacity water heating system, which had not been used for some time, had to be checked for *Legionella* bacteria. It was a further two days, before the authorities gave the green light to start developing the facility.

## ■ **ORGANISATION OF THE RESPONSE OPERATION**

The response operation was carried out under the auspices of three authorities, the Federal and Flemish Governments, as well as the Province of Flanders. The coordinator of the permanent Bird Rehabilitation Centre in Ostend was appointed Head of Operations. Other relevant organisations were appointed to advisory roles, with explicit responsibilities (see Annex 2).

## ■ DESCRIPTION OF THE SERVICES OF THE SEA ALARM FOUNDATION

### General advice

The Belgian authorities and animal rehabilitation organisations were totally unprepared to deal with an incident of this magnitude. No contingency plan for oiled wildlife was in place. Apart from the valuable assistance given to France during the *Erika* incident in 1999, no past experience was readily available. Links between Sea Alarm and BRSPB had existed for over a year. Recently the two organisations had cooperated in the Prestige incident when BRSPB offered an assistant to Sea Alarm's activities in Galicia. Because of the potential size of the *Tricolor* incident and the probability that international assistance would be needed, the BRSPB immediately asked Sea Alarm to assist. Because no contingency plan existed and none of the key responsible individuals had experience with managing a large-scale wildlife incident, Sea Alarm quickly became overall adviser.

### Strategy development

Sea Alarm assisted the HO with advice on a wide range of matters including the development of the crisis centre, organisation of staff and volunteers, options for (and organisation of) international expert assistance as well as the design and/or purchase of special equipment. Apart from this, the Foundation advised on strategy development based on day-to-day developments, expert opinion (international network) and identified capacity in other rehabilitation centres in Belgium, Holland and UK. This strategy, developed together with the HO, was directed to managing a reasonable number of birds to an acceptable standard of animal welfare within the limited capacity of the facilities in Ostend. These were subject to continuous re-assessment depending on day-to-day developments (improving facilities and/or technical drawbacks).

*Important decisions included:*

- The regular transport of birds to other centres in Belgium, Netherlands and United Kingdom.
- The search for assistance from experienced relief teams, resulting in the formal invitation to the RSPCA.
- The search for assistance from other centres in Europe, resulting in the continuous help from the Dutch oiled bird rehabilitation network and the on-site activities of volunteers from Project Blue Sea and Ölvogelhilfe (Germany)
- The search for more appropriate facilities in Ostend, especially for washing birds. The search resulted in the development of a second centre at the local Navy Base, Bootsman Johnson. Sea Alarm acted as facilitator in the establishment of this facility by coordinating the staff of the Navy Base, RSPCA and the HO.



An evening staff meeting.

— **Day to day management**

During the first weeks, Sea Alarm assisted the HO with the day-to-day management of the operation. Although not one of the most important remits of the Foundation, the exceptional situation in Ostend did not leave anyone another choice. The role was taken by Hugo Nijkamp and later by Jim Conroy. Of primary importance for the Foundation was:

- Optimal use of buildings and resources.
- Assisting the purchase of special equipment and materials, e.g. by contacting foreign resources.
- Involving RSPCA's expertise into animal welfare issues of the operation.
- Optimising effective cooperation between involved organisations and individuals.
- Supporting the management team to make sure that a reasonable strategy was followed at any time.
- Conflict management.
- Coaching of key officers on the work floor.
- Advising on human welfare



A truckload of birds. Lessons from the past have been learned.



In the kitchen volunteers worked all day to prepare food for thousands of birds.



Veterinary treatment of the birds.



Rinsing of a Guillemot.



Pools were set up inside the centre.



Cleaned Guillemots recovering on the pool.



Pools were set up on the beach in Oostende as a pre-release facility.



A visit from IFAW and IBRRC to the facilities in Oostende, here in discussion with RSPCA.

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## Coordination between parties

Many parties were involved (see annex 2) and the operation rapidly divided into activities at separate levels and locations in Ostend. After three days, the Navy Base facility became operational under the aegis of the RSPCA. In the second week, the beach pen was built up (for bird release) and required continuous attention from the HO. In order to monitor progress in the overall operation, Sea Alarm regularly contacted key players in different locations or functions in order to identify any (potential) bottlenecks.



Visit of the European Commissioner, Mrs M. Walström and the Belgian Minister of Environment, Mrs. V. Dua.

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## Link to ITOPF/P&I Clubs

ITOPF was informed about Sea Alarm's involvement from the outset. After three days, Alexander Nicolau, a representative from ITOPF, visited the facility at Sea Alarm's invitation. On behalf of local parties, Sea Alarm regularly briefed ITOPF and the P&I Club (Gard) on the situation.

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## Assistance to financial management

At the beginning of the incident, the financial basis for the operation was uncertain. On behalf of the coordinators, Sea Alarm contacted ITOPF to determine the possibility of the P&I Club covering the costs of an 'upfront emergency fund'. They responded that such a fund would be possible only as a last resort, i.e. in the case such a financial arrangement could not be realised by the appropriate parties in Belgium. At the same time, following a request by BRSPB to the Federal Minister for Environment and Agriculture, an emergency fund of 60.000 Euro was allocated to the operation. An important clause in the agreement with the Ministry was that BRSPB should undertake the necessary steps to reimburse the rehabilitation

costs from the polluter. The Society asked Sea Alarm to assist in ensuring that the money was reasonably spent and the Foundation advised the HO on the setting up of a reliable documentation structure and regularly checked the financial situation with the responsible officers. Thus BRSPB was regularly updated on the financial situation.

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### **Coordination of international assistance**

One of the main roles requested of Sea Alarm was the coordination of the international response. Initially, the Foundation contacted the RSPCA and IFAW to check their availability and the conditions under which they were prepared to assist. On the first Monday, RSPCA was

invited after intimating that they could send in a team the following day (the first members of IFAW's team, recovering from their activities in Galicia, could not arrive before Friday). Sea Alarm made the necessary arrangements for the RSPCA's arrival, and acted as coordinator between the Society's team and the HO.

Another assistance from abroad was the rapid purchase of special equipment or expert advices on particular questions or problems. Sea Alarm's international network of rehabilitation centres, aquaria, universities and institutes is a rich source in search of advice or equipment, such as pools or, large amounts of fresh fish (at reasonable prices!). For example, within 12 hours, the first two pools used in Ostend were supplied to the location by the Seal Rescue and Rehabilitation Centre in the Netherlands.



Birds are loaded into a truck for transport to the Netherlands.

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### **International transportation of birds**

Although, the building provided by the municipality of Ostend to deal with oiled victims had plenty space, it was not ideal, primarily because of its narrow aisles and lack of suitable (hot) water and electricity. If the number of birds brought in on a daily base had been lower, it might just

have coped: within a few days a generator was installed to provide power and an on-demand heating system connected to fire hoses provided hot water under pressure. But the continuous influx of hundreds of birds immediately after it opened unfortunately frustrated the plan to hold, wash and rehabilitate all these animals there (this being the strategy to be strived for). When the storage capacity was overwhelmed after the second day (Sunday) there was no option but to move birds to other centres in Belgium and Netherlands. In the later stages of the response, when technical problems continued to plague the washing programme in Ostend, transportation was the only viable option to relieve the pressure on the local activities. Sea Alarm initiated discussions about the necessity of such transportation and, in coordination with the Dutch oiled bird rehabilitation network, identified destinations in the Netherlands. In cooperation with the RSPCA, one transport was organised to the UK.

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### **Animal welfare**

The RSPCA was requested to assist with animal welfare issues. Although developing and running the facility at the Navy centre, their veterinary

expert regularly checked the position of the main facility and advised the vets and personnel there on possible improvements. In the beginning, these visits were organised by Sea Alarm, but later were routinely taking place. The Society's vet intimated that he was pleased with the overall way the crisis centre responded to his concerns about the welfare of the birds.

### **■ STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF THE OPERATION**

Overall, the operation was well organised, and considering the speed with which the incident developed and the lack of preparedness to deal with it, the responsible authorities and in particular the HO, should be complimented in what they achieved. Many of the problems were not related to the actual operation of the response, rather to unforeseen technical problems that arose. These related mainly to the inability to establish adequate washing facilities at both centres. No fault can be placed either with the local or naval authorities in their attempts to rectify these problems. Their help and cooperation was always available and readily given. The main weakness in the operation, especially in the beginning, was the

lack of a clear command structure in the main centre. This inevitably led to people on the work floor not knowing who was in charge and to wrong people taking wrong decisions. This situation, however, did not last, and once identified, much was largely rectified. The links and respect between the international groups and the local team greatly aided the operation – experienced people always found time to talk and discuss problems, making it easier for the local volunteers to understand what was happening, e.g. the need to euthanise some birds.

The main strengths and weaknesses of the operation are listed below.

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### **Strengths**

- Large number of volunteers
- Good workforce
- Well co-ordinated
- Volunteer welfare extremely good
- Rapid choice of response centres
- Good internal and external links
- A largely rapid and effective response from agencies invited to help e.g.

- Effective co-operation between international and local groups
- Well organised beach collection
- Effective administration
- Staff capable and prepared to make own decisions
- Good morale
- Good logistics
- Good links with civil and military authorities

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### **Weaknesses**

- Lack of structured command
- Other than the co-ordinator and vet, there was no clear indication of who was responsible for what. This improved in part as the incident developed
- Less than optimal statistics (i.e. poor record keeping, especially at first)
- Logistic failures in the operations of both sites
- Lack of security at main centre
- Lack of trained cleaners

## STATISTICS

Table 1 and figures 1 and 2 contain some preliminary data on the results of the *Tricolor* wildlife response.

	nr. of individuals
Total birds affected	8989
Dead birds collected	4181
Live birds admitted	4686
Died during treatment in Ostend (minimum)	2233
Transported to NL and UK	1856
Transported to elsewhere in B	525
Minimum released (B+NL+UK)	576

Table 1: Size oiled wildlife incident in Belgium (preliminary data, based on information of MUMM, Dorrestein and Velter; corrections need to be made, see also fig.2).

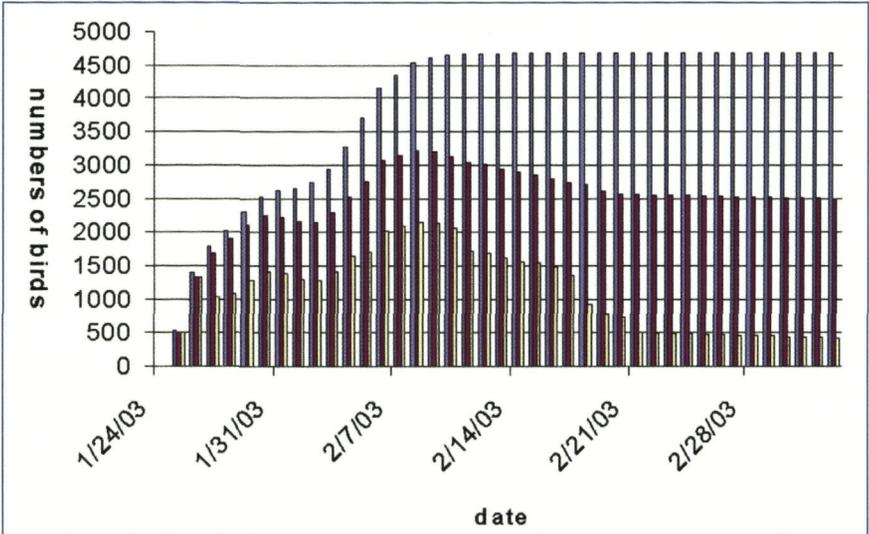


Figure 1: Overview of bird treatment in Ostend (B). Presented are cumulative numbers of birds admitted to the centres (red), gross numbers minus deaths/ethanatisation and transport (green). NB: the data after day 28 are less reliable in terms of deaths/ethanasia; still lacking data on euthanasia to be provided by vets from Liège University. Based on preliminary data by MUMM.

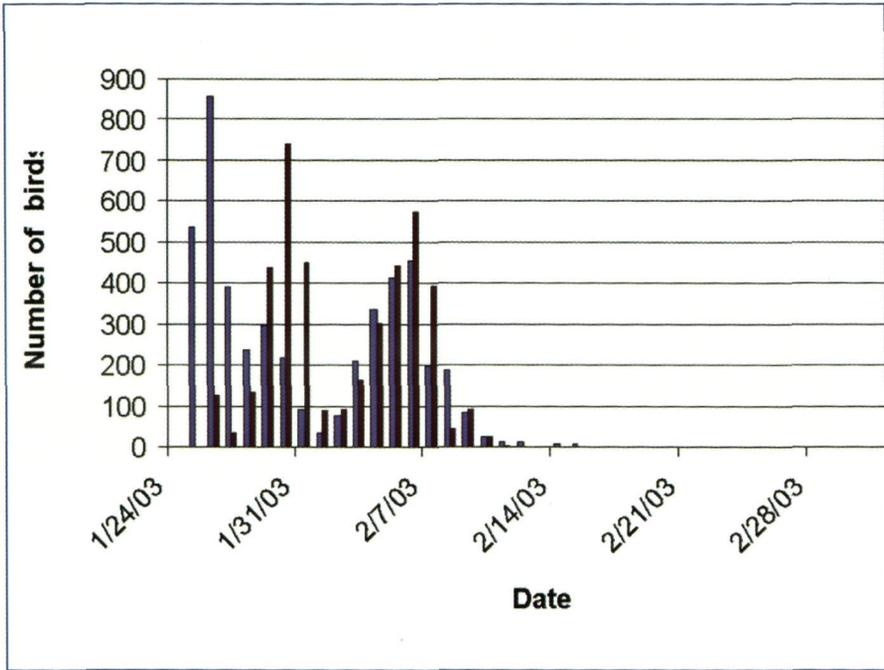


Figure 2: Overview of daily admissions of live (blue) and dead (red) birds. Clearly visible is the existence of a second peak early February, connected with a second spill with different oil, possibly also from the Tricolor.

## SEA ALARM'S EXPERIENCE

Sea Alarm is not a response organisation, rather a facilitator able to assess and improve organisation skills and expertise on site. The role it played in Ostend went beyond that. The unexpected and quick development of the situation took many individuals and officers by surprise, and, being unprepared, were challenged to set up a large scale opera-

tion from scratch. Sea Alarm's officers on scene could not but become involved in day-to-day management of the operation. This was especially the case in the early days. These occurred in situations where there were too few people to tackle too many problems. Internally, Sea Alarm must evaluate its own role in the Tricolor, which should lead to a better preparedness of the Foundation in any future incident.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The *Tricolor* incident demonstrated how a local community may become overwhelmed by an enormous number of oiled birds, following a relatively minor maritime accident (at least in terms of amounts of oil spilt). Authorities at local and national levels should be aware that such situations can suddenly develop, especially in geographical settings where vulnerable coastal bird areas are close to busy shipping routes. While the recommendations below relate initially to the situation in Belgium, they also reflect what needs to be done elsewhere in Europe. The recommendations are to:

- Set up a system for early notification of the national (and international) wildlife emergency networks.
  - Put in place an oiled wildlife contingency plan, reflecting pre-spill arrangements such as organisation structure, operational plan, identified officers, etc.
  - Set up, as a pre-spill arrangement, a national financial mechanism for coastal emergency situations, from which immediate costs in any future (oiled) wildlife incident can be funded.
- Identify in Europe existing purpose built reception centres capable of holding and rehabilitating 1,000 birds and other wildlife as well as other essential facilities to enable an effective internationally coordinated response
  - Secure that trained staff in washing and welfare techniques are available at national or international levels.



A Grebe is rinsed in the Navy base rehabilitation centre.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Sea Alarm would like to thank the Bird Rehabilitation Centre (Ostend) Claude Velter, and all of his hard working people who together built the centre and made it work

All members of RSPCA's Emergency Relief Team

Belgian Bird Protection Society - Jan Rodts and Roger Arnhem

The Netherlands Oiled Rehabilitation Network - Gerry Dorrestein, Koos van Donk

ITOPF - Hugh Parker, Alex Nicolau, Tosh Moller, Brian Dicks, Ian White

Management Unit of the North Sea Mathematical Models (BMM/MUMM) - Thierry Jacques, Jan Haelters, Francis Kerckhof

Flemish Marine Institute (VLIZ) –Andre Cattrijse, Jan Mees, Jan Seys

The various rehabilitation centres in Belgium, Netherlands and UK who accepted oiled birds

Project Blue Sea: Sascha Regmann and his volunteers

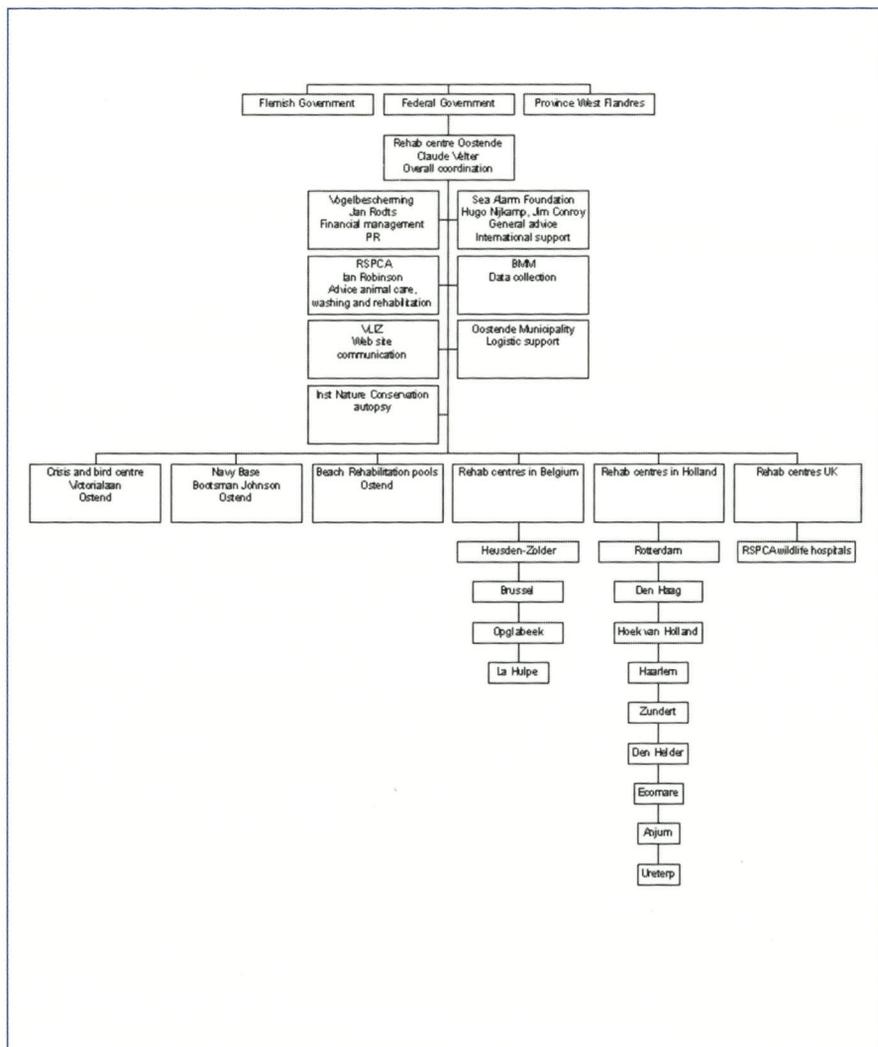
Övogelhilfe: Janine Bahr and her volunteers

...and all others involved in the response (see Annex ), including the many hard working volunteers!



The washing unit of the main rehabilitation centre.

## 1. Organisation diagram



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## 2. Cooperating Organisations

### In Dutch

Vlaams Instituut voor de Zee (VLIZ)  
Vogelbescherming Vlaanderen

Civiele Dienst (Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken)

Brandweerkorpsen kustgemeenten o.l.v. commandant Oostende

Marinebasis Bootsman Johnson

Ministerie van de Vlaamse Gemeenschap

Federaal Ministerie van Leefmilieu en Akkerbouw

Provincie West Vlaanderen

Beheerseenheid van het Mathematische Model van de Noordzee

Instituut voor Natuurbehoud

Vogelopvangcentrum Ostend

Sea Life Centre Blankenberge

RSPCA

Project Blue Sea

Ölvogelhilfe

Sea Alarm

Natuurhulpcentrum Opglabeeek

Vogelopvangcentrum Beernum

Vogelopvangcentrum Brussel

Vogelopvangcentrum Heusden Zolder

Vogelopvangcentrum La Hulpe

Vogelopvangcentrum Rotterdam

Vogelopvangcentrum Den Haag

Vogelopvangcentrum Haarlem

Vogelopvangcentrum Zundert

Vogelopvangcentrum Hoek van Holland

Vogelopvangcentrum Anjum

Vogelopvangcentrum Middelburg

Vogelopvangcentrum Ureterp

Universiteit Utrecht

Universiteit Luik

### In English

Flemish Marine Institute

Belgian (Flemish) Royal Society for the Protection of Birds

Civil Protection (Ministry of Internal Affairs)

Fire Brigade departments of coastal municipalities, lead by the commander in Oostende

Navy Base Bootsman Johnson

Ministry of the Flemish Community

Federal Ministry of Environment and Agriculture

Province West Flandres

Management Unit of the North Sea Mathematic Model (MUMM)

Institute for Nature Conservation

Bird Rehabilitation Centre Oostende

Sea Life Centre Blankenberge

Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty against Animals

Project Blue Sea

Ölvogelhilfe

Sea Alarm

Nature Help Centre Opglabeeek

Bird Rehabilitation Centre Beernum

Bird Rehabilitation Centre Brussel

Bird Rehabilitation Centre Heusden Zolder

Bird Rehabilitation Centre La Hulpe

Bird Rehabilitation Centre Rotterdam

Bird Rehabilitation Centre Den Haag

Bird Rehabilitation Centre Haarlem

Bird Rehabilitation Centre Zundert

Bird Rehabilitation Centre Hoek van Holland

Bird Rehabilitation Centre Anjum

Bird Rehabilitation Centre Middelburg

Bird Rehabilitation Centre Ureterp

University of Utrecht

University of Liege

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## Colophon

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