

The history of marine science in Belgium

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Marine sciences were a largely unexplored scientific area in Belgium until halfway the 19th century. Although some important predecessors were active during the previous centuries, it is Pierre-Joseph Van Beneden (1809-1894) who is considered as the founding father of marine sciences in Belgium. Van Beneden, professor of zoology at the Catholic University of Leuven, was the first researcher to study marine fauna in the North Sea in a systematic manner. He even established his own modest marine laboratory called *Laboratoire des Dunes* (Dune Laboratory) on the east bank of the Ostend harbour. This first marine research station in the world was an ideal base of operations, not only for Van Beneden's own expeditions at sea, but for those of his son as well. Edouard Van Beneden (1846-1910), professor of zoology at the University of Liège, further introduced numerous students to the marine research field from this station at the Belgian coast.

The marine research field gained momentum in the whole of Europe during the 1870s. Marine stations emerged at countless locations along the European coastline, while pioneering scientific ocean expeditions produced a wealth of new data. The era of modern marine research had begun, and many Belgian scientists were involved. Researchers such as father and son Van Beneden, Alphonse Renard (1842-1903), Gustave Gilson (1859-1944), Paul Pelseneer (1863-1945), Auguste Lameere (1864-1942), Julius Mac Leod (1857-1919), Alphonse Meunier (1857-1918), Charles Van Bambeke (1829-1918), Louis Stappers (1883-1916) and Jean Massart (1865-1925) made important contributions. At the turn of the century, marine science in Belgium further led to several important breakthroughs. The Antarctica expedition of the *Belgica* in 1897-1899 made history, while Gustave Gilson initiated a large-scale systematic research project in the North Sea. Between 1898 and 1939 he collected no less than 14,000 marine samples in the Southern Bight of the North Sea, which serve as important reference material for current studies.

The enthusiasm of the Belgian scientific world towards these marine studies during the 2nd half of the 19th century contrasted sharply with the unwillingness of the Belgian authorities to invest in adequate research infrastructure and to provide appropriate funding. Both the creation of a marine laboratory financed by the State and the construction of a governmental research vessel were major obstacles. The Marine Research Institute (*Zeewetenschappelijk Instituut (ZWI)*) in Ostend, which opened its doors in 1927, eventually became the first marine institute to receive funding from the government. The introduction of the first official Belgian federal oceanographic research vessel took even more time. It was not until 1984 that the *RV A962 Belgica* was launched.

During the second half of the 20th century, and especially from the 1970s onwards, the foundation was laid for a more multidisciplinary and interinstitutional approach to the study of the seas and oceans in Belgium. Nowadays, around 1,500 scientists are attached to 115 marine research groups from Belgian universities, graduate schools and scientific institutions. For their studies, they can count on the services of two research vessels: the *RV Belgica* and the Flemish research vessel *RV Simon Stevin* (launched in 2012).