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New international oceanographic centre Channelling data on s

THE ARRIVAL OF THE IODE PROJECT OFFICE IN OOSTENDE (OSTEND) means that there is now also an international centre for the uniform management and use of oceanographic data on Flemish soil. What does such a centre do and what is its relevance for Flanders?

Oceans

Flanders boasts another international centre since 25 April 2005: the IODE Project Office of the Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission (IOC) of UNESCO. The IOC, which was established in 1960, is the main

body within the United Nations for the study of seas and oceans. At the moment the IOC has 130 Member States. The IOC aims to promote international co-operation and co-ordinate programmes in ocean and coastal research.

Consultation forum

Since the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea came into force in 1994, an increasing number of UN Member States are choosing to co-ordinate the further develop-



[The new Project Office in Oostende (Ostend) performs a key function in the effective flow of ocean data.] →

Centre in Ostende Seas and oceans

ment of the – as yet still scanty – knowledge of the oceans. The IOC wants to find out more about the marine system in order to improve the management, long-term development and protection of the marine environment and so support the policy of its Member States regarding this issue.

The IODE programme

One of the IOC's major programmes is the International Ocean Data and Information Exchange programme (IODE). The IODE, which was set up in 1961, wants to make available and exchange oceanographic data and information worldwide in a standardized way so as to stimulate marine research. More than 60 countries currently have one or several data centres operational within the global IODE network. Flanders is actively involved in this network with the Flemish Marine Institute (*Vlaams Instituut voor de Zee, VLIZ*) and the BMM (*Beheerseenheid voor het Mathematisch Model van de Noordzee*).

Key function

Partly because of the exponential growth in computer, observation and data capture technologies there has been an explosive influx of data and information about the marine environment over the past decade. If this data flow is to be channelled effectively, we have to invest in new technologies to manage this vast

amount of data. The new Project Office in Ostende performs a key function in the effective flow of ocean data.

Assets of Ostende

If Flanders wants to strengthen its scientific basis, it must keep up to date with innovative developments, preferably within an international collaborative framework. Beside its good accessibility and wide choice of accommodation, Ostende boasts a number of additional assets that have led the IOC to decide to establish the IODE Project Office in this historic coastal town.

- **A co-operative environment and a creative environment:** besides the expertise of the VLIZ and the BMM, the Project Office can also call on the services of administrations (Waterways and Maritime Affairs among others), universities and higher education



colleges, a number of which are located nearby.

- **A breeding ground and test chamber:** the new technological developments can be tested in situ (with or without the direct collaboration of local partners) with local water platforms, coastal defences (dykes, peers, buoys, etc.) and platforms out at sea, i.e. on board the *Belgica* or the *Zeeleeuw*, or from fixed off-shore measuring posts.
- **Training opportunities:** the IODE Project Office provides specific training and also offers facilities for working on final dissertation or thesis projects.



← [The city of Ostende boasts a good accessibility and a wide choice of accommodation.]



← [The new IODE Project Office is - quite appropriately - located in the buildings of the former fish market of Oostende.]

Flemish involvement

Flanders has grown into a significant partner within the IOC. In 1999 the Flanders UNESCO Science Trustfund was set up to support the UNESCO research activities. Flanders puts more than 1 million euros a year into this fund; approximately half the FUST budget goes towards IOC programme activities.

Several Flemish institutions are actively involved within the IOC structure. The Flemish Marine Institute (*Vlaams Instituut voor de Zee, VLIZ*) and the BMM (*Beheerseenheid voor het Mathematisch Model van de Noordzee*) are the regional and national data centres respectively within the IODE programme. The VLIZ is also actively involved in the development of new software for the capture, management and making available of oceanographic data within various IOC working groups. And almost all Flemish universities (VUB, LUC, UA, UG and KUL) are involved in coaching activities and specific training programmes within the IOC.

Flanders has also actively contributed to the underpinning of the IOC programme, with logistical support in the organization of international conferences and by sending experts among other things.

Flanders assigns 60,000 euros a year to the accommodation of the IODE Project Office. This decision was prompted by the realization that such a hi-tech centre provides immense stimulation and enormous benefits for the research community and for all the users of ocean data and information. Flanders further supports the IODE Project Office with an annual contribution of 500,000 euros for the support of training of foreign students and experts in oceanographic data management, with particular focus on the development and deployment of early warning systems for tsunamis and other ocean-related natural phenomena.

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These projects may involve the development of new software applications or the creation of innovative technologies for oceanographic data collection, processing and transmission, including the development and/or testing of all kinds of sensors.

International profile

Flanders' association with an initiative like the IODE Project Office is of inestimable value

for the visibility of the Region in the international scientific world. This also filters through to the immediate locality and offers the VLIZ and the whole of the scientific community a unique opportunity to breach into the international arena. The IODE Project Office will accommodate a large number of international experts as it will run regular international workshops and seminars. A number of international conferences will also be held at the Project Office from which the VLIZ and the associated network will benefit.

The benefit to the scientific community is expected to far outweigh the cost. And that is not taking into account the economic



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↑ [Gunther Pertry (member of the board of management VLIZ), Marie-Claire Van der Stichele-De Jaegere (member of the board of management VLIZ), Jean Vandecasteele (mayor of the city of Oostende), Fientje Moerman (Vice-Minister-President of the Flemish Government and Flemish Minister for Economy, Enterprise, Science, Innovation and Foreign Trade), Patricio Bernal (executive secretary of the International Oceanographic Commission – UNESCO), Johan Vande Lanotte (Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for the Budget, Social Integration and Social Economy), Yves Leterme (Minister-President of the Flemish Government and Flemish Minister for Institutional Reform, Agriculture, Sea Fisheries and Rural Policy) and Paul Breyne (provincial governor of West Flanders and president of the board of management VLIZ).]

return for the local authorities of Oostende, as the IODE is currently providing 1,200 to 1,500 overnight stays for its experts,

a figure that is undoubtedly set to rise once the Project Office reaches cruising speed with all its planned activities. +



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For further information, visit
<http://ioc3.unesco.org/iode/> (English)