

ABOUT RESEARCH AND POLICY: WHEN FREE-FLOATING SCIENCE BECOMES COLOURED...

Baeyens Willy

Analytical and Environmental Chemistry (ANCH), Vrije Universiteit Brussel
Pleinlaan 2, 1050 Brussels, Belgium
E-mail: wbaeyens@vub.ac.be

Marine research in the period before 1970 was essentially carried out by individual laboratories. No structured research programmes existed.

In 1970, the former prime minister Theo Lefevre launched the novel and for that time highly innovative North Sea Programme. This programme had a nation-wide dimension, including all universities and a large number of scientific institutes and administrations. The goal was to develop mathematical models describing the hydrodynamical, chemical and biological aspects of the Southern North Sea ecosystem. After 5 years of collaborative research work the output was very positive: 11 reports were published and many mathematical models were developed. A few examples: a residual current model, a storm-surge model, a food-web model, a diagenetic sediment model, a 2-dimensional dispersion model.

To make all the information obtained during the North Sea Programme as much as possible profitable for scientists but also for policy-makers, the Administration of Science Policy initiated two new pathways: on the scientific level they funded universities via the Concerted Actions Programme (a 6 years project), while on the policy level the Management Unit for the Mathematical Models of North Sea and Scheldt (MUMM) was created and attached to the Secretary-general of the Federal Administration of Health and Environment. The idea behind this dual approach was that the scientists continuously updated and improved the models (including also the databases) operated by the MUMM. Meanwhile Belgium also ratified the international Conventions for the Protection of the Marine Environment (Paris Convention of 1972; Oslo Convention of 1973; Bonn Agreement of 1969). As a consequence monitoring of the marine environment became an important task. A major drawback for all marine research and monitoring activities in the seventies were the very poor work conditions at sea. The Belgian Navy had transformed an old mine-sweeper, RVS Mechelen, into an oceanographic vessel, but the infrastructure was very limited and when the sea state was a little bit rough the ship could not leave the harbour. Therefore in 1980, the Administration of Science Policy decided to build a new oceanographic research vessel, RVS Belgica, which became operational around 1982.

Unfortunately, the access to a new modern research ship coincided with the end of the marine research funding by the Administration of Science Policy. MUMM continued to give support to the policy decision makers but the input from the scientists was very low. The only light in the dark for the latter was the launching of the Antarctic Programme where a part of the funding was designated for oceanic research.

The critical point of change came around 1990 when the Administration of Science Policy launched the Marine Research Programme that actually still exists. It is a cluster oriented research programme with a main focus on the North Sea. Meanwhile the Flemish Region also took several initiatives, with the creation of VLIZ around 2000 as the major one.

What can we expect for the future? Is the creation of a Virtual Marine Center the solution for a better integration of science and policy?