Zuiderzee to MSDI

Right across from my desk I have put up a beautiful old hydrographic chart of the Zuiderzee. It's a facsimile by the Dutch Hydrographic Office of an 1852 chart, improved in 1859 and printed in Amsterdam by G. Hulst - Van Keulen. It shows depths measured in Amsterdam feet, an old local measure of the Zuiderzee which was then twice as big as the present IJsselmeer (the new name given to the Zuiderzee after it was dammed off from the North Sea in 1932) and an often dangerous estuary sea. I love the chart. I grew up on the banks of the IJsselmeer, and there are still plenty of features on the chart recognisable from then: fire beacons and church tower beacons, sandbanks. On the other hand, a lot has of course disappeared; half of the old Zuiderzee is now land inhabited by farmers and townspeople alike, old islands that have become part of the mainland.

This chart is for me proof of the necessity and importance of Marine Data Infrastructures (MSDI). A lot of initiatives are underway at the moment to accelerate MSDI development. Certainly in Europe the European Union is taking a lead with EMODNET, which will be integrating not just bathymetric, but also geological and even biological data. EMODNET aims to encompass all waters in and around Europe, from the Black Sea and the Mediterranean to the North Sea and the Baltic Sea. Around the North Sea, six countries - Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Germany, Belgium, the UK and Iceland - are taking the MSDI a step even farther (see page 38 in this issue of Hydro International) by collaborating in the BLAST (Bringing Land and Sea Together) initiative. As the name of the project suggests, the goal here is to include onshore data wherever necessary in the offshore database, in order to improve maritime safety, and integrated coastal zone management and planning in the context of climate change. Several commercial parties are busy helping governments set up MSDI in coastal areas. The European INSPIRE directive has literally inspired many of these initiatives; in force since May 2007, it is establishing an infrastructure for spatial information in Europe to support environmental policies.

Our world has for a long time no longer revolved around the locality and region, but been turning more and more global. And of course nobody measures in Amsterdam feet anymore. It is therefore good that these supra-governmental directives are leading to the developments I've described. MSDIs would probably never have come into existence otherwise. It is very important though, to keep forging links between all such projects and initiatives; to keep each other informed and work together wherever possible, putting aside pride in one owns project for the greater goal whenever necessary to attain a data infrastructure that ultimately links all seas.

There's no greater conceivable progress than moving from that old Zuiderzee chart to such a Marine Spatial Data Infrastructure.

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