

THE REHABILITATION OF OILED SEABIRDS  
AT THE GERMAN NORTH SEA COAST  
*DE REHABILITATIE VAN OLIESLACHTOFFERS  
AAN DE DUITSE NOORDZEEKUST*

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*Zes vogelopvangcentra in Sleeswijk-Holstein en één in Nedersaksen verzorgen jaarlijks ongeveer 75 tot 350 olieslachtoffers. Van deze groep vogels kan later ongeveer tweederde weer worden vrijgelaten. De kosten per vrijgelaten vogel variëren tussen de 5 en 2500 DM, afhankelijk van de medewerking van vrijwilligers in het asiel en of het voedsel bijvoorbeeld gratis wordt verstrekt door vissers. In totaal acht terugmeldingen van de minder dan 150 geringd vrijgelaten vogels laten zien dat de meeste exemplaren onmiddellijk omkwamen of verzwakt werden aangetroffen binnen 0-13 dagen na vrijlating. Eén Zeekoet werd echter een jaar na vrijlating broedend aangetroffen op een kolonie op Isle of May (Schotland).*

Every year several hundred to a few thousands oiled seabirds are found along the North Sea beaches of Germany (Reineking & Vauk 1982, Awerbeck *et al.* 1992, 1993). Birds that are still alive may be brought to one of the rehabilitation centres run exclusively by private organizations, where they are cleaned, cared for and released if possible. In 1997, there was only one licensed rehabilitation centre in Niedersachsen (since March 1994) but six ones in Schleswig-Holstein. However, uniform, countrywide and practicable regula-

tions on the treatment of oiled or otherwise injured seabirds do not exist.

In 1992, the Ministry for Nature and Environment of the Bundesland Schleswig-Holstein authorized our institute to make an expert report about the rehabilitation centres for oiled seabirds in Schleswig-Holstein in a national and international comparison (Grunsky 1995). Our report tended to give an overview of the rehabilitation efforts and their success in Schleswig-Holstein, to compile appropriate experiences abroad, and to make suggestions for uniform and practicable regulations concerning the treatment of oiled seabirds in Schleswig-Holstein under aspects of prevention for both animals and species. Here, we want to give a shortened update on that report. Details of the cleaning processes will not be described.

In autumn and winter 1992/93 we visited all five rehabilitation centres existing in Schleswig-Holstein at that time. Due to totally different ways in running these centres, informations needed were only accessible through discussions with the heads and responsible collaborators of the rehabilitation centres in combination with personal impressions and observations. If available, we also utilized the annual documentations of the centres. To actualize our results from 1992/93, we asked all six centres officially existing in Schleswig-Holstein, as well as the one in Niedersachsen, for more recent data including the years up to 1996. We received information from only five of these centres.

For international comparison, one rehabilitation centre in England, one in the Netherlands and one in Denmark were visited, which were mainly or exclusively engaged in the rehabilitation of oiled seabirds. The participation of BG in the Third International Conference '*Effects of Oil on Wildlife*' held in New Orleans (USA) in 1993 by the Tri State Bird Rescue & Research Inc., gave a lot of valuable impressions about the practice with the rehabilitation of oiled seabirds in the USA.

Each year the rehabilitation centres in Schleswig-Holstein receive on average between 1000 and 1300 birds, 400-600 of these are seabirds (Table 1). From these between 75 and 300 are oiled. Only one of the rehabilitation centres is engaged exclusively in the rehabilitation of seabirds, especially in the cleaning and rehabilitation of oiled birds. It is the only one dealing with cleaning methods as they seem suitable compared to the rehabilitation centres in England, the Netherlands and the USA. However, rehabilitation success is low with 7 to 60%. The estimated costs for each rehabilitated bird total 5 to 2500 DM. It depends on the amount of work done by volunteers, the availability of free or cheap bird food from fishermen, and other logistic factors.

Table 1. Numbers of cared and released birds in six rehabilitation centres in Schleswig-Holstein (data from 1985 to 1996), one in Niedersachsen (data from 1994 and 1996 only) and in centres in England and the Netherlands. The cost is estimated per individual (DM).

Tabel 1. Aantal verzorgde en vrijgelaten vogels in zes vogelopvangcentra in Schleswig-Holstein (1985-96), in een opvangcentrum in Niedersachsen (1994 en 1996) en in centra in Engeland en Nederland. De opvangkosten zijn geschat per individu (DM).

	Schleswig-Holstein	Niedersachsen	England	The Netherlands
oiled seabirds / year <i>olievogels per jaar</i>	75-300	ca. 30	1000-1500	1000
released birds (%) <i>vrijgelaten (%)</i>	7-67	0-60	70-95	60
estimated costs <i>opvangkosten</i>	5-2500	?	105-143	35

In comparison, rehabilitation centres in other European countries and the USA today work much more successful: on average the birds treated only have to be held captive for two or three weeks in the centre. The rehabilitation success of 60 to 95 % is very high. The estimated costs are relatively low and total 35 to 143 DM. In contrast, Sharp (1996) gives a figure of US \$ 41 million spent in the rescue, treatment and release of approximately 800 birds after the *Exxon Valdez* event, i.e. over US \$ 50 000 per released bird.

High numbers of seabirds are present in the southeastern North Sea throughout the whole year (e.g. Swennen *et al.* 1989, Tasker & Becker 1992, Camphuysen & Leopold 1994, Skov *et al.* 1995, Stone *et al.* 1995). Hence, it is not surprising that large numbers of oil victims are annually beached in this area (Reineking & Vauk 1982, Camphuysen 1989, 1995, Hartwig *et al.* 1990, Vauk *et al.* 1990, Averbek *et al.* 1992, 1993). However, compared to this, numbers of oiled seabirds picked up and rehabilitated are very small. Therefore, efforts on rehabilitating oiled seabirds have no influence on the preservation of populations or species in the North Sea. The work of these centres has to be considered only under aspects of ethic, and moral and prevention of anthropogenic cruelty to animals.

The examples of rehabilitation centres in other European countries and the USA show that beside suitable methods for cleaning and treating oiled seabirds other general aspects are of essential importance. These include the official authorization to operate, detailed documentations about the work done by the rehabilitation centres as well as the ringing of all released birds.

Rehabilitation efforts can only be considered successful if the individuals released are able to reintegrate into their natural populations. Information on this is very limited because of the low numbers of birds marked with rings before release in Germany. This stands in severe contrast to the situation in North America (Sharp 1996) and to our knowledge concerning owls and raptors, where more than 800 recoveries of birds released from captivity and marked with 'Helgoland'-rings render excellent information on the behaviour and mortality of released individuals (Bairlein & Harms 1994).

Since there is still no official regulation, ringing of the released seabirds is done on a voluntary basis only (in former times it was even not allowed to mark birds released from captivity with rings of the '*Vogelwarte Helgoland*'). Today, only the rehabilitation centres of the '*Vogelschutzgruppe der evangelischen Jugend Preetz*' and the '*Tierschutzverein Sylt*' mark most of the released birds individually with metal rings (M. Richter and B. Saier, pers. comm.). From the hundreds of formerly oiled birds released from the rehabilitation centres, less than 150 were ringed since 1976. In many cases, it has to remain open whether the released birds were oiled or not. Hence, no recovery rates for rehabilitated and released oiled birds can be given. So far, only one Slavonian Grebe *Podiceps auritus*, one Common Scoter *Melanitta nigra*, one Eider *Somateria mollissima* and five Guillemots *Uria aalge* were recovered, all but one within 0 to 13 days after release. There is one exception: a Guillemot rehabilitated, ringed and released at the German island of Sylt (18 May 1989) was observed as a breeding bird on the Isle of May a year later. In 1991, the bird was present in that colony, too, but it is uncertain whether it was breeding again (M. Harris and S. Wanless, pers. comm.). At least this single bird indicates that there might be a small chance for rehabilitated seabirds to get reintegrated into a natural population. Nevertheless, a judgement about the success of different cleaning, keeping and releasing methods applied to oiled birds is only possible with much more information becoming available through ringing the released individuals. Presumably higher mean survival rates of seabirds rehabilitated in North America compared to those of seabirds rehabilitated in Germany (Sharp 1996) make it clear that handling and keeping procedures must be improved in Germany. The rehabilitation rates and the survival of cleaned and released oiled birds will probably remain small, making these efforts only reasonable under ethic aspects but not as a measure for the protection of species.

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