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Ecological Research at the Offshore Windfarm *alpha ventus*

Challenges, Results and Perspectives



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Ecological Research at the Offshore Windfarm *alpha ventus*

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Foreword



In a February 2002 strategy paper, the German government adopted the ambitious and trailblazing goal of building 20,000 to 25,000 MW of offshore wind power capacity off the German coast by 2025 to 2030. The government and all parties in the German parliament adhere to that goal in principle to this day. But merely setting goals is not enough. Attaining them takes action, and the way there is often long, hard and full of obstacles. The development of offshore wind power has involved learning the hard way, and we are far from the end of the learning curve.

Yet we embarked on the journey, committed, and confident despite all the setbacks. *alpha ventus* is a key milestone marking the breakthrough for offshore wind power in Germany. It is an important industrial and energy policy demonstration project, and numerous other offshore windfarms since built, planned or started in Germany and elsewhere in Europe have benefited from the engineering and environmental experience and expertise gained in its construction and operation.

Relying on the government's policy framework, a number of mainly mid-sized companies with experience in planning, building and operating windfarms on land set about planning windfarms at sea, in most cases between 30 and 100 km or more off the German coast. This task has not been made easier by Germany's federal structure and the resulting distribution of responsibilities, or indeed by the geography of its marine areas.

The Borkum West offshore windfarm, the pioneer project later renamed *alpha ventus*, was approved by the Federal Maritime and Hydrographic Agency (BSH) in November 2001. The German Offshore Wind Energy Foundation, which was launched in 2005, used a € 5 million grant from the German Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety (BMU) to buy the rights to the windfarm in September 2005. A little over a year later, the foundation leased the rights out to the Deutsche Offshore-Testfeld und Infrastruktur GmbH (DOTI), a consortium formed by energy utilities EWE, Vattenfall and E.ON. Initial construction work began in autumn 2008.

Under the strict German regulations on marine facilities, the interplay between offshore windfarms and the marine environment was a key issue for *alpha ventus* from the outset – both during approval and in the ensuing planning, construction and operation phase. A major consideration was the impact on birdlife, marine fauna and life on the sea floor. The highest priority was and remains to minimize the impact on the natural environment.

An integral part of the approval notice for *alpha ventus* was the BSH Standard for Environmental Impact Assessment (StUK). From the start, DOTI assigned the task of meeting this standard to the German Offshore Wind Energy Foundation. Environmental assessments under the standard have three stages:

- A one-year programme before commencement of construction, to evaluate the findings and assessments on which approval is based (for *alpha ventus* this was shortened to six months given the trial nature of the windfarm and because of time constraints)
- Impacts of the construction activity on benthos, fish, marine mammals, resting birds and migrating birds; noise emissions
- Finally, a further environmental assessment – on the same topics – during a three-year operating phase, which was completed this year.

A brief anecdote illustrates the timespan covered by this major programme of study: When the first part of the research was commissioned, one of the contributors was expecting a baby. This spring, at the final briefing on results of the operating stage, I asked the husband how their child was coming along. He answered, 'Our little boy starts school this summer'. So here's to a bright future for their son – and for the ongoing expansion of offshore windfarms, which will go on providing electricity in harmony with nature and the marine environment for generations to come.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'J. Kuhbier', with a stylized, cursive script.

Jörg Kuhbier
Chairman, German Offshore Wind Energy Foundation

Preface



Offshore wind energy is vital in providing Germany with secure energy supplies for the long term. Fourteen years after the Federal Maritime and Hydrographic Agency (BSH) received the first application for approval of an offshore windfarm, 128 approval proceedings are now in progress for the building of offshore windfarms with some 9,500 wind turbines in the German Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). We have so far approved 33 windfarms with 2,250 wind turbines (as of September 2013).

Whatever the technical obstacles to building and operating windfarms far offshore, the technology has obvious advantages: Wind conditions out at sea are outstanding and subject to little turbulence, making for high and reliable performance yields. The energy is eco-friendly and incurs neither fuel costs nor carbon emission costs. No resources have to be acquired to harvest it. There is no environmentally hazardous waste to dispose of. And offshore windfarms offer low-disturbance areas where new natural habitats can evolve.

For industry, scientists and the public authorities alike, building and operating offshore windfarms beyond the twelve mile zone meant breaking new territory in terms of the engineering, scientific and legal challenges involved. While companies could make some use of experience with offshore wind energy in Denmark and the Netherlands, there was no such body of practical experience with wind turbines at depths of 40 m and distances of 30 to 100 km from the coast. Today, Germany is the industry leader and innovation driver. It is the only country in the world that builds offshore windfarms in such extreme conditions.

Offshore wind energy will only gain lasting, widespread acceptance, however, if shipping safety and protection of the marine environment are assured. In recognition of this, the Fourth National Maritime Conference on 24 and 25 January 2005 paved the way for Germany's first offshore windfarm project to be made the German test site for offshore windfarm research and development. Sited in 30 m of water some 45 km northwest of the island of Borkum, the windfarm Borkum West – subsequently renamed *alpha ventus* – thus presented the first opportunity to study the environmental impacts and gain a better understanding of marine environmental processes in and around a 'real life' offshore windfarm.

For five years, researchers and scientists accompanied the windfarm's construction and operation in a research project, 'Accompanying ecological research at the *alpha ventus* offshore test site for evaluation of the BSH Standard for Environmental Impact Assessment (StUKplus)'. The

research was funded by the Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety (BMU) and coordinated by BSH. Its aim was to find out more about construction and operation impacts on the marine environment, including birds, marine mammals, fish and benthic (seabed) organisms. In evaluating and analysing the project's impacts, the scientists were able to draw upon meteorological, oceanographic and ecological data collected and analysed since 2003 – before work started on the first wind turbines – at the FINO1 research platform on the periphery of the *alpha ventus* windfarm. This data made it possible to separate out impacts that specifically related to construction and operation of the windfarm.

At the *alpha ventus* test site, scientists, industry and public agencies undertook pioneering work to chart the impacts on the marine environment. This knowledge is now being incorporated in the revised BSH Standard 'Investigation of the Impacts of Offshore Wind Turbines on the Marine Environment' (StUK4). Monitoring methods during the construction and operation phase of windfarms have been adapted to offshore conditions. As the planning approval and enforcement agency for offshore plans, BSH can now require monitoring on the basis of improved scientific foundations to meet marine environmental protection needs while remaining economically viable for offshore operators.

The study findings also provide a valuable basis for further research in ecology, oceanography, geology and engineering – to the benefit of shipping, maritime technology and marine environment protection.



Monika Breuch-Moritz
President, Federal Maritime and Hydrographic Agency

Table of Contents

I Introduction

1 Current situation of offshore development in Germany and environmentally sound expansion of offshore wind energy..... 3

Simone van Leusen

1.1	Introduction	4
1.2	Legal basis of offshore windfarm approval	4
1.3	Marine Facilities Ordinance.....	6
1.4	Approval process.....	6
1.5	Incidental Provisions	8
	Literature	9

2 The Spatial Offshore Grid Plan for the German Exclusive Economic Zone..... 11

Annika Koch

2.1	Legal mandate	12
2.2	Accompanying Strategic Environmental Assessment	12
2.3	Results of the Environmental Report	14
	Literature	14

3 The *alpha ventus* offshore test site

Wilfried Hube

3.1	Introduction	16
3.2	Offshore challenges	16
3.3	Operation of the offshore windfarm	19
3.4	The control centre in Norden	20
3.5	Offshore power transmission	20
3.6	Retrospective: The building period	21
3.7	Outlook: <i>alpha ventus</i> as a reference project.....	21

4 The RAVE research initiative: A successful collaborative research, development and demonstration programme..... 25

Eva Otto, Michael Durstewitz, Bernhard Lange

4.1	Introduction	26
4.2	Actors and organisation	26
4.3	Measurements and data	26
4.4	Research focus	27
4.5	Achievements	29
	Literature	29

5 Accompanying ecological research at *alpha ventus*: The StUKplus research project..... 31

Anika Beiersdorf

5.1	Environmentally compatible expansion of offshore wind energy	32
5.2	Identifying environmental risks at the earliest possible stage	34

5.3	Learning from the past to optimise future monitoring	37
	Literature	37
6	Conservation features: Sensitive species and habitats in the German Exclusive Economic Zone	39
	<i>Jochen Krause</i>	
6.1	Introduction	40
6.2	Status of species and habitats of the North Sea	40
6.3	Impact of windfarms on species and habitats	42
6.4	The role of Marine Protected Areas	43
6.5	Conclusion	43
	Literature	43
7	Challenges, results and perspectives: An interview with Christian Dahlke	45
II	Main section	
8	Oceanographic and geological research at <i>alpha ventus</i>: Instruments for predicting environmental conditions and interactions	53
	<i>Bettina Kühn & Anja Schneeorst</i>	
8.1	Introduction	54
8.1.1	The RAVE Service Project	54
8.1.2	Environmental conditions in the North Sea	54
8.2	Methods	55
8.2.1	Study design: Oceanography	55
8.2.2	Study design: Geology	57
8.3	Results and discussion	60
8.3.1	Currents	60
8.3.2	Scouring effects	61
8.4	Perspectives	64
8.5	Acknowledgements	64
	Literature	65
9	Rapid increase of benthic structural and functional diversity at the <i>alpha ventus</i> offshore test site	67
	<i>Lars Gutow, Katharina Teschke, Andreas Schmidt, Jennifer Dannheim, Roland Krone, Manuela Gusky</i>	
9.1	Introduction	68
9.2	Methods	68
9.2.1	Study design	68
9.2.2	Data collection	69
9.2.3	Data analysis	73
9.3	Results and discussion	73
9.3.1	Epifauna	74
9.3.2	Infauna	75
9.3.3	Biofouling on the foundation structures	77

9.3.4	Mobile demersal megafauna	78
9.4	Perspectives	79
9.5	Acknowledgements	80
	Literature	80
10	Effects of the <i>alpha ventus</i> offshore test site on pelagic fish	83
	<i>Sören Krägefsky</i>	
10.1	Introduction	84
10.1.1	Possible impacts	86
10.2	Methods	88
10.3	Results and discussion	90
10.4	Perspectives	93
	Literature	93
11	Effects of the <i>alpha ventus</i> offshore test site on distribution patterns, behaviour and flight heights of seabirds	95
	<i>Bettina Mendel, Jana Kotzerka, Julia Sommerfeld, Henriette Schwemmer, Nicole Sonntag, Stefan Garthe</i>	
11.1	Introduction	96
11.1.1	Key species	96
11.2	Methods	99
11.2.1	Survey design	99
11.2.2	Data analysis	100
11.3	Results	101
11.3.1	Distribution patterns	101
11.3.2	Changes in the abundance of lesser black-backed gulls and common guillemots	104
11.3.3	Behavioural observations	105
11.3.4	Flight heights	106
11.4	Discussion	106
11.5	Perspectives	108
11.6	Acknowledgements	108
	Literature	109
12	Of birds, blades and barriers: Detecting and analysing mass migration events at <i>alpha ventus</i>	111
	<i>Reinhold Hill, Katrin Hill, Ralf Aumüller, Axel Schulz, Tobias Dittmann, Christoph Kulemeyer, Timothy Coppack</i>	
12.1	Introduction	112
12.2	Birds, blades and barriers	112
12.3	Bird migration over the German Bight: Origin, phenology and species diversity	113
12.4	Methods	114
12.4.1	Methodological challenges	114
12.5	Results and discussions	119
12.5.1	Measuring long-term patterns with radar and optical systems	119
12.5.2	‘Ground-proofing’ through automatic detection of species-specific bird calls	121
12.5.3	Detecting behavioural responses with fixed pencil beam radar	124
12.5.4	Measuring bird movements through the rotor-swept zone with VARS	125
12.5.5	Species composition	125

12.5.6	Estimating collision risks in the rotor-swept zone	126
12.5.7	A case of mass accumulation of night-migrating birds	126
12.5.8	Windfarm-induced deviations in route under daylight conditions	128
12.6	Perspectives	129
	Literature	130
13	Marine mammals and windfarms: Effects of <i>alpha ventus</i> on harbour porpoises	133
	<i>Michael Dähne, Verena Peschko, Anita Gilles, Klaus Lucke, Sven Adler, Katrin Ronnenberg, Ursula Siebert</i>	
13.1	Introduction	134
13.1.1	Key Species	134
13.1.2	Possible effects of windfarm construction	136
13.1.3	Possible effects of windfarm operation	136
13.2	Methods	137
13.2.1	Assessing presence, absence and abundance	137
13.2.2	Aerial line transect surveys	138
13.2.3	Static acoustic monitoring (SAM)	139
13.3	Results	140
13.3.1	Construction effects on harbour porpoises	140
13.3.2	Operation effects on harbour porpoises	143
13.3.3	Effects from the wind turbines during operation	144
13.4	Discussion	144
13.5	Perspectives	146
13.6	Acknowledgments	146
	Literature	147
14	Marine habitat modelling for harbour porpoises in the German Bight	151
	<i>Henrik Skov, Stefan Heinänen, Dennis Arreborg Hansen, Florian Ladage, Bastian Schlenz, Ramūnas Žydelis, Frank Thomsen</i>	
14.1	Introduction	152
14.2	Methods	152
14.2.1	Survey data	152
14.2.2	Habitat modelling	152
14.2.3	Hydrodynamic model	153
14.2.4	Modelling of underwater noise	156
14.3	Results	162
14.4	Discussion	167
14.5	Perspectives	168
	Literature	168
15	Underwater construction and operational noise at <i>alpha ventus</i>	171
	<i>Klaus Betke</i>	
15.1	Introduction	172
15.1.1	Impact of underwater noise on marine mammals	172
15.1.2	Sound, sound levels and sound spectra	172
15.2	Methods	174
15.2.1	Study design and layout: Construction phase	174

15.2.2 Study design and layout: Operation phase 175

15.3 **Results and discussion** 175

15.3.1 Construction phase 175

15.3.2 Operation phase 177

15.4 **Perspectives** 178

15.5 **Acknowledgements** 179

Literature 179

16 Noise mitigation systems and low-noise installation technologies 181

Tobias Verfuß

16.1 **Introduction** 182

16.2 **Noise mitigation measures** 182

16.2.1 Primary mitigation measures 182

16.2.2 Secondary mitigation measures 184

16.3 **Low-noise foundation installation technologies** 187

16.3.1 Vibratory piling 187

16.3.2 Offshore foundation drilling (OFD) 188

16.3.3 Suction buckets / suction cans 188

16.4 **Perspectives** 189

Literature 190

17 Cumulative impacts of offshore windfarms 193

Hans-Peter Damian & Thomas Merck

17.1 **Introduction** 194

17.2 **Seabirds** 194

17.3 **Migrating birds** 194

17.4 **Underwater noise and marine mammals** 195

Literature 197

Backmatter 199

Links 200

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Introduction

Chapter 1	Current situation of offshore development in Germany and environmentally sound expansion of offshore wind energy	3
	<i>Simone van Leusen</i>	
Chapter 2	The Spatial Offshore Grid Plan for the German Exclusive Economic Zone	11
	<i>Annika Koch</i>	
Chapter 3	The <i>alpha ventus</i> offshore test site	15
	<i>Wilfried Hube</i>	
Chapter 4	The RAVE research initiative: A successful collaborative research, development and demonstration programme	25
	<i>Eva Otto, Michael Durstewitz, Bernhard Lange</i>	
Chapter 5	Accompanying ecological research at <i>alpha ventus</i> : The StUKplus research project	31
	<i>Anika Beiersdorf</i>	
Chapter 6	Conservation features: Sensitive species and habitats in the German Exclusive Economic Zone	39
	<i>Jochen Krause</i>	
Chapter 7	Challenges, results and perspectives: An interview with Christian Dahlke	45

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Simone van Leusen

1.1	Introduction	4
1.2	Legal basis of offshore windfarm approval	4
1.3	Marine Facilities Ordinance	6
1.4	Approval process	6
1.5	Incidental Provisions	8
	Literature	9