

The Netherlands' Largest National Park

For the longest time, the Saba Bank has been the largest and richest forgotten treasure within the Kingdom of the Netherlands. It lies just 5 kilometers (3 miles) south west of the island of Saba but extends almost 70km from the Saba coastline covering an area roughly the size of the Dutch part of the Waddenzee or, more evocatively, about the same size as Luxembourg (2,679 km² / 850 mi²). The Saba Bank was set up as a nature park as recently as 2010, and was recognized as a protected area of regional importance under the SPAW-protocol (Protocol Concerning Specially Protected Areas and Wildlife of the Wider Caribbean) in 2012. In the same year it was declared a National Park, making it the largest National Park in the Netherlands (DCNA, n.d.).

The fishery on the Saba Bank was first documented in 1907 by Boeke who also mentioned the existence of extensive coral reefs.

In 1972 an expedition to the Saba Bank was organised and van der Land started mapping the coral reefs (Land, 1977).

In 2006 the Dutch Hydrographic Service collected high-resolution bathymetric data, from which the first detailed maps of the Saba Bank were made.

We now know that the Saba Bank is a flat-topped carbonate seamount rising 1,800 metres (5,905 feet) above the sea floor, crowned by a ring of growing coral reef on its fringes. It is the second largest submerged carbonate platform of its kind in the world (Church et al. 2004), and its rich biodiversity includes coral reefs, patch reefs, sand flats, as well as limestone pavements overgrown with uniquely diverse algal assemblages. It is entirely submerged and most of it lies at water depths of 20 to 50 meters (66 to 164 feet). It is thought that the southwestern part of the Bank contains the healthiest reefs.

From the bathymetric data the Bank can be seen in fascinating detail showing the presence of distinctive beach, reef crests and lagoon formations, which must have formed during previous glaciations when parts of the Bank were above sea level. Old spur and groove structures and former barrier reefs can be identified as well as a cluster of unidentified pinnacle like structures, which dot the northeastern part of the Bank

rising 10m above the bottom. The bathymetric data can be used to distinguish bottom types but these still need to be translated into habitat maps, so for the most part we still do not know what lives or grows there.

The race to discover more about this unique area only began in earnest in the mid-nineties, once it became clear that significant quantities of Queen Conch, lobster and grouper were being systematically harvested by foreign vessels.

About one-quarter of the Saba Bank lies within Saban territorial waters and 1.3% within the territorial waters of St. Eustatius, the rest falls within the Exclusive Economic Zone. After a brief exploratory expedition in 1996, and a first inventory of the fisheries in 1999, the former Netherlands Antilles organized two further expeditions to inventory the biodiversity of the Saba Bank with support from Conservation International and the Dutch government. After the constitutional changes in 2010, the Saba Bank became the direct responsibility of the Netherlands and since then six expeditions to the Saba Bank have explored various aspects of the biology and 'health' of the area.

The Saba Bank is exceptionally biodiverse and in addition to extensive coral reefs it is particularly rich in gorgonians and macro-algae, including algal assemblages never described before (Littler et al. 2010). The abundance of shallow water gorgonians is high (43 recorded species) which is 10-30% higher than at other sites in the Caribbean with the discovery of a new species of Pterogorgia being confirmed (Etnoyer et al. 2010). In terms of fish diversity, despite the absence of shallow water habitats, the Saba Bank ranks eighth in the Caribbean in terms of fish species richness. A total of 270 fish species were recorded during a nine-day expedition to the Saba Bank, raising expectations that the final count may exceed 400 species (Williams et al. 2010).

There have been 4 species of sharks recorded on the Saba Bank as well as 6 species of marine mammals (Stoffers 2012, Debrot et al. 2013). Humpback whales are regularly spotted in the channel between Saba and the Saba Bank and there have been various sightings of humpback whales with calves, leading to speculation about the role of the Saba Bank as a calving and/or nursery area for humpbacks.



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The Saba Bank is also an important foraging ground for many seabirds and conservative estimates indicate that ¼ million sea birds are dependent on the Saba Bank. This includes birds from Saba, St Eustatius and Dog Island, which alone supports 100,000 pairs of nesting seabirds including Magnificent Frigatebirds, Tropicbirds, Sooty terns and Masked boobies, all of which are species whose global populations are in decline. An estimated 18% of the world population, the equivalent of 70% of the Caribbean population of Red-billed Tropicbirds, forage on the Saba Bank (Adrian Delnevo, personal communication, 23 February 2017).

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The high species abundance on the Saba Bank prompted Conservation International to designate it an important “biodiversity hotspot” within the Caribbean (Hoetjes, 2010). In addition, the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) identified the Saba Bank as an Ecologically or Biologically Significant Marine Area (EBSA).

Whilst the Saba Bank is not immune to the effects of global climate change, sea level rise, ocean acidification etc., and has a history of fisheries exploitation, its remoteness means that it has been spared many of the insidious anthropogenic effects such as eutrophication and increased sedimentation. Recent studies indicate that good genetic connectivity as well as genetic diversity comparable to other sites in the Caribbean mean that the Saba Bank is a likely source of fish and coral larvae and may serve an important ecological role, bolstering the resilience of reefs downstream (Bakker et al 2016).

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