

Oosterschelde

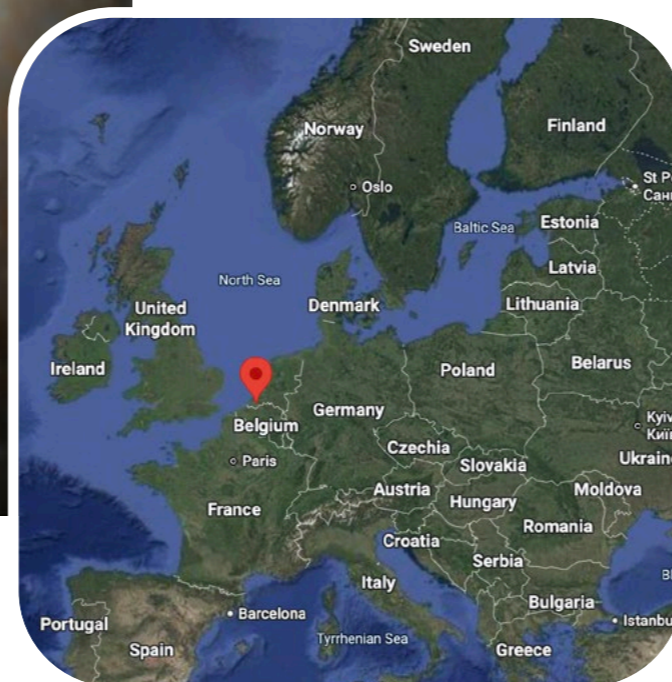
The Most Beautiful Dive Spot in the Netherlands

Text and photos by Patrick Kranenbroek





Underwater photographer Patrick Kranenbroek takes us on a tour of the underwater world at the Dutch National Park Oosterschelde, located in the province of Zeeland. Here, divers can find a variety of marine species, from nudibranchs and seahorses to cuttlefish, lobsters and lumpsuckers.



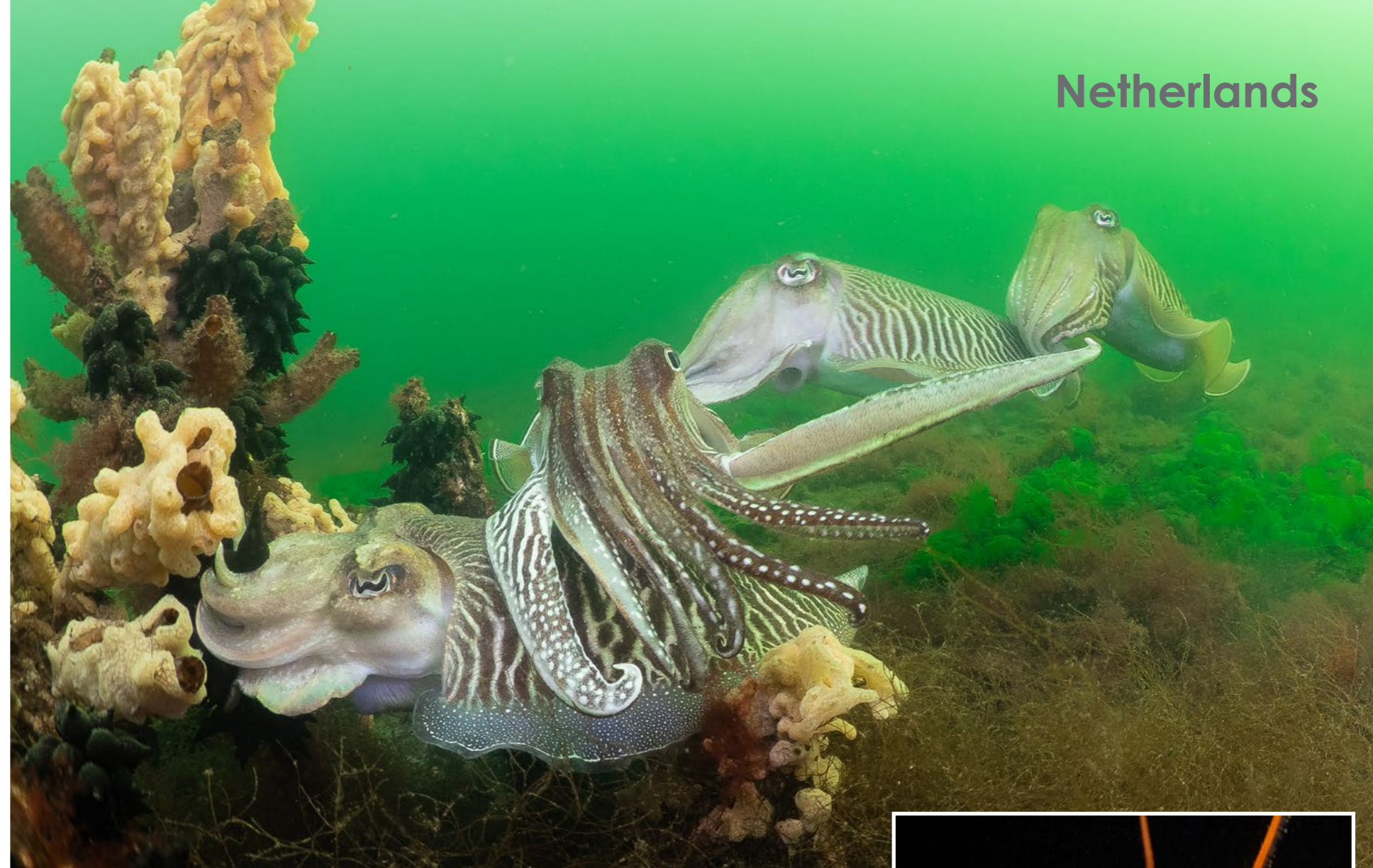
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Seahorse, Bergse Diepsluis dive site, Eastern Scheldt, Netherlands (above). When a storm comes, all of the gates on the dike will be closed (top right). *Sepioloideus sepioides* bobtail squid, Zoetersbout dive site (far right). Location of Eastern Scheldt on map of Europe (right). Small red anemone, Eastern Scheldt (previous page).

In the province of Zeeland, in the southwest of the Netherlands, lies the National Park Oosterschelde. The Oosterschelde (Eastern Scheldt) is a popular diving area, but it has a turbulent history. In 1953, a large part of Zeeland was flooded during the North Sea flood disaster. Many people lost their homes, and some villages almost completely disappeared.

After the disaster, the Netherlands built the Delta Works, a system of dams and storm surge barriers, to protect the area from the sea. The storm surge barrier in the Oosterschelde was constructed so that the ebb and

Female cuttlefish taking care of the eggs, while the male protects her from other males (right); Mussel farm (below) and lobster (bottom right) in Eastern Scheldt



flow of the tides would be preserved, but it can be completely closed during expected storms. Thanks to these measures, the Oosterschelde remains a unique area where tides still flow freely and rich underwater life can be observed. For divers, it is a place full of adventure, history and stunning underwater life.

The Oosterschelde is truly beautiful, and there's so much to see. Seahorses, many species of nudibranchs and fish, numerous sessile animals and various mussel farms can be found in the Oosterschelde. The mussels are cultivated on long ropes that together form "walls" hundreds of metres long. Among these mussels, you can find small crabs, sea squirts, skeleton shrimps and more. Both wide-angle and macro

photography can keep divers occupied for hours. The dive sites are not deep, allowing for long dives.

Cuttlefish

Every spring, when the water temperature reaches about 13°C, cuttlefish swim from the Atlantic Ocean through the North Sea into the Oosterschelde. They instinctively follow the tidal currents to lay their eggs.

In the past, they often laid their eggs on lobster traps, so divers have set up many cuttlefish tents. These are wigwams made of bamboo poles that divers place in the water for the cuttlefish to lay their eggs on.

For divers, this is a remarkable spectacle. Female cuttlefish attach their eggs to the poles, while males stand



Blenny under seaweed (right), lumpsucker (below) and snorkelling at Eastern Scheldt (bottom right)



guard. If rival males approach, the male defends his partner. This often leads to fights, which are fascinating to watch. When the eggs hatch in summer, there are countless juvenile cuttlefish at the dive sites.

Seahorses

From May or June onwards, seahorses arrive from deeper waters and also visit the cuttlefish tents. Finding them is an art, as they are masters of camouflage. If you look closely for their tails wrapped around the poles, you can spot them. They usually stay nearby all summer, showing strong site fidelity.

Seahorses usually live in pairs, with both male and female together. The male carries the brood pouch, meaning he carries the offspring. The downside is that the presence of seahorses attracts many divers. Because Zeeland is close to the Belgian border, divers come from both the Netherlands and Belgium.



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Zeeland is also beautiful above the surface (above), with picturesque windmills (left). This windmill is in St Philipsland.

parental involvement among fish, even in colder months. Once the eggs hatch, juvenile lumpsuckers are often found among the seaweeds in shallower areas.

The dikes

Between the basalt boulders of the submerged dikes, large American lobsters and thousands of crabs hide. Gobies have found their homes among the huge rocks, which are exposed at low tide. Pipefish, various nudibranchs, starfish and thousands of gobies can be found among the oyster beds. As the sun sets, the chances of encountering cuttlefish and eels increase.

Topside excursions

Zeeland is also stunning above the water. The expansive North Sea beaches, beautiful flower fields in spring and numerous

windmills are a feast for the eyes. With cities such as Goes, Zierikzee or Middelburg, there is plenty to see and do. Don't forget the picturesque village of Veere. Yerseke is famous for its oyster farms. Also visit the Watersnoodmuseum in Ouwerkerk, which tells the story of the great 1953 flood that led to the construction of the Delta Works. Cities like Rotterdam, The Hague and Antwerp are all within an hour's drive.

The Oosterschelde is therefore more than just a diving spot. It is a living story of history, nature, culture and unique underwater creatures waiting to be discovered. ■

Underwater photographer Patrick Kranenbroek is an editor for the Dutch diving magazine Duiken and frequently dives in the Oosterschelde. Further info: patrickkranenbroek.com.



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