

## ISHAM NEWS | 19 JUL 2017

### WATER

When you land at Schiphol airport on your way to the congress in Amsterdam, you will be 7 meters below sea level. That's a bit scary, with the recent floods in South Asia and Houston in mind. But in the Netherlands we are prepared for this, as we are living with the sea already for hundreds of years. The western part of the country is very low and flat, often with just as much water as there is land. Extensive waterworks are already being constructed since the early Middle Ages. This required a high degree of cooperation and a strong government. One of the magnificent achievements from the 17<sup>th</sup> century is found near Rotterdam: the series of windmills of Kinderdijk, which pump the water out in concert and created land out of swamp.



Climate change has accelerated precautions against sea, rivers and heavy rain. Keeping a low country dry is not just a matter of dikes, but requires organization in many aspects, and is a process that takes decades. Our last large flood in 1953 killed more than 1800 people, and the measures taken since then are still not finished. Gigantic doors have been constructed to protect the people of the delta in the south, with ingenious mechanisms that promote safety but leave space for ships and

fish alike. Although this sounds technical and boring, the Delta Works are absolutely worth visiting [https://en.wikivoyage.org/wiki/Delta\\_Works](https://en.wikivoyage.org/wiki/Delta_Works).

Many less-visible measures are taken to live with water even closer than we did before. The picture below does not show a recent flood, but is an amphibian, very efficient bus service in the Rotterdam area. You may even book a tour to the windmills of Kinderdijk above, check this <http://www.waterbus.nl/specials-evenementen/>. In Amsterdam the canals are littered by houseboats, but a recent variation on this theme is a complete quarter of floating houses, indistinguishable from your own home but rising with the water level. Along the major rivers such as the Rhine, large natural areas have been reserved to store the water in case of heavy rain, and this has provided pleasant space for water recreation – desperately needed in this densely populated country.



Over the centuries, rich people preferred dry soil, and the watery areas were for the poor. In a way this is expressed in names of the people. One of the most common names is Van Dijk, which means from the dike, because this was traditionally the safest place to live. But the second most common name is Van den Berg, which means from the mountain. There are no mountains in The Netherlands. Probably they meant the barely visible sand hills, just a few centimeters above sea level. In contrast, nobody

carries the name From the Swamp, although that would have been highly appropriate for the poor. Today life in the swamp has become fashionable: a house where you can take a dive in the crystal clear river water directly from your bed, costs around € 800.000,-.