

The Netherlands has three new stunning municipalities. On 10-10-2010 the Caribbean islands of Saba, St Eustatius and Bonaire received a new status that ties them more closely to the Netherlands. What does that mean for the islands, their inhabitants and their ties to the Netherlands?

BY MAARTJE SMEETS  
AND DANIELLE VAN GILS

HENKJAN KIEVIT



# A new chapter for Saba, Bonaire and St Eustatius

The new status of the islands has considerable consequences for their inhabitants. Positive consequences, such as health insurance, but also consequences that are emotionally more difficult to deal with, such as more environmental and construction regulations. Some of the inhabitants did not vote in favour of the new status when the referendum was held. They were sceptical of the Dutch who, sometimes in remarkably large numbers, are present as administrators, as inhabitants or as businessmen.

## Respect

It's up to the Dutch to earn the respect of the local population. The fact that working together does not always go smoothly

was shown when a zoning plan for St Eustatius was created. A Dutch company was contracted to draw up the basic plan, but the locals opposed the result. As the Statian Charles 'please, no surname' said, "It would be a good idea to make the plan, not in a Dutch office, but on Statia itself together with the local population, administrators, environmental officers, fishermen and businessmen. Visit a local businessman; talk with the people at the tourist office, with teachers. Then the plan would have wide support and might succeed." Charles said that he hoped his island "would be lifted up in the momentum of the changes ahead". The importance of working together properly and of support also became clear when creating the plan

for the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), in which the Ministry of Economic Affairs, Agriculture and Innovation plays an active role. The purpose of the EEZ is to stimulate the economy while also protecting biodiversity. (See also page 20, *How the Netherlands protects its coral.*)

## Biodiversity

Even though the inhabitants somewhat dread the almost clichéd Dutch mania for organization, it seems that the islands' rich biodiversity both on the land and at sea would profit from more regulation. Environmentalists on the islands hope that the Netherlands will give them more support and financial means for research and monitoring. That would help them



Residents from a home for the elderly on Bonaire during an excursion to Washington Slagbaai National Park.

PHOTO KAREN WINONA VAN DIJK

learn more about their natural environment so that they are more capable of protecting it. Nature is invaluable for the islands. For example, eighty percent of Bonaire's income comes from tourists who go there to dive. Nature protection serves a large economic importance. As government spokesman Glenn Thodé says of his Bonaire: "There will never be a situation of economy versus ecology because they'll always go hand in hand. As authorities we will see to it that Bonaire retains its ecological values. Only then can we help the economy to prosper."

(See also page 28, *The same dance to different tunes.*)

#### A sort of new municipalities

Maarten Beks, senior policy officer at the Association of Netherlands Municipalities, visits the islands regularly to support the administrators in all the ongoing changes. Although the tie to the Netherlands has become closer, the islands as municipalities can't be compared to municipalities in the Dutch polders. Beks: "Saba, St. Eustatius and Bonaire have been given the status of public authority. That means that they

don't have to fully comply with the Municipalities Act. This is only logical because the Act contains regulations about railway connections for example, which don't apply to the islands.'

In the past, Flevoland also had the status of public authority. This 'new land' gradually evolved into a province with its own municipalities, but Beks doesn't expect this kind of development for the islands. "They'll never become municipalities as we know them in the Netherlands. They just have too little administrative power

15 December 1954: Queen Juliana signs the Statute for the Kingdom with Suriname and the Antilles in the Knights' Hall in The Hague. / SPAARNESTAD PHOTO/NFP



## The history of the islands and the Netherlands

On 15 December 1954 Queen Juliana signed the Statute for the Kingdom of the Netherlands. From that moment, the Kingdom consisted of three separate countries: Suriname, the Dutch Antilles and the Netherlands. In 1975 Suriname became independent, and eleven years later Aruba was given a 'separate status'. Meanwhile, the relation between large Curacao and the small islands became lopsided, and the small islands felt that their voices didn't count. This situation came to an end on 10 October 2010 when Bonaire, Saba and St Eustatius became Dutch municipalities. St Maarten and Curacao are autonomous countries within the Kingdom.



Young people on Bonaire enjoy jumping from the high cliffs.

and capacity. Plus the context is also completely different, and the distance between local and other levels of administration is so great. You can't just drive from Saba to The Hague if you want to discuss something with a civil servant."

St Eustatius, Bonaire and Saba fall directly under the responsibility of the Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations. So they have nothing to do with a province, which carries out regional activities such as road repair. They don't have any neighbouring municipalities with whom they can deal with problems and they lack supporting bodies such as the Water Boards. In short, the islands still have a very unique position.

### Not interchangeable

"We have to remember that the islands differ a lot from one another", says Beks. "People seem to think that this is a row of interchangeable, adjacent islands with attractive sandy beaches. But nothing could be less true. There are huge cultural differences. The inhabitants are also afraid of being grouped under the heading 'BES islands'. By listening closely to the inhabitants of each individual island, we can prevent this from happening."

The question of what changes the inhabitants will experience as a result of the new status remains open. Beks expects that more money will be made available for things like education, health care, nature protection and waste disposal. But more money also means more rules. For example, people who ride scooters or motorcycles on the islands will have to wear a

## Laws and regulations

With one or two differences, Dutch laws will gradually replace the laws of the Antilles. Social security payments, for example, will be lower than in the Netherlands. Inhabitants will be eligible to vote for the Dutch Lower Chamber and the European Parliament. The Netherlands will see to it that the islands comply with certain financial demands, and the Netherlands is responsible for the police and the judiciary on the three islands. The communal Court of Justice of the Dutch Antilles and Aruba will continue to exist under a new name and will administer justice on the islands. By the Bonaire, St Eustatius and Saba Public Authorities Act (WoIBES), the islands became special Dutch municipalities. The Act defines, for example, the administrative system, the composition and powers of authorities and the supervision of the public authorities. The new political relation became effective on 10 October 2010.

helmet because this is stipulated by Dutch traffic regulations. But it will also be possible to regulate the disposal of poisonous liquids or asbestos. The necessary steps are already being taken in the areas of spatial planning and waste disposal. On Saba, St Eustatius and Bonaire, the Ministry of Infrastructure and the Environment and the island inhabitants are looking for ways to improve waste disposal. Cleaning up the existing dumping grounds and setting up a good system to separate waste are also items on the agenda.

### Be wary of one-way traffic

According to Beks, Dutch civil servants should be wary of creating a system of one-way traffic, which could strengthen the local fear of foreigners and their mania for organization. He is optimistic that the collaboration will be productive. "Once

Kevin Paula, a young Bonairean, looks at the brochure of STINAPA, the National Parks Foundation.



## You can't just drive from Saba to The Hague if you want to discuss something with a civil servant

contacts have been made between Dutch civil servants and the authorities or businessmen on the islands, they are enduring. People stay in touch, even if one is back in the Netherlands again and the other still on St Eustatius or Saba." Beks warns against arrogance on the part of the Dutch. "We have to remember that, as Dutch civil servants, we can learn a lot from the administrative culture on the islands. Policy makers and administrators often return from the Caribbean full of enthusiasm when they see how the contacts between the island authorities and the inhabitants are. In Nieuwegein, for example, no one takes any notice if the alderman walks down the street. On Bonaire, everyone stops to say hello to the deputy (the equivalent of the Dutch alderman)."

The short distance between citizen and administrator isn't the only good example for Dutchmen. Beks thinks that the Dutch can also learn something from the island mentality. "The course of events on the islands shows that you don't have to draw up rules and regulations for everything to ensure that things go well. Sometimes it's better to operate in more freedom so that there's room for flexibility and improvisation." ■

# Did you know that...

Saba is the only place in the Netherlands where people can be buried in the garden? The island was excepted from the Burial and Cremation Act; Long ago people from Saba returned to the island to be buried; Since 10/10/10 inhabitants of Curacao have to follow an official citizenship course; The Netherlands has acquired a new unique gecko – recently discovered on Saba; Eight new species of animals were discovered on the Saba Bank this year; Saba has the most climate zones per km<sup>2</sup> in the world: steppe/savannah, primary lower forest, secondary higher forest, cloud forest; The Netherlands has the smallest international airport in the world – Saba; The Netherlands has acquired new neighbours: the United States, France and Venezuela; Among the 1600 inhabitants of Saba, the most common religions per head of the population are Methodists, Seventh Day Adventists, Hindus, Muslims and Roman Catholics;



In addition to scrapple and blood pudding, the Netherlands can add a new dish to its national cuisine: the Saba pot, with pig's head and organs as the basic ingredients; The polling station in The Hague has outposts more

than 7000 km away; You can go from Amsterdam to Bonaire (7800 km) faster than from Saba to Bonaire (1200 km); The Netherlands has such an effective GKMB division (Yellow Fever and Mosquito Protection) that there are no mosquitoes on Saba; The largest tree in the Netherlands, the kapok tree, is on St Eustatius; The number of nature parks in the Netherlands has tripled with the new status of the BES islands;



The Netherlands now has to deal with invasive species from oil tankers' drainage water; In addition to heath, woods and dunes, the Netherlands now also has tropical rainforest and coral; The Netherlands boasts a

world-champion windsurfer – on Bonaire; St Eustatius is the only place on earth where you can find the St Eustatius Morning Glory – a rare plant that blossoms briefly every morning;



The fishermen from Urk have colleagues overseas – but they don't have to worry about competition from them; The Netherlands has its own lobster fishing fleet on Saba and St Eustatius; The Dutch volcanoes on St Eustatius and Saba are still active – but they've been dormant for more than a century; Amsterdam has

relinquished the throne: the second largest Dutch harbour (in tonnage terms) is on St Eustatius; The Netherlands has a new national hero: Simon Bolivar freed Bolivia with the help



of our Caribbean countrymen; St Eustatius is the country that has changed 'owners' most often – between 1636 and 1816, 22 countries 'took care of' the 'Historical Gem of the Caribbean'; The world's fourth best location for diving is now in the Netherlands – Saba; About 200 treaties

have to be adjusted now that the Dutch Antilles no longer exist (since 10-10-10) and the BES islands have become Dutch municipalities; The world's first underwater photos were taken on Bonaire (1939) and the first underwater cameras were also developed here; The first mooring buoys for divers on Bonaire were designed by Captain Don and are now used throughout the world; The smallest bird in the Netherlands, the Antillean crested hummingbird, lives in St Eustatius National Park.

