»In development aid Germany should adopt a leading role«

*An academic discussion with PETER EHLERS**

From 1989 till 2008 Prof. Dr. Dr. h. c. Peter Ehlers was president and professor at the Federal Maritime and Hydrographic Agency (BSH). During his term of office he particularly supported the protection of seas and oceans. Prof. Ehlers, a graduate lawyer, was representative in various commissions and an internationally perceived voice. Although he is already retired the 71 year-old's engagement for the ocean is still unbroken. A personal interview about achievements and shortcomings.

Federal Maritime and Hydrographic Agency – BSH | IHO | IMO | hydrography | definition environmental protection | marine economy | ocean engineer | HELCOM | Law of the Sea

HN: Mr. Ehlers, you have been retired since 2008. How does it feel when you enter this building, in which you worked as president for more than 20 years?

Peter Ehlers: I like being here though the times I come to visit become less. Since 1973 I had worked in this building, at that time in the department Maritime Transport of the Federal Ministry of Transport which for many years was located here in Hamburg. I regard the years as president of the Federal Maritime and Hydrographic Agency as a fulfilled period of life. It makes me happy when former colleagues recognise and greet me, sometimes we have a conversation. I am very satisfied when I look back, yet I know: the time is over. I have no withdrawal symptoms; the only thing I miss is the daily view on the port.

HN: Please explain what the title »president and professor« at the Federal Maritime and Hydrographic Agency means.

Ehlers: It is a title of official anchored in the Civil Service Remuneration Act. It exists for some positions in federal authorities with a scientific orientation. The idea behind is that scientists at federal institutions are on eye-level with professors at universities. That is why the title is for example »director and professor«. However, it is only a title of official, which does not entitle teaching at university.

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HN: However, after the evaluation of the Federal Maritime and Hydrographic Agency a couple of years ago the Scientific Council recommended the enhancement of research activities.

Ehlers: That's easier said than done. On the one hand the public sector must save costs, reduce personnel and positions, on the other hand new tasks are coming up. At the same time bureaucracy is steadily growing. You cannot increase scientific work without sufficient personnel, but the personnel is primarily needed for fulfilling necessary and important tasks demanded by law. The Federal Maritime and Hydrographic Agency fulfils excellent research but less than in former times. How could it be different?

HN: After the German Unification you realised the fusion of the Rostock and Hamburg locations. The newly developed Federal Maritime and Hydrographic Agency – till 1990 called German Hydrographic Institute (DHI) – had to be united with the authorities of the German Democratic Republic (GDR). How did that work?

Ehlers: When I became president of the German Hydrographic Institute in 1989 the department of maritime transport of the Federal Ministry of Transport was moved to Bonn, the former capital city. At that time, nobody even thought about the fall of the Berlin Wall. As compensation we were to create a central maritime authority by uniting the German Hydrographic Institute and the Federal Agency for Tonnage Measurement. Members of the German Parliament wanted to call the agency »Federal Maritime Agency«. The term was insufficient not only for me. The German Hydrographic Institute already included the term ›hydrography‹ and it should be part of the new agency as well. Fortunately, we were able to convince politicians to adopt the title »Federal Maritime and Hydrographic Agency«.

When the German Unification occurred a few months later we had to integrate the maritime tasks of the GDR – among them those of the Maritime Hydrographical Institute and the Board of Navigation – into the newly created Federal Maritime and Hydrographic Agency. Already before the Unification the directors of the maritime agencies of the former German Federal Republic and the GDR came together and discussed the new structures. Fortunately, we knew each other from former cooperations in international committees. This made it a lot easier. We showed the highest respect for each other. I always wanted that the restructuring would take place unbiased and as equal partners. The West had no reason to show

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Translation by Verena Eisemann

off and be presumptuous as we didn't grow up on the »wrong« side. On the contrary we had utmost respect for our colleagues from the GDR, who had implemented tasks with fewer means.

From October 3rd, 1990 the Federal Maritime and Hydrographic Agency smoothly adopted the respective duties of the GDR agencies; the Federal Maritime and Hydrographic Agency was thus one of the first viable unified German agencies. We opened a branch in Rostock and were able to keep 200 employees.

However, the most difficult part came later when the Commission of Federalism decided to transfer additional 150 posts from Hamburg to Rostock. The idea was to strengthen the Rostock location as symbol for the merging of East and West. This was a difficult situation for many colleagues in Hamburg. The problem was solved along the time frame. At the same time the Federal Maritime and Hydrographic Agency got two headquarters. I commuted between Rostock and Hamburg regularly. It was very important to distribute the tasks clearly between both locations. Parallel structures would have been uneconomically. And that's why we transferred the department of Nautical Hydrography to Rostock.

HN: Viewed from a distance of a few years what was one of your greatest achievements as president of the Federal Maritime and Hydrographic Agency?

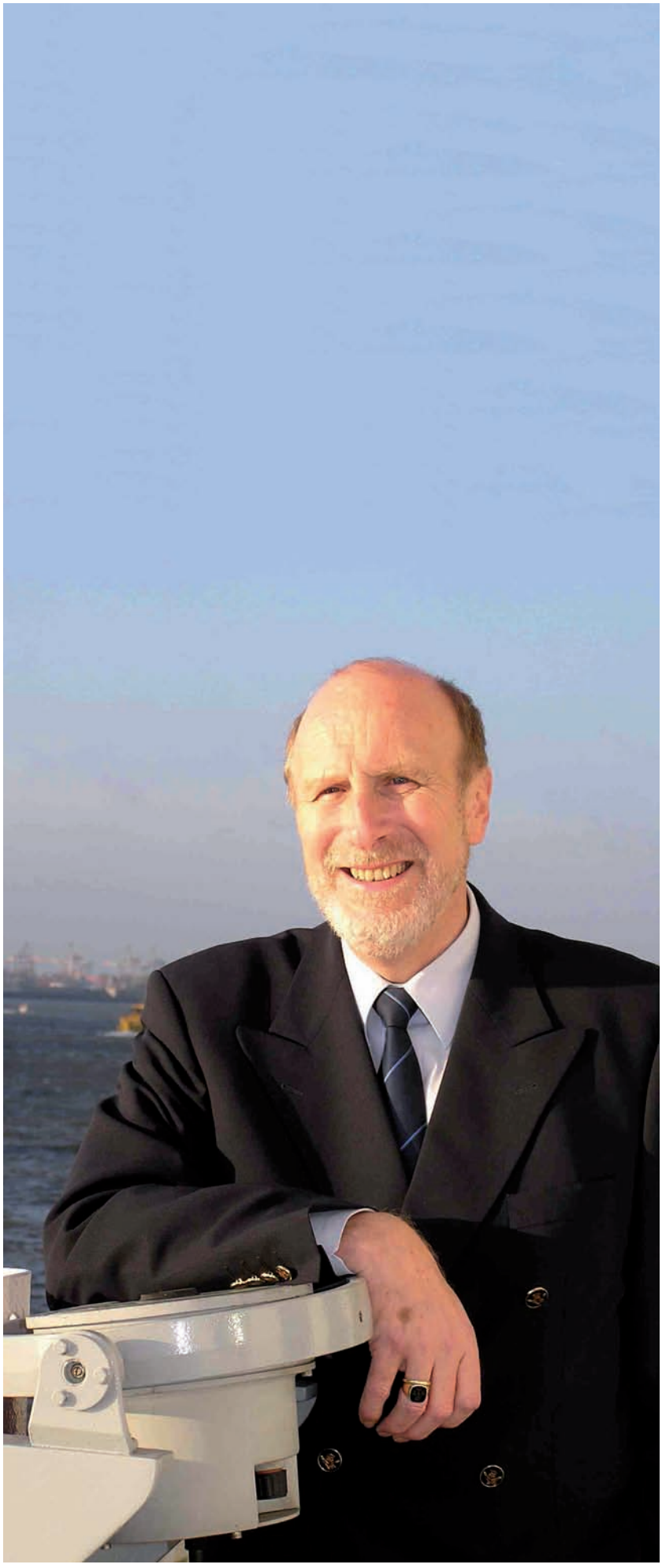
Ehlers: I would say the merging was my most important project because the German Unification was the life's dream of my generation. At the same time we were able to turn the Federal Maritime and Hydrographic Agency into *the* central German maritime authority. I say »we« because it was only made possible thanks to all colleagues.

We also made progress in individual topics. Among them ECDIS licensing, the testing of nautical-technical ship equipment, the authorisation procedures for the offshore wind power plants, and many more, ranging from supporting the German merchant fleet to marine research projects.

HN: Can you please tell us about a failure?

Ehlers: I was very sad when we had to sell our flagship »Gauss«. Due to the annual cuts in personnel we couldn't keep the ship's crew. So in 2006 we had to reduce our fleet from six to five ships.

I always was ashamed that we weren't able to achieve more in international cooperation for development aid. Regarding the maritime sector Germany isn't very active in technical cooperation. One reason can be found in the fact that those states, which still have to build up a maritime infrastructure, set other priorities. Hydrography, marine science and environmental protection are issues at the very end of the priority list of these countries. I always supported the build-up of maritime infrastructure as we also profit from it. Countries with a developing maritime industry, which are very important for us, are the future markets. Ten years ago, after the disastrous tsunami in Southeast Asia,



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we were able to give a certain amount of aid, especially in Sri Lanka. Horst Hecht took over international coordinating functions for hydrography, which are continued now by Thomas Dehling, who is very active in the IHO for Capacity Building.

HN: German hydrography has »international impact« – these were your words in the festive speech of 2011 for the »150 years of official hydrography in Germany« celebration (published in *HN* 90). What is Germany's contribution today?
Ehlers: From an historic point of view there are quite a few contributions initiated by Germany or at least that we pushed ahead. Especially the International Chart 1 (INT 1), for which the Federal Maritime and Hydrographic Agency was responsible for. Right from the beginning, Germany was also very much involved in developing and introducing the electronic chart. The necessary standards for ECDIS had been elaborated under the supervision of Horst Hecht. And for many years I chaired the WEND Committee of the IHO, which organised the development of ENC data centres. We had initiated the embedding of hydrography into the SOLAS Convention. In former times, there was no obliging international law for states to have a hydrographic office. When the IMO renewed the SOLAS Convention in the 1990s, we took the chance for a German initiative which finally succeeded. Since 2002 SOLAS obligates states to have a hydrographic office. This step strengthened the hydrographic offices for the safety of seafaring. And also the Helsinki Convention for the protection of the Baltic Sea was amplified by hydrographic tasks.

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We significantly helped to modernise the organisation of the IHO. To exaggerate a bit, after the revision of the IHO agreement we managed to create a modern international organisation out of a »club«. I regret that the new regulations are still not in force, but I am sure that very soon the necessary numbers of ratification will be reached. Today, we provide important impetus for developing the infrastructure of marine spatial information. During my active time, we had started that at an international workshop in Rostock. We also care about further developing survey standards. All in all, we are very strong regarding innovations. Maybe we have the advantage that we don't belong to the really big hydrographic offices, we are concerned about the matter itself and not about our own importance.

HN: When you were asked to define hydrography your answer was very often: »the description of the oceans and all ocean related issues«. This is a very broad, open and flexible definition. However, I miss something in the crucial aspect of the subject matter. Why don't you mention the inland waters?
Ehlers: The definition goes back to my pre-predecessor Prof. Roll. I liked it, but you're right. Why not mention inland waters? However, from an historic point of view it is critical. In the meantime, the IHO has decided rather reluctantly to mention inland waters in their new definition of hydrography. It doesn't sound very convincing though because the IHO writes about »marine activities«, which relates very much to the ocean.

Whenever I had used the quoted definition it was from the Federal Maritime and Hydrographic Agency president's perspective, who is responsible for the ocean. (The inland waters are taken care of by the colleagues of the German Hydrological Institute in Koblenz.) My definition goes beyond the traditional nautical hydrography and includes oceanographic tasks and fields of the Federal Maritime and Hydrographic Agency.
HN: What's the difference between the German perspective and the international one on hydrography?
Ehlers: That's a difficult question. When thinking of actual hydrography, then I must say that I lack detailed information on what is really achieved on international level. However, I have the impression that the science of hydrography is relegated to a niche existence in Germany. This may be different in countries like Great Britain, France, the USA and Canada. Nonetheless, there are technical achievements realised in Germany.

HN: What could Germany make better in terms of the ocean?
Ehlers: Let me tell you an anecdote. When the United Nations declared the year 1998 as the International Year of the Oceans, US President Bill Clinton held an inauguration speech. In Germany, this was done by the president of the Federal Maritime and Hydrographic Agency. That's exactly the issue. The Germans should devote themselves more to the ocean and recognise its economic importance. We focus on high-tech in many branches for example automotive, aerospace and mechanical engineering and are on eye-level internationally. However, we should emphasise more on marine technologies in order to find eco-friendly solutions.
HN: What should be improved in hydrography?
Ehlers: Hydrography should extend its service sector for marine spatial information. Detailed information about oceans is asked for everywhere. Hydrographic services are indispensable requirements for most maritime activities, but attracting attention to and entering new fields aren't our strong points.
HN: In what way can hydrography profit from changes in the marine economy?
Ehlers: Hydrography is part of the marine economy which is a branch with future potential for which alone in Europe the European Commission

has calculated a gross volume of more than 500 billion euros annually. Great potential lies in maritime shipping, aquaculture, offshore wind energy, tourism and innovative marine technology for the environmentally friendly exploitation of nonliving marine resources. This offers several economic chances as well for hydrographic services. Hydrography must trust itself more, be more innovative and secure more shares. There's a lot to do. In marine economy just like in classic hydrography the main issue is the global market. It is very important to offer not only single components, but overall concepts and solutions which are technically mature and eco-friendly. However, companies must position themselves in time on the worldwide market, which brings us to the importance of development aid. Politics must offer more support in this aspect.

HN: You describe future tasks which in detail cannot be grasped yet. Who can fulfil them? Oceanographers and hydrographers are not really prepared for that. You once mentioned the profession of ocean engineer.

Ehlers: That's right. We should think about a new study programme. The successful education of hydrographers in Hamburg could function as role model for the new profession of ocean engineer. It is important to recognise special requirements. As a matter of fact, a hydrographer isn't engineer enough, the oceanographer is too much of a physicist. An ocean engineer would have knowledge of both sides, and thanks to the Master study programmes nowadays, it would be easy to offer a respective specialisation.

HN: You have once called hydrography a »sleeping beauty« *(HN* 84). Is she still sleeping? And has she lost some of her beauty?

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Ehlers: She is as beautiful as ever, but I think she is still sleeping, although I may have missed minor changes during the last few years. We must show how broad the range of hydrography really is and seek contact to neighbouring fields, only in doing so we can give sleeping beauty the »fairy kiss«. All persons involved must convince politicians that we need different conditions and adequate subsidy measures.

HN: Can you give concrete examples how hydrography can call more attention? Is the IHO voice loud enough? What can organisations like the DHyG and the IFHS do?

Ehlers: The IHO does its best. For sure, press work could be better. The question is if the IHO is organised well enough with regard to its importance. Although the IHO is an intergovernmental organisation it doesn't belong to the UN-organisations. I had already asked from time to time if the IHO could be integrated into the IMO. In this way the IHO work would gain importance. When we started reforming the IHO, I could have imagined merging the IHO and the IMO to a powerful maritime organisation, even if that would have meant losing the attractive site in Monaco.

Every effort of trying to make hydrography popular in the public hasn't shown any effects so far. In the past, we always tried to explain hydrography in general terms. But in the meantime, I believe that we need to present it in a more concrete way and present our tasks. I always feared that showing only one aspect would exclude all others, which in a way is true. However, we have no other chance then talking about something concrete. When SHOM found the black box of the airbus that crashed into the Atlantic in 2009, this could have been a real success story in the public. It offered the possibility to show what hydrographers really can do. And this should also be the duty of the DHyG.

HN: During your career you supported the protection of oceans in particular. How should the ideal protection of the marine environment look like?

Ehlers: What does ideal mean? One could argue that ideal is leaving the ocean up to itself; however, this isn't feasible because we rely on the manifold use of the oceans. Effects on the marine environment are definitely the consequences. Every ship makes noises and therefore already has impact on the environment. It must be weighed. One thing is for sure: without protecting the oceans a greater use of them isn't possible. An important aspect is that marine protected areas aren't accessible for further use or only in a restricted way.

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HN: Like the North Sea which is an industrial park on the one hand and a protected nature reserve on the other hand.

Ehlers: That's correct. We cannot restrict the industrial use completely; we need a spatial planning for the sea as well. In view of rising resource consumption we cannot do without raw material from the ocean and marine mining. And it won't be possible to prohibit the recovery of resources in 1,000 metres depth and more. Furthermore, in environment protection there is the consensus to push ahead offshore wind energy. For sure, in future other means of energy production from the ocean will play an important part. We must balance responsibly between the economic use of the oceans and their protection.

HN: What predominates, pollution through maritime shipping or inputs from land?

Ehlers: Definitely landbased inputs, all studies have proven it. Compared to these inputs other sources of pollution play a minor role. Until the beginning of the 1980s we were convinced that pollution comes from ships, especially in form of oil pollution. Since then, there have been great improvements as concerns pollution from ships; nowadays the issue is to reduce ship emissions and the problem of ballast water. Marine pollution is still a very present topic, but mainly because of inputs from land. Worldwide there exist prohibitions for ships; however, compliance has to be controlled even more strictly.

HN: Since 40 years HELCOM has been working as intergovernmental organisation for the protection of the marine environment of the Baltic Sea. What has the Helsinki Commission achieved from your point of view?

Ehlers: All in all the condition of the Baltic Sea hasn't deteriorated. This alone is already a great success achieved by HELCOM. It was the first time during the Cold War that neighbouring states came together in order to pursue one common concern. Already in 1974 the Helsinki Convention for the protection of the Baltic Sea was adopted. In 1992 it was modernised and the aspect of protecting nature and biodiversity was included. All nine bordering states and the European Union belong to the Helsinki Convention. The Baltic Sea has become cleaner but still there is a lot to do. Eutrophication is the greatest threat and this demands significant efforts.

HN: HELCOM demands regular reporting about the effectiveness of protection measures. The basis for this is an extensive environmental monitoring of course. What does environmental protection mean? And what can hydrography contribute?

Ehlers: There's no monitoring without hydrography because right from the beginning you need to have a look at the local geographical conditions. Especially flow conditions, tidal range, water exchange and natural nutrient availability determine strongly how much an ocean area is influenced by human impact. Often physics and chemistry are looked at separately not to mention marine biology. You must combine all three in order to obtain well-founded and extensive results.

HN: Since 2002 you have been teaching Law of the Sea and Marine Environmental Law at the University of Hamburg. You had to organise that with your regular job for six years. How did you manage that? And does teaching get along with retirement?

Ehlers: Since 1991 I had held lectures on a regular basis, even at Rostock University for a couple of years. In 2002 I became honorary professor at

the University of Hamburg. The excursions into university and legal fields were a great enrichment of the practice-oriented management field. In my function as president I had to take one decision after the other on a daily basis. Therefore, an academic duty was a welcome supplement. Law of the Sea was always like a hobby for me and at the same time an indispensable basis for the maritime administrative tasks during my more than 40-year long career. Insofar, holding lectures was compatible with my job, even if I spent numerous weekends preparing them.

I don't lecture anymore at the University of Hamburg so I am more flexible. However, I teach at the World Maritime University in Malmö (Sweden), at the ITLOS we have a summer school every year and I hold lectures regularly on Malta.

HN: What fascinates you about Law of the Sea?

Ehlers: Since my dissertation about the IMCO, today called IMO, I am fascinated by Law of the Sea because the formulated regulations were always present in my individual professional stages. Most important to me is not only the law in itself but the use of the oceans and their protection. Definitely, this will not be possible without an adequate legal framework. Moreover, the Law of the Sea is still developing and offers many interesting questions.

HN: Do you realise that the Wikipedia entry about you isn't up to date?

Ehlers: The entry was made for my 65th birthday. I haven't looked at it for a long time because I know my biography, but I can imagine that it is outdated. I don't have the posts which were related to my functions at the Federal Maritime and Hydrographic Agency anymore, but I am still engaged in quite a lot of voluntary commitments in the maritime field.

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HN: What would you like to do better?

Ehlers: At my age you don't want to do many things better. I get along with my imperfections although many times I would have liked to have more knowledge in natural sciences. In school these subjects bored me a lot, but later during my career it would have made things easier sometimes.

More patience, not only in former times but also today because it doesn't come with age. Many times things don't work as fast as I want them to.

HN: The last question: What do you know without being able to proof it?

Ehlers: That we need the oceans for our lives and survival. ⚓