Dredging the IADC a 50-year course

Peter de Ridder stepped down from Van Oord to become truly international
Andrew Spurrier reports

Dredging executives often like to portray themselves as civil engineers who just happen to use ships to go about their business. However, some have stronger maritime leanings than others, and Peter de Ridder, president of the International Association of Dredging Companies (IADC), looks to be one of them.

A lifelong yachtsman, he explains without any qualms of conscience that, as a schoolboy, he would rather spend time at the local sailing club than in a classroom.

He says this led to him naturally looking to enter a profession that would keep him in close contact with the sea. De Ridder still enjoys yachting today and he does, theoretically, have more time for it since retiring from operational dredging.

He left his post as operations chief and executive board member at Van Oord, the Netherlands group, at the end of December 2012, after accepting the IADC presidency in September of the same year.

“For me, it was a pretty easy decision,” he tells IHS Maritime, explaining that the job required a good knowledge of the leading international dredging groups that comprise the organisation’s membership, and the people who run those groups.

“A lot of people think that the contractor is interested in making the contract as expensive as possible,” de Ridder said, “and that’s not correct. A contractor is interested in making the project as cheap as possible because then the chance it will go ahead is much bigger.”

In more than four decades in the industry, most of them with Van Oord, de Ridder had worked on pioneering land reclamation and offshore and port projects. His retirement from operational dredging was another factor qualifying him for the post: most IADC members feel that the president should ideally be someone who is not directly tied to a member company.

This structure is explained by the nature of the work carried out by the IADC, which organises a wide range of seminars, conferences, and other worldwide events in order to explain the dredging industry to potential customers and others.

Its work is not, strictly speaking, academic, even if there is an academic side to it; above all, it is not commercial. Bidding for contracts and customer relations is the domain of its individual members, while the IADC’s task is to present the industry’s capacities to those who might use them to carry out their projects.

This involves explaining the industry’s technical capacities and the way they have evolved over the years, as dredgers have gained power and facility, thus reducing the cost of land reclamation for its customers and making bigger projects possible.

The IADC goes further, however. De Ridder says it is today trying to demonstrate to project developers the role dredging groups can play before contract tendering, helping customers to draw up project specifications and budgets and, by making these operations more cost efficient, save them money.

By the same token, dredging companies are increasingly involving themselves in the financing of projects, which they find themselves undertaking with increasing frequency on an engineering, procurement, and construction basis. This aspect is also starting to feature in the work that the IADC carries out for the industry.

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the organisation’s founding in May 1965. This is being marked by special events. A limited-edition book called Beyond Sand & Sea is being published to commemorate some of the industry’s big achievements over the past half-century.

Publicising this anniversary is under way in social media, on the internet, and in the group’s magazine, Terra et Aqua, which is publishing special articles.

The IADC’s annual week-long dredging seminar in June, a regular highlight of its year, will also celebrate the anniversary. It will be held at the Institute for Water
Education in Delft in the Netherlands.

The year’s main event will be a conference
IADC is organising in October in Hong Kong.
The city was chosen because of the landmark
nature of the projects carried out by IADC
members there.

In particular, the IADC hails Chek Lap Kok
airport, calling it “a masterpiece of maritime
infrastructure” and “a turning point for the
modern dredging industry and the beginning
of a building boom in Asia”.

Completed in 1998 and billed as the most
expensive airport construction project in
history, it involved the creation of a large
artificial island through land reclamation and
the levelling of two existing islands.

The scale of the project and the other land
reclamation operations that accompanied it
led to virtually all leading IADC members
taking part, especially Japanese and European
operators. “We were all involved in Hong
Kong at the same time,” says de Ridder, who
speaks of the coming reunion as a chance to
revive what are clearly very fond memories.

De Ridder is due to retire at the end of this
year after three years in post. But he has been
asked to stay on “a little longer”, provided
that the extension of his term is approved at
the annual assembly in Hong Kong.

Assuming this happens, he would become
the organisation’s president as it begins its
next 50 years. De Ridder is confident that the
group will continue for at least that long, yet
does not take it for granted.

In 1965, 38 contractors, then a relatively
small number, from 12 countries formed the
group. Today, the IADC has become large,
multinational organisation.

It is not clear to industry outsiders that
they have a great deal to gain by remaining as
an IADC member. “The companies are so big
now that they can do everything that the
IADC is doing themselves,” de Ridder
acknowledged. “The only difference – and
that’s the extra that the IADC gives – is that
we represent more than just one company.
We represent a group of internationally
operating companies.”

That may not sound like much but it makes
all the difference. The IADC does not try to
sell the skills and capacities of any of its
member groups individually but acts rather as
the interface between the industry and
the public, particularly parties
seeking to develop ports or
reclaim land for
construction.

De Ridder argues
that the
information it
makes
available
assists
developers
to find the
most
cost-
effective
way of
carrying out
projects by
explaining the
different technical
and budgetary
options available.

The IADC has just
seven members of
staff at its head-
quartes in The Hague.
However, with 10 main
member groups and 100 member companies
– taking account of subsidiaries and affiliated
companies – it can call on the technical
expertise and qualified staff of its member
companies to realise its annual publication
and events programme.

“It is an independent body,” de Ridder tells
IHS Maritime. “That’s why the IADC will
survive for the next 50 years.

“Everybody will stay, I’m confident,
because there really is a need for an
independent institution like the IADC.”

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