Border scholar sees missed opportunities on San Diego-Tijuana border

Dutch visiting scholar at SDSU says educational exchanges are key

By Sandra Dibble

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Freerk Boedeltje, a political geographer and border scholar from Holland, has been studying the San Diego-Tijuana border for the past two years. Boedeltje, 35, holds a doctorate from the University of Eastern Finland.

He has been based since 2010 at the Institute for Regional Studies of the Californias at San Diego State University, where he is on a postdoctoral fellowship. He recently shared his perspective in a presentation for the San Diego Association of Governments that discussed chances for increased binational cooperation in the border region.

Q: Why are borders of such interest to you?

A: It's the excitement of going to another country. I went as a kid to Czechoslovakia when it was still communist, with my parents. We had friends there. We would line up in Germany at the border, wait for hours to cross. It was all the secrecy, the unknown. You would not know what was behind that fence.
Being from the European Union, it's very interesting to work with borders because those borders have shifted so much. The internal borders actually disappeared from the European Union; there are no border checks at all.

Q: What's notable to you about the San Diego-Tijuana border, other than it being the world’s most crossed?

A: It's a border with a big paradox. There's the same secrecy going on in terms of security and how tightened the border is, and how big the fences are nowadays. But there's also this huge flow of people and traffic crossing the same border. That to me is the most fascinating thing.

Q: What was your first impression of the San Diego-Tijuana border?

A: The fence, not just one fence, but the triple fence, with all the cameras, detention devices, surveillance roads. I thought to myself: It doesn't make sense to talk about cooperation. The only comparisons in Europe are Ceuta and Meillia, two small Spanish enclaves surrounded by Morocco that are fenced off to prevent migration flows into the European Union.

Q: Overall, how would you compare the San Diego-Tijuana region with the European Union?

A: The European Union is very much interested in cooperation and security. You can have secure borders, but you can also have cooperation. The priority here is much more security than cooperation. There is a lack of willingness to cooperate on a political level.

Q: Is it fair to compare the U.S.-Mexico border with Europe?

A: My research at SDSU did not really compare the two situations, but rather focused on how one can learn from another. In Europe, borders are generally dealt with in a more integrative way. The approach of the EU is ... an active policy to stimulate neighboring countries that are not EU. There is a huge educational exchange sponsored by the EU to bring kids from non-EU neighboring states for one semester or longer. The EU sponsors nongovernmental organizations. for example, those in Belarus that promote women's rights and freedom of speech.

Q: What collaboration are you seeing on the San Diego-Tijuana border?

A: Border 2012 (a U.S.-Mexican environmental agreement) was a success. It was easier than cooperation on planning or economic issues. Maybe it has to do with the fact that the environment doesn't stop at the border.

SANDAG is clearly an example of the interest in cross-border cooperation. It is organizing platforms like the SANDAG Borders Committee. What is difficult is implementing these ideas. That is where the political will comes into play. You can talk about collaboration, but to actually establish and execute common projects, that's a whole different stage.

Q: Do you see any obvious opportunities not being exploited?

A: I would say education. Educating a younger generation about the uniqueness of living in a border region that is so rich in culture and opportunities.

There was a fruitful network between San Diego State and Mexican universities, but after 9/11 and the whole security thing, this whole narrative changed to, "Oh, our students should not go there, even faculty."
Q: Who is responsible for this lack of collaboration?

A: Politicians in the first place. Mexico is very state-centric, so everything is decided from Mexico City, and the border is far away. So it's hard for local governments with few resources to do something. Washington, D.C., is deciding, the Department of Homeland Security is in charge of controlling the border with Mexico, and their agenda is not too much in cooperation but more in defending the border.

Q: Is there anything you've learned here that you would take back with you to Europe?

A: What I like is that on the U.S. side in the San Diego area, a lot of things are bilingual. Even though Spanish is not accepted as an official second language, a lot of things are available in Spanish — even at the Internal Revenue Service or Department of Motor Vehicles. Also in schools and on the street, it is fairly common to switch languages.

In Europe, the language barriers are kind of following the border. Even between Holland and the French-speaking part of Belgium, there is a huge language border. Here it kind of blurs over. I like that, and Californians don't seem to make a big issue out of it.

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