

The Väinameri project.

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The Väinameri project encompasses the areas of Matsalu bay, Vormsi island and south-east part of Hiiumaa island in Estonia, in the area of the enclosed coastal sea called Väinameri or 'the Sea of Straits'. These areas are extremely valuable due to high biodiversity of both terrestrial and marine ecosystems, and the long history of man-changed seminatural ecosystems. The Väinameri project is aimed at restoration and conservation of seminatural coastal ecosystems through assisting the local people in developing small-scale economies. Main areas of the project applications are in farming, handicrafts and ecotourism. Also, awareness building and ecological education are of high priority in the project.

The aim of the Väinameri project is to preserve or reconstruct coastal semi-natural plant associations. It is impossible to solve this problem alone in single action, for no single source would have enough means for the maintenance of such wide areas. Consequently we must create a system that would maintain itself and involve local actors, and should be economically profitable. Farmers' increasing interest in breeding beef cattle and the necessity to find a niche in market of agriculture products has helped to expand extensive natural grazing. Here a new duty has arisen in nature protection – to stimulate marketing of high quality meat bred in clean nature as a single article, to help consumer interested in local production. Handicrafts and local small industries manufacturing from local raw materials too are areas that will be connected with balanced nature exploitation arrangement.

The idea of the project is to some extent similar to the food chain concept in ecology. Local inhabitants, through their economic activities, use various resources of the coastal area, thus changing the landscape into more diverse state. Sustainable character of the human activity would keep the agroenvironmental system in equilibrium. Through assisting wise practices in the coastal area, the Väinameri project would support restoration of valuable areas, and as a parallel process, lead to improvement of social aspects.

Project goals

- A sustainable use of natural resources
- Conservation of biological diversity
- Increased knowledge, participation and involvement of the local residents towards the sustainable development of the area

Expected results

- Maintained and restored biodiversity
- Increased income from local production
- Increased number of nature tourism visitors
- Shifts in the approaches to balanced ecosystem management, agricultural and regional development policies
- Increased awareness in Estonia and neighbouring countries
- Creation of complete production chains (meat, handicraft, tourism) including international links, capacity building of local authorities for enterprise support and thus giving the project a "market"-oriented base.

Activities and Initiatives

1. The Landscape / Grassland management.

Increased using of naturally unfertilised grasslands is a necessity to maintain the area's biological values. Results:

- a) Model pastures/meadows

- b) Establishment of high-quality beef cattle herds
- c) Education
- d) Study visits
- e) Elaboration and marketing of "green" meat brand.
- f) Self-sustained beef cattle production grazing semi-natural grasslands

2. Handicrafts

Handicraft production makes use of the area's natural resources, which are obtained when maintaining the landscape and ensure long-term subsistence for the local residents. Results:

- a) Promotion of handicrafts based on coastal grassland management
- b) Establishment of new marketing solutions (Christmas fairs, market days)
- c) Education
- d) Information leaflets and booklets
- e) Study visits
- f) Labelling (Väinameri brand)
- g) International contacts
- h) Improvement of wool quality – sheep breeding.

3. Nature Tourism

Increase the area's attractiveness for small-scale nature tourism, which adds to the local resident's earning potentials:

- a) Four Tourism packages for nature- and quality tourism (bird watching, orchid visits, handicraft tourism and family at a farm)
- b) Seven nature trails, information leaflets and maps
- c) Study visits
- d) Development of network including international nodes
- e) Education

4. Awareness & Outreach

Outreach of information, experiences and result to general public, media and authorities. Results:

- a) The website in Estonian and English, with possibilities for downloading materials.
- b) Study visits to the Väinameri area from Estonian rural areas, Latvia, and Russia (Olonets project),
- c) Three video films translated in Estonian, English, and Russian, as well as numerous brochures, radio and TV programmes, lectures.

SIDA, WWF SWEDEN, the Estonian governmental sources, non-governmental organisations and private input finance the Väinameri project. Principal partner in Estonia is ELF (the Estonian Fund for Nature). The immediate project management in the Väinameri area is conducted by an NGO Arhipelaag in co-operation with Läänerannik (NGO from Vormsi island), and the Matsalu national park.

The main lessons learned from the project so far are:

- In peripheral areas such as coasts and islands, agriculture may contribute to the nature conservation activities;
- Modern socio-economic system in such areas would benefit from the improved environmental and landscape-related aspects;
- Co-operation with local actors and networking are key issues of reconciling rural development with nature conservation.

The main message from the project is that biodiversity can be an important factor for rural development.

The Väinameri project has, via a regional project executant and local co-ordinators, managed to mobilise a broad variety of local stakeholders in the project area. This has caused many unforeseen but positive side effects – several local NGO's have been established, jobs have been created and the project has affected Estonian practices and served as a model for other areas.

The possibilities for **future continuation** of the project are numerous. The Väinameri project is a part of the WWF's One Europe More Nature process. Also, the Väinameri project serves as a case in the Interreg IIIB project COASTSUST (see www.coastsust.net) An excellent opportunity for continued cooperation is the biosphere reserve programme of UNESCO, namely within the West Estonian Archipelago biosphere reserve. The Väinameri project gave a strong core, enabling to extend the cooperation fishermen, foresters, businessmen, and others.