

Restoration and conservation of important habitats through sustainable agricultural practices, Rusne - LT

1. Policy Objective & Theme

- SUSTAINABLE USE OF RESOURCES: Preserving coastal environment (its functioning and integrity) to share space
- SUSTAINABLE ECONOMIC GROWTH: Balancing economic, social, cultural development whilst enhancing environment

2. Key Approaches

- Integration
- Participation
- Ecosystems based approach

3. Experiences that can be exchanged

This case shows that sustainable agricultural practices can embrace nature conservation and improve the local community economy. It also shows that for action to be successful at the local level, a strong local partner working closely with all stakeholders is an advantage.

4. Overview of the case

Rusne Island is an example of traditional farming practices stimulating the local economy and forwarding conservation goals through good management of the land. A strong local organisation was able to stimulate and work together with all the relevant stakeholders to form a management and action plan and then implement them.

5. Context and Objectives

a) Context

The Nemunas River delta is a Regional Park (1992) covering an area of 28953 ha situated on the Russian/ Lithuanian border. Rusne Island is 5 km² of grassland, fishponds, reed beds, and swampy areas situated in the centre of the delta, 50 km south of Klaipeda town and 10 km west of Silute town. It has six settlements with a total population of 2,230 inhabitants and a long tradition of agriculture and wetland drainage. It also attracts numerous tourists every year with its unique landscape and good recreational facilities. Agricultural and fisheries production is the major activity and the main source of income for the island's population. Agricultural activities include cattle, production of grass forage and other agricultural products. Potatoes, crops and vegetables are grown on arable land that has increased considerably during recent years. The utilised agricultural area covers 2,606 ha. Arable land covers 495 ha (19 percent of the total), whereas pastures and meadows cover 880 and 1,231 ha, respectively. The size of the average farm is 9.5 ha. The vegetation is influenced by, and adapted to, cattle grazing and haymaking. Rusne is situated on the East-Atlantic Flyway, making it of great importance for migrating birds. Several of them are considered internationally important e.g. white-tailed eagle, crane and aquatic warbler. Most of Rusne Island is flooded every spring, after which the remaining water is collected through the well developed network of canals and pumped out into the rivers through a network of polders. The open meadows are especially important for migratory geese, ducks and waders. There are also a large variety of mammals including beaver, elk, wild boar and otter. The fertile sediments facilitate the development of prosperous alluvial grasslands (>2000 ha.) which support rich biodiversity. The use of grasslands was especially intensified during the Soviet period. However, in the beginning of the 90's, after the collapse of the Soviet system, almost all grasslands were abandoned. They became overgrown with scrub and reeds, unsuitable as feeding and breeding

habitat for most of the birds although still used for roof making. The lack of funds, initiatives and capacity of the local farmers impeded a rapid and successful land reform. Low agriculture activity was followed by degradation of grasslands as habitats for the rare and endangered species.

b) Objectives

The main goals of the initiatives taken have been to encourage environmentally sound and sustainable agriculture by management of the abandoned grasslands on Rusne Island. The dual purpose was to improve the local economy and make the grasslands more suitable for breeding and migratory birds. Other objectives were to promote environmental/ecological education within the local population; and to develop ecotourism.

6. Implementation of the ICZM Approach (i.e. management, tools, resources)

a) Management

The authority ultimately responsible for the implementation of agriculture and rural development programmes is the Ministry of Agriculture. On Rusne Island there is a local municipal administration. An NGO, the Lithuanian Fund for Nature, was the driving force behind several initiatives to kick-start the local economy.

b) ICZM tools

The initial measure taken was to mobilise the most enthusiastic farmers, who could become a flagship in a long process of recovery of lost grasslands. Single farmers did not see economic viability in purchase of expensive equipment which would be needed only once or twice a year. Therefore Rusne Fund for Nature acquired the necessary machinery under the condition that the local farmers would take over the land, start normal grazing or mowing and would not allow it change back into reed bed or scrubland. Among the first results was the formulation of the management plan for Rusne Island e.g. grazing and mowing rules which favour successful breeding of grassland and wetland birds. In practice, management activities started in 1998 through incentives provided to the farmers. These are similar to EU agri-environmental measures viz. farmers were paid to provide environmental services e.g. mostly the management of meadows, cutting trees and bushes. A pilot agri-environmental scheme for Rusne Island, the first in Lithuania, was prepared as a short-term project through the SAPARD (Special Accession Programme for Agriculture and Rural Development) programme. The main economic impact was related to silage production. Grass mowed from abandoned meadows and from places with environmental restrictions e.g. late mowing dates because of breeding birds, produces low-quality fodder. However, with the help of an EUCC project, the initiative converted this grass into high-quality fodder (silage) for the participating farmers: milk production also increased. The payments - several thousand litas - within the framework of the agri-environmental scheme have become a source of additional income for the farming community. Furthermore, 50 ha. of grassland areas, which are very important as a breeding place and resting site for migrating geese, is being leased from the local municipality, the first time that a nature protection NGO has leased land on Rusne Island.

A museum/information centre was established on an ethnographic farm-stead, an initiative of the local population. A bird observation tower and information signs were built, and a plan for the protection of the aquatic warbler was drawn up and is being implemented in a number of breeding sites. The initiative has paid significant attention to the provision of information. A newsletter about sustainable farming practices and activities of the Rusne Fund for Nature has been produced and distributed locally. Another new and important feature of the local economy is sustainable tourism development by the farming community e.g. bed & breakfast facilities.

7. Cost and resources

The Lithuanian Fund for Nature has so far gained many grants e.g. €169,450 from the EECONET Action Fund, and a subsidy from the GEF Small Grant Programme.

8. Effectiveness (i.e. were the foreseen goals/objectives of the work reached?)

The results have been a spectacular success and the formerly neglected meadows were already used by geese again during the first winter. Areas previously abandoned and overgrown by bushes and reed beds have been managed and completely restored. Since 1996, silage has been regularly produced, from 2000 three clamps/yr. Milk production has increased (2,000-3,000 l./cow). At the same time, the quality of milk has also increased. The regional park attracts increasing numbers of (foreign) tourists each year. Employment has increased. The farms that make silage are bigger and stronger and are able to sustain themselves whilst others have been decreasing their animal stocks. A milk cooperative was established. Organic farming has now begun. There is now a rural tourism business run by the locals and even some fishermen have started to rent their boats to tourists and extend the recreational services.

9. Success and Fail factors

The mutually beneficial partnership, based on co-operation of nature conservationists, the local NGO, the farming community, the administration of the local district and the regional park administration was instrumental in the success of the venture. All had a common goal, though with different objectives, in the extensive use of grassland. Protection of geese, waders or other rare species is not a stand alone exercise. Only by making it an integral part of daily rural life can a sustainable outcome be guaranteed in the long term. Investing in the future, through the primary school, local teachers and schoolchildren in an awareness campaign also paid dividends. Another factor was a strong national NGO which secured initial, external funds and the establishment of a local NGO by a group of enthusiastic local farmers and intellectuals.

10. Unforeseen outcomes

The local organization will incorporate its aquatic warbler management scheme in other areas where the species is found. The initiative contributed to the protection of 11 of the 12 bird species dependent upon agricultural landscapes which are registered in the Lithuanian Red Book: the populations of five species are increasing whilst the others have remained stable. Similar initiatives, also led by NGOs, are being conducted in neighbouring communities. However, on several grasslands, agricultural activities are beginning to re-intensify leading to overgrazing and, again, a decrease in the natural values of these lands.

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13. Sources

- Best practices in Natura 2000 management Cooperative management of Rusne floodplains, Lithuania (undated) CEEweb for Biodiversity
- Nature Conservation in Rural Policy Emerging Practices in Central and Eastern Europe (2003) The Regional Environmental Center for Central and Eastern Europe
- www.eeconet.org



Best practices in Natura 2000 management (93.05 KB) 



Nature conservation in rural policy (882.66 KB) 