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Best practices in Natura 2000 management

Cooperative management of Rusne floodplains, Lithuania

Country/Region/Town: Lithuania, Klaipeda County, Silute municipality

Natura 2000 site(s) code (if relevant): LTSLUB001

Name/organisation of person collecting the info:

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Can this example be found already in other data bases/publications? Has it been submitted elsewhere, too?

- http://sgp.undp.org/web/projects/9382/restoration_of_natural_habitats_of_the_curonian_lagoon%E2%80%99s_coastal_zone_in_rusne_island.html
- www.eucc.nl/en/policy/rusne_report.pdf
- <http://www.eeconet.org/eaf/nemunas/index.html>
- <http://www.glis.lt/?pid=21&lang=en&project=16>

What is/was the management problem?

Rusne is a flat flood plain situated in the river Nemunas Delta. It is separated from the mainland by Nemunas branch Skirvyte in the south, Atmata in the north and Curonian Lagoon in the west, therefore it is often called Rusne Island. Apart from a few settlements, most of the Rusne Island is flooded every spring. After spring flood is over, the remaining water is collected through the well developed network of canals and pumped out into the rivers through a network of polders. Regular floods and deposits of fertile sediments facilitate the development of prosperous alluvial grasslands.

More than two third of 3000 ha of Rusne area is occupied by grasslands. Alluvial grasslands support rich biodiversity. Primarily it serves as a resting ground for migratory geese, waterfowl and waders. It also supports a variety of rare and endangered bird species, including globally threatened Aquatic Warbler and Corncrake. For centuries these



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grasslands were used for mowing and grazing, and the use of grasslands was especially intensified during the Soviet period. In the beginning of 90'ies, after the collapse of the Soviet system, almost all grasslands were abandoned. It started overgrowing with scrub and reeds and consequently lost its value as feeding and breeding habitat for most of the birds.

Who are the main stakeholders/affected groups, people in this case?

Transition from the collective farms based Soviet agriculture to private, usually very fragmented subsistence farming affected local rural population. Transition from regulatory economic system to free market was not easy and often very painful, as in many Eastern European countries. The lack of funds, initiatives and capacity of local farmers impeded rapid and successful land reform. Low agriculture activity was followed by degradation of grasslands as habitats for rare and endangered species. Therefore all further attempts focused on mobilisation of most enthusiastic and vigorous farmers, who could become a flagship in a long process of recovery of lost grasslands.

What solution(s) were found? How was the problem solved?

In order to stop invasion of scrub and reed into open grasslands, it was necessary to stimulate farmers to start extensive use of these abandoned lands. Lithuanian Fund for Nature received funds from several international donors from 1994 to support activities on Rusne Island. From 2006-2008 Rusne Fund for Nature received also support from GEF Small Grant Programme.

In 1995 a group of enthusiastic local farmers and intellectuals established Rusne Fund for Nature, the first NGO in the area dedicated to nature conservation and sustainable farming. Cooperation of farmers through this NGO made it possible to purchase necessary machinery for mowing and management of abandoned grasslands. For example, removal of scrub and reeds from the area, which was abandoned for many years, requires some initial investments, including reed cutting machine, wood cutter with larger blades, etc. Single farmers did not see economic viability in purchase of such equipment, which would be needed once or twice in his life. Therefore Rusne Fund for Nature acquired necessary



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machinery and recovered most of the abandoned and overgrown grassland, under the condition, that local farmers takes over the land, starts “normal” grazing or mowing and will not allow it change back into reedbed or scrubland.

After the restoration of abandoned grasslands, it was necessary to guarantee their regular mowing or grazing. Local farmers were interested to put their livestock on newly “reclaimed” grasslands, but not many of them were financially strong enough to buy necessary number of cattle. Rusne Fund for Nature received support from UNDP GEF Small Grant Programme in purchasing 16 cows and bulls of Hereford breed. All increment of this cattle was donated to those farmers, who agreed to take care of parent stock and graze their own cattle in most biodiversity important areas of Rusne Island. Also farmers participating of this livestock increment re-distribution programme agreed to stick to certain grazing and mowing rules, which favour successful breeding of grassland and wetland birds.

The first grass in Rusne is ready for harvesting about first half of May. However, mowing of grass so early would cause destruction of bird nest. Farmers argued that mowing of grass in later summer i.e. after 15 of June (when most of young fledglings leave their nests) would not harm nature, but result in dryer hay with very low nutritional value. In order to preserve high nutritional value cattle food, Rusne Fund for Nature suggested farmers to produce silage instead of hay. Farmers who agreed to join “late mowing” programme got access to silage production equipment (e.g. tractor, forks, wrapping material, etc.), which was provided for free by Rusne Fund for Nature.

A lot of farmers or their family members were also involved in various trainings and educational programmes. Most of them focused on tourism development in Rusne Island. Rusne Fund for Nature invested in some tourism infrastructure (e.g. information boards, birdwatching tours, local museum, etc.), which made this place more attractive and increased the tourism potential of the area. As a result, some farmers established bed & breakfast facilities and enjoyed alternative income sources.



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Why do you think it is a best practice example?

It was proved that only mutually beneficial partnership based on cooperation among nature conservationists, the local NGO and local farmers could result in good conservation achievements. In Rusne case, both nature conservationists and local farmers found common denominator – extensive use of grassland. The abandonment of grasslands after the collapse of Soviet system led to failure of conservation of wild birds as well as to failure of local economy. Both were though gradually restored through close cooperation and nature benefited from the restarted economic activities.

What could other practitioners learn from this example?

It was learned, that only cooperation with local stakeholders (especially farmers) can ensure a long lasting perspective for conservation measures. Protection of geese, waders or other rare species is not a stand alone exercise. Only making it an integral part of daily rural life can guarantee sustainable outcome in a long term perspective.
