

The process of establishing sustainable tourism and agriculture in Matsalu National Park - EE

1. Policy Objective & Theme

- SUSTAINABLE USE OF RESOURCES: Preserving coastal environment (its functioning and integrity) to share space
- SUSTAINABLE USE OF RESOURCES: Sound use of resources and promotion of less resource intensive processes/products
- SUSTAINABLE ECONOMIC GROWTH: Balancing economic, social, cultural development whilst enhancing environment

2. Key Approaches

- Integration
- Participation
- Ecosystems based approach
- Socio-economic
- Technical

3. Experiences that can be exchanged

Developing sustainable farming practices for biodiversity in a National Park and introducing sustainable tourism as a means of improving the socio-economic well-being of the local communities.

4. Overview of the case

Sustainable extensive agriculture, which has been a common land use practice in Estonia, has practically ceased. This has meant semi-natural meadows and grazed wetlands are being lost, a major threat in Matsalu National Park where visitor numbers had also dropped. Efforts have been made to re-introduce eco-agriculture through a system of subsidies and formulating sustainable tourism products to attract tourists back to the national park.

5. Context and Objectives

a) Context

Matsalu National Park is situated in western Estonia and is one of the biggest and most important autumn stop-over grounds for migratory birds in Europe. It was founded as Matsalu Nature Reserve in 1957. In 1976, it was declared a RAMSAR site and in 2004 became a National Park, one of five in the country. Matsalu National Park covers 486.4 km² of land and water area encompassing Matsalu Bay along with the delta of the Kasari river and the surrounding floodplain and coastal meadows, reedbeds and woodlands, and also a part of the Väinameri Sea bordering the bay, including more than 40 islands. Matsalu Bay is shallow, brackish and rich in nutrients, 18 km long, 6 km wide but only 1.5 m deep. A total of 275 bird species have been recorded in Matsalu, however, every spring over two million waterfowl pass through. There were 11,655 inhabitants living in the Park and environs in 2003. In addition to bird monitoring, there is an educational programme in the Park.

Despite protection, the area of managed coastal meadows has decreased markedly over the past 50 years as a result of farming intensification which either turns the meadows into fields and cultivated grasslands or simply leaves them out of use. The semi-natural, Matsalu coastal meadows originated as a result of the constant grazing of the coastline and their preservation consequently requires constant grazing (or mowing). Not only has agriculture been in decline but tourism as well.

The peak of visitors and tourists visiting Matsalu was in the middle of the 1960s. From that time on the number of visitors has been constantly decreasing. In 1992-93, there was an absolute minimum with only 1000 visitors. Estonia as a travel target is still little known both to Western European countries and long distant markets; concentrated largely on Tallinn with an over-reliance on Finnish visitors.

b) Objectives

The principal aim of the programme conducted has been to re-introduce traditional farming practices back in to the National park to allow the meadows and reed-beds to recover and prevent further ecological deterioration. A further aim has been to develop a tourism product which will bring tourists back such that the living conditions of the local inhabitants will be improved.

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

a) Management

The Matsalu National Park Administration is responsible for running the Park and falls under the Ministry of the Environment. The Ministry of Economy and Estonian Tourist Board are responsible for decision-making for sustainable tourism whilst local authorities and Tourist Information Offices are responsible at the local level. The remit of farming lies within the Ministry of Agriculture.

b) ICZM tools

In order to prevent the coastal meadows from completely disappearing, a restoration and increased usage of coastal meadows programme was launched in the second half of the 1990s. The Matsalu wetland management plan was approved in 1994 and stated the need to enter into contracts with farmers in order to secure grazing and mowing of meadows. Restoration was initiated in the form of organising work camps in protected areas initially with the help of volunteers. The first international projects ensued and national funding was issued for coastal meadow management in some protected areas. The system was based on one used in Sweden: the farmer was paid on the basis of the number of grazing days, and the number of hectares, if mowing was employed. Pursuant to this, the funding of the management of any kind of meadows is based on the number of hectares managed, irrespective of whether the areas are mowed or grazed. A uniform meadow management system was introduced in Estonia in 2001 and complies with the EU rural development regulation. The funding rate on coastal meadows is 64 euros per ha. In the years 2001-03, more than one hundred thousand euros was paid out in such subsidies to agricultural undertakings operating in the Matsalu wetland. These subsidies are an incentive to use coastal meadows even if the amount of cultivated grasslands is sufficient for needs.

At this time, several donors stepped in by facilitating the necessary investments, providing livestock, electric fences and equipment, including the World Bank, the EECNET Action Fund, the Swedish WWF, SIDA and EU LIFE-Nature. As a result of the executed development and projects the number of sheep and cattle has almost doubled compared to 1996 despite the general decline of Estonian agriculture. In 2003, 1342 ha of coastal meadows were managed in Matsalu under the compensation agreements. A further World Bank funded project to improve the water quality of the Bay was instigated. It aimed to reduce water pollution discharge at two pollution "hot spots" one of which was the watershed draining into Matsalu Bay. Pollution reduction was to be achieved through improvement in the quality, reliability and cost efficiency of water supply and wastewater disposal by the extension and rehabilitation of sewerage and pumping stations. It was accompanied by increases in water and wastewater tariffs.

As part of the Estonian National Tourism Development Plan to enhance the assortment of tourism products, Matsalu NP is being marketed as an area with sand beaches and many attractions. These include: prepared hiking trails, bird watching towers, canoeing and boat-trips on the rivers, hunting, fishing, range shooting, guided tours on nature trails, horseback riding and rental bicycles. Four municipalities now provide tenting or camping sites. There are also cultural (fishermen's villages, churches) and historic sites (hill forts). One innovative attraction is the annual Matsalu International Nature Film Festival which started in 2003. The management plan has a target of increasing the ratio of tourists to day visitors to 50/50 (currently 10/90) by 2015. The number of foreign tourists should increase from 10% to 40%.

7. Cost and resources

The Matsalu Bay Environmental Project cost US\$8.4 m with a World Bank loan of US\$2.0 million, co-financed with US\$3.85 million by the EU, Denmark, Finland, Sweden and World Wide Fund for Nature. A multitude of other grants plus national funding has also been used over the years.

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

As a result of the World Bank project, pollution was reduced to below target levels. The Matsalu Nature Reserve Management Plan has been implemented and high biodiversity ecosystems are being maintained by a return to traditional grazing and mowing. The mowed wetland meadows increased from zero in 1995 to 2,500 ha in 2002, while grazed coastal meadows account for another 1,135 ha. Farming subsidies have not however enabled the farmers to carry out all the necessary investments. There are now around 5000-6000 people visiting the area. The International film festival has been a particular success; in 2003 it received 2500 visitors but has now grown to over 7000 visitors in 2007.

9. Success and Fail factors

The National Park had good pre-conditions for the development of nature tourism as it had a reputation among persons interested in bird watching. The externally funded grants in the initial phase were also very significant factors. The number of local people interested in coastal meadow management and willing to participate increased considerably. They also revised their attitudes towards their surrounding nature: coastal meadows, which had often been considered pastures and hayfields of little value, became to be appreciated for their diverse biota and potential income. Most of the tourist products are deemed to be of medium to good quality but there are still a number of factors and sites that need improvement. The area does have a longer tourist season (April – October) than a resort which provides beach holidays (June – August). The main weakness remains a lack of people educated in tourism and the service area.

10. Unforeseen outcomes

The European Diploma of Protected Areas was awarded to Matsalu nature reserve in 2003 It was also awarded the "Estonian undiscovered treasures 2009 tourism and protected areas award" in 2009 by an international jury organised by the Estonian Tourist Board. The organisation of this competition is part of the international project EDEN (European Tourist Destinations of Excellence) which was initiated by the European Commission in 2006.

11. Prepared by

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12. Verified by

It has not been possible to verify this case.

13. Sources

- Coastal meadow management: Best Practice Guidelines (2004) Ministry of the Environment of the Republic of Estonia
- Estonian Nature Conservation In 2007 (2008) L. Klein (ed.) Estonian Environment Information Centre
- www.elfond.ee
- Project Performance Assessment Report: Haapsalu And Matsalu Bays Environmental Project (2003) Report No.: 26198 The World Bank.
- Tourism and recreation economy development plan for the Matsalu sphere of influence for years 2004-2007 (2004) Enterprise Estonia
- www.agri.ee (Ministry of Agriculture website)
- www.envir.ee (Ministry of Environment website)

-  Coastal Meadow Management (5.04 MB) 
-  Estonian Nature Conservation (2.51 MB) 
-  Project performance assessment report (2.42 MB) 
-  Tourism and recreation economy development plan (926.32 KB) 