

Conserving abandoned semi-natural coastal habitats, an uphill fight for a small country - EE

1. Policy Objective & Theme

- SUSTAINABLE USE OF RESOURCES: Preserving coastal environment (its functioning and integrity) to share space

2. Key Approaches

- Ecosystems based approach

3. Experiences that can be exchanged

A rational spatial planning approach and a substantial financial support from the World Bank and the EU has been applied aiming at preventing the de-population and abandonment of valuable semi-natural coastal NATURA 2000 habitats, particularly, coastal meadows and alvars. These efforts directly contribute to the EU Habitats Directive.

4. Overview of the case

In 2001, a system of nature conservation subsidies for preserving and restoring semi-natural biotic communities was launched. The administrative authorities of each protected area and environmental authorities in each county entered into agreements with land owners for maintaining coastal, floodplain and wooded meadows and grasslands on mineral soils, as well as wooded pastures and alvars. Thus Estonia had for the first time initiated an economic instrument for activities necessary for preserving natural assets outside of the direct state administrative system (including areas under conservation); there was direct communication with land owners. An amendment to the Protected Natural Objects Act established a new type of subsidy – the nature conservation subsidy, which gave the aforementioned economic instrument a legal basis. A special feature of the latter is that, whereas subsidies are generally paid primarily to assist people, the nature conservation subsidy, as the name says, above all supports nature in all its diversity – with the purpose of preserving nature through practical human activities.

5. Context and Objectives

a) Context

Coastal meadows and alvars are common in Western Estonia and on the islands. 25% of Estonia's semi-natural grasslands have vanished during the last 20 years mainly due to abandonment. Unlike in Western Europe, the main reason for the disappearance of coastal meadows in Estonia has been the end of their traditional use. Traditional management of coastal areas has ceased in modern times and that has resulted in the overgrowing processes. Reed is an especially quick invader after the end of grazing. The outcome of overgrowing is a rapid decrease in the diversity of coastal plant communities and in the aesthetic value of coastal landscapes. The challenge is to find possibilities and means to guarantee the continuity of the management of coastal areas to overcome these negative effects.

b) Objectives

The specific objective to be achieved with the ICZM Approach is to preserve the coastal landscape and NATURA 2000 habitats of Western Estonia, to protect the vegetation and nesting and stop-over sites of birds. The timescale associated with implementation and goals achievement should be considered in decades rather than years as this is a regular coastal management exercise. Coastal meadows should be cleaned from reed and bushes every third year at least.

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

a) Management

Coastal habitats in Estonia may be in public (either state or municipal) or private ownership. All coastal habitats which have been taken into protection are accorded an equal level of legal protection regardless of the owner or the authority which has taken the object into protection. Due to the ongoing land reform there are many coastal areas in remote places whose ownership still needs to be specified.

b) ICZM tools

The ICZM tools in this case study fall within the policy, legislative and planning categories. The specific ICZM tools applied in this case study comprise inter-sectoral management plans, new guidelines and direct subsidies. In 1990, the West Estonian Archipelago Biosphere Reserve was established under the UNESCO Man and the Biosphere (MAB) programme. The tasks of the reserve included inter alia participation in regional planning and nature protection programmes, and orientation of local people towards a self-supported, culturally and environmentally sustainable development and integrated coastal management was pursued. The Management Plan for Matsalu Wetland includes setting grazing or mowing contracts with the farmers and paying compensations according to these. The farmers within the Matsalu National Park are paid state grants for managing the meadows. Since 2001, the state supports farmers in the management of valuable semi-natural grasslands.

Efforts have been made by several organizations to restore and manage coastal and floodplain grasslands. They have already prepared several protection regulations for semi-natural grassland conservation areas in Estonia, mowed and restored floodplain grasslands and completed an inventory of the semi-natural grasslands. In 2000, Estonia joined the Life-Nature programme and has, among other uses, employed it to organize protection for natural assets in the Matsalu National Park, Haademeste coastal wetland complex and Kopu peninsula. The aim of the "Boreal Baltic Coastal Meadow preservation in Estonia" project supported by the Life-Nature programme was to preserve coastal meadows in four Estonian coastal counties (16 sites with a total area of 1572 ha). This was achieved through provision of compensation to the farmers for mowing and grazing; procurement and giving/renting suitable cattle and machinery to local farmers. Another aim of the project was to rescue the remaining population of Natterjack toad (*Bufo calamita*) and establish reserve populations in adjacent suitable habitats. The aim of "Restoration and management of Haademeste wetland complex" project was to restore the water regime of coastal wetland (coastal meadow and bog) and to manage remaining meadows with the help of local farmers.

7. Cost and resources

Information not available.

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

During recent years, more attention has been paid to reconciling agriculture with nature conservation interests, and at restoring formerly extensive semi-natural landscapes in Estonia. The implementation of the nature conservation subsidy system enhanced possibilities for extensive grazing as the principal means to maintain coastal meadows. Support for grazing and other ways of managing conservation of valuable coastal habitats and species was provided through the EU environmental cooperation programme, Life-Nature.

9. Success and Fail factors

Conservation of endangered coastal bird and plant species and their habitats is complicated because of their narrow ecological specialisation. The preservation of various species requires large areas of coastal meadows with a diverse management regime, e.g. low-grazed turf with a high grazing load for dunlin, small pools of water on large open coastal meadows for black-tailed godwit, which does not tolerate intensive grazing of its habitat, low vegetation but also access to land with higher vegetation for ruff, etc. Continuous funding is critically important for the success of the programme.

10. Unforeseen outcomes

The Act on Protected Natural Objects (1998), fixed the land use provisions for a land-owner whose real estate is situated in a protected area. However, these regulations do not necessarily ensure the proper land management and the follow-up of the prescribed protection measures. One of the outcomes of the conservation of abandoned semi-natural coastal habitats is Estonia is that the territory of the state-owned protected areas is decreasing in years and this process is likely to continue in the future.

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13. Sources

- Estonian Nature Conservation in 2007. Estonian Environment Information Centre, Tallinn 2008



Estonian Nature Conservation in 2007 (2.51 MB) 