

Opening speech

Ladies and Gentlemen welcome to today's conference on the 3Water project. I am glad to see so many of you and especially pleased to welcome the representatives of the European Commission and of the Flemish Region.

The aim of this conference is to highlight the importance of involving private landowners in the effort to establish and maintain the Natura 2000 network. Especially considering the added value they can bring to nature conservation projects involving sustainable land use and land management. These and other aspects will be presented to you today and I hope they will spark an interesting discussion.

Before I move on allow me to give my views on the Natura 2000 network, its scope and how the ELO can contribute towards its future developments.

Regarding the scope, Natura 2000 is not simply about nature protection – in the sense of creating strictly “fenced” natural reserves – on the contrary it envisages an active role played by humans, who contribute to improving biodiversity by a responsible coexistence within the same environment. Therefore its objective is clearly not to eliminate existing or potential socio-economic activities, but to combine biodiversity with socio-economic aspects. Although it is a huge challenge to find a compromise between many, often conflicting interests, it is the only possible way to ensure a truly sustainable approach: which should include not only the environmental aspects, but also the economic and social ones.

Having said this it is clear that the objectives and scope of Natura 2000 are completely in line with what the ELO stands for, and therefore with the interests of landowners. However, for various reasons (including the top-down approach used in the designation process) there is still a strong degree of misinformation and resistance to the implementation of Natura 2000 within the various Member States. Landowners feel excluded from the process. Their opinion and experience were not taken into account during the designation process and they fear what the future will bring.

If we look at Belgium not too long ago there was a lot of negative perception amongst stakeholders about Natura 2000. I am happy to see that today the situation is improving, also thanks to the joint efforts of the ELO, Limburgs Landschap, Ontwikkeling Vijvergebied Midden-Limburg, Agentschap voor Natuur en Bos, Regionaal Landschap Lage Kempen, Hasselt Municipality and the Municipality of Zonhoven.

I believe this project has made it clear that the greatest opportunities for us is to improve the perception of nature conservation projects amongst land owners, while offering economical and practical solutions for a sustainable coexistence of humans with nature. In return we ask first of all for the recognition of what land owners are doing and have done for generations in terms of dedicated and responsible land management. Only by starting off with mutual respect it is possible to build cooperations. While it is unfortunately true that there are examples of clearly unsustainable and un-environmental practices carried out by some landowners, it is

foolish and narrow-minded to consider the entire category as following the same practices and having the same objectives. If we look carefully we discover that land owners are not only looking to maximise their profit. Sure they must make sure that their land provides them with an adequate living, but they possess a quality which is unique to other categories: the emotional attachment to their land which is the fruit of their deep connection and understanding of nature, particularly in their area.

It is precisely these qualities: practical sense and emotional attachment, which can provide the best added-value to nature conservation projects in the context of LIFE projects and Natura 2000. The solutions are there, but first landowners need to be recognized as the providers of these solutions and not as simple executors of measures imposed upon them in the name of “the greater picture”.

This brings me to why partnership is so important: it ensures that common goals and objectives are shared amongst the actors involved in the implementation of a project. Furthermore, experience has shown that projects which created solid partnerships amongst stakeholders have a higher rate of success because of increased legitimacy and diversifies funding opportunities.

Of course, true partnerships can only be achieved with the participation of all stakeholders involved in a project; that is why we carried out a study specifically to identify common enabling factors as well as obstacles shared by a number of Life-Nature best projects. The objective of this study has been to understand the context of the current lack of participation and to clearly identify when, how and who to involve in order to improve the negotiation process within a Life-Nature project.

Today I am happy to present to you the results of the LIFE 3Water project in Midden-Limburg, the results obtained by our analysis on stakeholder’s perception of the Natura 2000 network and the preliminary results of the best-practice review on the participation of private landowners in nature conservation projects.

Without further delay I leave the floor to VESNA VALANT – member of the Cabinet of Commissioner Potocnik – and in doing so I ask you to keep in mind the overall message which is at the very core of this conference:

LAND OWNERS ARE SOLUTION PROVIDERS FOR THE SUSTAINABLE MANAGEMENT OF NATURA 2000 AREAS AND THEREFORE HAVE A ROLE TO PLAY IN SHAPING NATURE CONSERVATION MEASURES.

Thank you for your attention

Presentation of LIFE 3Water project

LIFE 3 WATER objectives:

- 1) To restore and conserve the following habitats and species in the area of “Vijvergebied Midden-Limburg”

Habitats:

Oligotrophic waters of type 3110

Oligo-to mesotrophic standing waters of type 3130

Wet heath lands of type 4010

Dry heath lands of type 4030

Hydrophilous tall herb fringe communities of type 6430

Species:

Bittern

Tree frog

- 2) To establish a strong and sustainable **participation of the group of private landowners** and a **close collaboration between all stakeholders** involved in the management of the area.
- 3) To establish a sustainable basis for the conservation of the targeted species and habitats on the long term through special attention to the **synergies between ecology, education and economy in the area (triple-E approach)**.
- 4) To **enhance public awareness of Natura 2000** on a local; regional and national level.
- 5) To **demonstrate**, and further develop, a best practice method in how to reach, motivate and involve the group of private landowners as a significant and reliable partner in the restoration, conservation and management plans for Natura 2000 areas.

Actions to reach these objectives have included:

- **For the restoration of habitats:** restoration of the ponds and dikes, removal of organic layer, restoration of the hydrological regime.
- **For the restoration of the Bittern:** restoration of the hydrological regime, restoration of ponds and open areas, extension and improvement of the reed beds and fish availability, creation of predator-free breeding areas, creation of additional foraging areas and no-disturbance zones.
- **For the tree frog:** restoration of aquatic reproduction habitats, restoration of land habitats for foraging and hibernation.
- **Landowners' participation:** info meetings, publications and dedicated articles, guided tours, good contact with landowners (provided by ELO), clear agreements and commitments, after-Life continuation plan.
- **Education and communication:** study on communication and education, study on participation, establishment of a website, educational info-meetings for the local and regional population, material such as articles, brochures and videos, education packages for schools and special trainings for guides.

In general, the project area is of high value and importance because:

The area is especially important and best known for its unique number and variety of pond ecosystems, bird species and heath gradients. This project area is essential for the maintenance of 6 of the 9 species listed in the Habitats and Birds Directive in Flanders and it is very important for the maintenance of three other species.

The project area is characterized by hosting a variety of habitats such as ponds and marshes, which are essential for a larger number of threatened species in Belgium.

The main reasons for choosing this area have been:

- 1) most habitats and species were not in good conditions,
- 2) land fragmentation posed a problem,
- 3) many different private landowners could be involved in the project giving it strong legitimacy and making it an ideal showcase,
- 4) the area presented a lot of potential for restoration.

This project will contribute an important gain not only in terms of habitats and species, but in terms of coherence, it provides a “stepping stone” for the establishment of regional and national targets in Belgium for the establishment of the Natura 2000 network.

Main problems & threats for conservation of biodiversity

- **Water problems** in terms of quantity (lack of overall water management plan addressing different needs); and quality lack of waste water management in one of the neighbouring municipalities.
- **Fragmentation of habitats** which had a serious impact on the richness and breeding conditions of the species on site.
- **Reforestation and afforestation** has a negative impact on targeted species because they require more open landscape and good quality reed-beds, which are reduced by reforestation and afforestation.
- **Predation** particularly by fox and marten (for Bittern), but also indirectly by cormorant and Heron. Predation of tree-frog is mostly due to exotic fish species.
- **Abandonment of traditional land/pond use and management** which has strongly affected the conservation status of the targeted habitats and species.
- **Intensification of land/pond use** which is no longer caused by intensive fish farming (as in the past) but today is rather caused by increased pressure by people either living in the area (sewage, urbanisation, afforestation) or taking unguided tours (more traffic).
- **Lack of public awareness** which covers almost all stakeholders (from landowners to public authorities, to locals and visitors) and causes direct (disturbance, damage) and indirect (lack of support) threats to the area.

Actions which will be carried out or continued after the end of this project

The main recurring activity will be to keep the landscape by preventing afforestation and periodically mowing of certain areas on the project site.

The communication and educational plans will be further used to continue raising public awareness on Natura 2000, the website will be updated by the ELO and dissemination of project results will continue through the current networks.