



PROJECTS

The LIFE+ Project 3WATER



The 3WATER project aims to restore and conserve specific habitat types and species of European importance in Belgian Midden-Limburg. The project is situated in the area designated under the Nature Directives (the Habitats and the Birds Directive). The project specifically targets the Bittern (*Botaurus stellaris*) and the Tree Frog (*Hyla arborea*). To do this, their habitats are expanded and protected and they will have a better chance to settle and procreate. Next to this conservation effort, the project aims to implement sustainable regional development through a synergy between **Ecology, Economy, and Education**: the three E's.

The 3WATER project is an exceptional program that has established a unique and close cooperation between both public and private landowners, as well

as other important stakeholders. These (local) partnerships include the Flemish Agency for Nature and Forest (Agentschap voor Natuur en Bos - ANB), an association of private landowners called the OVML (Ontwikkeling Vijvergebied Mid-den Limburg), the national park Regionaal Landschap Lage Kempen (RLLK), environmental NGO Limburgs Landschap, the city of Hasselt, and the community of Zonhoven. It is supported by the EU.

The Bittern and Tree Frog are the 'flagship species' of the project, with specific environmental demands; they need a (breeding) place safe from predators, reeds to hide in, open places, and healthy water quality. Restoring and expanding habitats for these two species will also help other species to thrive in the project area.

The ELO provides the project coordination for this innovative project, and plays a key role in establishing and maintaining good relations between all the above mentioned stakeholders, both public and private.

• 3WATER ACTIONS IN 2012

During 2012, the works and actions around the 3WATER sites proceeded apace. With a number of different stakeholders working together to improve Tree Frog and Bittern habitats, as well as the surrounding nature, the 3WATER site was a hive of activity in 2012. The OVML, the association of private landowners, cut down a number of trees to 'open up' the countryside – this will help the Bittern go from their feeding grounds in the ponds to their living space in the forest with less interference. At the same time, ANB restored two ponds for the flagship species, as well as creating islands in the middle as a safe space for the Bittern to have their young. Their activities also included the restoration of grasslands as well as wet and dry heath; similar works were also undertaken by the city of Hasselt. At another location in the project, Limburgs Landschap prepared the ground for the reintroduction of heather; cutting down into the top-soil, removing root systems, and laying the groundwork for 2013.



Providing Training for Area Guides.

This year, the project stakeholders made a special effort to create a bond between the 3WATER works and the local inhabitants and communities. 33.000 local people were invited to the open information meeting at Domain Bovy, in Heusden-Zolder on the 28th of February, along with stakeholders, (local) media, and politicians. At this meeting, ELO staff and others told a full house about the project, the works involved, and the amazing cooperation between all the partners. After three hours, the 150 guests were able to ask questions, and most were not only satisfied, but impressed by the quality of 3WATER!

To further help educate people about the 3WATER project and the importance of Natura 2000, the ELO put out a number of educational tools for both local people and those all across Europe. The new information journal was published



in 2012; a beautiful full-colour brochure that addresses the issues around this project. A specific education package for schools was also produced in 2012, as well as a study on the same topic. The results of which can be found on the project website: www.3water.eu

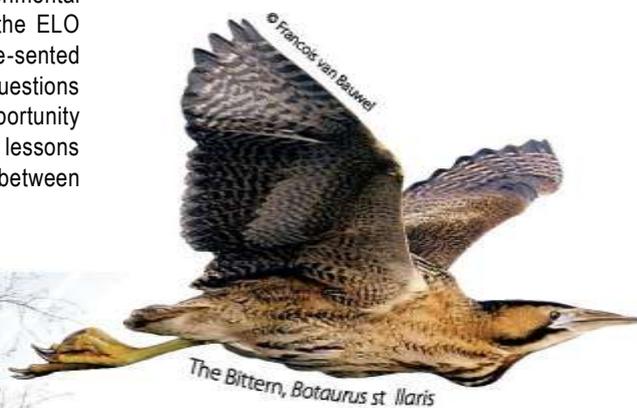
For young inhabitants, the ELO organised a guided tour of the project for three primary schools from Hasselt in May and for all primary schools from Heusden-Zolder in September, and showed the children the importance of nature and green areas - a guide led them through the area and the children had a chance to meet the Tree Frog, one of the 3water flagship species. In the afternoon they played a game that is specially designed to teach children about nature conservation. It is initiatives such as these that help educate and involve a whole new gen-

eration in the importance of conserving biodiversity and appreciating European efforts in this field.

The broader European public, as well as EU policy makers, had a chance to meet and discover the 3WATER project at various events throughout the year. These included, among others, the 5th Forum for the Future of Agriculture in March, the joint conference in Prague of the Young Friends of the Countryside and the European Club Prague in September, as well as the EU Green Week – the biggest European event regarding environmental policy in May. At these events, the ELO and 3WATER stakeholders presented their stand and answered any questions that guests had – an excellent opportunity to spread the knowledge and lessons learned from this collaboration between public and private actors.

● WHAT TO EXPECT IN 2013

The project's main works are expected to be completed in the coming year, including a new car park for visitors and observation walls to watch the new Bittern breeding grounds without disturbing the wildlife. To connect guests to the landscape, a series of pathways will be constructed, as well as a brand new visitor centre where, after the project ends, the education of new generations can continue.



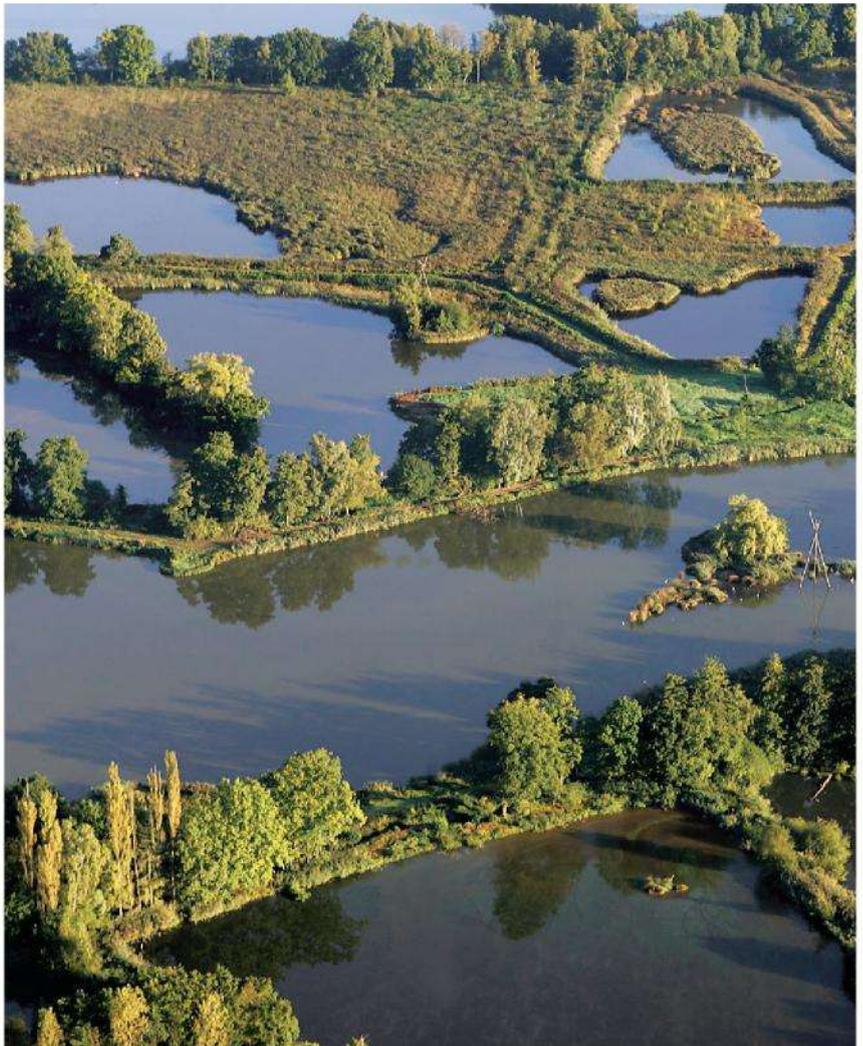


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As far as the major terrain works are concerned, the OVML will finish restoring habitats for their flagship species, both around the ponds and on land. The Tree Frog and Bittern have different needs that will be met in the coming year; fish-filled waters for the Bittern to feed, and fish-free ponds so the Tree Frog can safely lay its eggs. ANB, meanwhile, will continue to restore the ponds and improve grasslands as well as wet and dry heath. In 2013, they will expand their activities to the restoration of the Wijwenheide; yet another part of the 3WATER area. Limburgs Landschap will finish what they started last year and restore the heather on its prepared grounds, and also restore the favourite land habitat for the Treefrog: the long grass next to the ponds!



At the final conference, taking place on the 10th of December 2013, the final 3WATER poster and brochure will be unveiled. At this time, we are sure that we can say that public and private hands working together are a true role model for nature conservation around Europe and beyond. Through this program, we can help allay landowners' concerns about the impact of Natura 2000, and will help them become an even more positive partner in future projects.



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