



After LIFE conservation plan

Action F.3.

LIFE to Alvars project

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November, 2019

LIFE to Alvars project is implemented with the contribution of the LIFE+ financial instrument of the European Union

Introduction.

This paper is a report after LIFE conservation plan, compiled in the frames of LIFE+ project called LIFE to Alvars carried out in West Estonia. The main aim of the project is to restore 2500 hectares of alvar grasslands together with reintroduction of traditional management, livestock grazing. The goal of the report is to summarize the actions planned during the project duration that would ensure the long term sustainability of the project results.

Involvement of local farmers and landowners

During the whole project duration, efforts have been made to ensure the continuous management of restored alvars after the end of the project. Management contracts have signed with local farmers that obligate them to carry on grazing on restored alvars until 2024. 60 local farmers have been involved in the project through contracts with Environmental Board. Land lease contracts between farmers and private landowners or State Forest Management Centre are also signed and valid until 2024. The most realistic remaining threat is that some livestock owners would give up grazing the restored project areas as mainly the older people are dealing with livestock breeding. Fortunately the new generation of farmers also exists and general interest towards managing such a large areas is not poor if the restoration actions are finished. The sustainability of the management activities initiated during the project will be the responsibility of EB and SFMC also after the project: EB is responsible for organising the management activities of such protected meadows and SFMC is a land owner responsible for renting out the state owned protected alvar grassland areas for livestock keepers.

Financing

The long-term management of the restored project areas will be assured through the measures of the Common Agricultural Policy of the EU. The areas included to the official national semi natural meadows inventory database are eligible to apply for the management subsidy paid from the sources of the Estonian Rural Development Plan (RDP, 2014-2020). Currently the RDP for 2021- 2027 is under preparation and we can be confident that the management subsidy for the semi natural grassland management will continue and will be improved based on the information gathered during this financing period. The subsidy for grazing alvar grasslands in protected areas is also included there. Project team has given valuable information into preparing the frame for the semi natural grassland management measure for the next financing period. For example, a recent study by the ESSCA showed that during this financing period about 500 hectares of alvar grassland fell out of the management scheme as on site checks concluded that the managed areas have grown to be covered with junipers and shrubs in too high percentage of the area. Historically these areas were not kept open with just grazing but wood for heating and handicraft was collected parallel to grazing. In order to avoid once restored areas falling out from the management again new management measure foresees a mechanical removal on regrowth once in a five year period by the farmer.

Long-term economic benefits realize through new business opportunities for local farmers and tourism entrepreneurs. As the areas restored are large, the grazing gives direct income to a

number of entrepreneurs dealing with the later management of the project areas and creates employment opportunities at rural areas. There have been some cases where young farmers have started with cattle/sheep grazing in the restored alvar areas and given up their city job. Now when the restoration is finished, the area kept in favourable conditions and the information boards established the local nature tourism entrepreneurs can add project areas to their programs. Already we can see nature tourism emerging on the restored areas. In June and July orchid trips are organized to the project areas. Another economic benefit opportunity would be available for the livestock breeders if they start to co-operate with local restaurants. It would need common marketing from both sides but a local “meadow meat” could be a potential sales article especially for the visitors from abroad or more aware of that concept quite common there. We have a good example of that from the Muhu island farmers coop doing just that. For the local landowners an additional income source is generated by enabling renting out their land to the livestock owners managing the restored areas: now there is a realistic demand for this land that was not there before the restoration started. As a new effective approach in terms of restoration technique was developed, this can also be applied in the restoration of other semi natural grasslands in Estonia generating additional indirect benefit for the stakeholders involved.

Infrastructure

All the restored areas are equipped with suitable grazing infrastructure. Farmers have enough sheep and cattle to manage the areas by grazing annually. Project team has put effort into ensuring that there are enough sheep and cattle and in case of shortage we have assisted the farmers to apply additional financing from the Environmental Investment Centre measures to purchase grazing animals. Number of animals owned by the farmers participating in the project has raised by more than 2700 according to the information from the ARIB.

Legal situation

All the restored areas are part of the Natura 2000 network and all the areas have approved management plans. This ensures that activities that would damage the restored habitats are eliminated. No ploughing, fertilizing, reseeding, planting, digging, building or other damaging activities are allowed on these sites.