



European Natura 2000 Award

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Socio-economic benefits award

2018 Socio-economic benefits category winner: LIFE to alvars: restoration and grazing reintroduction for 2500 hectares of Estonian alvar grasslands

Applicant: Environmental Board of Estonia

Location: Estonia

Natura 2000 site: 16 Natura 2000 sites in Estonia

Website: <https://life.envir.ee/english-project-life-alvars>



European Commissioner for Environment, Maritime Affairs and Fisheries, Karmenu Vella, with Diane Mitchell, jury member from COPA COGECA with Bert Holm from the Estonian Seminatural Communities Conservation Association and Annelly Esko from the Estonian Environmental Board.

“We were surprised and delighted to receive the Award” said Annelly Esko from the Estonian Environmental Board after the ceremony.

Alvar grasslands are a priority habitat under the European Habitat Directive. Estonia has a special responsibility for its conservation, as one third of the total habitat in Europe occurs in this country. By the mid-1980s, the situation with the traditional management of this habitat was near catastrophic: most of the 9800 hectares of alvar grasslands occurring in Estonia was heavily overgrown with shrubs and trees, while only 2000 hectare was grazed and in a more-or-less satisfactory condition. “For this reason, we realised a long-term effort was needed and had already set up agreements with 300 farmers during the proposal stage of the project, before we had even got the funding.” Mr. Holm, from the Estonian Seminatural Communities Conservation Association, added.

The aim of the project “LIFE to alvars” was to restore 2,500 ha of alvar grassland in 19 Natura 2000 sites and to involve local farmers in the long-term management of the restored sites. Approximately 600 landowners in 25 project areas were contacted to prepare the restoration actions and ensure subsequent management through grazing. “We could not have done this without the local communities and the local farmers. All the hard work is actually done by them. Our role was to create the situation where farmers could benefit from the work that they are doing on grassland”, continued Ms. Esko. 1,400 ha of alvar grassland have been restored so far by using heavy forestry machinery. Cleared areas were prepared for grazing by installing fences, water troughs, animal shelters and access roads. Contracts with private landowners preparing the restoration of an additional 550 ha have been signed.

All restored sites became eligible for CAP agri-environmental payments which ensure the viability of both farming activities and the habitats over the longer term. In addition, the project has helped farmers to create additional revenue from the grassland management by organising an Added Value Products Working Group for the

farmers. The working group has a dual mandate: to find suitable uses for the timber harvested during the restoration actions, and to better capture the value chain of the products derived from the extensive grazing (meat and wool from the livestock). "Ensuring that farmers can make an income from the work means that it is sustainable in the future. Similar measures funded through the national Environmental Investment Centre and the European Rural Development Fund play an important part. But the fact that farmers can also market products from a shop right next to the site is really key, both for them and for raising awareness with tourists", said Mr. Holm.

In order to successfully market the meat, a cooperative was formed, which is in the process of establishing a local slaughterhouse to reduce transportation costs. Also, the cooperative is introducing a new high-end brand for its products: Muhu meat. For the marketing of the wool, the working group is trying to develop sufficient economies of scale by combining production and being able to offer output volumes attractive for wool processors.

The project has produced other benefits as well: the grazing of the sites does not only produce income for the farmers, but also for other businesses along the value chain. As a by-product, the landscape of the restored site has become more attractive to visitors. By reintroducing a profitable land use on the sites, the project was able to change the public notion of Natura 2000 from being an instrument that restricts land use options to one that can create new income opportunities. "Our work is definitely transferable to other areas. But planning needs to start early to engage so many people. We would definitely encourage others – the results are worth it!" finished Ms. Esko.

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