



WG ICZM

5th Meeting

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Proposal: The meeting is invited to discuss the document

Operation Corncrake – a voluntary nature conservation project in the valley of Varde River

The Varde River is the only remaining large river in the Danish Wadden Sea to have escaped regulation through dikes and locks. During the 1980s the estuary and the surrounding meadows were, however, subject to agricultural intensification and became a major centre for the production of grass for feeding pellets, through the draining of wet areas and a heavy use of fertilizers. With the prospect of a possible crash in grass pellet prices, the Varde Farmers Union began exploring ways to change agricultural practices in the area. They found that the areas would be ideally suited for agri-environmental schemes, which would give them at least a 20-year span of subsidies and activity. However, for these schemes to be eligible, the fields had to be restored to their former wetter state.

The Ministry of Environment recognised this to be an ideal opportunity to improve the conservation status of the areas as well. Therefore, in partnership with the Ministry of Agriculture, the former County of Ribe and the local farmers union, a LIFE project was launched to restore the SPA. The objective was to determine the best hydrological asset for each of the 13 compartments in the project area and to construct an extensive system of sluices and dams in ditches to allow for the rewetting of the areas. Once this was done and the farmers agreed to several restrictions, such as a ban on fertilizer use, they were able to access the local agri-environment schemes. The final result was that around 260 landowners joined the agri-environmental agreements by the end of the project and 2.488 ha, or 92 % of the initial target of 2.700 ha, was restored to a level where it could enter long-term agri-environmental agreements, securing its conservation over the next 20 years. Each agri-environment plan follows the prescriptions appropriate for the conservation of the area. Moreover, even the landowners outside the project site were interested in joining the agri-environmental agreements and the project is also a major component in the coming Wadden Sea National Park. The results of the project form part of the nature and cultural heritage extension carried out in the area.

EU ICZM Principle	Operation Corncrake – a voluntary nature conservation project in the valley of Varde River
<p>(a)</p> <p>A broad overall perspective (thematic and geographic), taking into account the interdependence and disparity of natural systems and human activities with an impact on coastal areas</p>	<p>Broad overall perspective (geographic): ‘Operation Corncrake’ was initiated to allow farmers to continue owning and farming in the Varde River Valley while at the same time restoring natural values in the only remaining large river in Denmark to have escaped from regulation. The name of the project was chosen as a popular reference to one of the birds forming the basis for nominating the area an SPA.</p> <p>Broad overall perspective (thematic): The use of agri-environmental schemes for long-term conservation and involvement of local stakeholders to secure acceptance, ownership and</p>

	<p>participation as well as long term sustainability both economically and biologically.</p> <p>Disparity and interdependence As an SPA and at the same time a privately owned agricultural area with an intensive production of grass pellets the Varde River Valley contained a possible conflict between nature conservation and farming interests. Furthermore, the crash in grass pellet prices threatened to undermine the financial foundation for farming in the area, thus potentially leading to declining agricultural activity. With less agricultural activity the wetlands and meadows in the river valley might become overgrown and of less value to bird species that formed part of the background for appointing the area an SPA.</p> <p>While on one hand threatening the financial stability of farming in the valley the crash in grass pellet prices also provided the incentive to consider more environment friendly options.</p> <p>Bringing local authorities and farmers together in a steering committee for the project enhanced cooperation and mutual recognition. The cooperation furthermore forms the platform for the ongoing nature and cultural heritage extension work in the valley.</p> <p>A long term threat to the success of the project exists in the fact that the agri-environmental agreements are limited to 20 years and the participation of farmers is likely to diminish if the financial compensation ends. The present agreements will end in 2018-2022.</p>
<p>(b)</p> <p>A long-term perspective which will take into account the precautionary principle and the needs of present and future generations</p>	<p>The long-term perspective of Varde River Valley is a continued effort to restore, secure and further develop the natural values of the area as an important part of the Danish Wadden Sea National Park.</p> <p>For this to happen it is envisaged to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Secure the continued support from farmers through long term agri-environmental schemes or similar arrangements • Obtain the cooperation from landowners in the area who are not yet taking part in the project • Carry out more nature restoration activities further upstream as part of the ‘Houting Project’ with funding from the EU Life (houting is a very rare fish species now only surviving in the Danish part of the Wadden Sea).
<p>(c)</p> <p>Adaptive management during a gradual process, which will facilitate adjustment as problems and knowledge develop. This implies the</p>	<p>Management and conservation targets for the species forming the basis of nominating Varde River Valley an SPA and EU Habitat site provided the background for the LIFE project that preceded the agri-environmental schemes that secured the financial incentive for farmers to join the project.</p> <p>The steering committee for the project was set up with representation from both authorities, farmers and other key stake holders offering a forum for balancing scientific information against farming and recreational interests.</p>

<p>need for a sound scientific basis concerning the evolution of the coastal zone.</p>	
<p>(d)</p> <p>Local specificity and the great diversity of European coastal zones, which will make it possible to respond to their practical needs with specific solutions and flexible measures.</p>	<p>The Varde River Valley consists of mainly privately owned farmland and the farmers are organised in farmers unions who greatly assisted in initiating the project.</p> <p>SPA and EU habitat status as well as protection through the Danish Nature Conservation Act made the local and regional authorities responsible for monitoring developments in the valley.</p> <p>The joint project brought nature conservation, recreational and farming together making farmland management much more environmentally friendly and at the same time also economically sound.</p>
<p>(e)</p> <p>Working with natural processes and respecting the carrying capacity of ecosystems, which will make human activities more environmentally friendly, socially responsible and economically sound in the long run.</p>	<p>Operation Corncrake was given its name to highlight the nature restoration target, i.e. to the valley to a state that will possibly bring the corncrake back as a breeding bird in sustainable numbers. The project thus presents the participating farmers as being environmentally friendly.</p> <p>Raising water levels in the meadows and banning the use of fertilizers and pesticides greatly reduces the influence from farming on the surrounding environment and lowers the nitrogen and sediment load going to the Wadden Sea.</p> <p>Reduced grazing pressure, late cutting and no use of irrigation through spraying improves the habitat for a number of birds either migrating through, resting or breeding there.</p>
<p>(f)</p> <p>Involving all partners concerned (economic and social partners, the organisations representing coastal zone residents, non-governmental organisations and the business sector) in the management process, for example by means of agreements and based on shared responsibility.</p>	<p>Operation Corncrake was initiated by two local farmers unions and has subsequently been joined by the Directorate for Food, Fisheries and Agri Business, Ribe County (from 2007 substituted by Varde Municipality) and the Forest & Nature Agency.</p> <p>Ornithologists, nature conservationists, hunters and other users all influence the decision making and together with the general public they are kept informed of the project through nature extensionists and the local nature& cultural centres.</p> <p>The Danish Wadden Sea Advisory Board made up of NGOs, local authority and government institutions follows the progress of the project on a regular basis.</p>

<p>(g)</p> <p>Support and involvement of relevant administrative bodies at national, regional and local level between which appropriate links should be established or maintained with the aim of improved coordination of various existing policies. Partnership with and between local, regional and national authorities should apply when appropriate.</p>	<p>Apart from the coordination bodies described above the Varde River Valley as an SPA and EU habitat site has been part of the ongoing discussions to set targets for the coming Water and Habitat Plans under the Waterframe and Habitat Directives. Formal cooperation bodies were established for this purpose between municipalities with interests in water bodies draining to the Wadden Sea. Additionally,</p> <p>As part of the coming Wadden Sea National Park a common National Park Plan will be developed in a close cooperation between authorities at all levels as well as NGOs and the general public. In accordance with the National Parks Act a National Parks Foundation will be established with an independent board and an advisory committee to discuss all matters with reference to management of the national park including the Varde River Valley.</p>
<p>(h)</p> <p>Use of a combination of instruments designed to facilitate coherence between sectoral policy objectives and coherence between planning and management.</p>	<p>Operation Corncrake was established with initial funding from the EU Life programme supporting the implementation of EU Water policy, more specifically integrated river basin management (IRBM) focussing on issues such as river habitats and species conservation, river restoration, and river basin management.</p> <p>The initial restoration phase was followed up with implementation of agri-environmental schemes operated by the Directorate for Food, Fisheries and Agri Business thus reflecting national priorities to reduce nutrient matter load from farmlands as stated in the Action Plan for the Aquatic Environment III 2005-2015. Furthermore, the project supported the regional policies for nature restoration and gave rise to the formulation of a separate amendment (no. 1) to the Regional Plan for Ribe County 2006-2016 with associated Environmental Impact Assessment.</p> <p>As mentioned above Varde River Valley will form part of the coming national park in the future and thus come under national park planning. National Park planning will by law follow Natura 2000 planning.</p>

Conclusion

This project represents an excellent “case study” showing the potential of combining funding for nature restoration (in this case EU LIFE) to favour long-term management agreements within agri-environmental schemes. The initial LIFE funding allowed the crucial restoration actions necessary to recover habitat quality, while the long-term management was ensured by Agri-environment funds. The project also serves as an

example of how vested interests can be a driving force behind nature conservation when and if the right economical conditions exist and all parties concerned agree to a common goal.

Further is should be emphasized that the idea together with management scheme is an excellent example of ICZM in practice and to be recognized and introduced in other SPAs.