

Overview

The project was developed and run between 1997 and 2004 by a network of partners in Estonia and Sweden: WWF-Sweden, Research Centre Arhipelaag, Matsalu Nature Reserve, NGA Läänerannik, Estonian Fund for Nature and local handicraft and farmers' societies. The main funding bodies were WWF Sweden and Sida (The Swedish Agency for International Development Cooperation).

The project combines three main components with the aim of bringing natural and economic sustainability to Väinameri:

- Management of naturally fertilised (organic) grasslands
- Handicraft production using local natural outputs from the managed landscape and giving long-term economic benefits to local people
- Increasing landscape attractiveness giving rise to nature tourism which again brings economic benefits to residents.

Status of Conservation Designation

Parts of the area are designated as wetlands of international importance under Ramsar specifications.

Matsalu National Park

Silma Nature Reserve

Väinameri has been designated by Birdlife International as an 'Important Bird Area'



Planning Framework

Sub-Regional

The need for an integrated environment and development approach, both in planning and management of the Matsalu area, was fully recognised by various international bodies, including the Helsinki Commission (HELCOM), the EU and the Ramsar Convention. HELCOM identified coastal lagoons and wetland as areas of major importance for the Baltic Sea environment and prioritised this field of work in the Joint Comprehensive Action Program.

Local

Various management plans guide development and conservation works in the area including plans for Matsalu and Käina incorporating plans for the establishment of fisheries and tourism initiatives.

Background/History

The natural and cultural qualities of rural Estonia, as with other areas in northern Europe, are intimately connected with traditional forms of agriculture. Many wildlife species are ideally adapted to semi natural unfertilised grasslands in coastal areas used for the grazing of sheep, cattle and horses, making these areas some of the most biodiverse habitats in northern Europe.

However, under the highly rationalised system of agriculture introduced during Soviet rule, large-scale specialised production and the widespread use of chemicals and fertilisers created widespread and damaging environmental and social problems.

The demise of the Soviet Union and the privatisation of agriculture in the early 1990s caused a rapid decline in agricultural production partly arising from the dramatic decrease in the use of artificial fertilisers. The number of cattle decreased by as much as half and unemployment and social problems grew in many rural areas. The area became overgrown, threatening local landscape and natural values.

The situation was aggravated by the fact that the Estonian government provided no agricultural subsidies or alternative assistance to farmers (e.g. export subsidies). Imported agricultural products (often subsidised by overseas governments) were often cheaper for Estonian consumers than home grown products.

In the early 1990s the Väinameri region was chosen by the Helsinki Commission (HELCOM) as one of the most important biological 'multi-function' areas in the Baltic Sea. Six areas along the eastern Baltic coast were chosen for preparation of coastal zone management plans for the management of marine lagoons and wetlands under the Joint Comprehensive Action Programme. Two of these areas were Matsalu and Käina Bay in Estonia.

Between 1993 and 1996 WWF was offered the lead role on HELCOM's Working Group on Management of Lagoons and Wetlands under guidance of the HELCOM Programme Implementation Task Force. Management plans were developed as pilot projects for the following six Task Areas:

- Käina Bay (Estonia)
- Matsalu Catchment Area (Estonia)
- Engure/Kemeru (Latvia)
- Kursiu/Curonian Lagoon (Lithuania/Russia)
- Oder/Odra Lagoon (Poland/Germany)

Following approval by HELCOM, WWF-Sweden made a decision in 1997 to work with the two Estonian areas in order to implement their management plans. The island of Vormsi was later added to the project which became known as the 'Väinameri project'. The details of the project were conceived in 1997 in joint discussions between WWF Sweden and key specialists in Estonia, including Toomas Kokovkin who subsequently became project director.

Following year-long negotiations, additional funding was eventually secured from the Swedish International Development Agency (Sida) under its bilateral funding agreements with the Baltic States.

Following Estonia's membership of the EU in 2004, Sweden's involvement in the project through Sida came to an end and the project moved into a new phase. It is hoped that successes of the Väinameri project will continue and that further improvements in the preservation and development of biodiversity and in economic growth will be sustained into the future with Estonia as a member of the EU.

Aims/Objectives

"The aim of the Väinameri Project is to restore and maintain the valuable coastal landscape, increase and sustain natural values, increase the attractiveness of the area and to create living conditions for people involved with agriculture in a sparsely populated area. Development of sustainable agriculture, small-scale tourism and a regional production of both agricultural products and handicraft will directly benefit both nature and local residents."

Apart from biodiversity and landscape related outcomes, the project stated aims with regard to socio-economic outputs were as follows:

- to create a viable coastal countryside society
- to support strong families with multiple livelihoods
- to establish networks
- to encourage voluntary associations

Key Resource Facts

Habitats

The area is located in the transition zone between temperate needle-leaf and broad leaf forests and encompasses pine forests, mixed spruce and deciduous woodlands, juniper and coastal meadows, swamps and peat bogs. The 'alvar' forests are of particular interest – spruce, pine or birch on limestone plains with thin soils.

Topography

The underwater topography is relatively flat and the coasts are gently sloping. This means that the shoreline fluctuates tens to hundreds of metres with the tides.

Climate

Located in the Atlantic-continental climatic region of the temperate climatic zone with warm summers and moderately cool winters:

February mean temperature: -3 - 4.5°C

July mean temperature 16.5 – 17.5°C

Annual precipitation 600mm

Snow cover lasts for 90-100 days.

Sea is ice covered January – mid April. In Summer sea water temperatures reach 20 °C. Salinity of the sea water is 6-6.5 per mil.

Biodiversity

As a complex of marine and coastal habitats, the range of resident species is diverse. Plant species range from those typical of seashore halophilous meadows, boreonemoral forests, alvars, broadleaf forests and wooded meadows.

The area is visited by waterfowl and waders during migration (over 2 million in spring), nesting, for rest or moulting. Over 270 bird species have been registered; 175 of these nest in the area and five are globally threatened species.

Over 40 species of mammal live in the area including seals, large carnivores (brown bear, wolf, lynx) and small land mammals (fox, racoon, mink). Over half are listed in the Red Data Books of the Baltic region and Estonia.

Significantly, the biodiversity is closely connected to the activities of man and in particular, the grazing and mowing of grass leading to the characteristic semi-natural meadows.

The project has identified the following as the most important ecosystems in the area:

1. The sea – almost the whole area is within the photic zone (sunlight reaches the sea bed) resulting in a rich biology including bottom-plant communities sometimes including rare and unique species. It is also important as a breeding area for fish and for Ringed and Grey Seals.
2. Bays, lagoons, reedbeds – stop-over areas for migrating swans, geese and ducks; fish spawning areas, feeding grounds for white-tailed eagles, home of otters and other mammals. Reed is harvested for thatch and for biomass energy production. The mud has medicinal benefits.
3. Grasslands (coastal, alvar, alluvial, marshy) – valued for rare and endangered plant species, nesting and migrating waders (eg. Dunlins, Ruffs, Godwits, Redshanks, geese species).
4. Woodlands – most valuable are those that are regularly mowed (100 ha in whole area). Nesting sites for black storks and eagles. High plant diversity including orchids and fungi.
5. Islets – most are currently uninhabited and overgrown leading to the decline of meadow flora and birdlife. However, some mowing and grazing continues in the protected Hiiumaa Islets. The islets are considered to have potential for nature tourism.

Culture/Heritage

Agriculture has shaped the character and natural values of the heritage landscape of the area: the relatively densely ditched small fields, large hay meadows and pastures with small woodlands.

The economic crisis following the demise of soviet systems of agriculture in the mid 1990s led to liberal agricultural policies for land reform, providing the essential context for the Väinameri project.

Key Tourism Facts

Assets

Tourism facilities are as yet relatively undeveloped, small in scale and appropriate to the key target markets (nature tourists): small hotels, lodges and camp sites. The main coastal resorts are Kassari, Käina and Suuremoisa.

Läänemaa has 30 lodges which receive about 20,000 tourists per year of whom an estimated 30% are from foreign countries.

On Hiiumaa there are some 53 accommodation businesses offering 1,200 beds (January 2004).

Most overnight accommodation is in the Haapsalu or Ridala areas. A hotel recently opened in Lihula and Kukeranna and Topu have camp sites.

Plentiful opportunities for bird watching, a popular activity in the area.

Hunting tourism has been increasing over the last decade with certain areas benefiting from income from goose, duck and game hunting.

Volume

To Hiiumaa yearly tourists number about 120,000.

Value

Tourism related employment is low but on the increase.

Key Issues associated with tourism development/management

- Absentee overseas landowners, mostly of Swedish origin will affect the future of the project and prosperity of residents.
- Stable population (5,000 in Vainmari area) but rising unemployment amongst local people, low incomes and socio-economic marginalisation.
- Future of agricultural sector depends on stabilising agricultural income.
- Low qualifications in the labour force.
- Threats of overexploitation of coasts and sale of land for housing and mass tourism.
- Threats of labour drain to other more urban parts of Estonia.
- Incoming farmers from Sweden, other Baltic states and Holland attracted to the area by subsidies will change the Estonian character and culture of the area.
- There is a recognised need for enterprises processing cheaper cuts of meat and offal to ensure sale of the whole carcass. At present restaurants purchase only the best cuts.
- Farmers see as low priority the maintenance of tourism infrastructure on their land (trails, signs and interpretative boards).
- Quality standards of holiday accommodation

Management/Organisation/Funding/Finance

Funding from Swedish International Development Agency (Sida), WWF-Sweden and Estonian Parliament.

The overall ideology of the project was formed by WWF-Sweden.

Two major Estonian organisations led the project:

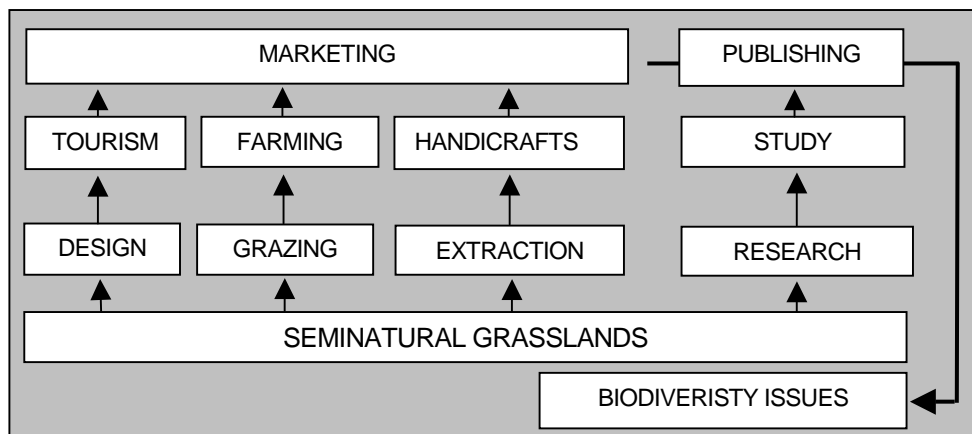
- i. Archipelaaq, acted as National Coordinator of the project.
- ii. Estonian Fund for Nature – responsible for securing and implementing the nationwide information and media campaigns and to undertake financial administration.

Local bodies coordinated activities in the three main regions. In Vormsi, an NGO, Läänerannik took over responsibility; in Hiiumaa, the NGO Arhipelaag, and in

Matsalu responsibility for local management of the project was the role of the National Park administration.

In addition a 'Reference Group' was established, comprising Estonian officials and local administrators, whose role was to guide the project where necessary, offer opinions and input ideas. This Group met yearly between 2000 and 2002. In addition, Ministers of Agriculture held meetings with project staff and farmers.

The Väinameri Management Model – the 'food chain' concept



Activities

The Väinmari project instituted rural improvements through the following key actions:

1. Landscape Management

- Education and training of farmers in landscape management, beef cattle breeding and marketing
- The purchase of pure bred cattle breeds by the Project.
- Assistance in purchasing small scale machinery, tools and electric fences
- Creation of pure breed beef cattle stocks
- Creation of a 'green' meat brand and the active marketing of products to high quality restaurants.
- Revival of the Estonian horse by some farmers leading to equestrian tourist activity on their farms.

2. Handicrafts

- Establishing a clear link in principle and practice between traditional handicrafts and local landscapes and in particular on coastal grassland management – a holistic approach.
- Making good use of local products including reed, juniper, osier for kitchen utensils and baskets. The skin and wool of the sheep are used to produce clothing and household items.
- Improvements in sheep breeding leading to improved wool quality
- Branding, labelling and marketing local handicrafts
- Launching a tradition of summer and winter handicraft fairs and competitions
- Arranging for visiting experts to give lectures and run training sessions

- Building skills and confidence amongst handicraft makers leading to well designed and consumer oriented products
- Building a network of crafts producers who actively arrange their own workshops and events.
- Establishing international contacts with e.g. the Swedish handicraft association leading to overseas exhibitions and retail outlets.
- Producing information leaflets and booklets as practical guides on handicraft production

3. Tourism

- Creating seven nature trails, watching towers and sites demonstrating the effects of grazing on this cultural landscape.
- Tourism appeal is built through handicraft and meat initiatives which help to build a 'sense of place'.
- Development of three tourism packages (bird watching, flora and family farm holidays), marketed through tourism agencies
- Nature guide training
- Publication of three tourist maps for the SE coast of Hiiumaa, the island of Vormsi and the Nature Reserve of Matsalu - in Estonian and English.
- Encouraging the formation of societies for farmers, artisans and entrepreneurs

4. Awareness and Outreach

- Dissemination of information, experiences and outcomes of project to the general public, media and governments at all levels.
- Completion of the project website in Estonian and English. Regular updates.
- Facilitating information exchange amongst stakeholders through familiarisation visits and study tours
- Production of a Väinameri film.
- Publication of project newsletters – distributed as inserts in local newspapers
- National TV coverage of project
- Regular features in the Estonian news Internet portal, Green Gate.
- Features on Swedish media including radio and TV.
- Establishment of a Reference Group comprising representatives of ministries, universities and municipal authorities has assisted dissemination of project information and achievements amongst local, regional and national organisations.
- Production of Väinameri project partner information signs – given to the 50 most active partners.

Achievements

- Dissemination of the project aims, initiatives, achievements to a wide audience including politicians and residents leading to consumer awareness of relationship between nature conservation and 'today's menu'.
- Increasing interest in breeding beef cattle has led to:

- Expanded areas for natural grazing leading to improved landscape and biodiversity (more than 2000 ha of well-maintained grasslands)
- A growing market for local high quality organic meat
- All farmers who became involved in the project remained working.
- These aspects have contributed to creating a more attractive destination for eco-tourists and nature tourists
- Putting the principles embodied in managing the 'food chain' into practice in order to ensure sustainable management of coastal semi-natural plant communities in the long term. A continuous chain begins from plants, leads to livestock and ends with the consumer.
- Revival of traditional handicrafts using local raw materials. The impacts of the handicrafts initiative upon local ecosystems have been relatively minor compared to farming and tourism initiatives. However, the benefits for local people have been substantial. The appeal of handicrafts has grown from purely tourist markets to resident consumers.
- The diversification of employment opportunities through development of sustainable tourism activities by farmers.
- The project has stimulated formation of eco tourism enterprises e.g. Moonsund Eco (www.moonsund.ee) offering handicraft, fishing and nature tourism packages.

Contacts

Bibliography

The Väinameri Project – Linking rural life and coastal nature, Toomas Kokovkin, 2005

The Väinameri Project – Final technical report, Tomos Kokovkin, 2004

Väinameri – a Coastal Plan for Estonia, Annual Report 2002, Toomas Kikovkin, 2002

All three books and reports above are available by download (pdf files) from this website:

www.arhipelaag.ee/vainameri

www.hiiumaa.ee