

LIFE Grote Nete

Something is happening in the valley of the Grote Nete, no wonder. Recently Natuurpunt carried out a European project to restore nature. Thanks to this project the Grote Nete chose its own path while the land dunes are again built by wind. Welcome to the valley of the Grote Nete!



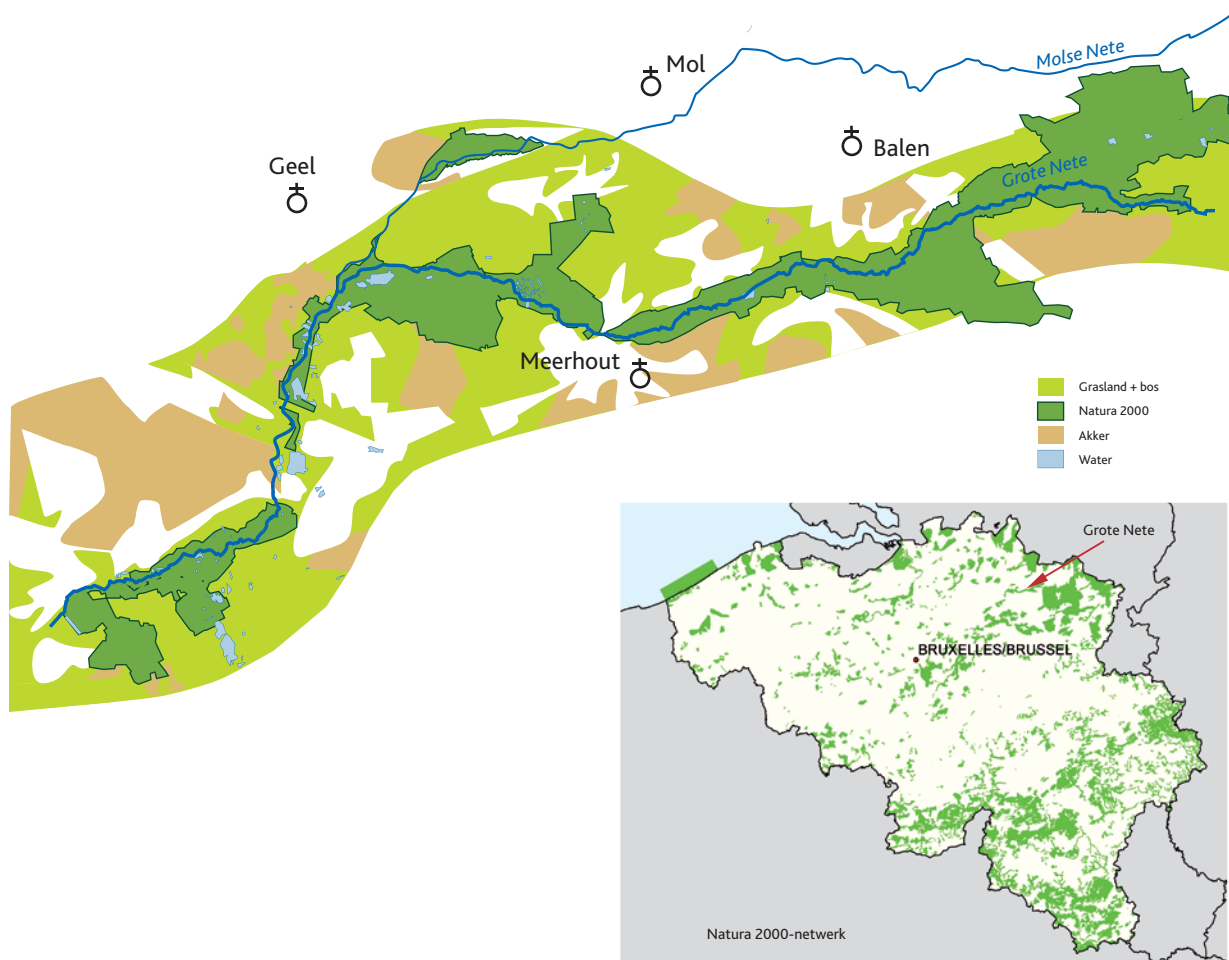
Welcome to the Valley of the Grote Nete

East of Antwerp you find the upper course of the Grote Nete river. Since 1950 nature has been severely degraded. Classical extensive agriculture changed into an intensive system. Therefore land use changed rapidly. Valleys were drained by deep ditches while the usage of chemical fertilizers increased exponentially. Traditional flowery hay meadows got lost. Dynamic land dunes were planted with pine trees. Weekend cottages popped up like mushrooms. Ancient heatlands were cultivated when possible by drainage, fertilisation and levelling. Much of the glory that once was, disappeared forever. The results are seen by everybody, butterflies and flowery hay meadows disappeared and the landscape has lost its color. One must drive a long time to find a natural spot to relax after a hard day at work.

More and better

In 1980 volunteers started with the conservation of the valleys natural character. Thanks to these efforts some species survived or even expanded their territory in a hostile environment. However the threats were not yet solved sustainably. Therefore Natuurpunt applied for LIFE funding. Luckily, we received this grant in 2005. LIFE Grote Nete was born. This report gives you a glimpse of the achievements during the project.

Large scale restoration actions created new chances for man and nature in a special European protected nature area. Natural treasures are preserved and where possible they were linked to larger areas. The final goal is a pure and unfragmented landscape with robust natural areas. By using all means possible, nature's destiny has changed and new chances lie ahead. Thanks to the project more than 220 hectare has changed profoundly.



LIFE is life



LIFE-nature is the environmental restoration programme of the European Commission with the reinforcement of the Natura 2000 network as main target. Innovative projects with a high value for nature and humans are approved of which LIFE Grote Nete is a good example. The project ran from the 1st of January 2005 to 31-st of March 2012. The total budget was € 3.120.940 of which the Commission contributed 50%.

The volunteer as ambassador

Volunteers are important for the project! They feel responsible for the nature in their neighbourhood and they can see the changes. Within the LIFE project they allow for cost-efficient and qualitative restoration. Volunteers know their area thoroughly and are imbedded in local social life. A short overview of tasks carried out by volunteers: land acquisition, cooperation with farmers, communication, organization of family happenings, guided tours, nature management, and many more.



Not just about nature

LIFE Grote Nete is not just about nature. By land acquisition and restoring local nature values you also gain on: agriculture, water safety and recreation.

More than 80 livestock and 20 horses of local farmers graze on these lands extensively. They help us to manage natural flood areas and ensure spontaneous evolution of a pleasant landscape full of life. During heavy rainfall the valley acts as a huge sponge which absorbs the water. Once water levels drop, it slowly flows away. Flooding risk in densely populated areas is diminished. Enjoying its beauty you can make an adventurous walk all year round.



Objectives

The main objective of LIFE Grote Nete is the large scale restoration, development, reconnection and subsequent sustainable management of the protected habitats in the upper course of the Valley of the Grote Nete (lowland river). At Belgian and European scale the project area carries a special responsibility for the habitats listed as well as for the fish species Brook Lamprey and Spined Loach. In addition, we performed many actions to reinforce local support for the project and offered the possibility to actively contribute to the restoration.

Objective	Habitattype	Target	Realised
Land acquisition		100 ha	100 ha
Restoration of dynamic land dunes	2330	10 ha	16 ha
Restoration of heathland with trees on land-dunes	2310, 4030, 9190	15 ha	15 ha
Development of alluvial forest	91E0+	40 ha	74 ha
Development of lowland hay meadows by removing plantations	6510, 7140	5 ha	5 ha
Development of structure rich grasslands (mosaics)	6430, 6510, 9190, 91E0+	50 ha	125 ha
Restoration of peatpits	3150	1 ha	3,6 ha
River restoration through dike removal	3260	300 m	690 m
Restoration of habitat for Brook Lamprey and Spined Loach	3260	4 ha	4,6 ha

What after LIFE?

The volunteers of Natuurpunt are actively involved with the projects planning and execution. They take up many responsibilities such as the contact with local stakeholders and the management of the habitats. Doing this they are supported by a professional team.

Local farmers carry out the grazing management. Where needed the grazing is accompanied by mowing and cutting trees. The low productive and wet grasslands are managed by Natuurpunt while the dry grasslands are mown by farmers. Most of the alluvial forest is left to develop spontaneously.



Hard work

Alluvial forest

Alluvial forests with twisted trees, have their own stories. One is young and developed recently out of grassland, while the other looks centuries old and reminds us of primeval forests. These are a world on its own with its own sounds and odors. The surface covered with forest was expanded in three ways. On the long run 137 hectare of new and biodiverse forest will be created.

- 32 hectare plantations with Canadian popular and exotic species were chopped down. Some of them were chopped and removed, others will die while standing.
- 42 hectare of former grasslands and cropland will evolve and grow on their own timing. On cropland thousands of little trees germinated on bare soil. A few years later not a single open spot is left. Grasslands on the other hand will only be gradually invaded with trees.
- In the long run in the grazing mosaics 50% of the forest will develop. All together 63 hectare of alluvial and oak-birch forests. In good conditions and with the right number of livestock, a full gradient of open and heavily grazed, to closed and almost ungrazed forests with a rich undergrowth of herbs, will develop.

Weekend cottages

Unfortunately some parts of the valley are disturbed by weekend cottages, most of them abandoned. Within the project 18 cottages were removed while 15 ponds were made more naturally. This resulted in a nicer landscape and a more robust natural system.



The Grote Nete has chosen its own path

The Grote Nete in Balen lays as a long and deep line, in the landscape. Just another river, dug to drain a valley. The province of Antwerp executed different restoration works to create room for water. Dikes from historical silt removal works were removed along 690 meter and more than 2 hectares of open water and marshland with meanders were excavated. Endangered fish such as the Brook lamprey and Spined loach will benefit from these works.

Sand between your toes

Where wind and sand meet, land dunes are created. 15 hectare of pine plantations on a land dune were cut. Hereafter the forest soil was removed (sodcutting) and was brought to the farmers' croplands. As there is not enough wind dynamics to keep the vegetation open, an additional dynamic will be generated by inviting walkers to walk freely through the area. Children are invited to build sand castles. This way we keep the land dune vegetation (2330) dynamic in order to preserve them on the long run.

Farmers reconnected

Until recently farmers owned most of the valley and managed it intensively. Nowadays Natuurpunt owns large parts. However, farmers are invited to have their livestock grazing on these grounds. Yet the rules of the game have changed. Conservationists decide on the management goals and the farmers are invited to cooperate. Fertilization is not allowed and we strive for a natural runoff of the water. This means that a smaller amount of cattle can graze. However it stays financially attractive for the farmer and a high surplus for nature. This way we try to reconnect farmers with nature.



Colofon

Info & contact:

Tom De Beelde
Coxiestraat 11 • 2800 Mechelen • Belgium
+3215-29 72 56 • tom.debeelde@natuurpunt.be
info@natuurpunt.be

Website: www.life-grotenete.be

Pictures:

Willem Laermans, Maarten Jacobs, Jan Dirckx,
Wim Dirckx, provincie Antwerpen, Hugo Willockx,
Klaas Verbanck en Ewoud L' Amiral.

Published by:

Chris Steenwegen
Coxiestraat 11 • 2800 Natuurpunt



natuurpunt

Natuurpunt!

Natuurpunt is the largest nature organization in Belgium. 10.000 volunteers and 400 professional employees work together for the protection of species, habitats and landscapes. To reach this goal, the organization protects nature by acquiring land and managing nature, study species and their habitats, educate the general and specialized public and lobby on policy makers. Natuurpunt manages 500 nature reserves with an area of 20.000 hectares and has 88.000 family memberships. Natuurpunt is a member of Eurosite and has a rich experience in LIFE projects with already 25 projects in its portfolio.

Become a member!

And give an important signal to the government so we can protect more nature for you. The membership fee is 24 euro for the whole family.

You can download a message of direct debit of our website or write to 24 euros on rack. (IBAN = BE17 2300 0442 3321 • BIC = GEBABEBB) with mention of Natuurpunt "Life GN new member". Many thanks for your support! More information and membership: www.natuurpunt.be