

Vochtig Haspengouw - Large-scale restoration of a complex of ground- and seepage water dependent habitats

LIFE11 NAT/BE/001068

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Background

The Vochtig Haspengouw region in Flanders, Belgium, contains the Mombeek and Demer valley that hosts unique habitats and species listed under the Habitats Directive. Although such habitats and species are protected under EU law, several interrelated threats pose a risk to their long-term conservation status.

Objectives

LIFE Nature project would focus on three Natura 2000 network sites, targeting actions in 10 different locations around Haspengouw between Hasselt, Tongeren and Maastricht.

Habitat restoration actions aimed to:

- Improve the conservation status of a complex of Annex I habitats dependent on groundwater and seepage water. The project area holds national and EU importance for such habitats, which include 25 ha of forests habitats on extremely wet soils with a large diversity of sub-types, as well as (on drier soil) 15 ha of lowland hay meadows in combination with hydrophilous tall herb fringe communities and very locally also *Eu-Molinion* (6410) habitats; and
- Boost around 10 ha of drier habitat types (typical for a semi-dry, poor sandy soil) that are of great importance as a stepping stone between the Campine region and the Haspengouw region. These include old oak forests dry heathland and Northern Atlantic wet heaths with *Erica tetralix*.

Additionally, the project aimed to boost the recreation value of the sites, promote voluntary conservation efforts and act as an example of good practice for public participation partnerships in nature conservation activity. The overall goal was to increase local communities' understanding, appreciation and involvement in the Natura 2000 network. Moreover, the Natura 2000 site would be one of the key areas in lowland Europe for the target habitats and target species.

Results

The project purchased nearly 68 ha of land and implemented restoration measures on a total area of 160 ha measures to improve the conservation status of grassland and forest habitats listed in Annex I of the Habitats Directive. Actions included setting back succession on grassland, converting poplar

plantations and introducing adequate mowing/grazing regimes. The removal of invasive alien species, *Prunus serotina*, *Quercus rubra* and *Impatiens glandulifera*, was carried out. Hydrology restoration also proved to be a major aspect of the conservation work.

The open grasslands and meadows habitat types improved included Arrhenatherion (6510) and Filipendulion vegetations (6430), along with dry heathland systems (4030) in transition to the Campine region, while the forest habitats included old oak forests (9190) and alluvial forests

The project also drew up management plans for the Natura 2000 sites, which were endorsed by the authorities and implemented. The target areas have been given the status of a nature reserve which means that funding for management and monitoring is guaranteed. A firm structure for carrying out these activities has been established. Additionally, project funding helped build up management infrastructure such as fencing and machinery, along with improved skills and human resources. Professional support is foreseen for the core team of volunteers dedicated to the management of sites.

Overall, the restoration measures were shown to have decreased the fragmentation of the habitats. Moreover, dissemination of the project results increased awareness among the local communities of the conservation challenges, increasing the willingness of volunteers to support the management of the sites. Finally, the project has led to follow-up initiatives with other stakeholders regarding restoration, water management, tourism and recreation.

The project is in line with goals of the Habitat Directive and the EU Biodiversity Strategy. By combatting IAS, the project also helps implement the EU's Biodiversity Strategy, while the hydrological restoration and efforts to improve water quality helps reach the targets of the Water Framework Directive.

Environmental issues addressed:

Themes

Habitats - Grasslands

Keywords

forest ecosystem, grassland ecosystem, protected area, restoration measure

Target EU Legislation

- Nature protection and Biodiversity
- [Directive 92/43 - Conservation of natural habitats and of wild fauna and flora- Habitats Directiv ...](#)
- [Decision 93/626 - Conclusion of the Convention on Biological Diversity \(25.10.1993\)](#)

- [COM\(98\)42 -"Communication on a European Community Biodiversity Strategy" \(05.02.1998\)](#)
- [COM\(2001\)162 -"Biodiversity Action Plan for the conservation of natural resources \(vol. I & II\)" ...](#)

Target Habitat types

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- 91E0 - "Alluvial forests with *Alnus glutinosa* and *Fraxinus excelsior* (Alno-Padion, Alnion incanae, Salicion albae)"
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- 6510 - "Lowland hay meadows (*Alopecurus pratensis*, *Sanguisorba officinalis*)"
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- 6410 - "Molinia meadows on calcareous, peaty or clayey-silt-laden soils (Molinion caeruleae)"
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- 4030 - European dry heaths
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- 6430 - Hydrophilous tall herb fringe communities of plains and of the montane to alpine levels
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- 4010 - Northern Atlantic wet heaths with *Erica tetralix*
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- 9190 - Old acidophilous oak woods with *Quercus robur* on sandy plains
-
- 9160 - Sub-Atlantic and medio-European oak or oak-hornbeam forests of the Carpinion betuli

Natura 2000 sites

| | | |
|-----|-----------|---|
| SCI | BE2200038 | Bossen en kalkgraslanden van Haspengouw |
| SCI | BE2200041 | Jekervallei en bovenloop van de Demervallei |
| SCI | BE2200042 | Overgang Kempen-Haspengouw |

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Beneficiaries:

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| Coordinator | Natuurpunt Beheer vzw |
| Partners | None |

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Administrative data:

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|-------------------|-----------------------------|
| Project reference | LIFE11 NAT/BE/001068 |
| Duration | 01-SEP-2012 to 31-DEC -2019 |
| Total budget | 3,773,426.00 € |
| EU contribution | 2,264,055.00 € |
| Project location | Vlaams Gewest |