

Integrating Natura 2000,
Rural Development and Agri-Environmental
Programmes in Central Europe



IUCN Programme Office for Central Europe

Integrating Natura 2000,
**Rural Development and Agri-Environmental
Programmes in Central Europe**

Proceedings of the conference held at Goniądz, in the Biebrza National Park, Poland
2nd–4th July 2003

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■ Executive Summary:

The conference 'Integrating Natura 2000, Rural Development and Agri-Environmental Programmes in Central Europe' held in the Biebrza National Park in Poland on 2nd–4th July 2003 aimed to:

- Forge links, build trust and increase understanding, co-operation and information flow on three levels:
 - between government organisations and NGOs,
 - between NGOs, and
 - between organisations from different countries,
- Share experience and best practice, as well as,
- Establish the state of play of nature conservation in the acceding and candidate countries of the EU.

The rationale behind the conference was to find ways to achieve the overall aim of conserving biodiversity linked to agriculture, using the synergy between Natura 2000 and Agri-Environmental Schemes (AES) as part of rural development strategies. The variety of land uses, such as the mosaic of different crops, as well as the interconnectedness and closeness of differing habitats, has a very strong influence on a landscape's species richness. The often isolated Natura 2000 sites will not be enough to conserve biodiversity on their own, and AES can play a vital role in providing migration and dispersal corridors as well as a mosaic of land-uses, all needed to conserve biodiversity in the long term. This guiding concept maintains that classic protected areas should not be considered as 'islands of biodiversity/wildlife in a sea of hostile agriculture', as semi-natural farmed and managed lands provide habitats for wildlife; acting as biodiversity reservoirs and stepping-stones for dispersal and/or migration pathways. This idealised matrix of protected areas, buffer zones and corridors/stepping stones is set within the context of sustainable land use and rural development, and is needed to ensure a living countryside.

The conference made it clear that a common culture of open consultation and information-sharing between government organisations and NGOs in most CEE countries is yet to be developed. In some cases, even the

preliminary condition for collaboration, the timely exchange of up-to-date information, is still to be reached. Working out a better understanding of each other's roles and allowing constructive criticism on both sides will eventually lead to greater benefits for people and nature in rural areas.

■ Opinions and Recommendations

- The re-establishment of the link between farming and environment, essentially making agriculture sustainable in the EU15, as well as maintaining 'high nature-value' habitats and environmentally friendly farming methods in the new Member States undergoing transition, are crucially important tasks, calling for a wide-ranging coalition of stakeholders.
- Small-scale, traditional farming methods have become increasingly marginalised in the EU15 and experience shows that, with the trend towards more intensive farming enterprises, many habitats and associated species have continued to decline.
- Both old and new EU Member States have the opportunity to set their own priorities within the RDR/SAPARD regulations. They can choose which measures to implement from those on offer, how to design the measures and how to distribute the funds over the different sub-measures. Decisions on rural development thus remain (within limits) the competence of the Member States.
- Technical shortcomings of the Agri-Environmental Programmes (AEP) in many Accession/Candidate Countries include limited Environmentally Sensitive Areas (ESA), which as eligibility criteria for AEP schemes therefore also limit entry for many farmers. In addition, the designation of areas of 'high nature-value' was based on political suitability instead of scientific data. In some cases, a lack of relevant data on nature protection is combined with a lack of targeting the AEP.

■ Factors affecting success of AES:

- appeal to farmers: effort versus financial reward
 - design of AES regarding farmers: limitations of eligibility criteria
 - funding provided by the administration, limitations of funding
 - design of AES regarding nature conservation
 - geographical spread of AES
- The amount of funds allocated to particular measures is not a sufficiently good indicator for the impact the measures have on protecting and managing habitats and species: differences in design, eligibility criteria and administration costs may result in considerable variation between countries.
- A Rural Development Plan is capable of both benefiting and damaging the environment, e.g. *'An afforestation scheme supporting the free planting of trees in an area where the biggest challenge is preventing conversion of open grasslands to shrubs is a typical example of money spent under AEP, which negatively affects the environment and thus wastes money'* (R. Wardle). Given the tight limits of the AEP budgets, clear targeting is needed on which measures to finance in which kind of environment.
- Better financial incentives for effective habitat management are needed: 'improvements' in the education of rural communities often mean that traditional systems of farming die out. It is thus of outstanding importance that the Rural Development Plan gives better financial encouragement to farmers and others to retain and manage habitats appropriately.
- An environmental assessment of the planned measures should be carried out on behalf of the MoA before the AES is made available to farmers, in order to avoid inappropriate application of schemes and thus assure overall effectiveness of the AEP.
- After payment levels, it is the AEP design, and also how its schemes are presented to the farmer, which in practice determine whether individual farmers will decide to take part in an AEP.



- It has to be understood, and reflected in AEP budget processes, that environmentally-friendly farming produces more value than that measurable in the market prices of the foodstuffs and fibre produced: there is added social and environmental value.
- AES payments should be targeted to not only preserving but also buffering natural and semi-natural habitats, in order to achieve a good interconnectedness of species-rich habitats. Through creating migration corridors between isolated spots of high nature value, the AEP can help establish a system of nature management that goes beyond traditional conservation efforts and is achievable at relatively low costs.
- With regard to both the requirements of Natura 2000 and the cost-effectiveness of well-planned AEPs, it should be remembered that it is always cheaper to protect existing environmental values and then buffer and extend them, than to restore the (sometimes irreversibly) damaged habitats. The Accessing States have the opportunity to conserve a great deal of their nature value at comparatively low costs, if the AEP is used as an effective tool to allocate payments to sites of high environmental value.
- Different media should be used to raise the public's awareness on the importance of conserving high-value nature within a sustainable development perspective.

Ministries need to give clear timeframes for their actions and communicate them better. In general, a definition on how the ministries perceive the role of NGOs and what their expectations are would improve mutual co-operation.

- The benefits of both Natura 2000 and the AES have to be communicated. It should be made clear to all stakeholders how future development of the region and/or their private and public lands will be affected, as well as what kind of compensation can be derived from the protection schemes.
- Farm advisory services provide opportunities for further co-operation. The services are in most cases provided by agronomists, who may lack sufficient specific ecological knowledge to advise on habitats and wildlife: therefore study visits for exchange of best practice should be increased, alongside ecological training which should involve NGOs and experts at different stages of planning and execution.
- Natura 2000 sites will not necessarily cover a country's important nature assets, due to the methodology being designed for a pan-European level.
- Presently Agri-Environmental Programmes are not necessarily supportive tools for the management of agricultural sites within Natura 2000. The concept

that the AEP supports Natura 2000 goals must be regarded as an 'ideal' and rather theoretical viewpoint (as in Poland).

- As the methodology of the Habitats Directive creates isolated Natura 2000 sites, Agri-Environmental Programmes should be used alongside the process of establishing the SACs by Member States (and Candidate Countries using SAPARD), to support the overall aims of the Habitats Directive by effectively linking and buffering pSCIs and SACs.
- A thorough review of existing nature conservation regulations on each national level is needed, to allow nature protection frameworks obtain optimal effects.
- The integration of Natura 2000 into other sector policies is still insufficient. Most CEE countries still have too little institutionalised cross-sectoral co-operation. Strong links are needed between the national Agriculture and Environment Ministries, as well as the Spatial Planning Agencies, using the available NGO expertise effectively.

■ State of play of Natura 2000 and AEPs in the Accession Countries

■ Regarding Poland:

The current scale of LFA schemes is rather limited in both design and eligibility – the 4 existing categories are connected to mountain and lowland regions in equal proportions, but exclude the majority of the Polish territory due to the limited funds directed to this measure.

The Ministry representative expressed her hope that this unsatisfactory situation (in terms of managing natural assets) could be improved with more favourable budget decisions in future Rural Development Plans. However, the ongoing transformation of Poland's agricultural sector is leading towards a decline in agro-biodiversity, and rare habitats such as extensively-managed meadows might become irreversibly damaged in the meantime.

Regarding AEMs, support was already available for the 'rare breeds' and 'organic farming' horizontal measures before the new AEP existed, so that Agri-Environmental Schemes having a new effect in terms of nature conservation are limited to those farmers who not only already manage their farm according to the Code of Good Agricultural Practice (GAP), but also dwell in spatially-limited priority zones. Fulfilling the GAP

requirements constitutes a big economic challenge for most Polish farms, but without costly investments (for example in proper manure storage) many potentially willing farmers will be denied access to AES.

If the application procedure and eligibility criteria are complicated, many farmers – although eligible for application – might not apply, due to their lack of understanding of the procedure. However, at the time (July 2003) the Polish MoA had not foreseen any activities for preparing potential participants of the AEP.

The Natura 2000 network in Poland fails to protect regionally or nationally important elements related to agricultural habitats, or agro-biodiversity. The Polish AEP also fails to protect important elements of agro-biodiversity; the designed support measures do not meet the management needs of endangered sites under agricultural use (*P. Pawlaczyk*).

As the example of (western) Poland shows, the Agri-Environmental Programme is not necessarily a supportive tool for the management of agricultural sites within Natura 2000. The concept that the AEP supports Natura 2000 goals must be regarded as an 'ideal' and rather theoretical viewpoint.

In western Poland, many important and endangered habitats are today in an unfavourable condition, as a result of 5–10 years degradation. The time restore them is now, not after another 3–4 years. In many cases another five years delay in restoration might lead to severe loss of habitats and species, and thus local, regional or national extinctions.

■ Regarding Slovenia:

Although living in the countryside is regarded as an asset, the actual number of those who maintain it – namely the farming community – is shrinking. Land abandonment is a major pressure to Slovenian rural areas, with negative effects on the habitat-rich environment.

The Ministry of Agriculture of Slovenia is aware that, as well as being environmentally beneficial, maintenance of very old and species-rich habitats is cheaper than restoration.

The Slovenian Agri-Environmental Programme follows a horizontal approach which will continuously grow over the coming years. (The AEP is not limited to certain areas as required under SAPARD, as they did not use SAPARD funds).

However, the ministries need to give clear timeframes for their actions and communicate them better. In general, co-operation would be improved if ministries defined how they perceive the role of NGOs and what their expectations are.

Farm advisory services provide opportunities for further co-operation. The services are in most cases provided by agronomists, who may lack sufficient specific ecological knowledge to advise on habitats and wildlife: therefore study visits for exchange of best practice should be increased, alongside ecological training which should involve NGOs and experts at different stages of planning and execution.

■ Regarding Slovakia:

The Agri-Environmental Programme seeks to harmonise the relationship between the production of foodstuffs and the conservation of the environment, while at the same time trying to maintain vibrant village communities. The way to achieve this is to broaden the scope of agriculture to include maintenance of the landscape.

The transposition of EU nature legislation into Slovakian law is not considered to be particularly problematic. However, problems may arise when it comes to the practical implementation, mainly due to a lack of financial incentives or compensation mechanisms and little public awareness about the benefits of the nature management tools available.

In Slovakia, the integration of the Birds and Habitats Directives into other relevant national policies and planning documents is insufficient and integration into other sector policies is also limited. There is a strong need for the involvement of NGOs which support access to information and public participation in the process.



■ Regarding the Czech Republic:

In the Czech Republic, Agri-Environmental Schemes are being considered as potential tools to install the management requirements of Natura 2000.

■ Regarding Brandenburg Federal State, Germany:

The Agri-Environmental Programme is a good opportunity for the farmers in the Lower Oder Valley National Park to earn extra income. A few years ago the farmers within the park were still very critical about environmental protection and the existence of the park itself, but over the years their opinion has changed completely, because the farmers see that the AEP is beneficial to them.

■ Suggested further actions:

Workshop meetings between members of national ministries and NGOs revealed the following possibilities for intensified co-operation, where enhanced mutual support is likely to improve overall results:

- exchanging scientific expertise and data, along with general information, perhaps through a platform of experts;
- raising awareness for nature protection;
- developing new funding instruments for Natura 2000;
- training nature conservation staff; and
- information and education campaigns or studies addressing both consumer and farmer behaviour, possibly with NGOs providing (sufficiently remunerated) services to the ministries.

Introduction

From 2nd to 4th July 2003, the IUCN Programme Office for Central Europe brought together more than 60 experts from CEE and EU countries in the Biebrza National Park, Poland, to discuss ways of 'Integrating Natura 2000, Rural Development and Agri-Environmental Programmes in Central Europe'. This paper summarises the main findings and refers to political frameworks as they were discussed during the conference in July 2003.

The conference's main aim was to exchange experience and establish regional needs for nature conservation, and how well this need was reflected in administrative programmes in different European countries. The exchange of experience and best practice focussed on current obstacles to nature protection, as well as the implementation of the Natura 2000 network, i.e. how effectively the synergy of Natura 2000 and Agri-Environmental Programmes (AEPs) could secure nature conservation in rural areas. The conference also aimed to establish the state of play for both Natura 2000 and AEPs within the rural development plans for the acceding and candidate states of CEE, which were represented by both NGOs and the Ministries of Agriculture and/or Environment (MoA/MoE) present at the conference.

The design of national Rural Development Plans and Agri-Environmental Programmes (AEPs) is very important for biodiversity protection. Support measures for specific farming methods, especially through AEPs, enable management of species and habitats on agricultural land. AEPs are obligatory in both current EU Member States and the New EU Member States as well as candidate countries (Bulgaria and Romania), as described in the Rural Development Regulation, the RDR or EU regulation no. (EC) 1257/99 – also referred to as *Pillar II* of the EU Common Agricultural Policy), and the SAPARD regulation, EC 1268/99.

Many environmentalists see the strategic combination of agricultural activities and biodiversity conservation as an essential supplement to the Natura 2000 network of rare

and endangered habitats, especially considering management costs of the protected sites. The EU directives that legally establish the Natura 2000 network (the Birds (79/409/EEC) and Habitats (92/43/EC) directives), as well as good farming practice and AEPs under *Pillar II* of the CAP, set up the main rules for managing and protecting nature assets: together they affect a potentially vast part of Europe's territory.

While Natura 2000 is seen as the 'flagship' to achieve the EU's aim to halt the loss of biodiversity by 2010, it can only be effective if agricultural biodiversity is not neglected. In the EU15, many formerly common species have declined over the last decades, while the species richness of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe is especially connected to extensive farming methods and management of the habitats connected with farmland.

The re-establishment of the link between farming and environment, essentially making agriculture sustainable in the EU15, as well as maintaining 'high nature-value' habitats and environmentally friendly farming methods in the new Member States undergoing transition, are crucially important tasks, calling for a wide-ranging coalition of stakeholders.

A lively exchange of experiences, as was initiated by this conference, is a useful and necessary tool which increases the chances of finding optimal solutions: in many cases, the multi-fold obstacles to the implementation of effective nature management derive from insufficient knowledge about institutional, ecological and socio-economical factors. However, these can be overcome by all actors embarking on a learning process. As the presentations of this conference showed, there is a particular need to improve the exchange between administrations and the scientific and NGO communities, to plan effectively-integrated rural development, in order to increase the number of positive examples and replicate these –

for the benefit of both the environment and the people living in rural areas.

The following pages give a summary of the key issues raised during the conference by reproducing a selection of shortened presentations from the experts' meeting.



The conclusion to this paper merges the main elements of the presentations, the points of discussion raised and comments on the ongoing discourse, to produce key findings and recommendations.

■ Natura 2000 and Accession Countries

One of the obligatory requirements for the EU Accession Countries is to submit a list to the European Commission, which contains proposed sites of European importance for the conservation of habitats and species (pSCI – proposed Sites of Community Importance) in that country's territory. The selection of sites must be according to certain criteria stipulated in Annexes I, II and IV of the Habitats Directive (92/43/EEC). The final selection of NATURA 2000 sites follows an established method, where a national consensus should be reached on areas of high importance to be protected under the directive.

At the time of writing (February 2004), the national lists containing the pSCI have been submitted to the European Commission and are awaiting final adoption. Consequently, the issues to tackle are shifted from submitting a more or less complete choice of sites, to preparing and funding appropriate management plans for the identified pSCI – to transpose them into Special Areas of Conservation (SAC) on the national level.

This is a more pressing issue in the Accession Countries than in the current EU Member States because the relatively high number of habitats rich in rare and threatened species in the Accession Countries is under immediate pressure from their ongoing transformation processes. These states are making strong efforts to imitate a sectoral model of development and generally have small national budgets to co-fund the management of identified NATURA 2000 sites. Thus, the preservation of biodiversity in the Accession Countries demands concerted action from more than the traditional stakeholders in environmental protection. If the protection of biodiversity cannot be reached with dedicated sectoral policies, the only alternative lies in shifting towards a sustainable development, which integrates the major European policies. Without integrated rural development as a strong motor for improving social and economic conditions, the management and preservation of a highly significant portion of Europe's biodiversity becomes questionable.

National Rural Development Plans – opportunities for nature protection

Presentations by representatives of WWF Poland, Polish Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, Polish Institute for Sustainable Development, and The Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group Ltd (FWAG), United Kingdom.

Experiences in RDR implementation in the EU Member States and SAPARD implementation in Accession Countries – *Inga Kołomyjska (WWF Poland)*

The Rural Development Regulation (EC) 1257/99 and the SAPARD Regulation (EC) 1268/99 form the legal background for the obligations and opportunities for new and old EU MS to combine agricultural support and biodiversity protection.

Every measure taken under these two regulations needs to be co-funded through national budgets, which limits the uptake of these measures, especially in the countries in transition.

The Rural Development Regulation, which will apply to the EU New Member States after accession, offers a choice of ‘accompanying’ and ‘non-accompanying’ measures, of which only Agri-Environmental Programmes (AEPs) are compulsory in all MS.

Both old and new EU Member States have the opportunity to set their own priorities within the RDR / SAPARD regulations – they can choose which measures to implement from those on offer, how to design the measures and how to distribute the funds over the different sub-measures. Decisions on Rural Development thus remain (within limits) the competence of the Member States.

The Rural Development Plan, an obligatory document for the New Member States, introduces the measures chosen in the field of agriculture and environment: in this RDP, the overall aims and priorities for the country’s deve-

lopment, as well as the planned budget lines, are presented in several Sectoral Operational Programmes (SOPs).

Each country decides on the ‘appropriate geographical level’ – either national or regional – to implement the measures. An overview presenting the pattern of proposed allocation of EU funds under SAPARD for the ten new Member States showed that the chosen priorities differed greatly; a result of differing structures as well as a varying degree of importance attached to nature management.

In many regions of Central and Eastern European, an outstanding abundance of biodiversity is found on agricultural land. However, threats to the environment and its biodiversity vary between the different regions. Each proposed measure under the Rural Development Plan therefore has to be specific to the range of problems it should target. Using the funding opportunities under SAPARD is especially important, since it allows the gathering of information and experience on how to best adjust the different measures to a country’s needs.

The amount of funds allocated to particular measures is not a sufficiently good indicator for the impact the measures have on protecting and managing habitats and species: differences in design, eligibility criteria and administration costs may result in considerable variation between countries.

Representing the Polish Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, *Maria Szemplińska* introduced environmental aspects of the Polish Development Plan, with a special focus on the measures taken under SAPARD.

The objectives of Poland’s Rural Development Plan (RDP) read as follows:

- to enhance the competitiveness of agricultural holdings, and
- to ensure a sustainable development of rural areas.

Activities including structural pensions, support for semi-subsistence farms, Agri-Environmental Schemes and Less-Favoured Area (LFA) schemes were chosen to achieve these aims.

The current scale of LFA schemes is rather limited in both design and eligibility: the 4 existing categories are connected to mountain and lowland regions in equal proportions, but exclude the majority of the Polish territory due to the limited funds directed to this measure.

The Ministry representative expressed her hope that this unsatisfactory situation in terms of managing natural assets could be improved with more favourable budget decisions in future Rural Development Plans. However, the ongoing transformation of Poland's agricultural sector is leading towards a decline in agrobiodiversity, and rare habitats such as extensively-managed meadows might become irreversibly damaged in the meantime.

Poland's Agri-Environmental Programme (AEP) is meant to:

- promote environmentally friendly farming methods,
- conserve semi-natural habitats,
- secure protection of genetic resources of old and local animal breeds
- raise environmental awareness amongst farmers, and
- restore cultural landscapes.

To achieve these objectives, four Agri-Environmental Schemes had been designed in July 2003:

Schemes I ('biodiversity protection in agricultural areas') and II ('protection of environment and land-

scape') have a very limited scope; they are only applicable in selected areas – the so-called 'priority communities' and Environmentally Sensitive Areas (ESA).

Next to these, interested farmers can apply for two countrywide ('horizontal') measures: Scheme III ('support for organic farming') and Scheme IV, which award payments to farmers raising/cultivating rare breeds.

The limited availability of the agri-environmental sub-measures under Schemes I and II reflects Poland's complex administrative nature. On a centralised level, the national MoA designs Agri-Environmental Schemes with sub-measures, and predetermines their applicability for the regions. On the regional (voivodship) level, a strategy for implementing the pre-selected packages is developed, posing further eligibility restrictions to the AEP by limiting uptake to priority zones and limiting the number of accessible sub-measures within the packages.

Support was already available for the 'rare breeds' and 'organic farming' horizontal measures before the new AEP existed, so that Agri-Environmental Schemes having a new effect in terms of nature conservation are limited to those farmers who not only already manage their farm according to the Code of Good Agricultural Practice (GAP), but also operate in spatially limited priority zones. Fulfilling the requirements for GAP constitutes a big economic challenge for most Polish farms, but without costly investments (for example in proper manure storage), many potentially willing farmers are denied access to Agri-Environmental Schemes and cannot profit from their payments.

Responding to whether the current area defined as Environmentally Sensitive Areas (ESA) actually covered all the environmentally sensitive areas of Poland, the Ministry representative expressed the hope that the size and number of priority zones and ESAs might enlarge in the future, to enable more farmers to apply for non-horizontal Agri-Environmental Programmes.

If the application procedure and eligibility criteria are complicated, many farmers – although eligible for application – might not apply, due to their lack of understanding of the procedure. However, at the time (July 2003) the Polish MoA had not foreseen any activities for preparing potential participants of the Agri-Environmental Programme.



The ex-ante evaluation of the Rural Development Plan for Poland for the first three years after Accession – Bożena Wójcik (Institute for Sustainable Development, Poland)

For all EU15 Member States and also for the Accession Countries, it is obligatory to prepare the Rural Development Plan (RDP) according to the Rural Development Regulation (EC 1257/99). With it comes the obligation for all countries to prepare a special appraisal showing the expected economic, environmental and social impacts, including employment effects of the proposed measures. This ex-ante evaluation has to be prepared before the Rural Development Plan is finally accepted, and overlaps with the final revision of the RDP. The Authority working on the RDP (in Poland, the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development) is responsible for organising the preparation of the ex-ante evaluation. The Accession Countries must have already prepared the final versions of their RDPs, accepted by the national authorities and the European Commission, before May 1 2004. A summary of the ex-ante evaluation has to be included.

The independent, non-governmental Institute for Sustainable Development was employed by the Polish Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development to carry out this appraisal. A broad interdisciplinary team of 25 experts from different organisations (including research/academic institutes and from NGOs) analysed the RDP along 4 themes – social, economic, environmental, and management issues.

The evaluation was carried out separately for each of the 8 proposed measures: 4 of these measures were set out in the Rural Development Regulation (EC) 1257/99; i.e. 'early retirement of farmers', 'support for less-favoured areas and areas with environmental restrictions (LFA)', 'agri-environmental programmes', 'support for afforestation of agricultural lands'; 4 measures were

agreed upon in the Accession Treaty; i.e. 'support for semi-subsistence farms', 'support for setting up producer groups', 'special aid for farms to meet the EU sanitary and veterinary standards' and 'technical assistance'.

While the evaluation was based upon sustainable development, one very important aspect of the work was searching the legal background to the proposed measures for gaps and identifying where adjustments were needed. The guiding questions were as follows:

- How do the proposed measures meet the needs of Polish rural areas recognised within their situation analysis?
- How is the implementation of those measures likely to change the situation in rural areas?
- Are the proposed measures effective for solving the recognised problems or will they create new problems or conflicts?

The distribution of funds was also assessed – both between the proposed measures and between priorities of the strategy for which they were created.

The potential consequences of implementing the RDP for the labour market were assessed by the team, as were the social, economic and environmental consequences (both positive and negative). They looked in particular for the position of the Natura 2000 Network within the RDP and for the Agri-Environmental Schemes proposed in this Plan, and which requirements potential future beneficiaries will have to fulfil.

The evaluation of the RDP was a unique experience for the working team, since it was the first time such an assessment had been prepared by a team of Polish experts, without involvement from abroad. If the co-operation between programming and assessing teams is seen as positive, it will be possible to provide real help for preparing better planning documents in the future.

Agri-Environmental Schemes – limitations and opportunities within the Rural Development Programme to complement NATURA 2000

As a long-term owner and manager of a protected site and having advised farmers on AEP for more than a decade, *Roger Wardle (FWAG Ltd, UK)* presented his experience of AEPs in the UK from an environmental and advisory perspective:

Small-scale, traditional farming methods have become increasingly marginalised in the EU15 and experience shows that, with the trend towards more intensive farming enterprises, many habitats and associated species have continued to decline.

The current system of regulations in the EU can set incentives with potentially negative environmental outcomes; so far the biggest share of agricultural payments is inversely related to an area's environmental value. The income-forgone principle, which ties the level of compensation payments to an agricultural yield obtainable by using intensive farming methods, can limit benefits to nature and/or the environment.

This had been applied to AES payments: if one considers farmers who converted from intensive to nature/environmentally-friendly production, then this is obviously beneficial. However, the compensation is being paid for actual income forgone, which implies

that the compensation a farmer can obtain depends on the volume of produce in the past: the higher the yield before, the more compensation after. Hence, farmers who in the past destroyed the natural and semi-natural habitats on and surrounding their fields will receive higher compensation than those farmers who maintained a better habitat quality on their land, for example keeping their hedges, did not harvest or use their land to the maximum, all at the cost of lower yields.

A general reversal of this income-forgone reference is needed, so that it also pays off economically for landowners and farmers to keep environmentally valuable areas within their properties. One justification for an alternative payment reference is the 'land stewardship' function of environmentally sensitive farming. The national AEP will be most effective to maintain or restore landscapes and their habitats, if the payments the individual farmers receive for their extra efforts are related to the wider 'goods and services' they create for society (for instance avoiding costs of pollution and habitat loss, recreational value, or maintaining cultural landscapes).

The Rural Development Plan is capable of both benefiting and damaging the environment. 'Improvements' in the education of rural communities often mean that traditional systems of farming die out. It is thus of outstanding importance that the Rural Development Plan gives better financial encouragement to farmers and others to retain and manage habitats appropriately. It has to be understood, and reflected in AEP budgets, that environmentally-friendly farming produces more value than is measurable in market prices of foodstuffs and fibre.

Given the tight limits of the AEP budgets, a clear targeting on which measures shall be financed in which kind of environment is needed: *'An afforestation scheme supporting the free planting of trees in an*



area where the biggest challenge is preventing conversion of open grasslands to shrubs is a typical example of money spent under AEP, which negatively affects the environment and thus wastes money' (R. Wardle).

An environmental assessment of the planned action should be carried out on behalf of the MoA before the AES is made available to farmers, in order to avoid inappropriate application of measures and thus ensure overall effectiveness of the AEP.

Well-prepared advisors are vital for the success of the AEP; these should have good knowledge about the different schemes available and should be able to 'sell' them to the farmers. This also implies that the requirements of the farmers have to be balanced with the financial benefits they receive. The AEP design, its funding, and also how its packages are presented to the farmer are all factors which in practice determine whether individual farmers will take part in an Agri-Environmental Scheme. Whatever good could be achieved by an AES that is well designed in terms of habitats' or species' management needs – farmers will not take it up if the payment does not outweigh the efforts. Unpopular schemes are usually those that require of the farmer doing a lot for little money. This basic fact needs consideration when drawing up the national AEP.

After payment levels, it is the AEP design, and also how its schemes are presented to the farmer, which in practice determine whether individual farmers will decide to take part in an Agri-Environmental Scheme.

Within the national AEP, different clearly-targeted agri-environmental schemes/packages should be available; this way, the discussion of 'broad and shallow' vs. 'deep and narrow' programme designs becomes obsolete. Both types of AES can be mutually supportive to serve the overall aim to improve the environmental/nature value of areas under agricultural use. In the UK, an understanding of this synergy led to the authorities categorising the whole country's rural area as Environmentally Sensitive Areas (ESA). The AEP is perceived as a viable tool to protect nature at a reasonable level of costs, and expenditures on the AEP will be doubled over the next years. Farmers throughout the UK can be paid to carry out the AEP, which is basically structured into two levels:

(I) The '**entry level scheme**' is less demanding and easily accessible, and is targeted towards intensively-managed farms. The farmer's obligations under this scheme do not go beyond the Code of Good Agricultural Practice, but allow for a better protection of existing environmentally valuable features on a farm. Water resources, wildlife and landscape mosaic can receive better protection with this scheme, and in addition, the farmer becomes familiar with the concept of AEP. So, he/she receives a small extra income for taking care of certain environmental aspects on the farm and might even decide to join a more demanding scheme at a later stage. In addition to its function of familiarising farmers with the concept of Agri-Environmental Schemes, the entry level scheme is justified by the high number and variety of species that can be maintained on otherwise intensively-managed fields.

The variety of land use, such as the mosaic of different crops, as well as the interconnectedness and closeness of different habitats, has a very strong influence on a landscape's richness in species. A low level scheme can positively influence the mosaic and thus guarantee a good level of nature conservation over a vast territory, at reasonable costs.

(II) A demanding '**sustainable farming level scheme**' combines a high level of restriction with a good level of reimbursement for the farmer. Its aim is to effectively conserve and manage areas of high nature value or environmental sensitivity.

AES payments should be targeted to not only preserving but also buffering natural and semi-natural habitats, in order to achieve a good interconnectedness of species-rich habitats. Through creating migration corridors between isolated spots of high nature value, the AEP can help establish a system of nature management that goes beyond traditional conservation efforts and is achievable at relatively low costs.

Currently many Candidate Countries still have a richer landscape pattern and mosaic of cropping than the current EU Member States. The Agri-Environmental Programmes within the Rural Development Plans could produce desirable results if a large number of farmers participate, essentially being paid for keeping up production methods which maintain a rich habitat pattern.

On one hand it may seem increasingly difficult to politically justify the continued payment, from public



Regarding the maintenance of natural and semi-natural habitats, the requirements of Natura 2000, the cost-effectiveness of well-planned AEPs should be remembered – it is always cheaper to protect existing environmental values and then buffer and extend them, than to restore the (sometimes irreversibly) damaged habitats. The Acceding States have the opportunity to conserve a great deal of their nature value at comparatively low costs, if the AEP is used as an effective tool to allocate payments to sites of high environmental/natural value.

funds, of one group of society in order to continue to do what it used to do for decades without compensation. However, on the other hand, if farmers are being paid as land managers providing environmental goods and services to the rest of society, this may well prove to be much cheaper in the long term, instead of paying the high cost of re-establishing lost habitats and species (assuming this might be possible at all) as well as lost ecosystem functions (including environmental goods and services).

Agri-Environmental Programmes – a chance to involve farmers in nature protection

Representatives of Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Food (Slovenia), Institute for Sustainable Development (Slovenia), DAPHNE Institute for Applied Ecology (Slovakia), MoE (Czech Republic), BUND Berlin/ Aktionsbündnis 'Zeit für die Oder' (Germany).

Marta Hrustel Majcen (Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Food, Slovenia) referred to the special position that sustainable agriculture has in her country, mainly due to decision-makers favouring the sustainable approach over others.

This is reflected in the structure of the Ministry of Agriculture, where the sub-sections *Commodities, Sustainable Agriculture* and *RD and Investment* work closely together.

Slovenia is comparatively rich in semi-natural habitats, of which about 20,500 ha can be found on utilised agricultural area (UAA). About 60% of Slovenian semi-natural habitats are forest habitats, so afforestation programmes are not perceived as a major necessity. Nearly one fifth (18%) of the semi-natural habitats are currently inside protected areas, which in total cover 9% of Slovenian territory.

With more than 90% of farmland being privately owned and a rather large number of owners (86,427 family farms) having small plots (average farm size is 5.4 ha UAA/farm), farmers need to find extra sources of income. In this respect, forestry plays an important role. From an environmental perspective, these figures give no immediate reason for concern, since they indicate a rich mosaic pattern and a high nature value landscape.

Although living in the countryside is regarded as an asset, the actual number of those who maintain it – namely the farming community – is shrinking. Land abandonment is a major pressure

to Slovenian rural areas, with negative effects on the habitat-rich environment.

Currently, farmers account for 6.6% in the employment structure, with a trend towards an even smaller share in the future: the mean age of farmers is 58, showing that there are few young farmers. During the last decade, 100,000 ha of UAA dropped out of agricultural production.

The Ministry of Agriculture of Slovenia is aware that, as well as being environmentally beneficial, maintenance of very old and species-rich habitats is cheaper than restoration.

Throughout recent years, Slovenia provided stable funding for LFA, which has shown good results. Many high nature-value habitats were maintained, which otherwise would most likely have been lost.

The development of agriculture and biodiversity should not be understood as a luxury. In Slovenia, effort is currently being invested into a long-term perspective, with the strategic aims of integrating biodiversity into the CAP and moving support from the first to the second pillar of the CAP.

The priorities within the Slovenian RDP are:

- the sustainable development of agriculture and rural areas, comprising LFA Compensatory Allowances, the Environmental Programme (AEP), and afforestation measures; and
- the economic and social restructuring of agriculture, comprising Early Retirement Schemes, Support for semi-subsistence farms, Support to meet EU standards, and a Producer Group scheme.

The Slovenian Agri-Environmental Programme follows a horizontal approach which will continuously grow over the coming years. (The AEP is not limited to certain areas as required under SAPARD, so they did not use SAPARD funds)

From a choice of 14 different schemes on 110,000 ha in 2003, the Agri-Environmental Programme was intended to develop into a set of 24 schemes, with 40,000 holdings applying the AEP on 350,000 ha in 2004.

There are 4 groups of Agri-Environmental Schemes (AES) in Slovenia, dedicated to

- decreasing impacts on agriculture and environment,
- preserving nature, biodiversity, soil and traditional cultural heritage,
- preserving protected areas, and
- education and promotion.

The major part of agri-environmental payments goes into the dominant livestock sector, via the most popular choice of AES, 'promoting sustainable animal breeding' (also including rare species/breeds).



A limiting factor for the AEP in Slovenia is the administration, which suffers from too few staff. However, thanks to being developed through consultation, the AEP is advanced as shown by the system of administrative control and enforcement of the well-designed basic conditions of the schemes:

- On-the-spot controls are carried out on 5% of the beneficiaries, checking if they fulfil their obligations and how they spend the funds received.

- Accredited agencies assure a 100% control for integrated and organic farming systems.

Farmers are obliged to attend courses prior to receiving agri-environmental funds; for each year of participation in the programme, three hours of attendance are required.

In a concluding remark, the importance of making use of different media was stressed, to raise the public's awareness on the importance of conserving nature within a sustainable development perspective.

Anamarija Slabe (Institute for Sustainable Development, Slovenia) pointed out that co-operation between the MoA and MoE and NGOs working on sustainable development is a natural partnership in Slovenia.

Since NGOs have good access to farmers and thus can obtain feedback on ministry measures, the official authorities should rely more on the skills and resources of NGOs and indeed provide NGOs with support to increase their capacity; the co-operation will be fruitful for all stakeholders involved.

However, ministries need to give clear timeframes for their actions and communicate them better. In general, co-operation would be improved if ministries defined how they perceive the role of NGOs and what their expectations are.

Birdlife's work in Slovenia on Natura 2000 was mentioned as a good example for co-operation: by proposing SPA sites, suggesting measures under AEP, and conducting workshops for the Slovenian Agricultural Advisory Service on the topic of AEP with farmers living in protected areas, valuable feedback could be sent to the ministry. Due to this co-operative approach, the overall results of the Slovenian AEP could be improved.

Farm advisory services provide opportunities for further co-operation. The services are in most cases provided by agronomists, who may lack sufficient specific ecological knowledge to advise on habitats and wildlife: therefore study visits for exchange of best practice should be increased, alongside ecological training which involves NGOs at different stages of planning and execution.

A better integration of the environment and agriculture policy sectors is also needed in Slovenia. The Agri-

Environmental Programme could function as a tool to integrate Natura 2000 with other national nature protection measures, if farmers learn that caring for environment pays off economically. It should be remembered that the scheme a farmer chooses is the most suitable one for him/her, even if this does not produce the effects the policy-makers intended. In such a case, the design contains errors – it is not the farmer who is to blame. The main problem for NGOs in Slovenia is funding. Linking ministries to the public, via school visits or campaigns, could be done most effectively by NGOs being financially rewarded to do so. While the ministry could outsource activities to experienced and effective civic organisations, this might also build the capacity of these groups and provide society with a needed and cost-effective service.

Eva Viestova (DAPHNE Institute for Applied Ecology, Slovakia) introduced the Slovakian Agri-Environmental Programme, funded under SAPARD, and put this into the wider context of transposing EU requirements deriving from the Habitats Directive (92/43/EEC).

Thanks to its geographical position between the Carpathians and the Pannonian plains, as well as its varied relief, Slovakia hosts a rich diversity of flora and fauna, with a high number of endemic species. A well-developed nature protection network, including 9 National Parks, 14 Protected Landscape Areas, and more than 1000 Protected Sites, Nature Reserves and Nature Monuments legally establishes strict protection to its valuable natural heritage. The total area protected in Slovakia, including buffer zones, covers approximately 23% of the country. There are also significant restrictions on land use around designated water protection areas. Unfortunately, this extensive system is not so effective in practice.

The high theoretical level of protection is significantly decreased by ambiguous and even conflicting legislation and low government priorities for nature conservation. The accession to the EU can be expected to bring significant improvements, turning the current 'parks on paper' into real protected areas.

The Agri-Environmental Programme seeks to harmonise the relationship between the production of foodstuffs and fibre with the conservation of the environment, while at the same time trying to maintain vibrant village communities. In Slovakia they have chosen to do this by broadening the scope of agriculture to include maintenance of the landscape.

In the framework of SAPARD (Measure 6), funding started in the middle of 2003 for five pilot areas – the Morava river floodplains, the mountainous area of Polana and Východná, the lowlands of Laborec and Uh rivers, and the intensively-used agricultural area of Jaslovske Bohunice. In these pilot areas, examples of Agri-Environmental Schemes will be carried out. The basic structure of the Slovakian Agri-Environmental Programme is as follows:

- **Basic schemes** – the so-called 'preliminary package without entitlement to compensation payments'; measures promoting Good Agricultural Practice, as currently required by the laws regulating the conservation of nature, landscape, water and soil.
- **General Agri-Environmental Schemes** – compensation payments for prescribed land management; the basic scheme (above) is connected to a general Agri-Environmental Scheme for the conservation of nature and the landscape. It is differentiated according to the type of land use with different packages for arable land, permanent grass cover, and for permanent cultures.
- **Specific Agri-Environmental Schemes** – compensation payments for the conservation of significantly important ecosystems; e.g. a scheme for arable land with biotopes of non-forest woody vegetation, a scheme for marshy and moist meadows, and a scheme for semi-dry and dry soil cover using grass.
- **Complementary Schemes** – compensation payments for environmental/landscape-sensitive farming; this support is available for certified production which is governed by special regulations – e.g. integrated production, organic-production, or for income forgone due to obeying certain limits in low-input systems (limited nitrogen input or stocking/grazing density limits to stabilise grassland biodiversity and/or prevent soil erosion).

The transposition of EU nature legislation into Slovakian law is not considered to be particularly problematic. However, problems may arise when it comes to the practical implementation, mainly due to a lack of financial incentives or compensation mechanisms and little public awareness about the benefits of the nature management tools available.

Because of a lack of financial resources and also due to effective lobbying from sectors representing counter-interests (mainly industry and transport), serious obstacles to future implementation might occur, particularly the realisation of Article 6 of the Habitats

Directive. Article 6 is already transposed into the new Slovakian Act on Nature and Landscape protection, but the current political situation and EU integration including development pressure pose potential threats to Natura 2000 areas. The European Commission has set up a working group on Article 8 and thus initiated a discussion process with Member States on the financial aspects of Natura 2000 – it is also expected to address the problems that the Accession Countries in general are facing¹. In the past, relevant authorities have not dealt with the economic and social consequences effectively, and often there was only ineffective public participation.



In Slovakia, the integration of the Birds and Habitats Directives into other relevant national policies and planning documents is insufficient. There is a strong need for the involvement of NGOs which support access to information and public participation in the process.

Some progress has been made, although there is much work ahead. For example, Environmental Impact Assessments are required, which will ensure that the minimum requirements for integration into sector policies and plans are respected.

1) The European Commission set up an Expert Group on Article 8, which met first in December 2001. Over one year it gathered information and examined costs connected with implementing Natura 2000 (a range between € 3.4 billion and € 5.7 billion was identified for the EU15). The Final Report was finished in December 2002 and contains judgements on the suitability of existing EU funding instruments for co-financing Natura 2000 and gives recommendations on further strategies. (Final report downloadable at http://europa.eu.int/comm/environment/nature/finalreport_dec2002.pdf)

Agri-environmental programmes in the Czech Republic and the potential management of Natura 2000 sites – Eva Havlinova, Abraham Hofhanzl and Bohumil Fiser, Department of Economic Instruments in Nature Conservation, Ministry of Environment, Czech Republic.

The character of the Czech agricultural system was significantly changed over the communist era. The collectivisation, support of intensification and associated changes in farming practices contributed to negative impacts on the environment. Water and soil quality decreased and landscape features were degraded; moreover it led to significant wildlife decline, e.g. a serious decrease in the abundance of birds such as Partridge (*Perdix perdix*), Corncrake (*Crex crex*), or Lark (*Alauda arvensis*), which inhabit agro-ecosystems.

The current system of protected areas covers 15% of the total area of the Czech Republic, and 40% of this is area under agricultural use. Extensively used grasslands are regarded as very important for avifauna and many species of flora. The first Agri-Environmental Schemes in the Czech Republic started in 1998, and over the years they were extended and grouped into an AEP funded under SAPARD (with 5 pilot projects in Protected Landscape Areas).

In the Czech Republic, Agri-Environmental Schemes are being considered as potential tools to install the management requirements of Natura 2000.

From 2004 onwards, AES will be integrated into the Horizontal Rural Development Plan, and the state authorities were finishing the draft of HRDP for discussion in government at the time of the conference. Simultaneously, the Parliament was to discuss a very important draft of the new legislative framework for Nature and Landscape Protection that serves to introduce NATURA 2000. This has the potential for improved nature management, and hopefully additional financial resources.

Natura 2000 and the Agri-Environmental Programme as future tools for nature conservation in West Poland – possibilities & limitations – Paweł Pawlaczyk, Naturalist Club.

The Natura 2000 network in Poland fails to protect nationally and regionally important elements of biodiversity, as those components related to agricultural habitats, or agro-biodiversity, are threatened.

The future Natura 2000 network in Poland will only be a part of Poland's system of nature conservation. Applying the Natura 2000 methodology results in excluding many important elements of biodiversity, e.g. in western Poland, various kinds of springs, wet pastures and Baltic pine forests containing *Empetrum* species. Since the goal of Natura 2000 is to protect a choice of nature elements of European importance as defined in the Annexes to the Birds and Habitats directives (92/43/EEC and 79/409/EEC), this situation is normal and expected. The Birds and Habitats directives do not – and cannot – aim to protect the entirety of Europe's nature assets. However, it is worth remembering in terms of agro-biodiversity in particular, that the Natura 2000 network does not protect some very important components, such as grazed pastures associated with specific birds and other animals.

According to the speaker, the Polish Agri-Environmental Programme fails to protect important elements of agro-biodiversity; the designed support measures do not meet the management needs of endangered sites under agricultural use.

The proposed Polish AEP (as presented in July 2003) contains theoretically adequate schemes for conserving the most endangered agricultural habitats, especially meadows, bog meadows and grazed grasslands. But some elements of agricultural landscapes with high importance for biodiversity still lie outside the system. For example:

- Segetal weeds: a group of plants strongly endangered as a result of modern agricultural activity.
- Shrubs in agricultural landscapes, key for some bird species: there are neither measures for supporting the protection of shrubs, nor for recreating them (measures exist for trees only).
- Small ponds in agricultural landscapes, key for some vertebrate and invertebrate species: there are no supporting measures to protect, recover, or recreate ponds (measures exist for large areas of rushes only).

It is likely that details of the schemes' implementation pose even bigger problems than those connected with the potential preservation capacity of the schemes. As a result of limiting the scope of the Agri-Environmental Programme to only Environmentally Sensitive Areas and Priority Zones, important nature elements, although theoretically possible to support, will most probably be totally excluded from the final AEP.

As shown by the example of (western) Poland, the Agri-Environmental Programme is not necessarily a supportive tool for the management of agricultural sites within Natura 2000. The concept that the AEP supports Natura 2000 goals must be regarded as an 'ideal' and rather theoretical viewpoint.

In Poland it is often stated that the Agri-Environmental Programme will be the main tool for managing agricultural lands on future Natura 2000 sites. Generally, biodiversity management can potentially profit from Agri-Environmental Measures, and the Agri-Environmental Programme could help to achieve Natura 2000 goals. But the relationship between protected nature elements under Natura 2000 and the possibilities offered by the AEP is not as simple as that. One can easily see that the AEP will not be able to support every agricultural element of Natura 2000. In reality, serious problems may be expected:

- The AEP may not deliver the level of support needed for conservation of particular habitats and species: e.g. there are only a few places inhabited by the aquatic warbler *Acrocephalus* in western Poland; the owners of the land may not be interested in joining the Scheme or may be excluded due to the AEP eligibility criteria.
- The support of most Natura 2000 habitats by means of the AEP is only possible in so-called Environmentally Sensitive Areas. Some species and habitats have a distribution pattern that makes it impossible to establish such areas according to the AEP rules.
- For some important habitats in western Poland, a large percentage of their area is state-owned. There is no scheme under the Polish AEP applicable to these areas.
- The support from the AEP for many very important habitats may not be available in reality, since the farm does not meet the requirements set out in the AEP.
- The details of payment calculations within the AEP (i.e. financial incentives) may sometimes even stimulate a negative conversion of habitats, for example the conversion of *Molinia* meadows (Natura 2000 habitat) to *Holcus meadows* (non-Natura 2000 habitat).
- The Polish Agri-Environmental Programme is rather generalised. For Natura 2000 species or habitats, some specialised non-schematic procedures may be necessary in particular places.

The Agri-Environmental Programme can be designed as a useful tool for successful agricultural landscape conservation, including some Natura 2000 sites. Unfortunately, there seems to be no vision for other necessary options for the protection of agro-biodiversity elements in Poland. The challenges to Natura 2000 and agro-biodiversity management can be grouped into two spheres – insufficient geographical scope of the AEP (as discussed above) and the time factor; according to the implementation timetable of the Polish programme, new areas will not be established before 2007.

In western Poland, many important and endangered habitats are currently in an unfavourable condition, as a result of 5–10 years degradation. The time to restore them is now, not after another 3–4 years. In many cases another five years delay in restoration might lead to severe loss of habitats and species, and thus local, regional or national extinctions.

Natura 2000 and the AEP should be regarded as two elements of the much wider activity needed for nature management. Many detailed problems connected with either Natura 2000 or AEP implementation still have to be overcome. These problems may only seem to be small details, but in reality they are critical and may dominate the final ecological effects of these measures.

Experiences with NATURA 2000 and Agri-Environmental Programmes in the German Federal State of Brandenburg – *Jeroen Kuiper (BUND, Germany)*

Farmers in the Lower Oder Valley National Park (Nationalpark Unteres Odertal) can make use of three Agri-Environmental Programmes:

1. Compensation on the base of Article 16 (of Council Regulation No. 1257/99)

The first programme is a Directive of the Brandenburg Ministry of Environment and Agriculture for the compensation of costs and loss of income for farmers in areas with environmental restrictions. The average support is usually not allowed to be higher than 200 Euro/ha.

Through this programme, the following measures are supported:

- Extensive use of pasture land: no fertilisers used;
- Late and restricted use of pasture: only after the 16th of June, or even later;

- Maintenance of low-quality pasture and heather through grazing;
- Extensive production methods on arable land.

2. KULAP (Kulturlandschaftsprogramm – Cultural Landscape Programme)

The second financial instrument is a Directive of the Brandenburg Ministry of Environment and Agriculture to support environmentally-friendly agricultural production methods. Furthermore, the instrument has the goal to support the cultural landscape of Brandenburg.

The programme aims to attain:

- A sustainable and extensive use of pasture by not using various types of fertiliser;
- An extensive use of potentially flooded areas along the river Oder;
- Certain mowing techniques creating mosaics.

The level of financial support through the 'KULAP-programme' is similar to the amounts paid through the Article 16 compensation programme²

3. Contractual nature protection

The third programme in the Lower Oder Valley national park consists of making contracts obliging farmers to protect nature. This aims to adapt agricultural practices in the park to bring them in line with the plans of the national park. This programme is financed exclusively by the state of Brandenburg. The programme is only used when the first two EU-co-funded programmes cannot be used.

In conclusion, the Agri-Environmental Programmes are seen as good opportunities for the farmers in the national park to earn extra income. A few years ago the farmers within the park were still very critical about environmental protection and the existence of the park itself, but over the years their opinion has changed completely, because they see that the AEP are beneficial to them.

²) Article 16 of the Rural Development Regulation (EC) 1257/99 allows Member States to pay compensation to landowners for income forgone due to environmental restrictions

■ Key findings and discussion on AEPs and *Pillar II* of the CAP

The range of measures under the AEPs, their design and funding ceilings, varies a lot between the different countries represented at the conference. *Pillar II* measures, such as the AEP, should gain importance. The environmental, social and economic benefits of AEPs for rural areas will be highest if every country approach seeks to:

- Ensure easy access for farmers willing to enter a scheme (this implies having a variety of schemes on offer, and to install a supportive system of administration (including *inter alia* sufficient numbers of skilled advisors), and
- Direct and adequate funding to these second pillar measures.

It must be borne in mind that the post-reform *Pillar II* of the EU's CAP can be used to better serve the needs of specific problems in a great number of regions: many areas of Europe have needs which are too specific to be handled under individual schemes valid for the whole EU territory; this will be even more the case after the accession of ten new Member States.

The second pillar of the CAP, with AEP as one example from a set of measures, should be perceived as a great chance for each EU Member State to adjust a coherent overall EU policy to their own specific needs. Within limits, every Member State will have the opportunity to set their priorities within a choice of second pillar measures.

AEP is so far the only second pillar measure which is obligatory for a Member State. If EU funds already

available under SAPARD are not being used, new MS are seriously missing out on the opportunity to gather valuable information, experience and the socio-economic and environmental benefits of a system that will have to be installed compulsorily after Accession.

To make Agri-Environmental Programmes (AEP) most effective, it must be remembered that the farming community is a key stakeholder. The acceptability for the farmer of a designed scheme has to be considered. The design of a scheme has to reflect both the requirements that science demands and the practicability of the actual measure taken. Only if the design and funding of an Agri-Environmental Scheme is balanced in this respect, is it likely to be applied for and thus be effective.

The number of farmers willing to join schemes under AEP usually reveals the quality of design and implementation. A small number of applications from national farmers for an AES should only be interpreted as a severe need to improve the scheme in terms of eligibility criteria, geographic spread, practicability, and allocation of funds and/or general administrative support.

Restrictions on the use of AEP and their component AES are set by the funding capacities of each state, as the required co-funding is often the limiting factor which prevents Acceding States from setting up an effective AEP. Additionally, the general attitude of decision-takers towards AEP proves to have a strong impact on the effectiveness of the schemes.

■ Key findings and recommendations on the Natura 2000 process and the use of AEP

Conference participants from the Candidate and Accession Countries considered the introduction of a standard methodology under the Habitats Directive (92/43/EC, on the conservation of natural habitats and of wild flora and fauna) to be a good first result of the ongoing Natura 2000 process. Regarding how to add the national contributions to the European ecological network, NGOs and Ministries in Candidate and Accession Countries entered into an intense discussion about the appropriate transposition details. The directives defined terms of action which were in some cases needed to start general co-operation among NGOs, as well as between the NGOs and official authorities. Although in most countries this mutual trust and recognition has still to be strengthened further, the process of transposing Natura 2000 requirements into national law had an overall integrating effect.

A general criticism made by Roger Wardle (FWAG, UK) alluded to key shortcomings of the Natura 2000 Network: In contrast to other protection methodologies, the Habitats Directive (92/43/EEC) seeks to establish Special Areas of Protection (SACs), which are initially marked and listed as potential Sites of Community Interest (pSCI) before final approval. The methodology will lead to a pattern of protected but isolated stepping-stones, with two resulting sub-optimal situations:

□ In many cases the protected site will be cut off from surrounding sites of lower nature value due to more intensive land use. But migration from and to a protected site would increase the wider area's ecological value at little extra costs. Migration/dispersal corridors would improve the value of the Natura 2000 network for nature conservation.

□ Since the site is subject to inputs from adjoining areas through transportation of critical substances via water or air, the SAC might deteriorate (e.g. through eutrophication of oligotrophic marsh lands). In this case, migration/dispersal corridors would be beneficial for maintaining biodiversity and/or re-colonisation.

In the process of establishing the SACs, Agri-Environmental Programmes should be used by Member States (and Candidate Countries using SAPARD) to support the overall aims of the Habitats Directive (92/43/EEC) by effectively linking and buffering pSCIs and SACs in their national territory.

Keld Soerensen (Roskilde University, Denmark) supported this integrative view. In addition, with all concentration focussed upon Natura 2000 and Agri-Environmental Programmes, a thorough review of existing nature conservation regulations on each national level was needed, to allow nature protection frameworks obtain optimal effects.

Zoltan Waliczky (RSPB) added his general judgement that, while Natura 2000 and Agri-Environmental Programmes were far from being a universal cure for all kinds of nature conservation pressures, they certainly contained many good opportunities to contribute to sustainable rural development, especially if they were perceived as mutually supportive instruments by decision-makers.

Pawel Pawlaczyk (Naturalists Club, Poland) reminded us that Natura 2000 Network and Agri-Environmental Programmes are not necessarily mutually supportive – it would be wrong to label Agri-Environmental Programmes per se a financing instrument for managing Natura 2000 sites.

Conclusions

The participants of the conference represented a wide range of different professional backgrounds, but all had in common a profound experience of nature management; as administration staff, scientists, or members of NGOs concerned with nature protection and implementing EU regulations on agriculture and environment. They brought together different perspectives of expertise in the field of nature management, and exchanged their views on how to link nature conservation aims, as set out in the Birds and Habitats Directives (79/409/EEC and 92/43/EEC) to establish a European ecological network, Natura 2000, with other targets of European policy, such as the development of rural areas, as set out in the Rural Development Regulation (1257/99/EC) and SAPARD (1268/99/EC).

It was the conference's main aim to present examples on the state of implementation in various present and future Member States, enveloping an abundance of different regions within their national boundaries, in order to learn from each other's experience. There was general agreement that the achievement of environ-

mental and socio-economic aims, such as preserving high nature value areas, or providing enough jobs and services in rural areas, would serve Europe's regions most effectively if financial tools on the national and sub-national levels are co-ordinated and designed in a sustainable way, and that they guarantee a justified spending of public funds.

The experts' exchange initiated at the conference in Goniądz, Poland, will be continued via a permanent Internet platform, which aims to further facilitate the inter- and intra-country exchange of information related to Natura 2000 and rural development which benefits nature conservation. In this respect, Agri-Environmental Programmes have a vital integrative function to provide funding for measures that serve both the people and the environment in rural areas. The exchange of experience and expertise will continue to be co-ordinated by IUCN – Office for Central Europe through the following Internet portal:

www.iucn-ce.org.pl

■ Glossary of terms

AEP	Agri-Environmental Programme(s); national programming documents containing Agri-Environmental Schemes (AES).
AES	Agri-environmental Scheme(s) are packages within the AEP, bundling several sub-measures under one heading, for which an eligible farmer can apply. These schemes with sub-measures are designed to protect semi-natural habitats and biodiversity in agricultural areas; in the EU these are funded under the Rural Development 'pillar' of the Common Agricultural Policy <i>NB: Some authors prefer not to discern AES and sub-measures, but name both Agri-Environmental Measures (AEM).</i>
Agro-biodiversity	biological elements (genes, species, communities, ecosystems, habitats) related to agriculture, including elements both on and surrounding the farmer's field.
Article 16 compensation programme	The Rural Development Regulation (EC) 1257/99 allows Member States, through Article 16, to pay compensation to landowners for income forgone due to environmental restrictions. So far, most EU Member States have not yet made use of this tool – the German Bundesland Brandenburg being one of the few exceptions to this rule.
Birds directive	Council Directive 79/409/EEC of 2 April 1979, on the conservation of wild birds
CAP	Common Agricultural Policy of the European Union; being extended to the 10 new EU Member states with Enlargement of the Union
CC	Candidate Countries to join the EU; formerly the 10 new Member States of the European Union
CEE(C)	Central and Eastern Europe(an Countries)
EU	European Union (in this context the EU 15, enlarging to the EU 25 in May 2004)
Extensive production/agriculture	non-intensive agricultural production, using minimal artificial inputs of pesticides and fertilisers
GAP	(Codes of) Good Agricultural Practice (GAP) means a practice that minimises the risk of causing pollution while protecting natural resources and allowing an economic agriculture. (The latest CAP Reform of 2003 followed these lines by making direct payments paid to EU farmers conditional upon the fulfilment of 'Good Agricultural and environmental condition(s)'). Thus farmers can only receive full payment if they fulfil their responsibilities in terms of environmental, animal welfare and health and safety standards (outlined in 18 pre-existing directives and regulations); this 'Cross-Conditionality' or 'Cross-Compliance' is therefore starting to reward farmers for providing the 'environmental goods and services' demanded by society)
Habitats directive	Council Directive 92/43/EEC of 21 May 1992 on the conservation of natural habitats and of wild fauna and flora
MoA	Ministry of Agriculture

MoE	Ministry of Environment
MS	Member State(s) (of the European Union)
Natura 2000	EU initiative, also being extended to the new EU Member States, aiming to establish a network of protected areas across Europe, including natural and semi-natural habitats, thus also biodiversity linked to agriculture
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
RDR	Rural Development Regulation, also referred to as the 'Second Pillar' of the EU Common Agricultural Policy, regulation EC 1257/99
SAPARD	Special Accession Programme for Agriculture and Rural Development, regulation EC 1268/99
SPA	Special Protection Area, to conserve wild bird habitats (Council Directive 79/409/EEC of 2 April 1979, or the 'Birds Directive')
(p)SCI	(proposed) Sites of Community Importance, later to become SACs.
SAC	Special Areas of Conservation – for those habitats which have been approved as Sites of Community Importance (SCI), EU member states have to set up legally-defined protection zones within their national systems of protected areas. The protection of the (p)SCIs has to be assured by the Member States until a SAC is finally legally established.
UAA	Utilised Agricultural Area
Working Group on Art. 8 of the Habitats Directive	The European Commission set up an Expert Group on Article 8, which met first in December 2001. Over one year it gathered information and examined costs connected with implementing Natura 2000 (a range between € 3.4 billion and € 5.7 billion was identified for the EU15). The Final Report was finished in December 2002 and contains judgements on the suitability of existing EU funding instruments for co-financing Natura 2000 and gives recommendations on further strategies. (Final report downloadable at http://europa.eu.int/comm/environment/nature/finalreport_dec2002.pdf)

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IUCN – THE WORLD CONSERVATION UNION

Founded in 1948, The World Conservation Union brings together states, government agencies, and a diverse range of non-governmental organisations in a unique worldwide partnership; over 1000 members in all, spread across some 140 countries.

As a union, IUCN seeks to influence, encourage and assist societies throughout the world to conserve the integrity and diversity of nature and to ensure that any use of natural resources is equitable and ecologically sustainable.

The World Conservation Union builds on the strengths of its members, networks and partners to enhance their capacity and to support global alliances to safeguard natural resources at local, regional and global levels.

EUROPEAN PROGRAMME 2005–2008

The IUCN European Programme mission is to contribute to a sustainable Europe by influencing policy development and implementation for biodiversity and landscape conservation, restoration and sustainable use inside and outside Europe. In practical terms, the mission translates into the following objectives:

Supporting the Union in Europe and the EU – Improved support framework for the global work of IUCN through the EU and other European partners; improved European membership services, including capacity building

Understanding the main drivers of biodiversity change – Improved knowledge of biodiversity change and effective conservation measures at landscape, ecosystem, habitat and species levels

Financing nature conservation – Efficient incentive frameworks for biodiversity conservation and sustainable use are available and understood

Linking education, science, policy and practice – National and supranational (EU) policies, multilateral agreements, processes and institutions are more supportive of biodiversity conservation and ecologically sustainable use

Managing our natural heritage – Ecosystems are managed in a sustainable manner, reconciling social, economic and biodiversity objectives

The European Programme seeks to make IUCN's voice heard through providing authoritative information and policy products, whilst applying the expertise in the European constituency of IUCN. These will be the result of integrating the diverse expertise of the Commissions, members and the worldwide IUCN secretariat to address the key drivers of biodiversity loss. The IUCN European Programme provides the platform for bringing the expertise together, coordinating development of the products and obtaining financial resources.

Countdown 2010

'Countdown 2010' is an initiative of IUCN, its members and partners to raise awareness on biodiversity and to monitor the progress of a unique political commitment by all EU heads of State, and the pan-European Environment Ministers to 'halt the loss of biodiversity in Europe by 2010'. This ambitious goal forms a part of the EU Sustainability Strategy, and was reinforced by the 5th Environment for Europe conference in 2003.

The IUCN Programme Office for Central Europe – current fields of activities

The IUCN Programme Office in Warsaw has a ten years experience in providing information on current topics related to biodiversity management. The office's expertise in compiling and disseminating information to key societal actors currently serves four major fields of activities:

- Ecological Networks – development of the ecological network in Ukraine. Uniting world experience to support a Global ECONET
- Agriculture – integrating environmental and consumer organisations of the CE region into the discussion of the European agricultural policy reform, and Integrating biodiversity protection concerns into the development of rural areas by linking instruments of the future Natura 2000 sites with Rural Development Plans in the CE region
- Forestry – raising awareness and building capacity among private forest owners in the CE region, developing nature conservation guidelines for afforestation projects
- Fishery – sustainable management of fresh-water fisheries in 19 countries of Central and Eastern Europe

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