

STATUS OF NATURA 2000 IMPLEMENTATION IN LITHUANIA: PROBLEMS AND DECISIONS FOR MANAGEMENT AUDIT

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The network of Natura 2000 territories is the basic instrument of EU biodiversity policy which helps to save rapidly disappearing natural values. For this reason, it is very important for each member state to have an effective management system which could ensure timely the implementation of commitments. The objective of this research was to ascertain what the status of works is in one of the Natura 2000 territories.

The paper consists of three parts. In the first part the main features of the chosen territory were presented, as well as the requirements that should be applied to the protected area according to management plans. In the second part, the necessity to implement the audit of protected sites is emphasized and evaluation of performance results are discussed: quality of management plan and its execution, relevance of implemented works and reasons of uncompleted tasks. The third part is based on the opinion survey of the officers of governmental bodies of The Republic of Lithuania and the staff of the NGO on the amendment of nature management process.

By a case study, the main problems of the management process (planning, implementation, auditing) were identified and the recommendations to strengthen it were formulated.

Key words: protected areas, management plan, Natura 2000, evaluation.

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INTRODUCTION

Concerned about the loss of biodiversity, the European Union has established a network of protected areas called Natura 2000. The legal basis for the Natura 2000 network comes from two EU directives: the Birds Directive (1979) and the Habitats Directive (1992). Natura 2000 is an essential tool to achieve this goal as well as the EU's largest contribution to the implementation CBD (Convention on Biological Diversity) Programme of Work on Protected Areas (PoWPA), the overall

purpose of which is to support the establishment and maintenance of comprehensive, ecologically representative, effectively managed and sustainably funded national and regional systems of protected terrestrial areas by 2010 and marine areas by 2012. Thus, Natura 2000 covers conservation issues, such as survival of the most valuable and endangered species of flora and fauna and their natural habitats, as well as long-term objectives of planning and regional cooperation. Natura 2000 network is still an ongoing process with a still growing number of protected areas.

According to the European Union requirements, a management plan has to be prepared for each Natura 2000 site. Drawing up of such plans started in 2005 in Lithuania and was funded by the Phare project “Preparation of management plans for protected areas in Lithuania”.

What is the state of play of implementing the said project in protected areas? What problems are encountered? Is there any guarantee that all works will be completed on time? We will try to answer these questions by our selected case study.

The purpose of the case study is to ascertain the status of implemented works in one of Natura 2000 sites. The main objectives were to analyze the progress of works carried out in the last few years, to evaluate and identify problems encountered. The study was conducted in 2009-2010, prior periods were analyzed too.

STUDY AREA, MATERIALS AND METHODS

Evaluation of the selected management plan was performed according to the EUROSITE (1 Eurosite - a membership network of site-owning and site-managing organisations across Europe, which has prepared recommendations for management planning, implementing and evaluation) audit recommendations. The main phases of the nature management process were assessed: planning, organization and implementation of the tasks in a particular area. We chose one of the first approved Žalioji Forest Management Plan for conservation of birds. Žalioji Forest is located in the North of Lithuania, Panevėžys district, and covers 14,172 hectares. The choice of Žalioji Forest Management Plan was determined by the expectation that, being one of the first approved plans, it would have most of its work completed. The objective of this study was to verify if conservation works implemented by Krekenava Regional Park Administration ensure that all works will be completed on time and good management results will be achieved.

The study was carried out following the Žalioji Forest Management Plan, biosphere polygon

regulations, outline of requirements for drawing up of management plans, as well as the EURO-SITE audit guidelines (questionnaire), which were adapted to the Žalioji Forest case. The study was conducted according to specific audit stages: analysis of literature, putting together of an adapted questionnaire, collection of information from a variety of sources (monitoring, analysis of documents and surveys). The data were analyzed and partially verified during the visit on the spot. Opinions of protected area staff and stakeholders were collected and evaluated. Findings of the case study were documented in the audit report.

Management Plan

Žalioji Forest Biosphere Polygon was established in 2004 by the order of the Environment Minister. Later, the special status of an “important bird area” (IBA) was granted to the site in 2005 and its protection became mandatory under the European law. The management plan for the territory was prepared and approved in 2007 for the period 2007 – 2016.

To achieve the main goal of ensuring a stable or increasing population of rare birds species (*Ciconia nigra*, *Pernis apivorus*, *Glaucidium passerinum*), four main tasks were determined in the management plan. Each task was complemented with implementation measures and assigned with responsible institutions. All measures had also been assigned a funding priority specifying the preference when allocating funds. Deadlines were fixed for each measure and a mid-term review had been provided to be undertaken at the end of the first three years. However, the plan did not provide for a review by an external independent evaluation at the end of period. CMS consortium, whose aim is to raise standards in conservation management, in its guidelines states that management plan audit replaces or complements long-term review which should be performed in specific intervals for protected areas and their natural resources. Audit is regarded as an essential component of management planning process (Alexander 2005).

Table 1. Priority I Measures and Deadlines for their Implementation

No.	Measure	Deadline	Status
1.	Construct nesting-boxes for <i>Pernis apivorus</i> (18 units)	2008	Not started
2.	Construct nesting-boxes for <i>Ciconia nigra</i> (11 units).	2008	Not started
3.	Construct reinforced nesting-boxes <i>Glaucidium passerinum</i> (14 units).	2008	Not started
4.	Prepare technical project for reconstruction of hydrologic regime.	2009	Not started
5.	Implement project of hydrologic regime reconstruction.	2009-2012	Not started
6.	Counting of predators.	2007-2016	Started
7.	Buy traps (100 units).	2008	Not started
8.	To contract hunters for putting traps.	2008-2016	Not started
9.	Organize regulation of raven population.	2008-2016	Not started

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Research results

Investigative audit was performed evaluating works being implemented by Krekenava Regional Park Administration, quality of management plan and causes of default on implementation. The evaluation was based on criteria such as administrative management, accountability, communication, planning and design of territory, quality of management plan, relevance of implemented works, and achieved effect. Below are the main criteria where important shortcomings or significant information have been found.

Quality of the plan. The Management Plan was prepared in accordance with all the requirements for management plans, however, some inaccuracies were found such as grammatical mistakes or vaguely defined concepts. This is an indication that the plan was prepared in a hurry and imprecisely.

Relevancy of instruments. The plan designer and the manager had disagreements regarding the appropriateness of the measures specified in the Management Plan. The plan was prepared without on the spot visits to the protected area and without communications with stakeholders, thus some of the measures could not have been adapted to the local situation. In this context the periodic review foreseen in the plan is welcomed for it may be useful in order to adjust the plan to the real situation of the territory taking account of the efficiency of measures and new factors.

Implementation of the tasks. As already mentioned, there are four tasks planned and measures for their implementation are listed in the Management Plan. According to its importance, each measure is ranked as the first or second priority, which means that a first priority measures is more important to implement than a second priority one. The following tables indicate measures of the first or second priority and status of their implementation.

As shown in Table 1, only one of nine first priority measures is being implemented, i.e. counting of ravens and martens. Because of the lack of funds, artificial nests or nesting-boxes have not been fitted for protected bird species, traps have not been bought and hunters have not been contracted. However, the person (ecologist) who is responsible for implementation of the plan maintains that nesting boxes are being fitted out by volunteers, though this activity is not documented. Hydrological regime restoration project for the protected area also has not been started to develop yet, but the Administration has announced in its website that the project will be started in 2011 and other measures specified in the Management Plan will be implemented as well. These works will be executed under the project "Protected Areas Management (Phase II)" funded by the European Regional Development Fund. Also, an installation of 4 units of artificial nests for black storks is planned in Žalioji Forest under the project "Improvement of the conditions for black storks breeding" (2010-05-03 to 2011-05-14)

Table 2. Priority II Measures and Deadlines for their Implementation

No.	Measure	Deadline	Status
1.	Draw up recommendations for private and public forests owners.	2007-2016	Started
2.	Install roadblocks, traffic restriction signs (15 units).	2007-2008	Started
3.	Inform private and public forests owners about works during birds incubation time.	2007-2016	Started
4.	Install information stand (1 unit).	2007	Completed
5.	Publish leaflets (3000 copies).	2008	Completed

Table 3. Monitoring data (number of breeding bird pairs)

No.	Name	2004	2006	2009
1.	<i>Ciconia nigra</i>	5	5-6	6
2.	<i>Glaucidium passerinum</i>	7-12	>5	12
3.	<i>Pernis apivorus</i>	10	9-10	10

funded by Birdlife International. Thus, should the study be repeated in 2012, the list of outstanding measures would be smaller.

As shown in the table 2, there are five second priority measures, two of which are fully and the other three are partially implemented. The deadlines of the first and third measures have not yet expired. These are measures concerning information to public and private forest owners about restrictions of works during the breeding of birds. Recommendations have been published in leaflets, newspapers, as well as indicated on the information stand. The roadblocks installation of the second measure has been completed, and sites for road signs have already been found, with signs to be fitted as soon as funds arrive. Information stand has also been built, and leaflets have been issued, only in smaller circulation than planned.

Comparing two tables above, it could be noticed that only a small part of the measures has been implemented and that preference is given to the second priority measures, not to the first as it should be. The reason behind this is the shortage of funds and complexity of first priority works, while second priority measures are less costly. In terms of meeting the deadlines, it is obvious that none of the measures has been completed on time. This could be explained by the fact that approval of management plans took too long and the works were started later than planned. This was confirmed by the audit conclusion: "The Ministry of Environment did not manage

to approve management plans in time, although most of the plans were submitted by the State Protected Areas Office for approval in 2005."

Monitoring results. Based on monitoring data for 2004, 2007 and 2009 a conclusion can be made that a number of pairs of rare birds is stable in Žalioji Forest area:

Implementation of the Management Plan should allow breeding for at least 9 pairs of *Pernis apivorus*, 7-12 pairs of *Glaucidium passerinum* and 5 pairs of *Ciconia nigra* in the territory. Minimum criteria which are required for establishing of an important bird area: 5 pairs of regularly nesting *Ciconia nigra*, 4 pairs of *Pernis apivorus* and 3 pairs of *Glaucidium passerinum*. Thus, as seen from monitoring data, the number of pairs breeding in the area meets all relevant criteria.

Effect achieved. Implementation of the measures was observed over a period of few years. Unfortunately, none of the measures which were outstanding in the end of 2009 have been implemented one year later, i.e. end of 2010. Despite the fact that the monitoring results indicate a stable number of rare birds in the territory, it can be concluded that the works are being carried out slowly and it is early to speak about the achieved effect until the main measures are still outstanding. It is intended to continue the study by monitoring effectiveness of implemented works and comparing the progress with progress made by other protected areas administrations.

Survey results

A survey of the opinions of the officers of governmental bodies of the Republic of Lithuania and the staff of NGOs on the amendment of nature management process was carried out in order to clarify the main reasons of behind the default on implementation of measures and possible solutions. Experts were interviewed such as the Deputy Director of State Protected Areas Office, a specialist from the Ministry of Environment, an expert biologist who has drawn up 5 management plans, one specialist from NGO and one from Kurtuvėnai Regional Park Administration. Experts were selected on the basis of their belonging to any of the stakeholder groups associated with different stages of the management planning process: management plan preparation, its execution and supervision, as well as contributing to the public interest to preserve the natural heritage.

Based on the results of the survey, the following main groups of conservation management problems have been identified: regulation of conservation auditing, continuity of management activities, encouraging private land owners to participate in the management of areas, lack of initiative among workers and skilled professionals, low outcome of their work. The main problem identified is the lack of financial resources. One of respondents explained that management plans are designed for ten years, but funding covers just the first two years. As a result, continuity of management works is not being assured for the following calendar years and expected effect is never achieved. Also, the effectiveness of management significantly decreases due to the delay of contractors works (e.g. felling of bushes). In addition, other problems were distinguished such as the shortage of appropriate specialists, conflicts with private land owners (also problems in finding them), lack of sufficient attention from the environment structures. One of the possible solutions was offered to implement tasks by other instruments or seek international aid of funding. Moreover, the most essential task indicated by several experts is to ensure the continuity of nature management process (such

as the use of economic territory) because without any measures the habitats usually degrade after a few years.

Therefore, one of the effective ways to motivate managers to respect the deadlines could be a conservation audit. According to the experts surveyed, a conservation audit is necessary and even required, because: 1) it would introduce more transparency in the management of protected areas, 2) it would help to clarify issues, 3) fairer decisions would be accepted, 4) it would obligate to seek better results, 5) it may offer positive foreign experience.

Some foreign countries have been performing such auditing or evaluation of management plans and implemented works for many years. Every single work of management must be evaluated in order to verify achieved goals and analyze the problems encountered. Control is mentioned only in one act of law of the Republic of Lithuania, i.e. Government Resolution No. 709 "Regarding procedures for preparation and approval of strategic planning documents for protected areas". It states that a conservation audit may be carried out in order to assess preparation of a management plan, relevance of a set of measures provided therein, and to assess the management efficiency. However, the procedures to that end have not been prescribed.

The authors of the present study are of the opinion that control of the management process would ensure efficient performance of tasks, draw attention to the weaknesses and emphasize the strengths. Moreover, it would help independently evaluate achievements and real impact of performed works, as well as enable improvements in management of protected areas.

CONCLUSIONS

1. Almost all first priority measures have not been implemented in Žalioji Forest area, although most of the deadlines have expired. The main reason for such delay is the lack of funds. Experts say if a shortage of funds exists, the measures have to be replaced by

- other measures of international assistance must be sought.
2. Monitoring data suggests that the number of rare birds is stable in Žalioji Forest area. Since only a small part of works is completed, the number may be expected to grow further once all measures are implemented.
 3. According to the experts surveyed, the main problems in executing management plans are: 1) lack of financial resources, 2) continuity of management process, 3) motivation of private land owners to encourage their participation in the managing of areas, 4) lack of employee initiative and low usefulness of their activity, as well as lack of skilled professionals; 5) regulations regarding management plan audit.
 4. According to the experts surveyed, management plan audit would help to introduce more transparency, to detect problems and would provide for better decision making. Audit would obligate to seek better results in management of protected areas.
 5. Audit of management plans is not regulated in Lithuania, but such kind of evaluation is recommended by foreign organizations as an important part of management planning process.

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