

Site 26: Nemunas Delta

26.1 Change of the site by project activities:

Only one-third of the meadows and pastures of whole Curonian lagoon were mowed and grazed in 1995 after crash of the agriculture due to recession. Before the start of the project nearly half of the project site remained not used. LFN in order to introduce and maintain agricultural use of leased land as well as support breeding of target bird species needed to combine targeted habitat management, re-creation of meadow habitat and building up of close cooperation with farmers. Knowledge transfer from Tipperne in DK, where combined grazing and mowing has been adopted in order to manage breeding sites of bird species, gave a support for project activities in the Nemunas Delta.

Situated on winter polder, the meadows of Nemunas Delta site are highly productive. First phase of the project has been aimed at recovery of meadows use. After 4 seasons of combined mowing and grazing, cover of reed decreased significantly. Targeted meadow management has started in 2008 (due to high water level it was impossible to access area in 2007), after expert visit to the site and preparation of management guidelines for the area. Management of different plots within the project area has been decided on the basis of presence of different bird species (differentiation between meadow species and Aquatic Warbler). Cattle enter the area in May and stay until late autumn, when after grazing regime shall ensure a sufficiently low grass sward before next bird breeding season. During the project it was possible to increase grazing pressure on the core area leased by LFN, from about 20 cattle at the beginning, to 50 cattle in 2011. Parts of the project area, the plots with observed presence of Aquatic Warbler or potential habitat of the species, have been taken out of grazing scheme. There only mowing is done. On the rest of the area combination of late mowing and grazing takes place according to recommendations of experts.

Combination of mowing and grazing with gradually increased amount of cattle lead to a change of the structure of the vegetation. Reed and reed canary grass dominated plots has got more diversified patchy structure of short and medium sward.



Difference in vegetation between plots managed by LFN (on left side of the road) and surrounding plots not used (on the right side). The picture was taken in spring.



Grazing of polder meadows in Nemunas Delta with close up on the structure of sward.

As a consequence of evaluation of water management importance in Nemunas Delta, the BaltCoast project induced reconstruction of 4 sluices in 2011 in the project area. The work was done in cooperation with the Association of Local Stakeholders for Melioration Infrastructure Usage in the scope of the project "Reconstruction Uostadvaris Summer Polder of Silute District Rusne Cadastral Unit" financed from EU Structural Funds.

26.2 Remaining challenges and actions:

Management of the Nemunas Delta is ongoing as planned and will be continued until the end of the project. Economic situation of the area is still not stabilised.

It is clear that LFN has to secure consideration of nature conservation in the future water as well as agricultural management of the polder. It requires both involvement in dialog with stakeholders and maintaining high water levels as long as possible on the meadows leased by LFN.

26.3 Public perception:

When the agrarian reform began, some polder land was distributed, but the majority remains state land. The project area consists of land leased by LFN and land leased by farmers.

The project activities are based on cooperation between NGO and farmers from the area. LFN owned cattle have been leased to farmers with an obligation to take care of the animals and to manage the section of land within the project area. In return farmers could keep offspring of the cattle. During years 2005 – 2007 farmers were subcontracted for mowing and payment were done "in kind" by cattle offspring as in contracts for cattle care. In 2007 situation has changed due to bad economic conditions for meat production. From 2008 farmers demanded payments in cash and in the same time it was possible for LFN to apply for subsidies on land use.

LFN cooperates close with farmers to achieve good atmosphere and understanding of conservation aims and is regarded as an important actor in the area. Due to challenges of changing economic situation and securing nature conservation aims LFN is involved

in different building capacity activities in the area as e.g. lately Initiative Group “Nemunas delta namai” (house of Nemunas Delta). The group aims to establish a round table of different stakeholders in Nemunas Delta region and Lithuanian Fund for Nature represents nature conservation interests in land use and tourism sectors.