

Piloting study tours as communication means in Natura 2000 areas

Report and policy recommendations

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Introduction

Project NaturallyEst-LIFE „Piloting Natura 2000 communication in Estonia“ is carried out to test and pilot different communication methods and make recommendations to Natura 2000 site managers and policy makers. During the project 5 study tours were planned for local stakeholders for chosen conflicting cases. The study tours were planned inside Estonia from one Natura2000 area to another for facilitating best practice dissemination via personal contacts in different areas. The tours were planned to be accompanied by nature conservation experts and facilitator. The lecturing to participants planned to be kept in minimum and the experience sharing among local stakeholders will be facilitated with the comments form experts if needed. During 2020 4 study tours were held and current report gives overview of the activities as well as results and follow-up recommendations. Due to COVID-19 restrictions one study tour was not carried out and is planned to be held in April 2021 as a virtual event.

The planning

To find topic for study tours Estonian environmental officials were and project shareholder group were consulted. Selected topics were: questions related to management of semi-natural meadow habitats in Natura 2000 sites; questions related to forest habitats and forest management in Natura 2000 sites; planning and mapping works in Natura 2000 sites.



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Organised study tours

Wooded meadow managers meeting in Nedrema wooded meadow – 22.05.2020

Wooded meadows are stunningly beautiful habitats in spring but the meadow managers face row of difficult questions related to management of these habitats. The questions can be divided into 3 main groups: buerocracy of management support system, economics and technical solutions of management and knowledge of habitat biodiversity and way how to sustain it. Environmental officials also pointed out that meadow managers work hard to manage our valuable habitats but they rarely get thanked for it.

To face these questions we invited Minister of Environment Rene Kokk to meet the managers and thank them for their hard work.



Fig.1. Minister of Environment Rene Kokk greeting wooded meadow managers in Nedrema Natura 2000 site

We also made sure that all wooded meadow managers get invited to the event and that they are prepared to share their experience with other managers. As COVID-19 pandemic was going on we prepared ourselves with microphones and headphones so we could safely be outside and not too close together but still hear each other well.



Fig.2. Headphones allowed better communication during the study tour

We asked local wooded meadow managing family Pikkmetts to give introductory talk about their site as well as to invite the study tour group to their farm to see the management machinery.



Fig.3. Meadow managers were very interested in grass cutter that enables make compostable biomass from less valuable meadow grass.

They were also happy to serve picnic table as they also work as an organic farm and produce range of dairy products.



Fig.4. Picnic table filled by Mättiku Organic Farm

Altogether there were 30 people attending the event, the group visited meadow sites, discussed ecological, economical and technical issues and managers expressed their concerns to Minister. The event was organised so that there were no lectures but ecologists as well as farmers and officials had opportunity to share their experience and find common solutions.

The main needs for meadow managers were compiled into a newspaper article and published in news site Postimees

(<https://leht.postimees.ee/7018220/poollooduslike-niitude-hooldaja-on-uheksa-ametiga-hunt-kriimsi-lm>) that was shared in social media 116 times. This shows that we managed to share much needed information to people involved in meadow management. The event also got more media attention to meadows thanks to visit of a member of government and his supportive remarks.

Coastal meadow managers meeting in Saaremaa – 15.08.2020

Although all semi-natural meadow habitats need mowing or grazing once a year, there are special questions for managers of different meadow habitats. We organised second meadow managers study tour in Saaremaa with a main goal to discuss coastal meadow managing questions. As many

managers manage different meadow habitat types it is sometimes hard to understand why on wooded meadows conservation rules say the trees must be left standing but on coastal meadow trees are not tolerated by ecologists. As ecological studies show that coastal birds nest mortality due to predation is enhanced by trees and bushes left on meadow the farmers have need to keep their cattle fed and protected.

In Saaremaa one of biggest meadow restorers and managers Mario Talvist was hosting the event. First site was visit to Orissaare coastal meadow and discuss the bird nest mortality and management possibilities.



Fig.5. Study tour group discussing the possibility to open the meadow more for ground nesting birds

The managers gave overview of their cattle and sheep farm economics and management plans.



Fig.6. Young farmer showing the animals on meadow

After visit to coastal meadow the study tour group has lunch in local facility and discussed coastal meadow management planning documents and the needs of meadow managers.



Fig.7. Participants of study tour on a lunch and discussion break

Next visit was to Saaremaa wooded meadow to see real machinery at work. The wooded meadows have been restored just couple years ago but already producing good diverse meadow hay. As wooded meadow grass is sparse it is not usual to bale the wooded meadow hay. So the participants were eager to see this in practice.



Fig.8. Familiarisation with meadow mowing machinery



Fig.9. Participants see how wooded meadow hay is put into bales

The study tour was well welcomed by participants who brought out that it was possible to see first-hand new technology, meet other managers as well as ask ecological questions straight from experts. Many managers said that they also see more tourism potential of meadows as they had not visited meadows as tourists themselves before.

The event did not gain so big media attention as there was no minister visiting but local media was happy to announce about the event

(<https://saartehaal.postimees.ee/7034835/saaremaal-toimub-maahooldajate-oppesaev>) and participants mentioned that without visiting minister it was possible to discuss among themselves more deeply.

Forest habitats and forest management study tour to Haanja Nature Park – 25.08.2020

The Natura 2000 forest habitats and their conservation is a topic causing many conflicts. The environmental officials have brought out that they would need more first-hand experience and knowledge of forest management practices to decide conservation issues in Natura 2000 forests. So a study tour was organised to Haanja Nature Park that has study trails and different managed and not managed forests that can be seen and compared.



Fig. 10. Forest expert Liis Kuresoo introducing the site on pristine forest hiking trail



Fig.11. Group of environmental experts and officials discussing if this habitat should be opened up a bit for other tree species to grow or left covered by hazel.



Fig.12. Clear cut by private forest owner has led to loss in this forest habitat and enabled invasive species to grow, re-growth of this patch should be done by natural broad leaved species not by planting spruce

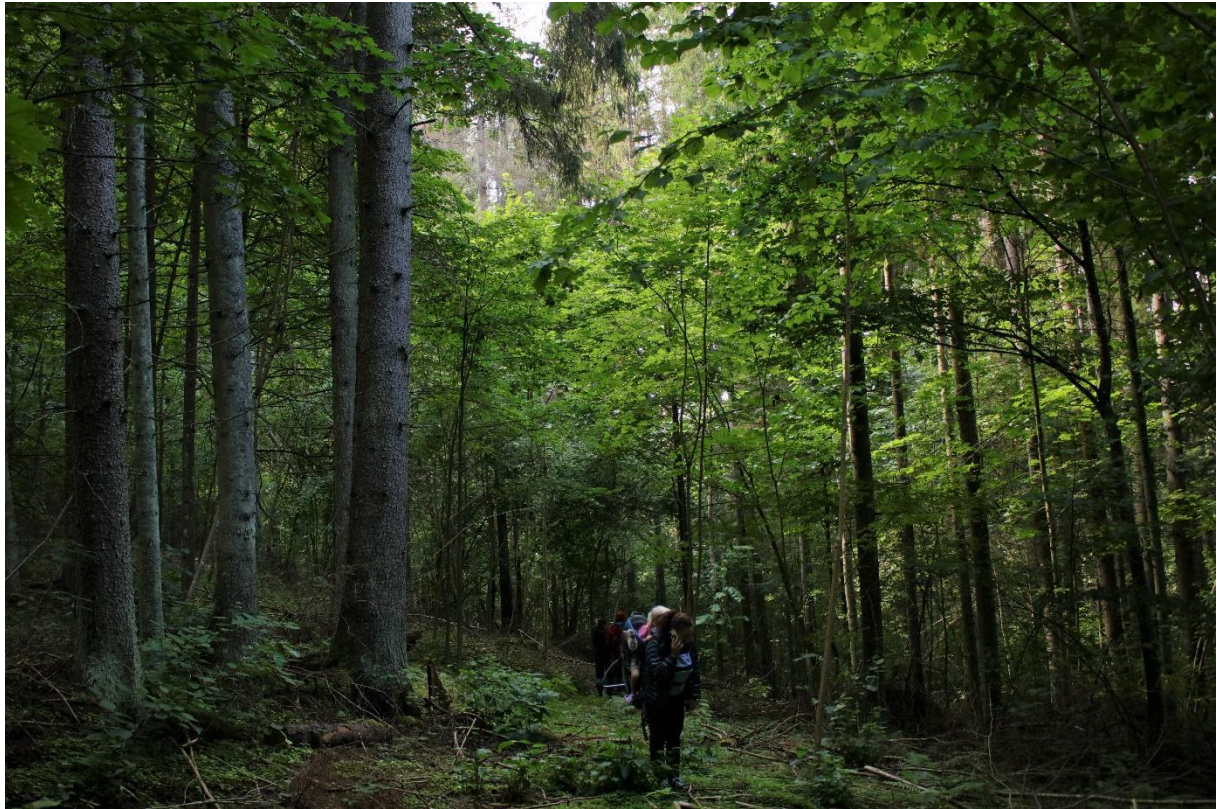


Fig.13. Some privat forest owners have decided not to use clear cut and the result is more favourable

During lunch time in local dinery Liis Kuresoo introduced fresh study book about non-clear cut forest management and group discussed about gaps in knowledge and possibilities t omake better environmental decisions.



Fig.14. Liis Kuresoo introducing study book and leading discussion

After lunch the group also discussed landscape scale conservation planning opportunities and visited watching tower to see the natural mosaic landscape of Naanja Nature Park.



Fig.15 Natural forest and meadow mosaic landscape of Haanja Nature Park

The study tour participants concluded that the tour was interesting but the groups should consist of more different stakeholders to tackle practical questions. Also the political involvement of decision makers is needed to protect the habitats.

Forest habitats and forest management study tour to Lahemaa National Park – 18.11.2020

To organise a more mixed group of stakeholders we invited environmental officials to North Estonia to Lahemaa National Park. We asked nature tourism private company NatourEst to organise the tour and asked a professional forest manager Aivar Täpsi to select and introduce best sites for comparing forest management practices. We also asked the National Audit Office, Environmental Law Centre and Environmental Board forestry officials to take part in the tour.



Fig.16. Different stakeholders expressing their view of the managed forest landscape

The big divide between forest managers view and biodiversity experts view is that forest managers are concerned in getting intensive new regrowth of young trees but to preserve forest habitats there is a need to preserve species that are specialised to old-growth forests.



Fig.17. A non-management zone where natural young re-growth has started where old trees have fallen



Fig.18. Forestry expert explaining how to get young re-growth in managed forest

All the participants of the study tour said that the tour was very useful and everyone felt they got new information or better understanding of environmental management decisions on the field. As forest management conflict is deep and complex it cannot be solved by one tour but participants said they are more hopeful of reaching common grounds between different needs and values.

Conclusions and recommendations

The piloting of study tour method proved that it is a good possibility to bring conflicting parties closed together or help to discuss complex questions. The method does not allow to go very systematically into one topic and give long lectures but instead it enables to soften the emotional heat of discussions and diversify points of view. We encourage Environmental Board and other environmental decision makers to use this format instead of closed room meetings during management planning process or conflict resolution process. If a higher official or politician is invited to the event it brings about more media attention and gives participants a sense of praise. From another side this event will be less filled with technical details. In case of meadow managers the two study tours complemented each other well: one worked as thanking and praising event and in second case more as a technical and practical first hand experience. The forest topics are very complex and conflict borne so the second study tour worked well to bring conflicting parties closer together. But the first tour had also good results: if one stakeholder group can openly discuss among themselves the conflicting issue they can come up with new solutions. The Haanja study tour led to a next event that was local community discussion about their own valuable landscapes and possibilities to value them more.