

INTRODUCTION

The **Užava Upper Reaches (Užavas augštece)** Nature Reserve was established in 2004 in order to protect the river floodplain meadows. In the same year the nature reserve was also listed as a Natura 2000 site for its significance as a nesting ground for the corncrake. The following specially protected habitats have been registered in the reserve: river floodplain meadows, meadows with blue moor-grass, and species-rich *Nardus* grasslands on siliceous substrates. The nature reserve is situated in the Kuldīga district, Alsunga parish, and it covers an area of 688 ha.

In the past, the area was continuously used for agricultural purposes, but in the last 10 years these activities have significantly decreased. As a result, the meadows are gradually taken over by shrubs and trees. If such conditions persist, in the long-term the nature reserve can lose its original purpose and value.

The management plan (MP) for the Užava Upper Reaches Nature Reserve was developed in 2005 on behalf of the Nature Protection Board of the Ministry of the Environment. The objective of the MP development process was to carry out an inventory of the area and to draw an action plan for conservation of the floodplain meadows and other nature values for the time period until 2015.

The MP has been drawn in accordance with the Law on Specially Protected Nature Areas, the Cabinet of Ministers' Regulation on General Protection and Utilization Rules for Specially Protected Nature Areas, and the Ministry of the Environment Order No. 120/04.07.2002 on Recommendations for Drawing Management Plans; the Nature Protection Department of the Ministry of the Environment has also been consulted in the process.

Development of the management plan was supervised by the supervisory board (see Annex) established by the Nature Protection Board. The group comprised representatives of the Alsunga Parish Council, the Kuldīga Regional Forest District of the State Forest Service, the Liepāja Regional Environmental Board of the State Environment Service, the LIFE-Nature project on Restoration of Floodplain Meadows, the Nature Protection Department of the Ministry of the Environment, and the Bērziņš and Skujenieki homesteads. Ilze Rēriha, Elmārs Pēterhofs and Arvīds Barševskis were part of the expert team developing the management plan.

SUMMARY

The management plan for the Užava Upper Reaches (Užavas augštece) Nature Reserve has been developed for the time period of 10 years. The document comprises information on the area and its biological values; it gives assessment of the current state of natural ecosystems, sets objectives for the conservation and management of the area, and offers an action plan for reaching the objectives.

The nature reserve was established in order to protect habitats of Latvian and European importance: nesting habitats of the *corncrake*, *river floodplain meadows*, *meadows with blue moor-grass*, and *species-rich Nardus grasslands on siliceous substrates*. In most cases, these habitats both originate and sustain themselves due to human activities. Over centuries, grazing and mowing of meadows has created a landscape that today could be regarded as cultural heritage. With the changing economy the utilization of the floodplain meadows of the Užava upper reaches became unprofitable. As a result, the meadows started overgrowing and ceased to be suitable as nesting grounds for the corncrake. Beaver dams appear along the meadow drainage ditches, which results in meadow flooding and subsequent turning into marshland. This triggers development of new plant and animal communities. In the short-term perspective the flooded sites could become important nesting grounds for specially protected bird species yet the initial profile of the territory would be gradually lost.

In the long-term, the natural meadows should be re-established to the state that they were in the early 80s of the past century; this is achieved through regular mowing. Fallows and cultivated meadows have to be preserved as important nesting grounds for the corncrake. Favourable economic conditions and sustainable management practices have to be created for the preservation of natural meadows, fallows and open fields.