

The International LIFE-Symposium
“Riverine Landscapes: Restoration, Flood protection, Conservation”
September 26 – September 30, 2005
Breitenwang, Reutte in Tirol, Austria.



Report by regional coordinator of the LIFE Nature project “Restoration of Latvian floodplains for EU priority species and habitats” Ainars Auniņš

Background

Although our project focuses mainly on meadows laying on river floodplains, all of our project territories are complex riverine ecosystems consisting of rivers (and streams) and their catchment areas of various complexities. The rivers can be regarded as backbones of the territories as the water tables and flooding regimes of the meadows are mostly dependent on the river hydrology. On the other hand it is important that planning of management activities in floodplain meadows takes into account requirements of all habitats of the whole riverine ecosystem and consider possible effects of the planned actions to them. This requires a wider understanding of the processes involved and interactions between the habitats. Exchange of experience as well as following the current developments in river restoration plays important role in ensuring success of the project.

Restoration activities and management of floodplain meadows that are planned in our project (removal of shrubs, shrub roots, controlled burning and initial mowing) has to be regarded as only the first step in the restoration of these ecosystems. As most of the meadows in our

study areas have undergone drainage in the past and some of the rivers have been straightened, the territories have altered water regimes that makes them more vulnerable to abandonment and less suitable to wet grassland species like *Crex crex* and *Gallinago media*. Thus the second step (a follow-up of this project) would be to restore the hydrology of the sites by closing drainage ditches and re-meandering the rivers where it is still possible. In this regard it is important to collect information on the practices used and gain experience in as early stages of planning as possible.

Taking these considerations into account as well as understanding the need for information exchange on other aspects of habitat restoration it was decided that one of the regional coordinators of the project participates in the International LIFE-Symposium “Riverine Landscapes: Restoration, Flood protection, Conservation”.

Organization of the Symposium

The International LIFE-Symposium “Riverine Landscapes: Restoration, Flood protection, Conservation” took place from September 26 to September 30, 2005 in Breitenwang, Reutte in Tirol, Austria.

The first three days of the symposium were organised as a scientific conference with 5 sessions where different authors presented their projects as well as scientific results or practical achievements. A general discussion was organised after each session covering the relevant topics. The last day was a practical experience during a field trip to places where river habitat restoration actions had taken place.

The first day of the symposium was devoted to concepts and experiences from several LIFE-Nature projects dealing with restoration of river ecosystems. The second day gave an insight on the current state of research on riverine landscapes as well as various aspects of species conservation and river ecology were covered. Practical aspects of river restoration and river engineering were discussed in detail on the third day of the symposium.

A field trip to project territory of the LIFE Nature project “Wildflusslandschaft Tiroler Lech” was organised on 29th of September, 2005. Project results and achievements were demonstrated in the field.

A full programme of the symposium is attached.

Participants

Regional coordinator of the LIFE Nature project “Restoration of Latvian floodplains for EU priority species and habitats” Ainars Aunins participated in the symposium. The other participants included representatives of other LIFE Nature projects dealing with restoration and management of riverine ecosystems. The symposium was organised by LIFE-Nature project LIFE 00 NAT/A/7053 “Wildflusslandschaft Tiroler Lech”.

Lessons learnt

1. The Symposium programme allowed to learn the current state of research in the ecology of riverine landscapes and gave a possibility to discuss the hot topics with the scientists currently working with these issues. A particular emphasis was put on questions regarding

natural dynamics of the rivers and their floodplains. Session talks as well as discussions that followed the talks covered both scientific and practical sides of the management of river habitats. It was important both for planning further restoration activities in our project and planning the project follow-up.

2. Several presentations showed examples how effectiveness monitoring of management actions has been implemented in other LIFE-Nature projects dealing with river ecosystems. This gave an opportunity to compare the approaches used with those we are using in our project as well as gave fresh ideas in possibilities analysing the project data. An important question was raised during discussions on effectiveness monitoring: it is very often observed that there is a pronounced time lag before many of living organisms start to respond (or this response is measurable) on management actions that have been carried out. This may be caused by a number of reasons such as depleted populations of target species, time necessary for the formation of microhabitats and others. As most of the LIFE Nature projects last for a few years only, there is a risk that the response of the target species might not be observed during the project period. To measure the real project success it would be necessary to continue carrying out the monitoring activities after the end of the project. However, this is often not possible because the funding for a detailed monitoring ends with the project and only less detailed monitoring (surveillance) is carried out that is only sufficient to fulfil the minimum requirements of Habitats Directive.

3. The question of flood risk has often been raised during the informational meetings with landowners of our project areas and other stakeholders. The public opinion currently would not allow starting restoration of natural river ecosystems if it would involve hydrotechnical works even if they would not cause risk of flooding their property. It was very important to exchange experience with representatives of other LIFE Nature projects regarding the public opinion and the possibilities to change it when necessary.

4. During the excursion of the symposium we visited several places where information signs of the project were exposed. I paid an attention to materials, construction as well as information content. This experience will be used carrying out similar activities under project action E.3. Very interesting approach was to include an audible content along with visual. The necessary power supply for playing the sound could be acquired by a visitor using a mechanical charging device. Such an approach helps to attract more attention and can provide more information than the conventional signs.