

From Nature Conservation to Regional Development

– ten years of learning by doing

by Henrik Dissing

Co-operation between WWF and its partner organisations in the Baltic Sea region has undergone fundamental changes.

Henrik Dissing, WWF-Denmark, gives his views on how purely conservation projects have moved towards regional development in environmentally sensitive areas.

The first generation of WWF projects on the Eastern side of the Baltic focused on conserving significant protected areas, but there were no funds for any other activities. The former Soviet Union had left behind it an impressive network of protected areas, where staff were virtually without salaries. WWF then started contributing by providing equipment and facilities.

In the case of the Estonian Matsalu Nature Reserve, WWF co-operation began in 1990. Tractors and equipment for cutting and mowing meadows were provided, as well as reed-cutters and fences. Bird-watching facilities were constructed, and computers and other office equipment were delivered. A modern management plan was also elaborated. This made it possible for the proper management of meadows to begin, following the earlier collapse of agricultural activities in this semi-natural habitat.

It quickly became apparent, however, that the focus should be extended beyond the protected areas as these areas had been established without public participation or the involvement of local communities.

Managing coastal lagoons and wetlands

In 1993 the Baltic Sea Marine Environment Protection Commission, HELCOM, launched an action programme entitled Management Plans for Coastal Lagoons and Wetlands – also known as MLW – with WWF as lead party. The MLW areas received support for development of management plans based on the principles of Integrated Coastal Zone Management (ICZM), which involves both economic development and environmental protection and nature conservation. Through this new approach a second generation of WWF projects in the Eastern Baltic was initiated.



The bird tower near Uoudstadvaris in the Nemunas River Delta provides a good observation facility while, at the same time, constituting an important element in the new tourism infrastructure. Photo by Romas Mecionis.



The author, Henrik Dissing, visiting the Matsalu Nature reserve in Estonia. Photo by Ola Jennersten, Sweden.

The experiences gained from the first round of management plans produced under the MLW umbrella were many and valuable (see box). Although there have been difficulties, the MLW project is considered one of the most successful international co-operation initiatives so far aiming to implement sustainable development in the Baltic Sea Region.

Lessons from the MLW projects:

- When setting goals for future development of these coastal lagoons, responsible institutions, legal frameworks and economic mechanisms must be identified in order to make the realisation of these goals possible.
- The immediate needs of local communities should be taken into account when evaluating nature and environmental activities. Obligations and benefits must be clearly shown at the outset to local stakeholders to gain their support.
- Capacity building of local and regional authorities should be given high priority. These actors often have little experience of information sharing, cross-border and cross-sector co-operation, conflict solving and pro-active work.
- Introducing public participation in areas without democratic traditions, where many people are concerned with economic problems and the day-to-day struggle to survive, is extremely difficult and time-consuming.

WWF is now entering the third generation of projects, focusing on regional development in environmentally sensitive areas. These projects, which will have district and regional authorities as main partners, include Väänameri – the western Estonia coastal region – and the Nemunas Delta – on both sides of the Lithuanian-Russian border, encompassing the Curonian Lagoon. It is suggested that this type of area, by being granted status as areas of special concern, will receive governmental support for environmental efforts.

During the 1990s, the Baltic states and Poland received substantial support from bilateral donors to equip protected areas, develop management plans and to build institutional capacity. With EU membership just around the corner, as well as immense need for help to other European regions, the Baltic Sea Region cannot expect external support to continue at the same levels. Now is the time to make use of the substantial input provided during the last decade.

Consequently, WWF has launched the BaltWet network, similar to a co-operation initiative in the Mediterranean, MedWet. This new Baltic network will compile and disseminate information, facilitate exchange of experiences and initiate demonstration activities, as well as provide support to selected areas. BaltWet will be implemented within the HELCOM structure, in close co-operation with the Ramsar Bureau.



Under the umbrella of HELCOM, management plans for five large coastal lagoons and wetlands were elaborated. In spite of the difficulties encountered, an eco-system-based planning and management approach was successfully introduced.

Author

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For further information

WWF websites: www.wwf.se and www.wwf.dk

Website of MedWet: www.medwet.gr