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# VÄINAMERI

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## A WWF *One Europe, More Nature Pilot Project Site*

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Ten years ago, WWF-Sweden, in partnership with the local NGO Arhipelaag and others, initiated an innovative pilot project in the Baltic coastal area of Väinameri in West Estonia. Its main goal is to restore and manage semi-natural coastal grasslands to maintain a higher level of biodiversity of coastal flora and bird fauna. At the same time, the project ensures that the wider rural community makes income through diverse economic activities that are based on the sustainable use of natural resources.

The main “tool” for grassland and meadow management was the introduction of beef cattle to the area. Today, the original herd of 30 cattle has grown to nearly 2,000, leading to the restoration and/or management of some 20,000 ha of semi-natural areas with significant nature conservation value and safeguarding of rare coastal species. Steps are now being taken to market meat as “green beef” – local landscape-supportive beef that benefits local conservation and provides additional incomes.

The project has successfully supported the expansion of eco-tourism (e.g. through building nature trails). And the production of local handicrafts based on traditional practices and resources has also been supported (e.g. through the creation of new artisan cooperatives).

# About the Project Area

# Problems

In recent decades, it became progressively harder for farmers to make a living through animal husbandry. This forced many to abandon their land. Once the grazing stops, the land becomes overgrown with reeds and scrub within a few years, and the species which depended on the grassland begin to disappear.

The region also experiences many of the problems common to rural areas including high levels of unemployment and an aging population as young people move to the cities in search of work.

## Location

The Väinameri Project encompasses the areas of Matsalu Bay, Vormsi Island and the south-eastern part of Hiiumaa Island in Western Estonia. Väinameri is connected to the Baltic Sea by five straits – thus the name of the area which, directly translated from Estonian, means “the Sea of Straits”.

## Significant landscapes, habitats and species

Väinameri is a region of shallow seas dotted with numerous islands and reed beds. The long coast encompasses a mosaic landscape of dune beaches and low bays with small islets. Coastal areas are fringed with beautiful meadows which were maintained for centuries by farmers practising low intensity grazing with local breeds of cattle, sheep and horses.

The distinctive features and diversity of nature in the West Estonian islands are mainly influenced by their geographical position, the geologically young age of the area, its lime-rich soils, and – last but not least – millennia of human activity.

The overall area is a haven for wildlife, attracting immense flocks of birds. Each spring and autumn, around two million waterfowl descend on the area as a stopover on their migration routes including Divers, Bewick Swan, Common Crane, Mute Swan, Goldeneye, Long-tailed Duck and Velvet Scoter.

## Human presence

Approximately 13,000 inhabitants live in the project area, which makes up 1% of the population of Estonia. The population in the islands has been steadily decreasing over the past decade, due to the negative natural birth rate as well as out-migration, a common problem in rural areas throughout Europe.

## Economic status

Until the second half of the 1990s, the dominant activities in coastal West Estonia were forestry, agriculture, fishing and industrial food processing. These have all declined.

Extensive grazing and low level mowing have always been vital to the maintenance of the coastal meadows which make Väinameri such an attractive area for migrating birds.



# Solutions and Results

The local NGO Arhipelaag started working in the area in 1997. The project was financed principally by WWF-Sweden, with additional contributions coming from the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA) and Estonian national sources. Finally, the project became part of WWF's business/nature programme “One Europe More Nature”.

The main goal of the “Väinameri Project” is to restore and manage semi-natural coastal meadows and grasslands in order to maintain a higher level of biodiversity of coastal flora and bird fauna. At the same time, the project tries to ensure that the wider rural community makes income through diverse economic activities that are based on the sustainable use of natural resources.

The mechanisms used by the project to reach this goal include: (1) grassland management; (2) green beef production; (3) expanding eco-tourism; and (4) supporting the production and sale of handicrafts.

## 1) Grassland management

The main “tool” for grassland and meadow maintenance was the introduction of beef cattle to the area. The breeds of cattle chosen were Scottish Highland, Aberdeen Angus and Hereford, on account of their hardiness and ability to provide high quality beef.

In the early 2000s, Arhipelaag loaned about 30 head of cattle to local farmers and gave them support and advice to get established. The cattle thrived and slowly but surely the old coastal meadows re-emerged from beneath the reeds and the birds returned.

As the herds grew, the farmers were able to repay their initial loans of livestock, enabling Arhipelaag to help more farmers get started. Today, the herds have grown to nearly two thousand cattle of various breeds. As a result, about 20,000 ha of semi-natural areas with significant nature conservation value have been restored and/or managed, and rare coastal species are safeguarded.

## 2) Green beef production

To maintain sustainability in the process, the ecologically grown beef will be marketed as “green beef” emphasizing its linkages with biodiversity benefits. It is known that consumers prefer local quality products not only because of their taste, but also because they support the maintenance of local rich biodiversity. In 2006 and 2007 three “Better Taste, More Nature” marketing campaigns were conducted on Hiiumaa Island by Arhipelaag which proved the existence of significant local market demand for quality meat.

Market research is now being carried out in supermarkets in Estonia's capital city of Tallinn and elsewhere in West Estonia. Initial results show that more shops are interested to sell local ecological products and to improve their “green image”, and customers are willing to buy. A comprehensive branding campaign will raise awareness among potential customers and the green beef is expected to soon be available in a number of local restaurants. A new organisation is formed to take the responsibility for marketing the meat.



One problem is that there is currently no slaughterhouse on the project islands, which means that cattle must be transported to the mainland by ferries. This leads to cost increases for the farmers. Furthermore, mainland slaughterhouses are not willing to separate conventional meat from green meat, so the resulting meat cannot be sold as Väinameri local green beef. Another concern is that cheap Brazilian beef available on the market competes with the locally produced beef. In response, the project will soon start discussions to build a slaughterhouse on Hiiumaa Island -- essential to achieve project sustainability. Funding is being sought from different sources.

## 3) Expanding eco-tourism

Väinameri's location on the border between East and West meant that for decades before 1990, many of the islands were occupied by Soviet troops. As a result, the tourism potential of the region remained unexploited.

Since Estonia gained its independence, growing numbers of visitors have discovered the area, drawn by the beautiful scenery, rich biodiversity and peace and quiet. In cooperation with the Väinameri Project, a number of nature trails have been designed, and bird-watching towers scattered throughout the region offer breathtaking views over the landscape. Many local entrepreneurs have also opened up guesthouses where visitors can experience local food and traditions.

The introduction of the cattle to naturally graze on, and therefore manage, the coastal meadows has significantly helped in making the open landscapes attractive. Finally, the sustained production of local green beef is also expected to lure more tourists to the area.

## 4) Supporting the production and sales of handicrafts

At the start of the project, the handicraft workers usually worked alone and income was low. The Väinameri Project brought the craftsmen and women together into co-operatives where they could develop their expertise and work together to market their products.

Old skills are now being revived and local people are rediscovering a pride in their cultural heritage. The high quality, handmade goods, made from locally sourced, sustainably produced materials, include woollen knitwear, woven rugs, blankets, leather goods and wooden items. They are proving popular with tourists and locals alike. A group of artisans has opened up a shop in the local town of Lihula. And Craft Fairs held at Christmas and Mid-summer are now attracting ever more people from across the country.



## OEMN Mission

WWF's One Europe More Nature (OEMN) project uses an innovative approach to forge unusual partnerships so that business and nature can co-exist. Its mechanisms lead to win-win solutions for all, allowing Europe's rural workers to make incomes from the countryside while protecting nature. OEMN, tested at many pilot rural locations throughout Europe, is now mainstreaming conservation into everyday European business life.

## Other WWF OEMN pilot project sites:

Tisza Floodplains (Hungary), Gelderse Poort (Netherlands), Maramures (Romania), Sinca Noua (Romania), Doñana (Spain), Merja Zerga (Morocco) and Prespa (Greece, Albania, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia)

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