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Workshop H

New approaches to lake and floodplain conservation in Latvia

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One of the main problems influencing Ramsar sites in Latvia, as in many other countries, is overgrowing of shallow lagoon lakes and floodplains. Lakes are overgrowing mainly by reed, shore meadows are disappearing and thus, biological diversity (both, species and habitats) is largely influenced. Floodplains are overgrowing mainly by bushes and again – decreasing biological diversity.

All these changes are caused by several reasons, most important of them being:

- agricultural pollution, and
- cessation of traditional farming practices.

Agricultural pollution has to be dealt with at catchment scale. It was high during Soviet times, decreased at the beginning of the nineties, and is forecasted to increase again, with EU accession. At the same time, several measures of the Latvian Rural Development Plan are addressing this issue, introducing requirements for manure storage pads, protection belts around fields, etc.

The lack of traditional farming practices has historical reasons. During Soviet times, when individuals were forbidden to keep cattle, the tradition of individual cattle keeping began to diminish. Today, while there are no more restrictions, livestock rearing is not profitable enough to merit investments. Therefore, large areas of land remain unmanaged: plenty of agricultural lands, and areas more difficult to reach, mainly wet floodplains and shore areas, are abandoned.

In order to maintain the biological value of semi-natural habitats such as lake and seashore grasslands we have to ensure their management. Several projects in Latvia are dealing with this aspect (mainly financed by the EU LIFE budget). I present two of them, the projects “Implementation of the management plan for the Lake Engure Nature Park” and “Restoration of Latvian Floodplains for EU priority species and habitats”.

Lake Engure Nature Park is a Ramsar site. The main problems of this territory are related to overgrowing of the coastal lake Engure and to the American mink, an invasive species. The project is addressing the overgrowing aspect by cutting reed in the lake, restoring shore pastures and ensuring their maintenance through grazing. The project finished in 2004 and local farmers and the private Lake Engure Nature Park Fund are in charge of the further maintenance of the natural habitats.

Floodplains in Latvia are threatened by overgrowing too. Due to changes in water regimes, many of them are no longer flooded to the scale necessary for the survival of

open habitats. This results in the development of bushes in the floodplains, overgrowing the open grasslands and thus diminishing their biological value. The LIFE project is addressing this problem by restoring the floodplain habitats and ensuring their future maintenance through the farmers and owners of these areas. Farmers are assisted in this by the possibility to apply for financial support under the agro-environmental schemes of the Rural Development Plan.