

Contribution of Private Lands to Biodiversity Conservation of Latvia. Challenges and Opportunities

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INTRODUCTION

A significant amount of biodiversity occurs on private lands of Latvia. About 88% of grassland habitats and 19% of forest habitats of EU importance are located on private properties. Most of the biodiversity values are located outside the Natura 2000 network and other types of protected areas. In order to reach biodiversity conservation goals of the European Union and Latvia, it is important to integrate private lands into nature conservation strategies as well. There are different mechanisms in Latvia available for biodiversity conservation on private land: protected nature territories; micro-reserves; general legal requirements of nature protection; support payments under the Rural Development Programme; tax exemptions for landowners in protected areas, and others. Economic restrictions related to biodiversity conservation measures also tend to create tension in society and cause socio-economic conflicts that might influence the success of reaching biodiversity goals.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

In order to explore private landowners' attitudes towards biodiversity conservation measures on their land, a literature review was carried out including the analysis of research articles, reports of projects, reports of landowner surveys, and others. Only studies from Baltic Sea region countries were reviewed, selecting 18 articles and reports analysing factors influencing landowners' attitudes towards biodiversity conservation on private lands. Identified factors and conservation approaches in other countries were analysed in the context of nature conservation system of Latvia, discussing the possible improvements of existing conservation strategies.

RESULTS

Private landowners are a very heterogeneous community, with various attitudes towards biodiversity conservation measures. There are many factors influencing landowners' attitudes regarding biodiversity conservation on private lands, e.g., property size, field of education and education level, general conservation values of the landowner, income proportion from land management, and others. In general, landowners of Latvia support biodiversity conservation measures on private land; however, they are concerned about possible related restrictions on economic activity and the respecting of their rights to own property. Landowners highlight the importance of effective compensation mechanisms, respectful communication with environmental institutions, and landowners' participation in conservation related decision-making.

DISCUSSION

In the process of searching for improvements of biodiversity conservation strategies, it is important to take into account the needs and concerns of private landowners. According to analysis, there is a potential and demand for voluntary biodiversity conservation mechanisms in Latvia, which could complement the existing (regulatory) biodiversity conservation strategies. Significant proportion of landowners would be ready to take an active part in the biodiversity conservation process if an effective support system (consultative and financial) were provided.

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