

Private Landowners as Safeguards for the Conservation of Biological Diversity and the Management of Natural Heritage in Natura 2000

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INTRODUCTION

Of all *Natura 2000* sites that form the basis of the national nature conservation system in Latvia, 43% are owned privately. Therefore, the owners and managers of private lands are strategically important stakeholders, and the achievement of nature conservation goals depends to a large extent on their motivation, environmental awareness, and involvement. The forest is an important and indispensable custodian of natural values, but natural and semi-natural grasslands are recognised globally for their high biodiversity, social and cultural values and provided ecosystem services. The aim of the research is to obtain data on how private land owners and managers treat natural values and their conservation not only in *Natura 2000* areas, but also outside them. This decision was made because a large part of grasslands and forest micro-reserves are also located outside *Natura 2000*.

METHODS

To collect data on private landowners' opinions about their motivation for being involved in nature conservation, the value of nature among other values and existing compensating mechanisms for unearned economic value, both online (ArcGIS123) and paper (in seminars organised by Latvian Rural Advisory and Training Centre) questionnaires were used to reach a representative sample of respondents. Data were collected between July and December 2021. Altogether, 604 forest landowners and 442 grassland landowners' responses were used for further analysis.

RESULTS

Research shows that 42% of all respondents have lands in specially protected areas – *Natura 2000*, national parks, biosphere reserves and micro-reserves. 39% of forest landowners know what actions should be taken to preserve these natural values in their forests, but only 29% consider that before carrying out economic activities in the forest, its owner should ascertain the specially protected natural values found in the forest. Only 19% of forest owners, with restrictions on economic activities in order to meet nature conservation objectives, have received compensation, of which less than half (48%) were satisfied with the amount of financial support. 3% applied, but did not receive financial support, because their forest was too small.

The continuity of nature-friendly perennial grassland management will be ensured, with 93% of landowners showing rather high motivation for this. Of all respondents, 78% consider that grasslands provide wild plant diversity; improve the quality of the landscape while preserving the traditional rural landscape – 87%; provide a place for the continuation of cultural traditions, annual rituals – 57%; and provide business opportunities – 47%. Although 41% think that other land uses are more profitable, 29% admit that they have a lack of knowledge about grassland management.

DISCUSSION

Forest owners are less motivated than natural grassland owners regarding nature conservation activities, as the price of the economic value of the forest is likely to far exceed the number of compensatory mechanisms. Integrated solutions for ensuring nature protection on private land must continue to be sought. The opinions of the respondents will provide an opportunity to create a clear and reasonable motivation system for private landowners, which balances the interests of conservation of natural values and economic development, is understandable to everyone and will serve not only this, but also future generations.

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KEYWORDS: Natura 2000, Nature conservation, Compensation mechanism, Private landowners, Motivation