

Successful realization of ecological networks – an example

Committed to the preservation of dry meadows and grasslands in Grisons

The starting point

Lower Engadine in the southeast of Switzerland is among the country's areas with the greatest number of dry meadows. Dry meadows, with up to 1,000 insect species and up to 100 plant species per one-tenth of a hectare, are among the Swiss habitats with the greatest biodiversity. Many rare or endangered species depend on them. Lower Engadine is part of a larger area in the Alps identified by the WWF as being particularly valuable for the preservation of biodiversity. In the framework of the Convention on Biological Diversity, Switzerland has a special responsibility for the preservation of these valuable habitats.

Within the framework of the ECONNECT project, which covers all of the Alps, Lower Engadine is also part of the 'Rhaetian Triangle' region. Using an approach shared with the other six pilot regions of the ECONNECT project, the region implements pilot measures for the improvement of ecological networking. One of these is 'Inscunter', supported by Swiss federal agencies. The WWF, the foundation Landschaftsschutz Schweiz, the Swiss National Park, the Sempach bird station, the regional Forestry Commission, the Engadine Tourism School and the farming sector cooperate in this project. The recently established foundation Pro Terra Engiadina will ensure the continuity of the cooperation and of the realized projects after the conclusion of the pilot activity. The objective of the WWF component is to preserve dry meadows and grasslands, and to create regional value added with the help of the business community.

The challenges

Dry meadows and grasslands were created by centuries of sustainable agriculture. But since the 1950s an estimated 90% of these ecologically valuable lands have been lost. The federal dry meadow ordinance which came into force on February 1, 2010, has created a basis for the protection of dry meadows in Switzerland. Nevertheless, the decline continues. The reasons are:

- Intensification of agricultural in the lower-lying mountain areas.
- The increasing loss of land through building and infrastructural works.
- Forest plantations compensating for the above.
- Abandonment of farm land (especially in the higher areas), after which shrubs and trees take over.

Valuable habitats are lost in this way; in the valleys networks among the habitats are no longer guaranteed, ecological connectivity is gone. As a consequence, genetic exchange, which is important for the preservation of biodiversity, can no longer take place.

What is being done?

Under the WWF component, dry meadows and grasslands are kept open with business community support. Employees help to improve these habitats, which also include structures such as stone heaps (cleared from fields) and dry-stone walls. These activities are led by local farmers (who are paid) and regional products provide sustenance to the volunteer workers. Agriculture therefore benefits from the financial compensation and the sale of products. The employees are also informed about ecology, nature and local culture, raising their awareness of the natural and cultural values of the region. They are also stimulated to think of Lower Engadine as a holiday destination. You might say that the WWF programme is 1/3 work, 1/3 pleasure and 1/3 information.



First successes

In 2010, almost 300 people put 750 hours into these activities. Brief working hours hide great achievements. Bush was removed and general maintenance carried out on about 15 hectares of dry meadow, walls were built with stones cleared from 5 hectares of alpine meadow and 15 m² of dry-stone wall was rebuilt. Many rare animals and plants, such as the strictly protected Austrian Dragon's Head (*Dracocephalum austriacum*) have benefited – the Dragon's Head, for example, would have disappeared if the meadows had turned into bushland. Most of the cost of the activities is paid by the firms.



Online information

<http://www.wwf.ch/de/tun/aktivwerden/freiwillig/umwelteinsatz/>
<http://www.inscunter.ch> (under development)

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