

Annex 8.1.: Nature conservation in the Walloon Region

1. Protective statuses (see text box at the end of article 8).
2. Taking nature into account outside protected areas

Town and country planning policy

In the Walloon Region, land use is planned: 23 sector plans cover the whole of the territory and define the potential occupation of the territory. Some statuses have been specified in order to maintain environments considered of biological interest. These are green areas "*intended for maintaining, protecting and regenerating the natural environment*" and among these, more particularly, nature areas and nature areas of scientific interest or nature reserves.

Farming and forestry areas are dedicated to their specific activities and may in theory not be subject to urban development.

The Walloon code of town and country planning, urban development and heritage has just been revised. It redefines more particularly area divisions with a view to a future revision of sector plans. As far as nature preservation is concerned, the code plans another specific nature area where the priority will be given to nature conservation and, superimposed on that, protection areas affected by the legislation concerning nature protection.

Natural parks

The decree of 1985 concerning natural parks, stipulates that the "*natural park is a rural territory of high biological and geographical interest, subject to measures intended to protect its environment in harmony with the aspirations of the population and the economic and social development of the territory concerned*". It therefore involves searching for a harmonious integration of human activities and the protection of the natural heritage.

At present, there are seven, officially recognized, natural parks:

- the national natural park of Hautes-Fagnes Eifel;
- the natural park of the valleys of the Burdinale and of the Mehaigne;
- the natural park of the valley of Attert;
- the natural park of the plains of the Escaut;
- the natural park of the Hill country (*pays des Collines*);
- the Natural park of Viroin-Hermeton;
- the Natural park of the High Lands (Hauts Pays).

River contracts

The river contract is a voluntary agreement, between the whole of public and private actors, on objectives aimed at reconciling the many functions and uses of waterways, of their approaches and of catchment basin water resources. It therefore also deals with biological diversity. The approach is based on a twofold principle: a necessary integrated approach of the waterway management on the one hand, involvement and consultation of all parties concerned on the other hand. This is basically a process where decisions are reached by consensus among the political, associative, scientific bodies about various objectives and proposing actions. Seven river contracts exist in Wallonia, two are being drawn up, they concern: the stream of Fosses, the Dendre, the Haute-Meuse, the Munos Bassin, the Semois, the Hoëgne and the Wayai, the Dyle, the Sambre, the Ton and the Ourthe.

Municipal Nature Development Plans

These were launched from the point of view of sustainable development. It involves safeguarding or developing nature diversity at municipal level, in co-operation with all parties concerned and by taking the economic and social development of the community into account. The means implemented on a local scale were the establishing of partnerships bringing together persons and associations, the drawing up of an inventory of the nature and landscape heritage and the drawing up of a long-term biological diversity development plan. At present, more than 41 municipalities have launched their plan.

Management of roadsides and public spaces

Since 1984, the use of herbicides on public property has been regulated. In particular the use of herbicides is banned in the Walloon Region on verges, embankments, berms and other land of state property and are part of the road system or adjacent to it, including motorways; in public parks; on waterways, ponds, lakes and their banks when they are public property. The use of herbicides is however still authorized for weeding paved areas, or areas covered with gravel, areas

situated less than a metre from a railway track and graveyard paths. The ban on using herbicides to maintain roadsides led to roadside cutting. The idea of cutting roadside vegetation late in the season, a practice more favourable to biological diversity, gradually gained ground. After an experimental phase and its application to regional roads, the Nature Conservation Department provided a new impetus by launching a campaign 'Late cutting-Refuge area' among municipalities. Several dozens of them signed an agreement with the Walloon Region.

By signing the 'Roadside' agreement:

- the municipality undertakes to draw up a management plan defining areas where roadside cutting will be intensive, and others where it will be extensive while taking a number of provisions into account (cutting height above or equal to 10 cm, cutting dates, etc.);
- the Walloon Region provides the municipalities with the road signs 'late cutting-refuge area', leaflets for distributing information in all letterboxes and topographical maps to 1/10,000 covering the whole of municipal territory.

Agro-environmental measures

Agro-environmental measures are specific grants intended to remunerate farmers for their contribution to the quality of the environment. The specified subsidies include an incentive share but are especially intended to compensate the income that the farmer agrees to lose compared to a more intensive use of the soil.

The following measures have been adopted by the Walloon Region and are applicable everywhere on a voluntary basis:

- late cutting;
- conservation transition strips (edges of fields sown with grass or farmed extensively (without inflows) and extensive meadow strips (located along waterways, farmed without inflows and mowed late in the season);
- keeping and maintaining hedges and wooded strips;
- keeping livestock populations low;
- rearing local endangered breeds.

In areas defined as being sensitive or priority areas, farming operations may be further assisted technically and subsidized to improve the overall environmental impact of farming (reduction of inflows, traditional cultivation and old varieties, late cutting, etc.).

Forestry policy

Nearly half the area of Walloon forests (236,306 ha) belongs to public owners and is administered by the Nature and Forestry Division. These woods are managed on the basis of management plans called 'forestry developments'. These firstly consist of drawing up an inventory by collecting a maximum of information about the forest. They then fix objectives to fulfill the different functions. They lastly determine means by defining the future forest, by choosing the methods of development and by drawing up the operating regulations and the work programmes. The new developments must take into account priority forestry conservation vocations, water and soil protection and production. These vocations do not exclude each other but indicate a priority objective. The conservation vocation comprises biological, genetic, climatic and forestry subvocations. It tries more particularly to safeguard the conservation of rare forestry formations, seeding plantations, para-natural formations and plantations with scientific, educational or historic value. The water protection vocation concerns the areas bordering on waterways, spring areas, catchment wells and dam lakes. It aims at preserving a quantitative and qualitative water supply. Restrictions involve the limitation of clearings, the banning of draining or inflows and the type of treatment. As for the soil protection vocation, it concerns hydromorphous soils with temporary or permanent groundwater, peaty or peat-like soils and sloping soils. Restrictions involve the absence of forestry (where peaty soils are concerned), the limitation of clearings, the banning of draining in some cases, the method of regeneration, the density of plantations and the choice of species. As far as general forestry measures are concerned, the main measures recommended are:

- *choice of tree species adapted to stations;*
- *adoption of a stable and balanced plantation structure. Forests with trees of many ages are preferred without excluding regular forests. Priority is given to natural regeneration;*
- *mixture of tree species;*
- *dynamic forestry (wider spacing, large clearings).*

Specific measures connected with nature conservation are taken: conservation of dead trees, old trees and epiphytes, management of areas of reproduction of endangered animal species, work timetable in relation to nesting periods, etc.

Forest edges are taken into account, glades are maintained and some forest areas are assigned a 'non-management' status. Measures are provided in connection with cultivation care, the choice of tree species and treatment in order to favour the habitat of wild ungulates. Lastly, the circular includes measures of landscape types to make the forest more attractive to its users. The opening of the forest to the general public aims at encouraging slow traffic, respectful of the forest ecosystem. Areas accessible to youth movements are not overlooked. Subsidies are granted to private owners to encourage the implementation of these measures in private forests.

Thematic operations

A number of nature conservation actions initiated by the Nature Conservation Department or by non-governmental organisations are structured around a particular objective. Let us mention as examples:

- the attics and belfries operation: launched as part of European Nature Conservation Year among municipalities, its aim is to develop the access of wild fauna (bats and chouette effraie) to the attics and belfries of public buildings;
- the operations '*Ciconia nigra*', '*Crex crex*', '*Chiroptera*' (jointly funded by the LIFE programmes) aim at purchasing natural areas favourable to these species;
- the 'Wild Gardens' operation aims at encouraging management more favourable to biodiversity in the gardens of private citizens (choice of plant species, upkeep, development of ponds, etc.);
- the 'Underground cavities' operation aims at listing and protecting underground cavities of great biological interest, in particular of chiropteran interest.

Subsidies for the planting of hedges and wooded strips

Subsidies are granted to encourage the replanting of hedges, subject to compliance with conditions that guarantee its biological interest and a life expectancy of at least 20 years.

Production of seeds of wild plants and indigenous trees

Seeds of indigenous wild plants are used increasingly for sowing after work has been done, when farmland is let to lie fallow or even for laying out wild gardens. A programme aimed at the production of seeds of indigenous origin has been launched, so as to avoid the introduction of exotic species and preserve local ecotypes. At forestry level, research into genetic matters is carried out at the Gembloux Scientific Research Centre. A Forestry Seed Centre (Forest counter of Marche-en-Famenne) has been recently set up. It takes part in maintaining the genetic diversity of Walloon forests through the collection of seeds over a maximum of species, a maximum of origins and a maximum of trees.

Regulation of leisure activities

The strong pressure exerted by leisure activities on the natural environment led to various regulations. The use of motor-driven vehicles outside public thoroughfares is limited to authorized circuits. The Walloon Government decree (AGW) of 30 June 1994 regulates the movement of boats and divers on and in waterways. It limits activities to certain times, to certain seasons and to certain sections of waterways as long as the flow reaches a minimum level.