

State activities in nature conservation management to guarantee the preservation of semi-natural communities

Can the state achieve the conservation goals of semi-natural communities?

Report of the National Audit Office to the Riigikogu. Tallinn, 27 March 2015

Summary of audit results

The National Audit Office audited whether the organisation and financing of the conservation of semi-natural communities has been effective, i.e. guaranteed high-quality and consistent maintenance of communities in conservation areas to the extent that is necessary for the preservation and improvement of their condition.

The destruction of biodiversity is a global environmental problem. The European Union has set itself the goal of stopping the decrease in biodiversity by 2020. Natura 2000, the network of nature conservation areas in the territory of the European Union, was created for the achievement of this goal. The majority of the conservation areas in Estonia form part of the network and are used by the state to perform its obligation to protect endangered species and their habitats. Such habitats include Estonia's semi-natural communities, whose condition has deteriorated in recent decades due to the weakening of traditional agriculture. These areas need consistent maintenance – mowing and herding – for the preservation of conditions suitable for the semi-natural communities and the species living in them. 40 million euros of EU and Estonian money was invested in the maintenance and restoration of communities and the establishment of the necessary infrastructure from 2007-2013, as maintaining these communities without support is not economically viable. The plan is to support the area with at least 65 million euros in 2014-2020.

The National Audit Office is of the opinion that the Ministry of the Environment has not organised the maintenance and restoration of semi-natural communities effectively, as the area that was actually maintained was a one third less of the planned one for 2013. There are also significant problems with the quality of maintenance work. It is unlikely that the state will achieve the objectives of the Nature Conservation Development Plan and that the status of the semi-natural communities will improve in the future if protection of these communities continues in the same manner.

The National Audit Office is of the opinion that the desired goals have not been achieved, as the support schemes of protection works do not motivate the farmers sufficiently, the management of nature conservation is split between different agencies and fragmented depending on land ownership and does not guarantee the performance of works in areas whose maintenance does not generate much interest.

The main observations of the National Audit Office are as follows:

- **The maintenance of 35,000 hectares of semi-natural communities planned in the Rural Life Development Plan 2007-2013 was not achieved: 25,000 hectares of semi-natural communities were maintained in 2013.** Compared to 2006, when 18,500 hectares of semi-natural communities were maintained, the area of communities to be maintained increased by 6500 ha. It should have been 10,000 ha more. The goal set in the Nature Conservation Development Plan for 2020 is to

maintain semi-natural communities on *ca* 45,000 hectares, which means that the areas to be maintained must be expanded by 20,000 ha. The plan for 2030 is 60,000 hectares.

- **Approximately one quarter of the semi-natural biotic communities restored in 2007-2012 have not been maintained since restoration or their maintenance has not been done according to requirements.** Maintenance has not been carried out on 1000 hectares of the 5700 hectares that received support for restoration in 2007-2012. 500 ha were maintained with other support whereby there is no obligation to comply with the requirements of maintaining semi-natural communities, and the maintenance has not been controlled. Such a speed of restoration (4200 ha in 2007-2012) has not been sufficient to maintain communities to the extent required to achieve the relevant goal. It is therefore unlikely that 45,000 ha of semi-natural communities can be maintained by 2020;
- **The state has not exercised adequate supervision over the quality of maintenance works and the quality of the maintenance of a significant share of semi-natural communities is not good enough.** Approximately 10% of the recipients of support for maintenance of semi-natural communities have been inspected and the maintenance quality in *ca* half of these areas does not comply with requirements. The supervision results cast doubt on the achievement of nature conservation objectives in the areas that have received support;
- **The support schemes developed for the maintenance and restoration of semi-natural biotic communities have not motivated the land maintainers sufficiently.** Maintaining semi-natural communities is necessary for nature conservation, but responsibility for this has been placed on the shoulders of land maintainers and it is fully dependent on their interest in managing the communities. The state has developed financial support measures for the restoration and maintenance of communities, but they have not been sufficient for the achievement of conservation goals. Some types of communities that are of primary importance for nature conservation (e.g. wooded meadow and alvars) have been particularly problematic, as maintaining them has no agricultural benefits. The support rates will increase somewhat in the 2014-2020 period of the Rural Development Plan, but the changing support scheme and stricter quality requirements may not guarantee the achievement of nature conservation goals concerning problematic communities;
- **Half of the semi-natural biotic communities on state land have not been maintained.** The state has not performed its obligation to organise conservation work in communities for which interested maintainers could not be found. One-third of the semi-natural communities in protected areas are located on state land, where nature conservation goals should be achieved as a priority. On state land where the state has failed to give areas of semi-natural communities on lease or find maintainers, the state has not organised the necessary works in any other manner either (e.g. with a procurement or by performing the works itself). The Ministry of the Environment has failed to clearly regulate how and with which mechanisms the agencies in its area of administration (the Environmental Board and the State Forest Management Centre) should achieve the semi-natural community protection goals in cases where attempts to rent out communities on state land are unsuccessful. On private land, the state has not implemented the possibility stipulated by the Environment Protection Act to perform the works for the owner by mutual agreement if the owner does not wish to perform the work by themselves;
- **The problems in the organisation of the protected areas management have made it impossible to protect the semi-natural communities effectively.** Almost half of all conservation areas have no approved management plans, which would specify the necessary protection works, incl. the activities that are necessary for the preservation of semi-natural areas. The Environmental Board has also failed to give sufficient attention to systematically informing land owners and land

maintainers of the fact that there is a semi-natural community on their land which must be maintained, and that options for maintaining them have been created. This information is not easily accessible by the public.

Main recommendations made by the National Audit Office:

- organise the works required for achievement of the protection goals of semi-natural communities also in communities where the state's activities and the financial support provided so far have not motivated the land maintainers to perform the works;
- increase the supervision of the maintenance of semi-natural communities to guarantee the necessary maintenance quality and thereby the achievement of the ecological goals of such communities; and
- the state should assume a more active role in informing landowners and maintainers about the communities that need to be maintained on both private and state land, and the conditions of their maintenance. It should be guaranteed that this information is publicly quickly and easily accessible.

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