



CASE STUDY

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SOLUTIONS



GLOBAL ENVIRONMENT FACILITY  
INVESTING IN OUR PLANET



## Payments for Ecosystem Services

# Grazing on water meadows of the March-Thaya

This case study presents a scheme for ecosystem services payment as a solution to the problem of land abandonment and decreasing live stock in the area of March-Thaya floodplains.

### The March (Morava)-Thaya (Dyje)

floodplains are among the most important wetlands of Central Europe and are the natural treasure of the Austrian-Slovak-Czech border area. It supports stretches of floodplain forests with oxbow lakes and a wide variety of habitats. Large open areas were formed by centuries of low intensity farming: floodplain wet meadows, with shrubs and coppiced willow trees, all home to abundant wildlife.



**Total area:**  
60 000 ha

**Area involved in the project:** 1150 ha

**Main economic activities:**  
agriculture, tourism.

450



Euro per ha  
is the annual payment for  
good land management  
practices in the region.

## Problem

Before flood protection dams were built in the early 20th century, the only possible farming practices on the open, regularly flooded lands were grazing and stacking hay. The decrease in the number of cattle farms during the last 40 years resulted in the conversion of a large part of the valuable meadows to arable land which has led to dramatic habitat loss for a number of rare and protected species.

## Stakeholders involved in the project

Local and national governments, farmers, facilitating NGO: Distelverein.

## Solutions

Since 1989, local NGO Distelverein works on the problem and its central message is: the only way to preserve habitats of high conservation value is by cooperating with the farmers. This requires rising awareness (e.g. persuading farmers to maintain or enhance sustainable low-intensity farming) as well as provision of financial incentives to compensate loss of income. Later the Austrian Program for Ecological Agriculture (ÖPUL) was developed. ÖPUL is a complex scheme comprising 36 elements. Participating farmers receive environmental payments on a voluntary but contractual basis over a period of five years. Distelverein managed to establish long-term lease contracts with the farmers who own 30 meters wide strip of forest along 5,3 km of the Thaya River to allow erosion processes to take place. Annual payments for the contracted land-management practices are between 400-450 EUR /ha. On average half of the funds come from the EU and the other half from National Funds through Rural Development Programmes. Additional kick-off funding was provided by EU's LIFE programme.

## Legal framework & procedures

Two regional conventions give the background for the project: the Ramsar convention of 1993–94 and the “MARTHA 95 concept”. Documents in development include the “Bilateral framework project Morava” focusing on the EU Water Framework Directive, as well as a concept that operates beyond the Morava-Dyje border region, “Concept of the Biosphere Region”, including suggestions for an eco-corridor linking the Alps with the Carpathian mountains (“Alpine-Carpathian Corridor”).

## Success factors

Distelverein identified three key issues which are important for a success of the project: communication, cooperation and dialog between stakeholders. Distelverein invests a lot of efforts in establishment of trust between stakeholders, trying to understand farmers' position and communicating conservation value of the land. The fact that the Chamber of Agriculture, the hunters' association, the “Naturschutzbund” (nature conservation NGO) and WWF Austria are members of the Distelverein, provides opportunities to tackle “traditional” conflicts between different interest groups both locally and internationally. The “Trilateral Ramsar Platform”, a forum for environmental and hydraulic engineering officials and NGOs, was initiated during the LIFE-projects and serves to coordinate engineering and management decisions. Good contacts with various interest groups and government officials have occasionally allowed partners to take an active role in the decision-making processes.

## Benefiting nature and society

The area of wet meadows has increased compared to the situation in the 80s; however it is still less than before the river became regulated. Agro-environmental contracts on Natura 2000 areas in 2007 covered 1,150 ha and are worth almost €0,5 million in payments annually. The nearby town, Raabs/Thaya has 3,300 inhabitants and attracts over 22,000 tourist visits during a year.

This case study was prepared as part of THE DANUBE PES PROJECT: PROMOTING PAYMENTS FOR ECOSYSTEM SERVICES AND RELATED SUSTAINABLE FINANCING SCHEMES IN THE DANUBE BASIN.

This project promotes and supports land managers who help us sustain the benefits that we all get from nature. The project is implemented by the WWF Danube-Carpathian Programme with the financial support of the GEF through UNEP and the European Commission.



### Why we are here.

To stop the degradation of the planet's natural environment and to build a future in which humans live in harmony and nature.

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