

Grassland conservation in the Abava river valley in Latvia



Project report July 2002 – June 2004
(project PIN/MATRA 2002/023)



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1 Introduction

Since 1990, Latvia is co-operating with the Dutch province of Overijssel. In 1997, this co-operation was extended to conservation of species-rich grasslands, which have become one of the most endangered habitats in Europe. In the European Nature Conservation Year 1995, eleven Dutch provinces signed a declaration on *The Netherlands for European Nature*. In this declaration, contribution to nature conservation in Central and Eastern European countries is a major theme. Cross-European co-operation on nature conservation is also an important target in the Pan-European Biological and Landscape Diversity Strategy and in the Dutch *Programme on International Nature Conservation*.

In 1995, the so-called *Eurograssland* project was started, and in 1997, Overijssel joined this project. Aims of the project are:

- to join knowledge and forces in order to protect valuable grasslands in Europe;
- both by enhancing a less intensive use in intensive regions and by preventing grasslands from being abandoned;
- to promote sustainable management by farmers;
- to promote active co-operation between farmers, conservationists and policy makers.

As nature conservation, farming and rural economy are closely related, the province of Overijssel wishes to fulfil these aims within the necessary context of rural development.

Latvia and Overijssel aim to find ways to restore and protect the grasslands involved and - at the same time - strengthen regional economy. In the context of this so-called *Eurograssland* project, several initiatives have taken place since 1998.

Over the last four years, a lot of 'preparatory' work has been done and some concrete measures (demonstration farms, training courses) have been established. After the publication of the *Abava River Valley Development Plan* (2001) and with the Latvian agri-environment programme being prepared since 2000, a new phase in the co-operation has started. In this phase, concrete activities supporting the introduction of the agri-environment programme are of crucial importance to really enhance biodiversity conservation in the valley, as well as contributing to the issue of water quality. As the agri-environment programme merely includes conservation contracts between farmers and the Rural Support Service (RSS), it is important to enroll supporting activities like:

- providing economic incentives for 'green farming', like creating additional grazing capacity and attracting 'green farm tourism' to the valley;
- providing information and training additional to the information already provided by the RSS.

The activities between 2002 and 2004 are related to these two main themes. The activities related to rural tourism have been financed by the province of Overijssel, while the nature conservation activities have been mainly co-financed under the PIN/MATRA budget of the Dutch government.

Next to the Latvian Fund for Nature, which has been the main contract partner in Latvia, the Latvian Agricultural Advisory and Training Centre, the Kurzeme Tourist Association and the four Abava municipalities (Kandava, Sabile, Gibuli and Renda) have been actively involved in the project activities.

2 The Abava River Valley

The Abava is the biggest right coast tributary to the Venta river and is one of Latvia's 12,400 rivers. The middle section of the Abava river forms a 30 km long and 0,5 – 2,5 km wide valley, which has the status of protected area for some decades. The Abava valley together with the valleys of the side-rivers Imula and Amula forms a unique natural, cultural and historical landscape. The Abava valley within its 8,000 hectares summarises Kurzeme's natural, cultural and historical heritage, including a diversity of biotic and abiotic natural phenomena, reflecting centuries of interaction between nature and human activity. And as the protected status originally focused on cultural and historical values, the botanical values of the valley's grasslands and forests are now as well being recognised as an important feature.

The situation in the Abava valley and the motivation for actions

Like in many other Central and Eastern European countries, agriculture has been finding itself in a difficult situation in the 1990s. As a result, rural areas have been abandoned and large areas of agricultural land were no longer used. This is not only a problem for farmers and rural societies, but also for nature conservation, because agricultural land use is an important condition for the conservation of species-rich grasslands. This phenomenon has been quite apparent in the Abava valley, where formerly valuable grassland are now rapidly overgrowing with bushes and trees. This is a major threat to farmers, biodiversity and the status of protected area. As nature conservation and rural economy are closely linked, the valley and the organisations involved were facing the complex problem to try to enhance rural development and nature conservation at the same time. This challenge calls for an integrated and stimulating approach to the valley, its farmers and the organisations involved. As national and European policies are now enabling such an approach, there is a strong need to act at short notice. For this reason, a *Abava valley development plan* was published in 2001.



Valuable grassland flora is threatened by expanding bushes and trees

What has already been achieved?

Since 1998, the following activities have already been established:

1. In 1998, the Latvian Fund for Nature (LFN) carried out a botanical inventory in the valley. From the inventory there appeared to be an urgent need to act quickly if the most valuable grasslands are to be protected: about half of the grasslands are already overgrown. Nevertheless, almost 40% of the grasslands (even some overgrown ones) still are very valuable. A total of 335 vascular plant species has been detected, of which 30 protected species included in the Latvian Red Book.
2. In 1998/1999 the Latvian Agricultural Advisory and Training Center (LAATC) carried out an agricultural inventory by interviewing about 200 farmers in the valley. About 20% of the farmers appeared to be interested to participate in the Eurograssland project. Reasons for abandonment of grassland appeared to be the (sometimes distant) situation on steep slopes, the lack of cattle and economic incentives for grassland use and the time-consuming restoration of already overgrown grasslands.
3. LAATC and LFN together organised several trainings on farming and nature conservation, for local trainers as well as for groups of farmers.
4. In 1999, four demonstration farms were established, where conservation measures were applied, demonstrated and paid for. These farms functioned as pilot farms for the future agri-environment scheme to be enrolled.
5. Short studies were devoted to the possibilities for adjusted equipment (e.g. to mow steep slopes) and for 'green credits' (Western European funding of 'geen farms' in Latvia).
6. In 2000 and 2001, the Abava River Valley Development Plan was elaborated in close co-operation between Latvian and Dutch project partners. This plan includes many ideas for a further 'green' development of the valley, and contributing to an improvement of water quality in the river basin.

All these activities have been contributing to the status of the Abava valley as a 'biodiversity pilot area' under the agri-environment part of the Latvian Rural Development Plan.

3 The 2002-2004 project results

The *long-term* objectives of the project can be defined as follows:

1. An effective integration of botanical grassland management in dairy farming.
2. Introduction of economic incentives for farming and grassland conservation in order to reduce or prevent abandonment.
3. Providing 'tailored' information, both written and oral, on conservation measures and financial options for conservation activities.
4. Promote active co-operation between farmers, conservationists and policy makers.

The *short-term*, measurable objectives of the 2002-2004 project can be defined as follows:

1. Establishment of an Abava Rural Development and Information Centre (ARDIC). The ARDIC will be situated in the centre of the valley, in the municipality of Sabile, and will provide important information on the natural values of the valley (especially to tourists) and on biodiversity measures and payments to farmers.
2. Introduction of additional grazing capacity by purchasing cattle and renting this to interested farms in the valley. In this way, an economic incentive is introduced for grassland use and – subsequently – to grassland conservation.
3. Providing conservation information to farmers by means of a colourful leaflet, a botanical footpath on one of the demonstration farms and prolonged oral training (field seminars).

Mid-2002, the follow-up project *Grassland conservation in the Abava river valley in Latvia* was granted. Since then, the following activities have been carried out:

1. Establishment of an Abava Rural Development and Information Centre (ARDIC).
2. Creating additional grazing capacity.
3. Production and dissemination of a leaflet on grassland conservation.
4. Establishment of an educational 'botanical footpath'.
5. Organisation of courses and field seminars on grassland conservation.
6. Establishment of a *Biocentre* in Renda.
7. Personal exchange between Latvia and the Netherlands.

In this chapter, these activities will be described in more detail.

3.1 Establishment of the ARDIC

The 2001 Abava River Valley Development Plan Establishment mentions the establishment of an Abava Rural Development and Information Centre (ARDIC) as one of the priority activities. In the second half of 2001, the plan for an ARDIC has become more concrete. The four Abava valley municipalities agreed on location of the ARDIC in Sabile, the centre of the protected area. At the moment, an office is being established (renovated, equipped and staffed) in the building where also the Tourist Information Center is situated. Early 2002, the Dutch province of Overijssel donated a 'start-up' subsidy for the ARDIC in order to get it started in the course of this same year. The part financed by PIN/MATRA includes several conservation activities.

Functions of the ARDIC

The ARDIC functions as a regional focal point (for at least the four municipalities in the protected area) for information, education and promotion activities in the field of agriculture, nature conservation and tourism. Its functions are roughly three-fold:

- streamlined, easy to access *information and education* on all relevant topics in the field of rural development. There still is a great lack of knowledge on the possibilities for nature conservation and rural development and for financial resources. This function does not necessarily imply that the centre should employ an extensive staff of experts. On the contrary: the centre could function as an integrated part of a Latvian knowledge network, focusing on the Abava valley;
- *innovation*: the centre could be the focal point for rural development projects: to generate ideas, (assist to) initiate and carry out projects etc.;
- *help-desk* for the elaboration of good project proposals, e.g. under the Latvian Rural Development Plan.

As for nature conservation, the ARDIC has been co-ordinating conservation activities in the region and has provide information on the possibilities for nature conservation.

A good organisational and institutional embedding creates conditions for all conservation and rural development projects to be implemented much more effectively. The original aim was to create a full-grown organisational structure for such activities in the Abava valley in a few years time. The ARDIC will then be an important additional regional organisation next to the government implementation of the Latvian agri-environment scheme, co-ordinated by the Latvian Rural Support Service. Next to that, it will function like a focal point for all conservation and rural development knowledge and information, provided both by local staff (help-desk function of the ARDIC) and by the surrounding network of expert organisations (agronomists, botanists etc.).

From the end of 2002, Ms. Laila Pilege has been the ARDIC co-ordinator. In 2003, the four municipalities involved decided to each finance 10% of the ARDIC costs, and to move the office to the bigger and more touristically equipped town of Kandava.



The Abava Rural Development Information Centre (ARDIC) has first been housed in the Sabile tourist information offices, but will move to Kandava municipality in the course of 2004

Project results

Start-up subsidy from Overijssel

With the start-up subsidy from the province of Overijssel, all preparations have been made for the official start in early 2003. These preparations include:

- a. Compilation of the statutes for the new NGO Abava Rural Development and Information Centre. The draft of the statutes has been written, sent for the comments to all municipalities involved. The final version is prepared to be committed to the Ministry of Justice.
- b. Involvement of local municipalities Sabile, Kandava and Renda into activities of ARDIC. Information letters were sent to local communities. They were involved as founders to establish the NGO ARDIC and to delegate their official representatives for the constituent assembly. All three municipalities officially agreed to be founders of the ARDIC and delegated their constant official representatives to the ARDIC.
- c. Preparation of the registration documents to be committed to the Ministry of Justice.
- d. Establishment of new independent bureau of ARDIC. Organisation of the tender for building and repair companies to find the most suitable one for reconstructing the office spaces. Collection of proposals and selection of the winning company.
- e. Organisation of the Constituent Assembly of the ARDIC. Representatives of all municipalities, representatives of farmers and farmers' advisory boards, landowners and businessmen took part.
- f. Election of the ARDIC board and Commitment of the Statutes of ARDIC and registration documents to the Ministry of Justice and registration of ARDIC as nongovernmental organisation according to the national legislation.

PIN/MATRA subsidy

Under the PIN/MATRA part of the project, the following activities have been developed:

- a. Compilation of the terms of references for the project representative in ARDIC.
- b. Development of activity plans for the years 2003 and 2004.
- c. Compilation and selection of printed materials, copies of legal acts etc. to be disseminated by the ARDIC help-desk. The topics include biodiversity, agri-environment, rural development, tourism and project management.
- d. Selection of books, brochures, leaflets to develop an ARDIC library. Annotations of all selected publications were compiled and an electronic version of the catalogue was prepared in CD format. The topics include biodiversity, agro-environment, rural development and tourism.
- e. Compilation of the overview on internet resources on these topics. Collected information was designed, as an electronic catalogue in CD format.
- f. Organisation of seminars for local farmers: dissemination of information (in the form of personal letters - invitations, leaflets, press releases, advertisements, posters) to the main stakeholders (including farmers, landowners, entrepreneurs, local and regional newspapers, regional broadcasting companies).
- g. Consulting of farmers on grassland management, grassland restoration, agri-environment measures under the pre-accession programme SAPARD and the National Rural Development Programme, farm agri-environment plans.

In 2003, the four municipalities involved decided to co-finance each 10% of the ARDIC costs and to move the office to the bigger and touristically better equipped town of Kandava.

3.2 Creating additional grazing capacity

As many grasslands in the valley have been or are being abandoned, periodical grassland use is of great importance to botanical conservation. The attractiveness of grassland use can be increased by introducing additional cattle, which is relatively expensive, especially for individual farms. In the context of the earlier Eurograssland activities, sheep have been bought for one of the valley's farmers.

The approach in the current project has been as follows. Cattle and goat were bought for three farms, which will not only use them to graze (parts of) their land, but which will also function as 'breeding and rental stations' for other interested farms.

As dairy cows require additional equipment and adjusted stables, the purchased cattle include goat (ancient strong breed) and beef cows ('Scottish Highlander', 'Charolais' and cross-breeds: 'Latvian Brown' x 'Scottish Highlander', 'Latvian Brown' x 'Charolais'). From a conservation point of view, these cattle can contribute substantially to maintenance and enhancement of the botanical values of the Abava grasslands.



Additional cattle include Charolais, Scottish Highlander and cross-breeds of these two with the traditional Latvian Brown. They graze some of the valley's botanically most valuable fields

Project results

The following activities took place:

- a. Selection of areas and farms to expand the grazing activities. The first selection criterion for extension of grazing activities was the botanical and conservation value of the grasslands. For this purpose, the botanical data were used that were collected during previous Eurograssland projects in the valley. The selected grasslands were all in 'Category I' – most valuable grasslands including nationally protected habitats and habitats of EU importance with rare and protected plant species.
- b. The second criterion was the feasibility of additional grazing and the willingness of the owners of the selected grasslands. For this purpose, the following persons were approached:
 - involvement of farm "Drubazas" in the creation of grazing capacity. Discussion and regular meetings with the farmer, Mr. Andrs Dzerve on the selection of potential areas and habitats to be grazed;
 - meetings and discussions with farmer Janis Pagils about creating additional grazing capacity in his farm "Meztiņi".
- c. Selection of cattle:
 - feasibility study to find farms offering calves for increasing grazing capacity in farms of the valley;
 - visit to farm breeding local beef cattle and new crossbreeds and interview with farmer Mrs. Aelita Runce about the possibilities for buying calves;
 - visit to farm (Tukums district, Vane municipality) breeding local beef cattle and new crossbreeds and interview with farmer Mrs. Janis Ozols about the possibilities for buying calves;
 - visit to farm (Cesis district, Zaube municipality) breeding goats and interview with the farmer about the possibilities for buying them.
- d. Acquisition of cattle:
 - acquisition of a 'Scottish Highlander' bull to be grazed in the new enclosure on "Drubazas" and to be crossed with the farmers' local breed 'Latvian Brown';
 - acquisition of 2 cows: 'Charolais' and cross-breed 'Charolais' x 'Latvian Brown' to be grazed in new enclosure on "Drubazas" and to be crossed with the 'Scottish Highlander' bull;
 - acquisition of 3 cows: cross-breeds 'Charolais' x 'Latvian Brown' and 'Scottish Highlander' x 'Latvian Brown' to be grazed in new enclosure in farm "Zvejnieki";
 - acquisition of 3 goats to be grazed in a new enclosure on the farm "Meztiņi".
- e. Fencing:
 - building of a fence on "Drubazas" with a length of 1,850 m around about 12 ha of pasture (9 ha grasslands, 2 ha scrub and woodland);
 - building of a fence in farm "Meztiņi": length 400 m around 1ha of pasture (steep slope grasslands).
- f. Preparation of a document package to be committed to the Ministry of Finance for the tax reduction for international support projects.

All together 3 farms were involved. Newly fenced areas were developed on all three farms. As there are several hectares of abandoned valuable grasslands for further extension of grazing activities, all of these farms will further extend the grazed areas in the future. Newborn calves and goat will be used at the same farms at first, but in later years also on the grasslands of neighbouring farms.

3.3 Production and dissemination of a leaflet on grassland conservation

At the start of the project, there was no printed material on biodiversity issues in the Abava river valley. For this reason, the Latvian Fund for Nature has been developing a colourful leaflet *Grasslands of the Abava River Valley* (in Latvian), including:

- the botanical values of the Abava grasslands, the importance of these values and their relation to (traditional) farming practices;
- the appropriate management of such grasslands, including the role of different grazers (cows, sheep, goats and horses) and mixed small-scale grazing schemes, and the importance of mowing and haymaking practices;
- the possibilities for conservation payments.

The leaflet is meant to play an important role in making farmers more aware of the values involved and to educate them in botanical management practices. Next to that, the leaflet will be useful for local inhabitants and for visitors of the valley.

Project results

The following activities have been carried out:

- a. Tender to select a publishing company. Publishing house “Kodols” was selected as potential partner for the preparation of the leaflet “Grasslands of the Abava River Valley”.
- b. Compiling of the text of the leaflet.
- c. Selection of illustrative material for the leaflet.
- d. Printing of the leaflet. The leaflet will be printed in full-colour in 1,000 copies.
- e. Dissemination of the leaflet. The leaflet will be disseminated by the ARDIC (400 copies), the Regional Agriculture Advisory Centres in Tukums (200 copies) and in Talsi (200 copies), the Latvian Fund for Nature (50 copies), the Latvian Agriculture Advisory and Training Centre (50 copies), the Ministry of Environment (25 copies), the Ministry of Agriculture (25 copies) and the Tourist information centres in Kuldīga (20 copies), Sabīle (20 copies) and Kandava (10 copies).

3.4 Establishment of an educational ‘botanical footpath’

On one of the former demonstration farms (Drubāzas in Sabīle), the farmer together with the Latvian Fund for Nature and the Kurzeme Tourist Association have developed the idea for an educational botanical footpath along the species-rich Abava slope. In 2003 this footpath was realised under the PIN/MATRA project.

Botanical and conservation information is presented alongside the path. The path shows some of the most typical and endangered grassland habitats of the valley – dry lime-rich slope grasslands. Also Juniper growth and forest edge communities are included. For the general public, the path offers a beautiful view on the Abava landscape and interesting habitats and plant species like orchids. For farmers and conservationists, the path offers examples of management and conservation practices: the slope grasslands are mown with a light motor mower (sponsored in an earlier phase of the Eurograssland project), the grasslands nearer to the river are now grazed by cattle bought within project budget (see § 3.2). For ecologists, the path offers rare species and habitats, demonstration of permanent grassland monitoring plots and examples of grassland development and vegetation succession.



The botanical footpath is situated on the 'Drubazas' farm's lime grassland slopes, where additional cattle grazes on adjacent grasslands. The footpath is accompanied by road signs, information boards and an informative flyer

Project results

The following activities took place:

- a. Development of the route and the infrastructure:
 - discussions with the farmer on the route, his wishes, priorities and options;
 - building of gravel track (length 614 m; surface area 1,535 m²).
 - building of a wooden ladder along the slope of the valley terrace (length 60 m).
- b. Development of the accompanying information:
 - selection of information stations to be included and of botanical subjects to be introduced in each of them.
 - construction and design of interpretation boards: 3 large size boards (introduction to the foot-pass, habitat of calcareous fen, habitat of dry calcareous slope grassland) and 3 small size boards (grazing and cattle species, previous freshwater tuff excavation site, previous lime excavation and burning site; last two consist information on cultural history of the area and its relevance to plant diversity);
 - drawing of 16 full-colour pictures of rare plant species for the boards and information materials.
- c. Development of a leaflet / field guide and postcards:
 - compiling the text and selection of illustrations for the leaflet / field guide;
 - printing and dissemination of the leaflet / field guide (2,000 copies). These copies are disseminated by the farmer (1,500, mainly to visitors), the Latvian Fund for Nature (50 copies), the ARDIC (300 copies), and the tourist information centres in Kandava (50 copies), Sabile (50 copies) and Kuldiga (50 copies);
 - printing of 20 postcards, which form a supplement to the field guide and include images of rare plant species, beef cattle breeds grazing grasslands and rare habitats. (2,000 copies). These will be disseminated together with the leaflet or separately by the farmer.

The ARDIC plays a major role in the dissemination of information on the footpath. Besides that, the tourist information centres (Kandava, Kuldiga, Sabile) provide information, as does the Latvian Fund for Nature website.

3.5 Organisation of courses and field seminars on grassland conservation

Another important way of awareness raising and training in conservation practices is the organisation of field seminars for Abava valley farmers. Some of these have been organised in the context of the previous Eurograssland project, but the number of farmers involved could be substantially extended and there appeared to be need for additional topics to be covered. For this reason, the Latvian Fund for Nature and the Latvian Agricultural Advisory and Training Centre have been organising a series of additional seminars on grassland conservation, grassland management and the opportunities of the Latvian agri-environment schemes.

Project results

Under this sub-project, the following was achieved:

- a. Development of the plan and the curricula (lists of main goals to be reached in each of seminars; detailed plans of lectures) for the seminars to be organised in 2003.
- b. Compilations of texts of lectures and hand-out materials for participants.

- c. Organisation of four seminars “Agriculture and Nature Conservation in the Abava River Valley” in all municipalities in the Abava protected area: Kandava, Sabile, Gibuli and Renda. The seminars took place in October 2003 with the following results:
- Sabile (Guest house “Imulas”): 34 participants ;
 - Kandava (Museum of the Town): 47 participants;
 - Gibuli (Education Centre Pastende): 30 participants;
 - Renda (Culture Centre): 22 participants.



Ivars Kabucis of the Latvian Fund for Nature during his seminar lecture in Gibuli municipality

The seminar programme was as follows:

- Biological value of the grasslands in the Abava River Valley – Ivars Kabucis (LFN).
- The Abava River Valley Nature Park and the conservation of the biodiversity in the area – Ivita Nagle (Ministry of Environment).
- Ecological farming and good agricultural practice – Dzidra Kreismane (Latvian University of Agriculture).
- National Rural Development Plan and its agro-environmental measures – Liga Drozdovska (Ministry of Environment).
- Field visit to the demonstration farms (excluding the Renda seminar).
- Biodiversity and agri-environmental farm plan.

Possible national and EU subsidies for particular farms including foreseen agri-environment measures: farm “Braslini” in Sabile with Alfons Speks (Talsi District Agriculture Advisory Bureau), farm “Grivas” in Kandava with Verners Zigerts (Tukums District Agriculture Advisory Bureau, farm “Sirmi” in Gibuli with Alfons Speks (Talsi District Agriculture Advisory Bureau).

3.6 Establishing a *Biocentre* in Renda

Renda municipality has adopted a programme to become a 'green municipality'. One of the ideas in the programme is to establish a local *Biocentre* where:

- information is provided on 'green behaviour' and 'green entrepreneurship', including sustainable (e.g. organic) farming;
- general information on the Abava valley is provided (its history, landscape and biodiversity values);
- organic and/or local products are being sold and served;
- local meetings and trainings are organised.

The Biocentre should be a multifunctional building, meant to strengthen local economy. The information and training functions are partly similar to those of the ARDIC (see § 3.1), but more targeted at the local level. The function for marketing local and sustainable produce are specific for the Biocentre.

The province of Overijssel has been donating a start-up subsidy of € 22.700,-, mainly for the renovation of the housing facilities. Under the PIN/MATRA budget, the Biocentre's information and training function on biodiversity issues is financed, being part of the labour costs of local and 'hired' staff.



Admiring the originally foreseen location of the Renda Biocentre

Project results

Anticipating the office facilities, the following activities under the PIN/MATRA project were carried out:

- a. Feasibility study of the necessary information and educational activities in the Renda Biocentre.
- b. Draft plan of educational activities on agricultural and rural development, biodiversity and rural tourism items to be organised for the Renda Biocentre in 2003.
- c. Compilation of the terms of reference for the project representative in the Renda Biocentre.
- d. Selection of printed materials, copies of legal acts etc. for the Biocentre help-desk. The topics include biodiversity, agri-environment, rural development, tourism and project management.
- e. Recruitment of local co-ordinator Mr. Andrejs Jekabsons.
- f. Development of the programme for a series of lectures to be held in early 2004 at the Renda Grammar School / Eco-School. Target groups are teachers of the eco-school and teachers of the municipal kindergarten. Also everybody was invited to take part through advertisements and information posters. In total 19 persons participated. The lecture topics included:
 - biodiversity in the farm: habitats, wildlife and its management;
 - biodiversity in the Abava River: habitats, plants, animals;
 - biodiversity in the grasslands: habitats, wildlife and its management;
 - biodiversity in the rural park: wildlife and its management;
 - biodiversity in the forest: wildlife and its management.
- g. Three lessons for children as part of project week in March 2004 on:
 - construction and the role of bird boxes (Oskars Keiss - LFN);
 - old remarkable trees – nature monuments: inventory, measuring, monitoring (Peteris Evarts-Bunders – National Botanical Gardens);
 - “Castle flowers” in the school park – inventory, biological role (Ivars Kabucis – LFN);The lessons were supported by 3 field excursions led by local naturalist Janis Lencis.

Renda municipality faced severe difficulties during the project period. Because of supposed financial and legal trespass the Ministry of Regional Development discharged the elected Council of the Municipality and appointed a state Interim Manager. All activities concerning the development of the Biocentre were stopped. Also the budgets for all projects were temporarily closed. As a consequence, the architectural design of the Biocentre building was not started by the previously selected company. There was no responsible person for the Biocentre activities to communicate with and to implement the planned activities. In fact, the Biocentre was not established, neither as an organisation nor as a multifunctional building.

As the Latvian Fund for Nature was the main contractor for the PIN/MATRA activities and still no contract was made up with Renda municipality, the PIN/MATRA activities were not financially influenced by the Renda events.

After the elections of a new Council a feasibility study was carried out to clarify and renew the activities on the Biocentre. With the support of the new council a seminar was organised. During the seminar, two topics were selected for future co-operation:

- a series of lectures for the teachers of the eco-school;
- support for marketing of local eco-products, in the region as well as in Riga, and raising the awareness of organic farmers on educational possibilities (seminars, workshops).

3.7 Personal exchange

In September 2002, a Dutch delegation visited Latvia. During this visit:

- a. Practical appointments have been made with the primary Latvian partner organisation, the Latvian Fund for Nature, and with the regional partners in the Abava river valley. With the regional partners, agreement was reached on the independent position of the Abava Rural Development and Information Centre (ARDIC; project activity no. 1).
- b. a visit has been paid to the farm where the botanical footpath (project activity no. 4) will be established;
- c. ideas have been generated for additional projects in the Abava river valley. This has resulted in a programme of projects, many of which have now been granted by the Province of Overijssel. These include a project on nature development in an old Abava river oxbow lake;
- d. Mr. Hans Kampf of the Expertise Centre of the Netherlands Ministry of Agriculture, Nature Management and Fisheries (LNV) joined the mission during one day and was informed on the project activities.

In October 2002, Ms. Laila Pilege of the ARDIC visited the Netherlands to receive training on several issues relevant to her work as co-ordinator of the ARDIC. Among others she visited a similar information centre in Weerselo. This visit was organised linked to a visit related to the project cooperation between the communities Heino (Overijssel) and Sabile (Abava) and co-financed by Laila Pilege privately (the budget of this project does not foresee in extra budget for exchange activities).



During the personal exchange visits, meetings with representatives of the four Abava municipalities have become more frequent

In April 2003, a Dutch delegation visited the Abava valley. During this visit:

- a. further project appointments have been made with the primary Latvian partner organisation, the Latvian Fund for Nature, and with the regional partners in the Abava river valley;
- b. meetings with all Abava valley municipalities took place in order to strengthen their project involvement (also financially);
- c. several visits have been paid to farms involved in the project;
- d. ideas have been generated for additional projects in the Abava river valley, leading to (amongst others) an additional PIN/MATRA application in June 2003. Unfortunately, this application was not granted.

In October 2003, a last visit to Latvia took place in order to make final arrangements for the full implementation of project activities by the end of 2003. Following this visit, the Dutch Ministry was successfully requested to postpone the project deadline with three months to 31 March, 2004.

3.8 Communication

Among farmers in the Abava valley itself, the Eurograssland activities are reasonably known, as the project has been going on from 1998. However, many of the activities in the 2002-2004 project are relatively new and have been communicated frequently. The following communication activities have been established:

- a. The periodical (approximately half-year) ARDIC Newsletter – a new source of information, raising awareness and serving as an important communication means. The Latvian version is targeted at local inhabitants, regional and national organisations and governments. The English version is targeted at the Dutch organisations and governments involved and everyone else interested in rural development in the Abava valley.
- b. The ARDIC Board meetings provide a forum for communication between the leaders of municipalities, supporting the dialogue between municipalities and experts and between municipalities and NGOs.
- c. ARDIC Board meetings and seminars were announced through the regional broadcasting company “Kurzemes radio”.
- d. The regional newspapers provide regular information on project activities.
- e. The leaflet on grassland management has been actively disseminated to all relevant target groups.
- f. The website of the Latvian Fund for Nature (www.lnf.lv; in Latvian and English) provides extensive information on the project: summaries of the activities, current news, information about coming events, all accompanied by full-colour pictures. The website of the municipality of Sabile (www.sabile.lv; only in Latvian) provides information on the ARDIC activities.
- g. Publication in the national magazine “Kas notiek” on the botanical trail and management of valuable grasslands.
- h. Close co-operation between experts and regional agricultural advisors, generating increased awareness on biodiversity values and on preservation and management of valuable grasslands.
- i. Involvement of the Heads of Boards of the Abava Municipalities in the process of nature management and conservation, raised level of information.
- j. Dialogue between experts and local entrepreneurs, involvement in conservation and management activities.

- k. Involvement of authorities from both the Ministries of Agriculture and of Environment in the dialogue with farmers and local inhabitants. Exchange of information, avoidance of overlap between the different projects in the valley (including those supported by the Province of Overijssel).
- l. Involvement of local and regional tourism information centres (in Kandava, Sabile and Kuldīga), local tourism entrepreneurs and managers in conservation activities.



Front page of the second edition of the English version of the ARDIC newsletter (2003)

4 The future of grassland conservation in the Abava valley

All botanically valuable grasslands mapped and monitored during the previous Eurograssland projects (1998 – 2002) are included in the National Rural Development Plan as pilot areas for the agro-environmental measure “Management of biologically valuable grasslands” (2004-2006). Two sub-measures are included within it: late mowing and extensive grazing of grasslands. The payment will be € 138,- per ha. Now that the Latvian Rural Development Plan (including the agri-environment programme) has been approved by the European Commission in June 2004, the implementation (originally foreseen for 2002 under the SAPARD programme) can finally start. Based on previous motivation of Abava valley farmers, a relatively high uptake could be expected. But as the payment level is severely criticised and the implementation has been postponed several times, it is hard to estimate scheme participation.

The Abava Valley Nature Park is included in the national proposal to the European Commission as potential NATURA 2000 site (areas under the Birds and Habitats Directive). The coming years, this will facilitate the access to funds for specific restoration and management activities (such as the EU LIFE programme).

The final version of the Nature Part Management Plan, elaborated by the Danish consultancy CARL-BRO, has recently been submitted to the Ministry of Environment. The plan includes the management and restoration of grasslands as a priority activity. It will also serve as a theoretical and legal bases for the grassland management and restoration. A project proposal to implement this management plan will be the next step and will be an important tool to support management activities on farm level.

Next to support for conservation activities, the Latvian Rural Development Plan (RDP) offers support for farm investments, education, rural tourism and other kinds of farm diversification. I will take joined efforts to make an optimal use of the RDP’s opportunities in the Abava valley. To do so, the project activities may have created some initial infrastructure.



Abava river and adjacent grasslands in a late spring (April 2003)