

# INTERNATIONAL GROUP ON NATURE CONSERVATION AND CULTURAL LANDSCAPES

One of the key contributions of Europe, the Middle East and India to global biodiversity is through the interactions that long-established agriculture has with nature. In many areas the results of agriculture have been the dominant land-cover for very long periods, often longer than for any other biotope. Over several thousands of years, agriculture has developed regional characteristics depending on the natural environment, and modifications have taken place at a rate which seems to have allowed natural processes to continue and wildlife populations to be maintained, and possibly even enhanced. In addition, semi-natural open habitats provide the main existing substitute for the species of natural open areas, biotopes now largely lost. In recent decades, the rate of agricultural change, including drainage/irrigation, chemical applications and other intensification, has accelerated markedly in most areas. The regions which are still farmed in an extensive way retain tremendous natural interest as well as being far more compatible with the concept of sustainability. However, the importance of these areas is little recognised. There is a need for more integrated rural development.

Important grassland areas occur in other parts of the world, both because of direct environmental conditions and because of the interactions with wild or domesticated grazing animals. In many cases, such as in the Americas, this was linked to long-term development of human cultural activities.

The biological importance of grasslands in extensive farmland landscapes, particularly those depending on low-intensity agricultural activities, has tended to be neglected. Instead, attention has focused on protected areas and sites directed particularly at nature conservation on the one hand, and the restoration of nature values in intensively farmed areas on the other. Paradoxically, this emphasis has endangered some of the more sustainably managed low-intensity areas, the maintenance of which will prevent the loss of many wildlife populations.

In the last few years, three groups have tried to pull together information on these systems and develop co-operative working between the parties interested in them. The groups are the European Forum on Nature Conservation and Pastoralism, BirdLife International's specialist group on steppes and dry grasslands, and the Wader Study Group's project on wet grasslands.

These have resulted in the publication of reviews of the state of knowledge on interactions between low-intensity agriculture and wildlife, and recommendations for policies which would help conserve these systems (see below).

There is a good deal of common interest between these groups of people. It is now planned to increase the common working between them. This will be explored in

the near future. First steps will include the fourth European Forum on Nature Conservation and Pastoralism and, in addition, the wider circulation of the newsletter of that group, *La Cañada*, to members of the other two groups. (This will include those WSG members known to be involved in work on wet grasslands. Anyone who wishes to ensure that they are on the list should write to Dr Eric Bignal, at the address at the end of this article.) The international group on nature conservation and cultural landscapes could bring together those existing groups to develop common interests, without losing the strong foci in existing work.

The international group on nature conservation and cultural landscapes would be a network bringing together expertise in ecology, nature conservation and extensive ecology and aiming to collaborate with partners to sustain vulnerable cultural landscapes, their biodiversity and social fabric.

The principal aims of this group are as follows:

1. Getting better recognition and increased understanding - amongst conservationists, academics, land-managers and policy-makers - of extensive agricultural systems, their importance, their relationship with nature conservation, biodiversity and sustainability, and related policy issues; these to be achieved by means of research, exchange, meetings, pan-European projects, policy work, etc;
2. Ensuring the availability, dissemination and exchange of supporting information, science and expertise; and identifying and stimulating any further research required into ecological, social and economic aspects of extensive farming systems;
3. Developing and promoting policy options which ensure the maintenance and development of these cultural landscapes.

To achieve these, the following main activities will be undertaken:

1. Bringing together, expanding and strengthening the work of the groups in this area, which together co-ordinate the activities of statutory and voluntary organisations, ecologists, conservationists and farmers, and nature conservation, agricultural and socio-economic interests.
2. Continue the series of Forum meetings, which bring together participants to help identify necessary actions to take the issue forward.
3. Produce and circulate *La Cañada*.

4. Increase the focus on these issues by, and the involvement of, governmental policy makers, business and financial institutions.
5. Encourage the development of a network of demonstration projects which utilise the combined expertise of working farmers and conservation biologists.
6. Encourage initiatives in integrated rural development, such as small scale investments at the local level, in maintaining low-input agriculture.
7. In Europe, (i) draw the attention of policy makers to the conclusions of the workshops and other fora of the group, (ii) develop policy workshops with newly joining members of the European Union, and (iii) develop the involvement of eastern Europe, other countries which might join in the European Union partnership and a wider circle of relevant nations.

## INSTITUTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The clear feeling of members in all three networks is that, while enlightened farmers, conservationists and many in the agricultural policy area, have developed sufficient expertise and knowledge on how to integrate low intensity agriculture and wildlife conservation, there is still not enough direct action. In view of this, the leadership of the three groups concerned will examine the potential for taking more radical measures to promote the interests of the international groups on nature conservation and cultural landscapes. Since agriculture is itself recognised as a major business activity, it seems appropriate to employ the same tools for advancing nature conservation in the agricultural sector. Therefore, as one possible route, it is hoped to circulate in the near future a proposal, on behalf of the international group, to establish a private limited company which can use business methods to promote the objectives outlined above. This could link to the other networks, such as the European Forum.

## FUTURE ACTIVITY

WSG will be collaborating within the network in related areas of activity, principally plans for a new WSG project to reassess population sizes of lowland breeding waders throughout Europe.

A short report from the Fourth European Forum on Nature Conservation and Pastoralism, held in November 1994 in Spain, will be included in a future *Bulletin*.

## MAIN PUBLICATIONS

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Bignal, Eric M., McCracken, David I., & Curtis, David J. 1994. *Nature conservation and pastoralism in Europe*. Peterborough, Joint Nature Conservation Committee

*Dr Eric Bignal, Kindrochaid, Bruichladdich, Isle of Islay, Argyll, Scotland PA44 7PT, UK; and Dr Mike Pienkowski, Joint Nature Conservation Committee, Monkstone House, City Road, Peterborough PE1 1JY, UK.*

