

Environment and Management on the West-Estonian Islands

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The West-Estonian Archipelago Biosphere Reserve

The West-Estonian Archipelago is situated in the eastern part of the Baltic Sea. The Biosphere Reserve (BR), set in motion in 1990, is spread on 1,5 million hectares. Islands make up 404 000 ha and about 1 115 000 ha is sea. Besides four bigger islands, there are some hundreds of smaller islets. This immense territory occupies parts of three administrative districts.

The BR has three main functions: 1. A conservation function, aimed at protection of both unique and typical ecosystems of the islands. 2. A scientific function, to carry out the studies of dynamic nature-man interrelations and to participate in the international monitoring network. 3. A development function, to take part in regional planning, resource management, local participation and ecological education.

The de-Sovietisation of Estonia has been rather rapid during the last two years. For 50 years the islands had been virtually closed to visitors from outside. But there is still a lack of new laws concerning land use and ownership, nature management and protection. In this situation, the BR acts in the community of islanders as a task force for sustainable nature management and ecological education. One of main functions of the BR is to be an advocate for the fragile nature in different conflicts of interests.

The changes in land ownership are causing fundamental conflicts. All the lands expropriated in 1940 by the Soviet state are to be returned to the heirs. For instance, the effective system of nature preserves was built up on lands that have to be returned to the original owners. During Soviet times, seaside villages and small farms were almost demolished. Now, the revival of coastal fishing and private farming will be an essential part of the traditional nature use patterns.

One further field of conflicts is tourism, that has increased considerably during two years. Rare ecosystems are endangered by this. At the same time, tourism may bring desirable investments. Tourism, built up on cultural and social traditions of the islands, is a noteworthy area of future co-operation between islands in the Baltic Sea.

To conclude, items of disagreements on Estonian islands are the following: the protection of algae, fish resources, seals, birds; building in coastal areas and on islets; waste water pollution; the increase in sea transport and sea tourism; the right of public access to the resources of nature.

The task of the BR staff is to trace the changes and to devise the environmentally sound models of nature management. In our situation, where interest in local resource management grows faster than new legislation, it's important to shed light on areas of conflict. The strategic goal of the BR is to favour ecologically clean production and lifestyles in the spirit of sustainable development.