



NATUURPUNT VZW

COMMUNICATION ON ENGAGEMENT (COE) – UNITED NATIONS GLOBAL COMPACT

Period covered by this COE: January 2016 to December 2017

Part I. Statement of Continued Support by the Chief Executive

To our stakeholders,

I am pleased to confirm that Natuurpunt reaffirms its support to the United Nations Global Compact and its Ten Principles in the areas of Human Rights, Labour, Environment and Anti-Corruption. This is our Communication on Engagement with the United Nations Global Compact. We welcome feedback on its contents.

In this Communication of Engagement, we describe the actions that our organization has taken to support the UN Global Compact and its Principles as suggested for an organization like ours. We also commit to sharing this information with our stakeholders using our primary channels of communication.

Sincerely yours,

Chris Steenwegen,
Algemeen directeur

Part II. Description of Actions.

About Natuurpunt's engagement for the environment.

Nature and biodiversity

For Natuurpunt the protection of nature and biodiversity form the foundation of a sustainable society. People need nature. We are an integral part of nature. Even though society supports the irreplaceable services of nature, biodiversity is decreasing. We want to turn the tide. To do this, Natuurpunt works on a Flemish level, but always from an international perspective.

Nature and biodiversity can only get sufficient chances when they are embedded in a network of core nature areas and connecting areas. This network is aimed at fulfilling the need for nature in Flanders and meeting international nature conservation duties. We develop a clear vision on how such a network can look and take the lead in its realization by focusing on acquiring, hiring and managing wildlife areas. We aim for large connected units of nature. These can be managed more efficiently and offer more space for spontaneous processes. At the same time we purchase and manage small, sometimes isolated wildlife areas. These also play an essential role in preservation, recovery and the spread of species and often have a major perception and awareness raising value for local residents. Although the intrinsic value of nature comes first for us, Natuurpunt also takes account of the fact that people can have greatly varying images of nature.

Nature has a place in everyone's life. This is why we as a society take care of nature 'for everyone', so everyone has access to local nature. We also find it important to open our areas for visitors. We always search for a balance between nature conservation and recreational use. We also stand up for nature and biodiversity outside our wildlife areas.

We protect and develop urban nature and urban forests and stand up for more nature in agricultural areas. We aim for an attractive and natural countryside, where an end has come to the fragmentation of open space, the alarming degeneration of the wealth of species and the loss of land-based heritage.

As nature and landscape are inseparable, we dedicate ourselves to improving the quality and the protection of heritage and abiotic elements. We ensure that our own areas are managed properly, by us or together with others. This leads to our areas being regarded as a reference for proper conservation of nature. We also promote more owners and users outside our wildlife areas to cooperate in the execution of a sustainable biodiversity policy that meets high quality standards.

The more participants who take responsibility to actually protect nature, the better. Where possible, we make our knowledge and expertise in nature conservation available. With this, we work on 'nature with everyone'.

Civil society

Volunteers are the beating heart of Natuurpunt. There is room for everyone's commitment, ranging from occasional to far-reaching, from local, to regional to national. At Natuurpunt, volunteers get the opportunity to develop themselves and grow in the organization. They cooperate with a team of professionals, on the basis of respect, mutual empathy and realistic expectations. Via a targeted diversity policy we form a reflection of the make-up of society.

We focus extra attention on involving youngsters in the organization. To offer people who have trouble finding a job in regular employment new opportunities, Natuurpunt invests in jobs in the social economy. We ensure that the workers can work in nature in a useful manner. We act as a responsible employer and provide good working conditions and career development opportunities.

Natuurpunt is developing into *the* knowledge center of biodiversity in Flanders. Professionals as well as volunteers have knowledge about species, habitats and conservation. We are recognized for our expertise by the users. In addition, knowledge is expanded via low-threshold citizen science projects.

Involved into public debate

We strongly focus on increasing our impact on the government policy. To this end, we invest in consultation with the government and other participants. If necessary, we take action and use legal measures to protect essential natural values.

Natuurpunt stimulates the 'sense' of nature, works on a change of mentality, among others, by getting to know nature, and raises awareness regarding treating nature with respect.

Natuurpunt joins and proposes partnership projects

We enter into strategic alliances for natural objectives can be realized. We cooperate with partners and organizations on all levels: we organize activities together, work on joint projects, etc. This way, Natuurpunt introduces nature conservation to numerous organizations.

Part III. Measurement of Outcomes.

Partnerships for nature and environment.

Last two years Natuurpunt has been involved into different partnerships for nature and environment. Here we describe two of the most important among them.

- Demer valley project.

In the Demer valley project we have set up a cooperation together with het Coca-Cola Company on water protection and replenishment. In 2007, Coca-Cola announced a sustainability effort to "return to nature and communities an amount of water equivalent to what is used in finished beverages" by the year 2020.

In Belgium Natuurpunt and the Coca-Cola Company defined a project which aims to give back water to nature, in order to improve biodiversity, and protect at the same time communities of floods.

The Demer valley project will be executed from 2017 until 2020 in the Flemish region (Diest-Aarschot). Natuurpunt manages important areas of land on which several measures will be taken in order to realize the common targets of water infiltration and biodiversity improvement.

The purpose of the project is carrying out specific actions for restoring the water retention, increasing the average groundwater level, and improving the quality of the ground and surface water within the Demer Valley nature reserve. At the same time, we are ensuring improved quality for several Natura 2000 protected habitats using the proposed planning measures, including focusing on bringing back the nesting birds to the Demer Valley, such as the spotted crane, common snipe, and red-backed shrike. Developing an attractive, water-rich landscape on the own site and getting the public excited about it.

This project proposal is complementary to the actions in the European nature restoration project 'LIFE Hageland', being implemented by Natuurpunt (2012-2018). Furthermore, this project can ensure essential quality improvement and an expansion of the 'Sigma Demer' water management program that is now (2017-....) being implemented by the Flemish government.

The total working area in this valley is 2,115 hectares, 640 of which are under ownership of nature protection organizations and already under active nature management.

The execution of the project will add an important volume of groundwater to the area.

Based on mathematic models we calculate that 319,275 m³ of water or 319.3 million liters of water will be added annually.

The following measures will be taken in order to realize the targets:

1. Water quality measurements

Catalogued watercourses are monitored well by the government, but for nature management to be successful, the water quality in the smaller, unmapped watercourses that flow through the nature reserves must be monitored. This will make it possible for us to apply the appropriate measures to the detail drainage based on an understanding of the issues, specifically what water could be stopped in the region and what water is best allowed to flow into the river unrestricted

2. Improved detail hydrology

Via the on-going LIFE project, Natuur en Landschapszorg was able to invest in adapted material for mowing the wet grassland vegetation, including a Softrak and single-axle trucks. However, an element essential for nature management in the valley is missing: adapted material for managing the detail hydrology. Cranes with a sufficiently low ground pressure to be able to carefully work in wetland systems are virtually non-existent among standard contractors. Therefore, we would like to purchase our own adapted crane that has sufficient power to carry out the watercourse excavations and which also has an exceptionally low ground pressure. This is necessary to work in the peat bogs without causing any damage. The crane will be utilized in a series of detailed measures that must improve water maintenance

3. Combatting erosion on the ironstone hills

There are two ironstone hills located within the project area. When rainfall is heavy, the water flows down in large amounts, primarily from the agricultural plots. This has created erosion gullies. By creating several diverting ditches and dikes that lead the water to small balancing catchment basins, the rainwater atop the mountain can infiltrate and ensure that the runoff no longer poses a problem in terms of sedimentary deposits in the valuable, lower-lying mountain habitats.

It may be possible to link this action to a larger 'land development project' that our association is trying to initiate on the Wijngaardberg. A part of the preparatory topographic study and several smaller interventions on the plots to be acquired were submitted in this project. Development works on-site can be carried out using the own purchased crane.

4. Restoration of European protected habitats in river valleys

There are more beautiful examples of each of the habitat types listed, but the surfaces that were recently taken into keeping by the NGO are mostly degraded due to, for example, drying up, building weekend sites, poplar plantings, and ploughing and intensively fertilizing grasslands or maize fields. Depending on the situation, there is a good chance to restore these in our project regions. This will primarily have to be done via interventions to the river through the Sigma Plan and the detail drainage (see above). The removal of paving from the weekend residences and other (illegal) built areas will ensure an increase in the infiltration surface area. Removal of conifers and poplars will ensure an increase in the groundwater through the significant reduction of evapotranspiration. The development on these sites near peat bogs does a much better job at retaining the water. More than 100 hectares have been restored to an optimal and largely 'wetter' condition in the on-going LIFE project.

5. Conversion of weekend residences into species-rich standing aquatic habitats (3150)

The quality of aquatic habitats has significantly declined in the past century in the Demer Valley, just as it has in the rest of Flanders, as a result of pollution and drying-up. Previous projects in the Demer Valley have proved that restoration from banal recreational ponds is possible if the abiotic is full of potential and if the limiting factors can be removed. In recent years, nature protection organizations have been able to purchase a series of abandoned weekend residences in mutual agreement. By removing all of the pollution, construction, and other paving, exotic plants, and the nutrient-rich sediment layer in the pond, this can be converted from a system with turbid, species-poor water into a system with clear, species-rich water. The remediated site then has a positive influence on the release of the groundwater. Such pure, standing aquatic habitats can eventually encourage the growth of peat-forming vegetation.

6. Restoration of populations of European protected species in river valleys: common snipe, Eurasian bitterns, red-backed shrike, northern crested newt, floating water-plantain

By implementing the discussed measures, we are convinced that the final threshold can be crossed towards re-establishing the abovementioned rare EU-protected species that are now only occasionally observed in the Demer Valley. This will shift the category of these regions concerning the state of maintenance of these populations from the 'very degraded' to 'sub-optimal' category.

7. Creating visitor infrastructure

The natural values will be made accessible for families, schools and youngsters by the installation of extra paths and bridges. This way there will be an extra hiking path which offers the possibility of making a smaller walk with children. The new paths will offer some comfort so visitors would not need to go through wet zones.

Finally we will install at the Voortberg an observation platform over the Demerbroeken. This offers extra possibilities for wildlife observation and the observation of the executed works.

- *GrassGood Project*

Natuurpunt works together with 12 partners in the Interreg project 'GrasGoed – Natuurlijk Groen als Grondstof' (GrassGood – Natural Green as Raw Material) to come up with solutions to strengthen the links in the chain from grass to product. This project allows nature managers, companies, and knowledge institutions in the border region between Flanders and the Netherlands to give a new life to the 'leftovers' of nature conservation.

The environmental organisations Natuurpunt, Grenspark De Zoom-Kalmthoutse Heide, Natuurmonumenten, and Brabants Landschap are looking for techniques to mow the wet meadows without damaging the surrounding environment. The clippings come from three regions: Altena-Biesbosch/Vlijmens Ven, Grenspark De Zoom-Kalmthoutse Heath, and the Dommeldal and Zwarte Beek Vallei.

Two green maintenance companies, Verschoor Groen & Recreatie and VanderVelden, are developing machines to more efficiently collect the clippings from wet regions and prepare them for transport on-site. The companies Grassa and Newfoss process the grass clippings into raw materials. Millvision and Agricon, two product developers, in turn create new prototypes and products using these raw materials. Avans Hogeschool and Inverde take care of the inventorying and market development, as well as translating the new knowledge from the project into teaching materials.

The clippings left over from managing wet regions (such as reed-lands, wet meadows, damp heath, etc.) are often under-utilized or not utilized at all. This is unfortunate because thousands of tons of clippings are created every year. Not only is it logistically difficult to remove the clippings from these regions, dumping clippings is a costly business. This project aims to solve these problems by improving mowing, transport, and processing machinery, developing new products, and creating a market.

Reap what you sow

Giving clippings a second life as a sustainable product is the goal that GrasGoed wants to achieve. We are collecting as much grassy biomass together in the three regions as possible to create an economically interesting amount. To this end, we are improving, among other things, the mowing, pretreatment, and transport systems. This way, the clippings are gathered from the environment better, meaning it will be dry and thus less expensive to transport.

We are also improving the machines that break down the cell structures of the grass and separate these into fibers, proteins, and cell fluids. Lastly, we are developing new, regional products that use these fibers, proteins, and cell fluids as raw materials. Some examples are paper and cardboard, insulation, or peat free potting soil from grass fibers. We also try to convert the protein concentrate and the nutrient-rich fluid into livestock feed or soil enhancers.

Grow with us

There could be a place in GrasGoed for everyone. An amazing amount of new products can be developed using clippings, but the market is still new. We would like to open the market up even more together with developers of bio based products. Companies and institutions that want to operate sustainably and with social responsibility are invited to see what is possible, together with us, when using new bio based products. We also regularly organize demonstrations and expert meetings that you can register to attend.

As an outcome of this project we could print the organization's annual report on paper made of grass of our nature reserves.

Some other key figures

- 10.001 new Natuurpunt members in 2017. The total number of members has increased until 107.333 members.
- 730 ha nature area purchased in 2017. The total area of nature reserves managed by Natuurpunt has increased up to 23.685 ha
- 13.952 financial donors
- 8.650 hours realized for nature education courses
- 2.661 km new walking paths
- 272.000 visitors in our nature centers
- 180 new trained nature guides and 43 new climate guides
- 26.086 volunteers observed garden birds during the bird weekend

