



**NATUURPUNT VZW**  
**COMMUNICATION ON ENGAGEMENT (COE) – UNITED NATIONS GLOBAL COMPACT**

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Period covered by this COE: January 2018 to December 2020

**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,

Walter Rycquart,  
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.

#### **- Turnhouts Vennen area.**

In the Turnhouts Vennen 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.

This target was fulfilled in 2020.

However Coca-Cola does not want to stop there and has redefined it's targets based on new figures and ambitions.

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 purpose of the project is carrying out specific actions for restoring historical water fens, increasing the average groundwater level and improving the biodiversity within the Turnhouts Vennen nature reserve.

Once restructured, the Turnhout Fens will ensure a holding capacity of an enormous quantity of rain water. The extra water holding capacity will prove valuable given the more extreme weather conditions expected. Furthermore, it will protect the City of Turnhout from any flooding.

Because the vegetation will develop extra carbon and therefore CO<sub>2</sub> also will be stored in the soil. Certain places will witness new fen formation -- a process which can retain CO<sub>2</sub> in the very long term. Through this project, the area with heathland and grasslands will take up more CO<sub>2</sub> than the current maize and grass fields.

All these elements help as a climate buffer for the future.+

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 rare birds and plants to the area.

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 Limosa', being implemented by Natuurpunt (2020-2024).

The total working area in this valley is 108 hectares which are under ownership of Natuurpunt and already under active nature management.

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

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

### **1. Preliminary studies**

Preliminary studies are indispensable if fens are to be restored successfully. Various studies had already been conducted under previous LIFE projects: diatoms of the fens, seed bank analyses, archaeological survey, ecohydrological system analysis and soil studies.

These studies form the basis of an integral management plan with implementation measures.

### **2. Reconstruction of fens**

In the first place, the aim is to restore fens that have disappeared and marshes by excavating them again up to the original profile. The original depth of the fen can be mapped by means of soil samples. The trick consists of excavating precisely to that original level with an excavator. The seed bank still present is thereby exposed to the maximum thereby affording the biggest chance for maximal restoration.

The excavated material will be spread next to the fen and form a dune again. This relief is fitted fully into the landscape, whereby there is no leverage to approach the original relief to the maximum

### **3. Restoration of the natural hydrology: re-wetting at plot and basin level**

The plots of land that Natuurpunt acquires in the Turnhout Fens are usually highly 'degraded' by desiccation. For the natural hydrology to be restored, the drainage of the area must be substantially reduced so that the entire area can become more marshy again.

Due to the shallow presence of clay and the minor relief differences, many smaller fens (0.1 to 1.0 hectare) were also outside the watershed zone, which is characterized by the presence of large fens. A number of those fens dried up completely in dry summers. This was a normal process. Historical data show that ca. 10% of the heathland consisted of such small, drying fens. During wetter periods, these fens grew to a drenched wetland situation, where up to 30% of the surface consisted of open water.

When the heathland was cultivated between 1920 and 1960, these parcels were subjected to detailed dewatering and were systematically fertilized. They thus developed into grazing lands. Part of the grazing lands in the area retained the original microrelief. Other plots, especially in the northeast and southeast of the area, were turned into farmland and the microrelief was lost as a result.

The restoration of these plots of land consists of:

- Excavating fertilized soil of the 'fen' basins that are still present
- Filling the dewatering trenches and ditches on the plots of land where the microrelief is still present
- Reconstructing the early microrelief on the basis of a detailed soil analysis. New fens and new marshes are constructed and the drainage pipes and canals are removed.

### **4. Neutralization of the effects of intensive fertilization over many years by excavating the soil of the new fens or rehabilitating the surroundings of these new fens**

A high-quality restoration of the fens moreover requires ensuring a low-phosphate aquatic environment. This can be done by excavating the excessively nutrient-rich fertilized layer of silt in the fens or by sophisticated rehabilitation management of the surrounding plots of land. The buffer zones around the fens will be rehabilitated. This is a recently developed management technique used primarily to extract phosphate from the soil. That is necessary in order to restore oligotrophic *Nardus* vegetation. Extra nitrogen is added under this rehabilitation management process to make the existing plants grow substantially and thus take up a lot of phosphate from the soil. These are then mowed and the clipping is removed so that the soil is depleted more rapidly than with a traditional depleting mowing management.

### **5. Raising of the water level in the area by reducing vaporization by basal shoots and alien trees and forests planted**

The removal of planted coniferous forests raises the groundwater level. Trees evaporate a lot of water, in fact. And coniferous trees evaporate even more water than coniferous trees because they evaporate water year round.

This measure is quite radical on the landscape but necessary in order to clear the afforested heathland again and thus make it suitable as a habitat for extremely critical species such as the Woodlark, Nightjar or Curlew.

Needless to say, forestland in Flanders is also important. Natuurpunt offsets such deforestation by expanding a number of forests elsewhere in Flanders by planting new trees. Ecologically valuable forest complexes are thus bolstered by the extension of forest resources – a double benefit for nature in other words.

Targets:

### **1. Return of symbolic species**

Thanks to the afore mentioned initiatives, rare, EU-protected biotopes will increase again in area size where they currently have only limited expanse in the Turnhout Fens.

Symbolic species such as the Crane, Black tern, which is now seen only sporadically in the region, will hopefully settle permanently here.

In restructuring the area, we will also be able to upgrade the state of conservation for plants such as the Shoreweed and the Lesser Butterfly-orchid from 'very degraded' to 'sub-optimal.'

### **2. Ecosystem services and climate buffer**

Once restructured, the Turnhout Fens will ensure a holding capacity of an enormous quantity of rain water. The extra water holding capacity will prove valuable given the more extreme weather conditions expected. Furthermore, it will protect the City of Turnhout from any flooding.

Because the vegetation can now develop beautifully extra carbon and therefore CO<sub>2</sub> also will be stored in the soil. Certain places will witness new fen formation -- a process which can retain CO<sub>2</sub> in the very long term. Through this project, the area with heathland and grasslands will take up more CO<sub>2</sub> than the current maize and grass fields.

All these elements help as a climate buffer for the future

### **3. Visitor infrastructure and facilities**

Access to the Turnhout Fens and the related nature experience for the public can be improved. We therefore foresee a number of number of investments for the visitor infrastructure in this project. More specifically, Natuurpunt will invest in:

\* The construction of a new viewing platform on Koeven. The restored Koeven can be surveyed and the fauna (in particular a black-headed gull colony) better observed from the viewing platform. This will enhance the involvement of visitors in nature and the area, and enable us to create support for the at times drastic restoration measures that are necessary in the area.

\* Permanent benches and picknick tables will be installed in certain areas. The benches and tables will be made from wood from Natuurpunt nature reserves by Natuur en Landschapszorg [Nature and Landscape Care], the social company of Natuurpunt. The area can be discovered in comfort thanks to this infrastructure.

\* An exhibition on the Turnhout Fens in the Klein Engelandhoeve [Little England Farm]. This old farmstead at the edge of the area dates from 1826. It was turned into a reception centre in 2010 that serves as a starting point for hikes in the Turnhout Fens. Natuurpunt is a partner of the current operation, 'Trefpunt Toreke' [Toreke Meeting Point], a non-profit association that wants to give underprivileged persons a place in society. The farm boasts an old Campine sheepfold which Natuurpunt is already using to receive groups. The aim is to equip the barn with contemporary educational material visitors can use to familiarize themselves with the nature value of the Turnhout Fens.

## - *Project Care-Peat - Restoring the carbon storage capacity of peatlands*

### Taking care of peatlands

Care-Peat is an Interreg project with nine partners working together to reduce carbon emissions and restore the carbon storage capacity of different types of peatlands in North-West Europe. Natuurpunt is lead partner in this project.

The main partnership consists of five knowledge institutes and four nature organisations from Belgium, France, Ireland, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. Together with our other project partners, we develop and test new techniques and socio-economic strategies for carbon reduction.

### Peatlands tackling climate change

Why focus on peatlands? Peatlands are not only habitats with a highly specialised flora and fauna, they also play an important role in global climate regulation. Northern hemisphere peatlands count for 3 to 5% of total land area and contain approximately 33% of global soil carbon. Therefore peatlands have a strong natural potential to save carbon and play an important role in nature based solutions for climate change.

When peatlands are drained, the well preserved carbon is released as greenhouse gases to the atmosphere. That is why it is important to keep peatlands wet. Unfortunately many peatlands are degraded and emit rather than store carbon. The global annual greenhouse gas emissions from drained organic soils are twice that from aviation. We need to act now to prevent further degradation and encourage more recovery of our remaining peatlands.

### What does Care-Peat do?

The main goal of Care-Peat is to set up and demonstrate innovative technologies for new restoration and carbon measurement techniques and involve local and regional stakeholders.

Therefore the nature organisations, together with local landowners, restore peatlands of five different pilot sites ranging from 10 to 250 hectares and demonstrate the (potential) carbon savings of the restoration. For each pilot site different restoration techniques are used - from manual labour to growing additional peat moss. Throughout the project the organisations are supported by the knowledge institutes that work together to develop and test new equipment, methods and models to predict carbon flows (e.g. by the use of drones and satellites to guide restoration and inform carbon models). Care-Peat also works with innovative companies in the field of restoration and develops partnerships with local and regional stakeholders to increase the impact of pilots and maximise socio-economic benefits.

An important output of Care-Peat is the publication of management and decision tools concerning the best options for peatland restoration in regard to carbon storage. This way the results of the project are transferred and replicated to users across North-West Europe to determine the most appropriate management measures, even after Care-Peat has ended.

### How much carbon can be saved?

Care-Peat is ambitious. By the end of the project in 2022, we expect that about 7800 tonnes of carbon emissions per year are prevented from losses and stored in the five pilot sites (in

total approximately 630 hectares). This is comparable to the greenhouse gas emissions of 6072 passenger cars driven for one year (source: EPA).

After 2022 we hope that nature conservation and other organisations all over the North-West Europe region will take (further) measures, resulting in the restoration of many more peatlands. And the more peatlands are restored, the more carbon is saved. In this way peatlands can become an important natural partner in climate policies across North-West Europe.

### Some other key figures

- 3.873 new Natuurpunt members in 2019. The total number of members has increased until 114.173 members.
- 717 ha nature area purchased in 2019. The total area of nature reserves managed by Natuurpunt has increased up to 25.048 ha
- 2.299.532 visitors on [www.natuurpunt.be](http://www.natuurpunt.be)
- 29.754 participants for nature education courses
- 2.990 km walking paths
- 49.360 participants for activities in our nature centers
- 163 new trained nature guides
- 36.488 volunteers observed garden birds during the bird weekend