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

Period covered by this COE: January 2020 to December 2021

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 the partnership with the Pepsico Company.

Waterreplenishment

In Belgium Natuurpunt and the Pepsico 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. Pepsico and Natuurpunt work together on two nature projects, both located in West-Vlaanderen. The projects are "Uitkerkse Polder" and "De Blankaart".

The purpose of both projects is carrying out specific actions for restoring historical wetlands, increasing the average groundwater level and improving the biodiversity within the supported nature reserve.

Once restructured, the nature projects 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.

Because the vegetation will develop extra carbon and therefore CO₂ also will be stored in the soil. Through these projects, the area with grasslands will take up more CO₂ than the current 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.

We invest in developing an attractive, water-rich landscape on the own site and getting the public excited about it.

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

1. Preliminary studies

Preliminary studies are indispensable if nature area's are to be restored successfully.

Various studies had already been conducted under previous LIFE projects for both projects: seed bank analyses, archaeological survey, eco-hydrological system analysis and soil studies.

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

2. Reconstruction of old canals and marshes

In the first place, the aim is to restore canals and marshes that have disappeared by excavating them again up to the original profile. The original depth of the canals 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 plots of land that Natuurpunt acquires in these area's 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.

A lot of 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 were turned into farmland and the microrelief was lost as a result.

The restoration of these plots of land consists of:

- 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 marshes are constructed and the drainage pipes and canals are removed.

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.

Symbolic species such as the black tailed godwit, which is now seen only sporadically in the Blankaart, will hopefully settle permanently here.

2. Ecosystem services and climate buffer

Once restructured, both projects will ensure a holding capacity of an important quantity of rain water. The extra water holding capacity will prove valuable given the more extreme weather conditions expected.

Because the vegetation can now develop beautifully extra carbon and therefore CO₂ also will

be stored in the soil. Through this project, the area with marshes and grasslands will take up more CO2 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 Blankaart and the Uitkerkse Polder and the related nature experience for the public can be improved. We therefore foresee a number of investments for the visitor infrastructure in this project. More specifically, Natuurpunt will invest in:

* The construction of a new viewing platform in Uitkerke so the reserve can be surveyed and the fauna 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 picnic 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 integration structure of Natuurpunt. The area will be discovered in comfort thanks to this infrastructure.

* In the Blankaart we will construct a new visitor's centre.

That will leave the current building from the Province. Thanks to the new centre we will be able to tell more the story of Natuurpunt and the reserve.

Some other key figures

- At the end of 2020 the total number of members has increased until 123.333 members.
- 896 ha nature area purchased in 2020. The total area of nature reserves managed by Natuurpunt has increased up to 26.069 ha
- 3.488.653 visitors on www.natuurpunt.be
- 21.773 participants for nature education courses and 10.304 participants for webinars
- 3.060 km walking paths
- 360.000 visitors in our nature centers
- 1.063 cooperation agreements with farmers for nature management
- 79.300 volunteers observed garden birds during the bird weekend