

Bull by the Horns: Grazing in Nature and Landscape Management

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The sustenance of rural cultural landscape and the biodiversity within it often demands effort that is left quite invisible. “Bull by the Horns” was a project that supported landscape management actions and aimed at raising the profile of this work within the face of agricultural change. The main aim of the project was to promote the usage of grazing animals in landscape and biodiversity management. This work was organized and planned by regional authorities and advisory organizations together, and local stakeholders such as cattle farmers and landowners conducted the work in collaboration with each other.

“Bull by the Horns” started in June 2009 and lasted until September 2012. The project covered five administrative regions within Finland: Central Finland, Southern Savo, Pirkanmaa, Ostrobothnia, and Central Ostrobothnia. Altogether the project area comprised nearly a fifth of the total area of Finland. Collaboration over the administrative borders offered several benefits: mutual cooperation, spreading know-how, and unifying courses of action became possible.

The need for this project was grounded in the prevailing ecological crisis facing agricultural areas. A significant amount of European biodiversity and cultural heritage is based on long-term, low-intensity agricultural practices. However, the modernization of agriculture has resulted in large-scale changes in rural livelihoods and landscapes, and this has led to wide-spread loss of semi-natural habitats and endangerment of species. One example of this transformation is the abandonment of traditional rural biotopes, which are semi-natural meadows and pastures typical of high-nature-value farmlands. This change is concerning, as traditional rural biotopes are among the most biodiverse habitats of Europe. In Finland, over 99 % of the total cover of traditional rural biotopes has disappeared during the last one hundred years. As a result, traditional rural biotopes are the second most important habitat for threatened species in Finland.

Currently, the loss of agricultural biodiversity and overgrowing of open landscapes are two major challenges within rural areas. These issues are connected to each other, and grazing by cattle provides an answer to both problems. Low-intensity grazing is a good way to manage landscapes and biodiversity simultaneously, because grazing on semi-natural pastures promotes cultural heritage and species richness. It also diversifies the operational base of cattle farms. Grazing animals bring rural landscapes to life, thus providing important cultural ecosystem services for the general public through aesthetics and recreation.

With the help of participating cattle farmers, “Bull by the Horns” project safeguarded and enhanced the diversity of and within rural landscapes. This was achieved through promoting cattle, sheep, and horse grazing on a range of sites which benefited from such management actions. The basic idea was simple: to bring grazers back to abandoned pastures. In addition to grazing, also other management activities were conducted in order to open up sceneries that were overgrown because of management abandonment. These included clearance of bushes and selective tree logging. Management actions were funded through agri-environmental subsidies within the national rural development programme. The usage of these voluntary subsidies was made more efficient via the advisory services of the project. Furthermore, within available possibilities, also additional funding from other sources was directed to covering management costs.

Promoting biodiversity, cultural heritage, and aesthetic sceneries within rural landscapes is laborious and expensive. For this reason, one of the project’s aims was to utilize existing agri-environmental subsidies efficiently in order to compensate for management costs and gain benefits for biodiversity. The subsidies are based on five-year site-specific contracts, and active farmers can apply for them.

Although there are large cattle farms which have the grazers and are able to apply for the subsidy contracts, they often do not have the semi-natural pastures to graze on. Traditional rural biotopes, in turn, are increasingly owned by people that have given up agriculture. Therefore they do not have the grazing animals and the sites become abandoned. Because these landowners are not farming anymore, they do not have the possibility to apply for the subsidies. During “Bull by the Horns” project, a major effort was done in order to connect these people with each other: the cattle farmers and the landowners.

The initiative for including sites in the project usually came from locals in a bottom-up way. They shared knowledge on valuable abandoned pastures with the project workers, which in turn started to build management networks around the sites. A management network usually included the landowner or landowners of the site, and a cattle farmer who was interested in renting the site for grazing and could apply for the subsidies that were needed to fund the management actions. After this network of management stakeholders was formed, the project workers compiled a detailed management plan for the site. The plan was tailored to incorporate different stakeholder interests with ecological aspects, and it included a budget and a financing plan. In this way, a shared target for site management was formed within a collaborative planning process. These site-specific plans were done by ELY Centre officials and ProAgria advisors together, which made it easier to integrate different points of view into planning and guidance given for practicing management. Carefully compiled management plans and advice on funding opportunities gave the managers confidence to apply for fixed-term subsidy contracts. This brought continuity to site management, as the subsidy contracts continued even after the project itself had ended. It was also easier for managers to renew their contracts with the groundwork done by the project workers. A total of 131 subsidy applications were prepared within the project, some of them covering several pasture sites.

The sites included in the management planning were various. “Bull by the Horns” was targeted to farms, traditional rural biotopes, conservation areas, Natura 2000 -sites, village surroundings, and landscapes classified as valuable. Special attention was paid for sites that were considered to be difficult in terms of management planning. These included abandoned pastures that held specific biodiversity value, such as threatened species, and sites where management reintroduction required a shared effort from multiple stakeholders. Sometimes planning and conduction of management was complicated because of land-use restrictions posed by conservation legislation or land-use zoning. In these cases, the involvement of ELY Centre officials proved to be invaluable, as they were familiar with the laws and statutes, and provided their insight for the management planning process from the governance perspective. On the other hand, ProAgria advisors were able to incorporate a more entrepreneurial point of view into the management planning. For example, many cattle farmers were motivated to manage several pastures, and this was made possible by planning the management actions according to other farm-specific practices. Sometimes pasture sites were located quite far from the manager’s farm. Therefore management planning often took animal transportation and monitoring arrangements carefully into account.

During the project, local farmers and also other society members were encouraged to participate and to take the responsibility on landscape management actions that concerned their own surroundings. Together they developed skills of landscape stewardship. However, often landscape management needs reaching over the local scale. Grazing animals are not evenly distributed and certainly are not located near to potential pastures. In order to bring the pastures and grazers together we utilized an internet-based service, “Pasture Bank”, which was completely reformed during the project, and is functional even on today. In “Pasture Bank”, cattle owners can announce their need for pastures, and landowners can announce their need for grazing animals.

I am very happy to state that “Bull by the Horns” proved its necessity. The positive feedback from the project participants underlined that people living on rural areas do need guidance and practical help in managing their landscapes and environment. Three topics emerged as especially useful and I will introduce these briefly.

Firstly, project workers were able to provide advice on landscape management through phone and internet without any fees, and this service was open for everyone. Over five hundred persons received personal guidance in landscape management matters during the project's operational period. Many farmers who applied for the subsidies independently utilized this possibility in order to clarify specific issues that had troubled them.

Secondly, many farmers warmly welcomed all advice given specifically on the non-productive investment subsidy for initial clearing and enclosing of valuable traditional rural biotopes. This new investment contract was aimed at covering restoration costs, which tend to be especially high, but the measure was experienced as overly bureaucratic. However, with the help of project advisors and planners, 32 abandoned traditional rural biotopes were restored and grazing was started again through this measure. The project's effort comprised nearly 40 % of all traditional rural biotope investment contracts on national level during that period.

Thirdly, the advisory services provided for civic associations came into real need. In Finland, civic associations can apply for landscape management subsidies, but their members rarely are familiar with the bureaucracy involved in applying and receiving funding through agri-environmental schemes. Therefore the help "Bull by the Horns" -project workers were able to give to civic associations' representatives was termed invaluable.

Indeed, "Bull by the Horns" offered a possibility to raise the level of quality of advisory work, whether it considered landscape management actions or available funding sources, or both. In many cases, the communication between the project workers and participants did not end at the point when the management plan was finalized. On the contrary, help was given throughout the subsidy application process and also when the management actions on the site started.

In addition to single sites, management planning was also done on landscape level. This large-scale management planning covered several sites within a planning region, and the people living in and travelling through the region profited from results of coordinated management actions. Large-scale management plans were targeted to nine regions that still had beautiful sceneries and active farming, but were threatened by landscape overgrowing caused by agricultural land abandonment.

Finally, I wish to underline that the social context of landscape management is of crucial importance. Usually those landscape changes that are experienced as negative result from a detachment of people from their environment. If this broken link is not fixed, landscape management initiatives will not be successful. However, there are good opportunities for mutual understanding and cooperation. Because the landscape is shared, it is easy to start to build networks of locals around its management, and this process enables collaboration and social learning which generates new knowledge. "Bull by the Horns" encouraged this networking, but the project also gave the opportunity for managers and professionals to connect with each other. For example, project workers and volunteering farmers participated in a study trip to Sweden in summer 2011. During the visit, participants learned from Swedish model of coordinating landscape management and compared the Swedish and Finnish agri-environment schemes with each other. These and other experiences gained from the project were later utilized in the preparation of Rural Development Programme for Mainland Finland 2014–2020. In this way, the legacy of "Bull by the Horns" lives both in the practices of landscape managers and the landscapes they manage today.