

The project

“THE KEMPENSE HEUVELRUG between Kleine Nete and Aa: where a biography of the landscape brings together the past, future and people”

The text below provides a detailed description of the landscape project, supplemented with insights from the national jury that nominated this project as the Belgian candidate for participation in the European Landscape Award 2025-2026.

I. Brief project description

The Kempense Heuvelrug project is a long-term, integrated area initiative in the Antwerp Kempen, set up and coordinated by Regionaal Landschap Kleine en Grote Nete in collaboration with local authorities, Flemish and provincial governments, nature and heritage organisations, scientific institutions and citizens.

The project area covers the Kempen Ridge and the surrounding valleys of the Kleine Nete and the Aa. It is a distinctly rugged sandy landscape with parabolic dunes, heathland, forests, fens and valley areas. The area contains an exceptionally rich soil and heritage archive, including Celtic fields, burial mounds, historic hedgerows, old farmland complexes and military heritage.

II. The landscape context

This introduction situates the project in its landscape context and identifies the landscape values that determine the character and quality of the project area.

2.1 The layered landscape of the Kempen Ridge

The Kempen Ridge and valleys characterise the landscape of the Antwerp Kempen in Belgium. It is a beautiful walking area with European protected nature and a wealth of heritage, with the ridge itself as its most remarkable relic. From the surrounding valleys, this striking relief can be seen as a Sleeping Giant in the landscape.

The Kempense Heuvelrug is a 15 km long inland dune that stretches between the valleys of the Kleine Nete and the Aa across the municipalities of Kasterlee, Herentals, Lille, Retie, Vorselaar and Grobbendonk. It reveals a landscape that has been shaped by millions of years of geological processes and centuries of human use.

The relief was created when tides, meltwater and wind deposited and moved sand during the ice ages. This created dunes and sand structures that rise up to twenty metres above the valleys. In later periods, wind and vegetation further shaped these sand masses into drifting dunes and parabolic dunes. Today, these forms can be seen as characteristic landscape features in places such as the Kabouterberg in Kasterlee and the Toeristentorenheuvel near Herentals.

Over thousands of years, human use and agricultural activities have further shaped the relief. For centuries, the ridge was an open heathland with diverse and stable land use. From an extensive heathland area, the ridge evolved from industrialisation into a closed wooded landscape with scattered remaining open heathlands and fens. The poor sandy and dune soils of the ridge meant that it remained largely untouched by intensive land use such as industrial development, construction and agricultural reclamation.

The elongated hill in the flat landscape of the Kempen has always been a great attraction for people, both in the past and today for holidaymakers.

2.2 The scenic values of the Kempen Ridge

The landscape is characterised by a rare combination of parabolic dunes, drifting sands, heathlands, forests, fens and valley areas, and has a high geological, natural and heritage value. The area is home to an exceptionally rich soil and heritage archive and geological values, including Celtic fields from the Iron Age, burial mounds from the Bronze Age, historic hedgerows near medieval farm complexes, as well as military heritage from the twentieth century.

a) Geological and geomorphological value

The Kempense Heuvelrug is one of the most striking geological structures in the Antwerp Kempen. The ridge was formed by sand deposits during the Tertiary and Quaternary periods, followed by intensive wind action during cold and dry periods of the last ice ages. This led to the development of drifting sands and parabolic dunes, elongated sandy ridges and micro-relief with pronounced differences in height in an otherwise flat and sandy landscape that characterises the Kempen. These geomorphological structures are exceptionally well preserved and still determine the water management, soil composition, vegetation development and the way in which humans use the land.

The sandy soils of the ridge are poor in nutrients and highly permeable. However, there is also variation here, with richer soils here and there, which prehistoric farmers found their way to and left behind Celtic field complexes on the ridge. Medieval farmers were also able to utilise the slightly richer tertiary soils here and there, where we find oak edges and sod soils on the Kempen Ridge. However, the vast majority consists of poor, water-permeable soils, which historically led to predominantly extensive land use, extensive heathlands and limited agricultural opportunities. Wet zones, fens and stream valleys developed on the edges of the ridge. These contrasts between dry and wet form the basis of the varied landscape and recognisable geomorphology. Two valleys, the Kleine Nete and Aa, embrace the Kempense Heuvelrug and make it visible in the landscape.

b) Ecological value

The soil, relief and, later, human intervention have resulted in the development of a rich palette of habitats on the Kempen Ridge and in the valleys: dry and wet heathland, drifting sands, poor grasslands, small fields with hedgerows, pine and mixed forests, fens and wet depressions.

The ecological value of the area lies not only in individual nature sites, but above all in the cohesion and gradients between these biotopes. The Kempen Ridge functions as an ecological framework in which species move between dry and wet zones, open and closed landscapes.

c) Heritage values

The Kempen Ridge has a long history of human use. The ridge has been attractive for habitation and use since prehistoric times, as evidenced by the cultural-historical and archaeological values that can be found there today, such as traces of Bronze Age burial mounds, Celtic fields from the Iron Age, (medieval) iron sandstone reclamation structures, sod soils, sunken roads, historic cart tracks, church roads, heathlands, sand pits and, later, forest plantations and military infrastructure.

These relics are often not isolated from each other, but form discernible patterns in the landscape. These traces can be found, for example, in old land division structures, plot boundaries and differences in elevation. These traces reveal how people adapted to the natural conditions of the ridge over the centuries.

d) Perceived value

The specific character of the Kempen Ridge is explicitly reflected in its experiential value: views from dune ridges, seclusion in woods and heathland, silence and tranquillity, and the opportunity to 'read' the landscape while walking.

This experiential value forms an important basis for education, recreation and landscape conservation, and strengthens the bond between residents, visitors and their environment.

2.3 Coherence and legibility of the landscape

The Kempense Heuvelrug is a unique geomorphological landscape, formed by sand deposits from the Tertiary and Quaternary periods, later reshaped by wind into dunes that are now among the most striking geomorphological structures in the Kempen region. These natural processes form the basis on which thousands of years of human use have left their mark. Evidence of this can be seen in an exceptional concentration of geological, archaeological and cultural-historical relics such as sunken roads, hedgerows and traces of earlier land reclamation (sod soils, small agricultural plots, quarries, etc.).

At the same time, the ridge is now closely intertwined with habitation, recreation, forestry and infrastructure. Fragmentation and functional pressure are putting the legibility and coherence of this landscape under pressure. The project responds to this tension and focuses on the

III. An integrated approach to the landscape

The project is based on an integrated approach to the landscape in accordance with the principles of the European Landscape Convention.

3.1 Starting points

a) The landscape as a layered and dynamic system

The Kempen Ridge is characterised as a distinctly layered landscape, whose geological, ecological, cultural-historical and experiential values are inextricably linked. The area derives its significance not from a single dominant element, but from the coherence between soil, relief, water management, vegetation and human use throughout time. It is a dynamic landscape that is constantly changing and in which old structures are often still visible on the ground.

The sustainable preservation and further development of these values is only possible if the landscape and its unique dynamics are understood as a whole, managed with respect for its history, and developed with a view to the future, paying attention to the landscape's cohesion and identity.

b) The landscape as a carrier of meaning

The landscape of the Kempense Heuvelrug has a strong internal cohesion and a recognisable identity.

This identity arises from:

- the contrast between the ridge and the surrounding valleys,
- the alternation of open and closed landscapes,
- the interplay of relief, sand and vegetation,
- its history and the visible traces of historical use.

Over time, afforestation, fragmentation and more intensive land use had diminished the cohesion and legibility of this landscape. The project around the Kempense Heuvelrug is based on the ambition and a detailed landscape vision to restore this cohesion and make the landscape meaningful, recognisable and future-proof again.

c) The landscape as a framework for development

The project succeeds in its ambition to allow the landscape to function not as a backdrop, but as a supporting and structuring framework. The landscape forms the common denominator that connects nature development, heritage conservation, tourism and recreation, and intermunicipal policy.

3.2 Objective

The central objective of the project is to sustainably strengthen the Kempen landscape through integrated, area-specific cooperation, based on a landscape biography and a landscape vision built on it, widely supported by the population, managers and policymakers.

This approach interprets the landscape as a layered whole of geology, ecology and human use through time and translates that knowledge into a future-oriented and accessible development strategy. This makes the landscape more readable, more accessible and more meaningful.

The project connects the past, present and future and uses the landscape as a common vehicle for nature, heritage, recreation, tourism, spatial quality and social involvement. The landscape is regarded as an active structuring element for policy, management and experience (education and tourism).

IV. A systemic process approach: from landscape biography to vision and implementation

The Kempense Heuvelrug project is distinguished by its process-based approach. This process approach was launched more than 10 years ago and continues to bear fruit.

The Kleine en Grote Nete Regional Landscape Association acts as process director with an eye for the bigger picture. This allows complex issues in the area to be addressed in a region-specific manner, resulting in solutions that strengthen the landscape identity of the area.

The process-based approach is rooted in a thorough landscape analysis that is translated into a vision, which in turn is implemented in phases and on a project basis with the municipalities and managers involved:

- Creating an area-wide landscape biography as a scientific and narrative basis
- Translating area knowledge into a strategic landscape vision aims at long-term policy anchoring, as a strong plea for more landscape in local spatial policy.

- The step-by-step and project-based realisation of the landscape vision in the field, as a catalyst for more investment in the area and landscape and heritage conservation, as well as sustainable and meaningful tourism and educational activities.

The process approach also resulted in sustainable partnerships, inter-municipal cooperation and committed volunteers who are actively involved in caring for the landscape. The structural nature of the Kempense Heuvelrug's area-wide activities within the Regional Landscape provides stability and continuity in feeding local spatial policy on the one hand, and creates the necessary dynamism and a shared perspective for action for all partners involved on the other. The partners involved in the area therefore work together regularly, depending on the focus area or current theme.

4.1 The creation of an area-wide landscape biography as a scientific and narrative basis

a) *Inspiring pioneering work in Flanders*

The methodology for conducting a landscape biography originated in the Netherlands and was first applied in Flanders, the northern part of Belgium, to the Kempen Hills.

Two comprehensive landscape biographies have been developed for this area. In 2015, the first biography and landscape vision for the sub-area between Lichtaart and Kasterlee (500 ha) was published. This was followed in 2021 by an area-wide landscape biography for the entire Kempen Hills and the surrounding valleys (4,500 ha). Both biographies are digitally accessible to a wide audience and have also been published in book form. More than 1,500 copies of these publications have been distributed, indicating broad public and professional interest.

- [Link to](#) The Kempen Ridge between Lichtaart and Kasterlee
- [Link to](#) The Kempen Hills and valley areas, Herentals and surroundings

Since then, landscape biography has become a widely used methodology and valued tool in Flanders, particularly in the context of the recognition of Flemish Parks. The methodology has thus been scaled up, and this methodology and biographies are used as a basis for drawing up master plans and visions within the area processes.

A selection of the landscape biographies available in Flanders that have been published following the pioneering work:

- [Link to](#) Scheldt Valley National Park
- [Link to](#) Flemish Ardennes Landscape Park
- [Link to](#) Zwinstreek Landscape Park
- [Link to](#) Maas Valley Landscape Park
- [Link to](#) landscape biography of the Grote Nete

b) An investment for the future based on an integrated and broader understanding of landscape

A landscape biography describes the history and current state of a landscape using a scientifically based and multidisciplinary approach. It starts with a thorough landscape analysis, focusing on geomorphology, geology, soil formation, ecology, archaeology and historical land use, and reconstructs the gradual development of the landscape over time. The landscape is approached as a layered and coherent whole, in which natural processes and human interventions have influenced each other over the centuries.

This analysis provides in-depth insight into landscape elements, structures, patterns and processes, and forms a solid basis for local environmental and landscape policy. A landscape biography compiles and synthesises knowledge, but does more than that: it provides all the building blocks for vision development and translates historical and spatial insights into future-oriented perspectives. In that sense, compiling a landscape biography is an investment in the future. Although it requires time, resources and expertise, it pays off through its long-term usefulness and its inspiring and guiding power.

The narrative, visual and communicative approach makes landscape biographies accessible to a wide audience. They introduce readers to the 'story of the place' and reveal connections in time and space that are not always easily perceptible or escape attention. By presenting the landscape as a readable and experiential whole, the integrated and holistic approach becomes self-evident. The landscape is not the sum of separate elements, but a meaningful whole with its own identity.

In addition, landscape biographies make landscape values explicit and open to discussion. For example, they identify cultural-historical values, such as sunken roads, chapels, former heathlands and historical land division patterns, and place them in their broader landscape context. This creates a common language that promotes dialogue between residents, recreational users, land managers, farmers, heritage and nature organisations, policymakers and other stakeholders.

Crucially, a landscape biography is not a final report, quite the contrary. It encourages action and acts as a catalyst for more landscape conservation, future policy, management and design of the area. In the case of the Kempense Heuvelrug, the landscape biography has been the central theme of the area's activities since 2015. It provides a sustainable and stable framework that guarantees continuity and knowledge building in the long term. This enables steady, well-considered and high-quality development, tailored to the capacity and identity of the landscape and its residents.

4.2 The translation into a strategic landscape vision ensures a solid policy anchoring

The project has a clear and strategic growth path from experimentation, which began in 2014, to stronger policy anchoring of landscape and upscaling to area and (knowledge) network.

In the landscape biography and vision Slapende Reus (Sleeping Giant), a defined area of approximately 500 hectares served as a testing ground. This first landscape biography was used not only to inform a landscape vision and qualitative tourism development plan, but also as a methodological tool to inform local immovable heritage and landscape policy and to deepen existing forest and nature management planning and tourism development. In doing so, the Kleine en Grote Nete Regional Landscape, together with the Immovable Heritage Agency, wanted to build a bridge between Flemish knowledge development and local policy development.

In a second phase, this methodology was scaled up to an intermunicipal area, in which the landscape biographical approach was structurally embedded in various project activities and focus areas. This upscaling was achieved through further commitment and the attraction of Flemish and provincial project subsidies, and resulted in concrete implementation projects in the areas of management, design, public engagement and education.

In a third phase, the landscape vision that has been developed will be further enhanced and positioned within an international policy framework, through the prospect of establishing a geopark or deepening these values for the area. This step is explicitly inspired by the work of UNESCO Global Geoparks and their policy frameworks. In this context, the submission of a SoilScape project is currently being explored and active efforts are being made to seek cooperation and knowledge exchange with Geopark De Hondsrug and Geopark Scheldedelta with a view to further policy anchoring, international coordination and substantive upscaling and deepening of the project.

4.3 Realising the landscape vision through numerous collaborative initiatives

The area-based approach resulted in a wide range of concrete interventions and projects. The interconnection between the various actions creates a reinforcing effect, raising the quality, legibility and experience of the landscape to a higher level than would be possible with separate interventions.

a) Landscape and nature restoration

More than 10 hectares of nature conservation and landscape restoration were achieved, including:

- restoration of heathland and dune landscapes,
- management of fens,
- making visible, protecting and managing archaeological sites such as burial mounds and Celtic fields,
- restoration of historic fields and hedgerows
- management of wooded heritage

b) Forest management and soil care

The scientific knowledge gained from the biography is directly translated into appropriate management in the field.

- Adapted forest management on vulnerable parabolic dunes and archaeological sites
- customised forest exploitation with attention to archaeological and soil heritage;
- refinement of existing forest management plans by explicitly taking into account soil heritage, archaeological structures, relief forms and landscape perception.

c) Tourism, experience and education: The Sleeping Giant

The sustainable approach to (geo)tourism development and opening up the area acts as a lever for landscape conservation and awareness raising. The implementation of the tourism development plan 'The Sleeping Giant' is a key project.

Specifically, it includes:

- a wide range of walking routes with starting points and information points designed to blend in with the landscape
- walking routes, treasure hunts and adventure trails that explain geology, heritage and nature
- a child-friendly offering with play infrastructure and educational elements
- socially inclusive facilities such as wheelchair-accessible paths and sand play areas, and autism-friendly routes and accommodation.
- the integration of landscape art (such as 'A Giant Sculpture' by Gijs Van Vaerenbergh) that reinforces the identity of the ridge

d) Awareness raising and participation

Awareness raising and participation are a core part of the project:

- More than 70 local landscape guides have been trained;
- Two landscape biographies have been published, with 1,500 physical copies distributed and also available online;
- The general public has been reached through educational and promotional films, lectures and articles;
- Various public activities and landscape festivals have been organised;
- Schools, care institutions and local associations are actively involved

e) Accessibility and mobility

Efforts are being made to ensure maximum accessibility to the area:

- softening and redesign of roads (e.g. Goorseweg, Kasterlee)

- mobility interventions to promote of soft recreation and accessibility (wheelchair accessibility, safe play areas for children with disabilities or autism);
- improvement of traffic safety

f) establishment of the 'Bodemverbond' expert group

- launch of a support team of scientists and experts: the Soil Alliance, which provides substantive support to the area's activities as a sounding board. The group consists of the following experts: historical geographer, professor of geology, professor of soil science, professor of landscape archaeology, local area expert, landscape architect, archaeologist and project coordinator. Work is currently underway on a geo-cycle route with geosites and a handbook entitled 'Discover the Kempen from the Underground'.

4.4 Sustainable partnerships give the area's activities a lasting shape.

The Kleine en Grote Nete Regional Landscape Association plays a coordinating role in the area around the Kempense Heuvelrug. This initiative has been set up as a long-term, structural collaboration between local authorities, the province of Antwerp, various Flemish government departments, nature and heritage organisations, tourism partners, scientific institutions and area experts, local actors, guides and citizens.

The collaboration leads to substantive cross-fertilisation between authorities and sectors, coordination of policy and implementation, joint financing and project development, and results in a strong connection with the public. These broad and sustainable partnerships contribute to a solid social anchoring and strengthen the preservation and development of the area's unique landscape qualities and regional identity.

Cooperation between the partners is generally variable and project-related. On the other hand, the permanent nature of the intermunicipal partnership ensures continuity in policy and implementation, of which the long-term strategic project around the Grote Nete is a good example.

Based on its role and with the help of the landscape biography and vision as the foundation of the area's activities, the Regional Landscape manages to keep the landscape on the agenda within the overall spatial processes in the area.

V. Assessment of the project against the provisions of the European Landscape Convention

The Kempense Heuvelrug project clearly puts the principles of the Council of Europe Landscape Convention into practice, both in the process and in the results.

The approach, objective and implementation of the project give concrete expression to:

- the definition of landscape and the conceptual, integrated approach to it (Articles 1-2)
- the multiple objectives of the convention (Article 3)
- the general and specific measures (Articles 5-6)
- the structure of the European Landscape Award (Article 11)

Through an integrated, participatory and long-term approach grounded in landscape biography, it successfully connects nature, culture, heritage, governance and community well-being. The project not only enhances landscape quality and social cohesion locally, but also offers a transferable methodology that serves as an exemplary model at regional, national and European level.

a) The landscape definition and the integrated approach to landscape

Relevant provisions

- Article 1 a)
- Article 2

Accountability

The Kempen Ridge is explicitly approached as a landscape "as perceived by people, whose character is determined by natural and/or human factors and the interaction between them". Covering approximately 5,000 hectares, the project area encompasses the living environment of the local community and is therefore fully in line with the holistic definition and broad scope of the Convention.

The project fully implements the integrated landscape approach advocated by the European Landscape Convention:

- The project explicitly approaches the landscape as a living and dynamic system: the life cycle of the landscape is described narratively in a biography of the landscape.
- The project views the landscape as the everyday living environment of human beings: the landscape is not divided into sites or places of special value or exceptional quality, but is viewed as covering the entire project area and situated more broadly in its context;
- The project demonstrates a cross-cutting approach in that it explicitly links various sectoral interests around heritage conservation, nature restoration, forest management, sustainable tourism, spatial planning, mobility, care and education, based on a shared vision of the landscape.
- The project establishes links between ecological, social, cultural and economic objectives.

b) Landscape as a vehicle for identity and quality of life

Relevant provision

- Article 5 a)

Justification

Fully in line with Article 5(a), the project explicitly recognises landscape as an essential part of the living environment and as a common cultural and natural heritage:

The project explicitly takes the landscape as its starting point, as a bearer of identity and a basis for tourism development, with the Kempen Ridge as a geologically, ecologically and culturally and historically coherent whole. Through landscape biographies, the landscape is interpreted as a layered whole of subsoil, nature and human use, in which the connection between geomorphology, habitation, land use and cultural history is made visible and communicated through specific storylines, such as the story of the ancient Belgians and prehistoric farmers.

This approach strengthens the identity value for residents and visitors, positions the landscape as a common heritage and anchors this vision in local and regional policy, which promotes the quality of life and well-being of the local community.

c) Designing and implementing a coherent landscape policy: protection, management and design

Relevant provision

- Article 5, b – Formulating and implementing landscape policy aimed at protection, management and design
- Article 3 – Objective: promoting the protection, management and development of landscapes

Accountability

In accordance with Articles 3 and 5(b), the project translates knowledge of the area and landscape into a coherent vision and concrete measures for protection, management and development. These measures are sustainably anchored and have demonstrable effects on the ground:

The landscape biographies, the landscape vision and the tourism development plan together form a coherent policy framework that provides direction for protection, management, spatial design and development. Numerous instruments are used and coordinated as much as possible to translate this into concrete projects. For example, the protection of an archaeological site goes hand in hand with appropriate forest management or heathland restoration or an intervention in the field of softening, and the development of educational and recreational facilities.

d) Strong public participation and active involvement of the local population

Relevant provision

- Article 5, c – Procedures for public participation, local and regional authorities and other stakeholders
- Article 6, C.1 – Identification and assessment of landscapes with the active participation of interested parties

Accountability

Participation, consultation and strong involvement of the local community are at the heart of the project. The project owes its success largely to the support this has generated.

The project is strongly committed to structural and multifaceted participation. The bottom-up approach has resulted in the formation of strong local area coalitions, community-based initiatives and co-creation with residents, local actors, schools and organisations. Residents, local authorities and partners are actively involved throughout the process of vision development and the implementation of the various projects. The landscape biography and vision serve as a shared frame of reference, while a network promotes dialogue between authorities, experts and residents, as well as visitors, which strengthens social cohesion and creates co-ownership of the landscape.

Thanks to the project, local communities have become stronger and the public has become more aware of landscape values in the context of sustainable development.

The project demonstrates that landscape approaches can foster public participation and an awareness of sustainable development issues. Its participative and unifying process has made it possible to mobilise the population around a great diversity of local actions. The bottom-up approach that was followed represents a remarkable example of raising public awareness of the need for a healthy landscape.

e) Integration into sectoral policy areas

Relevant provision

- Article 5, d – Integration of landscape into spatial planning, cultural, environmental, agricultural, social and economic policy

Justification

In accordance with Article 5, d, landscape is integrated into spatial planning, forest and nature management and development, heritage conservation, recreational access, sustainable tourism, education, healthcare, mobility and climate adaptation. The landscape of the Kempense Heuvelrug acts as a connecting framework between sectors and between policy levels (local–regional–Flemish) and brings about horizontal and vertical policy integration that prioritises the landscape's carrying capacity. Insight into the layered and integral nature of the landscape ensures that sectoral projects are also inspired, and that heritage and landscape conservation are not seen as a problem but as a solution or source of inspiration. A better understanding of the living environment, natural systems

and cultural-historical landscape, a better spatial policy is fostered that integrates soil, water systems and cultural history as guiding principles.

f) Awareness raising, education and knowledge sharing

Relevant provision

- Article 6, A – Raising awareness among society and public authorities about landscape values
- Article 6, B (a–c) – Training of experts, multidisciplinary training and education
- Article 8 – Exchange of knowledge and experience

Accountability

The project places a strong emphasis on awareness-raising and education through a broad and diverse communication approach involving a project website, publications, brochures, films, exhibitions, educational routes and all kinds of public activities. This makes the landscape accessible and understandable to a wide audience, including children and vulnerable target groups, which increases public support.

In addition, specific guide training courses, lectures and educational packages for schools are actively used to transfer knowledge. Specific training initiatives (study days, courses, etc.) explain the process approach and methodology to professionals, which has since resulted in concrete applications in other regions in Flanders.

g) Describing, assessing and formulating landscape quality objectives

Relevant provision

- Article 6, C (1a–b) – Identification, analysis, assessment and monitoring of landscapes
- Article 6, D – Formulation of quality objectives following public consultation

Accountability

The landscape biographies directly implement Article 6 c) through their participatory methodology for analysing, describing and assessing the landscape. The combination of scientific expertise with local knowledge and experience of the landscape is essential for identifying the characteristics, dynamics and values of a landscape and has since been replicated in Flanders. The creation of a landscape biography also reveals the opportunities and threats to the landscape's identity and makes policymakers and the population aware of desirable and undesirable landscape developments that need to be monitored further.

The resulting landscape vision clearly defines the landscape quality objectives in terms of preserving or restoring ecological systems or historical structures and landscape cohesion, legibility and experience. The objectives guide the management and design of the area and are of significant value in supporting policy.

h) Implementation

Relevant provision

- Article 6, E – Introduction of instruments for protection, management and design

Justification

The area's activities have been and continue to be reflected in numerous sustainable landscape projects in the field of management and design. Various instruments are used for this purpose. A brief overview is provided in section 4.3 of this text.

In total, more than 1.5 million euros has already been invested in landscape conservation. The results are visible and measurable in the field.

Many projects have been and continue to be co-financed with European PDPO and Leader subsidies or supported with funds from the Province of Antwerp, the Flemish government, such as Tourism Flanders funds, and European funds for nature development.

i) Exemplary role and long-term effectiveness

Relevant provision

- Article 11 – Council of Europe Landscape Award

Accountability

The Kempen Ridge has become a leading example of integrated landscape management in Flanders and also has transnational potential.

The project inspired the widespread application and upscaling of landscape biography in Flanders. Thanks to its methodological innovation, reproducibility and proven effectiveness, the project fully meets the criteria of Article 11 of the Council of Europe's Landscape Award. It shows how landscape can serve as a unifying policy framework, a driver for sustainable development and a lever for cooperation.

For a further explanation of the specific assessment criteria, please refer to the application form.

VI. Conclusion

The Kempense Heuvelrug project embodies the spirit and letter of the Council of Europe Landscape Convention. In particular, Articles 5 (a–d) and 6 (A–E) are exceptionally well fulfilled. The project fully implements Articles 5 and 6 in particular.

in a concrete, tangible and transferable manner. In this sense, it is an exemplary project that deserves to be replicated not only in Belgium but also internationally within the meaning of Article 11.

The project combines knowledge, participation, policy integration and concrete implementation into a coherent whole, and the systemic process approach can inspire other regions in Europe as an example of good practice.

The strength of the project lies in the combination of the following:

1) Long-term vision and sustainability

The project has established and anchored a structural area-based approach. It results in long-term effects that are not tied to a standard project term:

- The project has demonstrable sustainable effects on the landscape and society and contributes significantly to the continuity of local policy.
- The landscape biography, landscape vision and tourism development plan function as a stable policy framework and support decision-making at a strategic and operational level
- Management planning and monitoring focus on future-oriented action
- The project is a series of achievements with a cumulative effect

2) Restoration and revaluation of existing landscapes

The project focuses on general landscape conservation through the restoration of existing landscape elements and structures:

- Through all kinds of small-scale interventions (softening, management, design, etc.) and landscape restoration actions, a successful contribution is made to the quality and experience of the landscape.

3) Respect for historical stratification and identity

The project focuses on the 'legibility of the landscape', not only as a starting point but also as a goal.

- Reading and understanding the landscape from the perspective of its history forms the basis of both landscape biographies and the landscape vision.
- The numerous interventions make the landscape more readable
- The project strengthens the landscape identity through, among other things, careful handling of historical elements, structures and patterns and the integration of the land art project.
- Identity is actively translated into design, storytelling, education and art.

4) Connection between nature and culture

The project values the landscape as a cultural product and as an ecological system, which is directly in line with the European definition of landscape:

- The landscape biographies demonstrate the inextricable link between natural processes and human history, thereby promoting an integrated approach to ecological and cultural values.
- Where the opportunity arises, intangible heritage values (traditions, crafts, customs, knowledge) are also included.

5) Multidisciplinary collaboration

The project combines multiple areas of expertise to transcend sectoral challenges and respond to complex challenges such as biodiversity loss, climate change, landscape degradation, etc.

- The area-based approach is based on broad cooperation between authorities, associations and local organisations, knowledge institutions and citizens, and is therefore scientific, social, administrative and institutional in nature.
- A creative approach is taken to the cross-fertilisation that arises when designers, planners, ecologists, historians, farmers, care providers, policymakers, etc. work together on the opportunities and challenges in the landscape.
- The Regional Landscape keeps these partnerships alive and kicking through its process-directing and facilitating role.

c) Improving quality of life and well-being

The project leads to an improvement in quality of life and has a significant impact on the lives of residents and the experience of visitors:

- The landscape is made accessible in an accessible way and is accessible to everyone, including wheelchair users and people with disabilities
- Through walks and other activities, the landscape is made explicitly tangible and becomes a place where individuals and social groups actively meet, relax and recreate. This makes a concrete and substantial contribution to individual and social well-being.