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CONVENTION ON THE CONSERVATION OF EUROPEAN WILDLIFE
AND NATURAL HABITATS

Standing Committee

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REPORT

**ON THE SPOT EXPERT APPRAISAL OF THE
WURZACHER RIED NATURE RESERVE**

(GERMANY)

9-10 July 2018

*Document prepared
by Mr Robert Brunner (Austria)*

PREFACE

The on-the-spot appraisal was carried out in July 2018 for the first time since 2008. The site was awarded the European Diploma in 1989. The latest Diploma for the Wurzacher Ried Nature Reserve has been granted until 18 June 2019 (Resolution CM/ResDip(2009)⁴, adopted by the Committee of Ministers on 21 October 2009). The visit of the area took place on 9 and 10 July 2018. The area is also listed as NATURA 2000 site, including the Rohrsee (Rohr lake) a few kilometres off Bad Wurzach. The site is managed by the Naturschutzzentrum (Nature Conservation Centre) in Bad Wurzach.

AVAILABLE DOCUMENTS

Official documents concerning the European Diploma include the on-the-spot appraisal reports 1998¹, 2003² and 2009³, the renewal Resolution of 2009⁴ and the annual reports for the years 2015, 2016 and 2017. The representatives of the area visited provided further information material such as booklets, brochures and maps.

A management plan for the NATURA 2000 site including the nearby Rohrsee is in preparation and should be available within one year.

SITE DESCRIPTION

The Wurzacher Ried Nature Reserve is situated in the Federal State Baden-Württemberg approx. 55 km south of the town of Ulm. The total area covers 1812 ha. It is a pattern of large raised bogs or high moors and low-level moors, surrounded by heather and bog forests, and reed meadows. The reed lake (Riedsee) is a result of peat cutting. The NATURA 2000 site covers 1896 ha and is protected under the Habitats and the Birds Directives.

The genesis of the Wurzacher Ried began after the last (Würm) ice age some 20,000 years ago. After reed and floating leaf plants died off in a flat lake filled with melting water, peat or turf developed. Over more than ten thousand years one of the largest peat bogs in south-west Germany was formed. High moors occur when turf mosses grow higher and lose the contact with groundwater. In the end, they are only supplied by rain. Along the small brooks and creeks, influenced by lime-rich groundwater, low-level moors arose.

In some areas where peat was cut for many decades or peat bogs were drained, heather and bog forests occurred. Reed meadows surround the Wurzacher Ried, nowadays traditionally managed. But some meadows are still intensively used for grazing and haymaking resulting in nutrient input into the protected site.

History

Peat cutting started more than 200 years ago as a small business, partly replacing wood as fuel. But it took another 100 years, until the turf work (Torfwerk) was established in 1880, operating until the 1960ies. At the same time, drainage of the moor began on a larger scale. After World War II, a glass factory used the turf, but due to the high moisture content the heating value was not sufficient. From 1956 to 1995 the turf of the Ried was used exclusively for spas in Bad Wurzach and other locations. In 1995 turf cutting ended in the Wurzacher Ried.

Altogether, peat cutting was concentrated in the south-western part of the Haidgauer Ried. Approx. 280 ha high moor of nearly 800 ha in total are classified as damaged high moors. Some parts of the area were drained, but peat cutting never started.

¹ Report PE-S-DE (99)64

² Report PE-S-DE (2004) 9

³ Report T-PVS/DE (2009)5

⁴ Resolution CM/ResDip(2009)4



In 1987 the Wurzacher Ried was registered in the federal support scheme “Naturschutzvorhaben mit gesamtstaatlich repräsentativer Bedeutung” (Nature conservation scheme of nation-wide importance). Within 10 years, €15 million were allocated to the elaboration of a broad nature conservation programme and to buying of land. The project is aiming towards a sustainable protection of 1400 ha high and low-level moors. Former drainage systems are dismantled and in large areas the water level is rising. It is obvious that an ecosystem, grown over thousands of years, cannot be restored within the short period of a human life. The management has to learn how the measures take effect, and some corrections might be needed over the years.

Habitats and species

The Wurzacher Ried consists of large high moor areas surrounded by transition and low-level moors. Peat cutting areas, formed by human activities, contain ditches, moor pools and dry heathers. Two brooks are flowing through the Ried, which is surrounded by meadows.

Fifteen habitat types are defined, according to the Habitats Directive, of which 490 ha are high moors close to nature, and another 280 ha listed as damaged high moors. Quaking bogs, depending on high water level, and low-level moors, complete the spectrum of moor habitats. Bog forests cover about 380 ha. Due to the higher water level in the Ried, dying trees can be seen all over the former drained areas.



Open high moor and turf cutting areas (Photos: M. Borghammer)

Many species listed in appendix II of the Habitats Directive and in the Birds Directive can be found, in particular the big moss-maid (*Leucorrhinia pectoralis*), the bullhead (*Cottus gobio*) and the beaver (*Castor fiber*), which is a big help to raise the water level, or the comb newt (*Triturus cristatus*).

The Birds Directive lists inter alia the dwarf diver (*Tachybaptus ruficollis*), the black stork (*Ciconia nigra*), the honey buzzard (*Pernis apivorus*) and the black kite (*Milvus migrans*). But the corn crake (*Crex crex*), the common snipe (*Gallinago gallinago*), the pewit (*Vanellus vanellus*) or the stone chat (*Saxicola rubicola*) can also be seen in the Ried. Recently the acrobatic flights over the Ried have been an intolerable disturbance on the birdlife. Over the last years cranes (*Grus grus*) started breeding in the area, and in 2017 for the first time successfully in Baden-Württemberg since many decades.



*Slender cottonsedge (*Eriophorum gracile*) and common European Viper (*Vipera berus*)*
Photos: Samuel Hoffmeier

RESEARCH AND STUDIES

Along with the NATURA 2000 management plan preparation several surveys were carried out. The research work in connection with the management plan will be continued.

MANAGEMENT PLAN

In 1991 a conservation and development plan was elaborated, and updated in 2007. Due to the appearance of the beaver, management is adjusted regularly. Therefore, the current management is more or less carried out in line with the guidelines of 1991 and the experience of many years of management. A NATURA 2000 management plan is under preparation and will be published mid-2019 at the latest.

As NATURA 2000 management plans concentrate on species and habitats, additional management measures should be added to the management plan to meet the requirements of the European Diploma. The management plan should address and detail the issues and challenges facing the Diploma holding area, outline the long-term plans for the area, and contain concrete operational objectives increasing the European interest of the protected area.

BUDGET AND STAFF

The annual budget for the management of the Wurzacher Ried is about €550.000, covering the running costs (staff, visitors centre, etc.) but does not include financial support for projects, which vary from year to year and has to be negotiated separately. The financial support is provided by the Land Baden Württemberg (70%), the Landkreis Ravensburg (15%) and the town Bad Wurzach (15%), plus annual revenues (entrance fees, funds, donations, etc.). Landscape conservation measures on about 150 ha are fully compensated by the Land Baden Württemberg with approximately €90.000 per year.

The staff consists of two full time and six part time employees, as well as 16 voluntary guides. Three assistants are financed through public programmes, but only on annual contracts.

INFRASTRUCTURE

Tourist infrastructure

The visitor centre – combined with the Bad Wurzach tourist information – is located right in the centre of the town and easily accessible for tourist and inhabitants as well as school groups. In the same building the exhibition “Moor extreme” offers multi-media information on moors in general and the Wurzacher Ried in particular. Two hiking routes and cycling routes start right at the visitor centre and lead into the Ried or around it. At present, two viewpoints allow insight into the Ried. A nature trail equipped with panels provides more information about the ecosystem.

From the Torfmuseum with an exhibition on the history of turf cutting and the social life in earlier times, visitors can take the Torfbahn, a small-track railway, to the former turf work. Both Torfmuseum and Torfbahn are operated on a voluntary basis in cooperation with and support from the Nature Conservation Centre.



Information centre and exhibition and nature trail information panels (Photos: Brunner)

Maps and information leaflets are available at the visitor centre, some of them with the European Diploma logo. In the exhibition “Moor extreme” a copy of the award is presented. The website informs about the European Diploma. Displaying the logo on the homepage of the website would be an asset.

Offers for visitors

The Nature Conservation Centre has various offers for visitors. Programmes for children and school groups, guided tours, special exhibitions and lectures are organised and highly appreciated. With 22,000 participants in about 300 events and projects, the field guides are reaching their limits.

THREATS TO THE AREA

Green energy and related infrastructure

Although there are currently no plans to implement wind towers or photovoltaic plants in the area, such techniques could always cause a strain to the environment. The landscape around the Ried and Bad Wurzach is dominated by hills and moraines from the Riss ice age and form - together with the Ried - a harmonious landscape, which should not be disturbed by technical infrastructure.

Stunt flights

The host organisation informed about acrobatic and stunt flights over the Ried. Nosedives and loopings cause disturbances through noise and low-flying airplanes mainly for the birdlife in the area. Such threats are intolerable and incomprehensible in protected areas, and not understood by the people in Bad Wurzach. It is expected that the European Diploma is not only an award for protective measures, but also an instrument to preserve a landscape in its entity.

Trunk road B465

Even with increasing traffic, the B465 cannot be seen as a major problem. Speed limits reduced the risk of accidents. The bigger problem is the interruption of water flow between the two parts of the Ried along the road.

Intensive farming

Some meadows along the Albaser Ried are intensively used as grasslands. Due to the decline of the slopes towards the nature reserve, water contaminated with livestock effluents or chemical fertilizers can reach the so-called Randlagg, the wet zone at the border of the Ried, and pollute the water along and in the Ried.

COMMENTS ON THE 2009 RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations of 2009

1. *The Peat Museum in the edge outlying area of the reserve will constitute a new attraction. It should provide information about protection issues, and appropriate facilities - in particular a tall tower with a panoramic view – should be installed. Funding should preferably be sought on a partnership basis.*

The Peat Museum with the Peat Railway and Peat Educational Trail has evolved into an attraction and an important spot for educational activities. The Peat Museum is run on a voluntary basis by the local culture and heritage preservation society “Wurzen” with the support of the city of Bad Wurzach and the Wurzacher Ried Nature Conservation Centre.

The installation of a viewing tower at the Haidgau peat work is still under discussion, the city of Bad Wurzach has ordered a feasibility study. The Nature Conservation Centre is examining the funding of the project, including European Union funds and contributions from the City of Bad Wurzach.

2. *The scale of the projects carried out by a small permanent team is considerable. The special effort made to provide guided tours and cater for school classes deserves support. It is necessary find means of obtaining such support in consultation with the education authorities.*

The Nature Conservation Centre Wurzacher Ried organises nearly 300 events and projects every year, attended by approx. 22,000 visitors. Around 80 projects are aimed specifically at children, youngsters and school classes, and gather 1,500 participants.

Contact has been made with the responsible school administration for funding of additional staff for the Nature Conservation Centre team, and intensive talks aimed at improving the cooperation with the school administration authorities are being held. But so far no results concerning personnel reinforcement could be achieved.

3. *The B465 trunk road that cuts across the Ried is now less of a problem, thanks to the measures taken. In the medium or long term, the downgrading of the road should make it possible to eliminate motor vehicle traffic in favour of pedestrians and cyclists.*

Although some restrictions (speed limits) are effective, the B465 trunk road is still an important link in the area. A bypass would be costly and could not fully stop the traffic. For the Ried it could be more effective to improve the water flow between the two parts of the Ried separated by the trunk road.

4. *The areas cultivated with maize on the slopes surrounding the peat bog should be restricted, for example by buying up land. This would also have a beneficial impact on the quality of the water.*

So far, buying up land or restrictions in land use, e.g. cultivation of maize, has been depending on the will of the landowners, and has therefore not been fully in the hands of the authorities.

5. *The major effort made to buy up land in the outlying area should continue. The problem concerning the slopes of Albers, where five hectares that have been purchased, are still being intensively farmed, needs to be addressed.*

So far, negotiations with the landowner have not been successful, also due to the lack of barter areas.

6. *The proliferation of high-voltage power lines over the outlying area is blighting the landscape. Requests that they be buried must continue to be reiterated, even if the costs are high.*

The power line is running along the edge of the Ried and cannot be seen as a major problem.

CONCLUSIONS

The visit was accompanied by numerous representatives of various organisations, experts, managers and staff. All people working in any form either in or for the nature reserve are motivated and dedicated to the aims of protected areas.

The site itself offered an impressive insight into a large peat bog. The limited access due to natural barriers and legal restrictions ensures an undisturbed development of nature. Nevertheless, management is needed to maintain the natural areas and regenerate others. Drainage channels are closed down to raise the water level. The beaver, which re-occupied the area and started to build dams, is a natural help in this process. A belt of meadows around the bog is to be turned from intensively-used cultivated land into extensive, species-rich meadows.

European interest

Peat bogs of a size like the Wurzacher Ried are rare in central Europe and the conservation of this site is undisputed. The restricted access preserves the area undisturbed. Nevertheless, two hiking routes offer an insight into the area and the Torfmuseum (turf museum) and the information centre provide additional and more detailed information about these particular habitats. After decades of exploitation of turf in parts of the area, management measures were taken to restore the reserve. More than 2,500 species of flora and fauna testify of the importance of the nature reserve and new species are still found in the area. The European interest is further confirmed by the designation as NATURA 2000 site.

Renewal of the Diploma

It is recommended to renew the European Diploma for the Wurzacher Ried Nature Reserve for the period 2019 to 2029, taking into consideration the following condition and six recommendations:

Condition:

By 2021 revise the 2007 management plan or draft a new management framework meeting the provisions and objectives of the European Diploma for Protected Areas and complementary to the Natura 2000 management plan in preparation.

Recommendations

1. Investigate the potential and technical methods to connect the aquatic system of the Haidgauer high moor, separated by the trunk road B465, through water channels or other technical measures to enable more water flow towards the eastern part of the moor and to ensure water exchange especially in the Randlagg.
2. Develop a precautionary concept on how to deal with invasive species, to be prepared in case of their appearance, according to EU-decree 1134/2014.
3. Continue the efforts to install a view tower next to the Torfmuseum to provide an additional attraction in the area without disturbance of the ecosystem.
4. Stop - in cooperation with the aeronautical authority - any unnecessary acrobatic flights over the Ried with negative impacts on the site and especially the birdlife.

5. Resume negotiations with landowners to buy land in the outlying areas – mainly near the village of Albers – to limit and further stop the deposition of substances harmful to the sensitive environment. In case of inconclusive results, long-term agreements should be negotiated to reduce depositions.
6. Consider the overall impression of the entirety of the landscape around the basin of Bad Wurzach and avoid the construction of technical infrastructure on the hills and hilltops in the visual range of the Wurzacher Ried.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The visit was perfectly organised by the authorities involved. Special thanks go to all the numerous participants who shared their experience in various meetings and during the field trips. The open discussion was highly appreciated.