

First steps to landcare in Europe



Imprint

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Print:

dieUmweltDruckerei GmbH
 Sydney Garden 9, Expo Park
 30539 Hannover
climate-neutral printed on 100% recycled paper

Picture credits:

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Federal Ministry for the
 Environment, Nature Conservation,
 Building and Nuclear Safety



This publication was developed in a project that was funded by the German Federal Environment Ministry's Advisory Assistance Programme (AAP) for environmental protection in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia and other countries neighbouring the European Union. The project was supervised by the German Environment Agency. The responsibility for content and edition of this publication lies with the authors.

I. Landcare in the European context

Landcare Germany (DVL) is the umbrella organisation of the currently existing 160 Landcare Associations in Germany. In cooperation with representatives of nature conservation, farming and politics, Landcare Associations aim to preserve and enhance diverse cultural landscapes with a focus on environmentally-friendly regional development. This form of cooperative nature conservation is regarded as an effective approach for the implementation of key environmental and nature conservation goals – not only in Germany, but also across Europe. For this reason, the Pogány-havas Association, a regional development organisation working in the Harghita County in the Romanian Carpathian Mountains, contacted DVL and asked for assistance in establishing a Landcare Association in the Harghita County that could coordinate the various stakeholders at local level and improve cooperation between them with the aim to preserve one of Europe's most biodiverse landscapes.

During the course of a project from May 2015 to May 2017, DVL in cooperation with the Landcare Association Neumarkt in der Oberpfalz (i.d.OPf.) has assisted the Pogány-havas Association to implement cooperative nature conservation as a “best practice” example for the Harghita County and for other European regions. The project focused on counselling support, including exchange visits to Romania and Germany.

This publication is intended to provide a summary of the experiences made during the project. Important practical information and steps towards establishing a Landcare Association are going to be addressed in order to assist other committed partners in Europe to promote cooperative nature conservation in other regions.





II. Landcare Associations and their umbrella organisation in Germany

Landcare Associations are non-profit associations, in which nature conservationists, farmers and local politicians cooperate voluntarily. Each of these groups is represented on the association's board by the same number of people and has an equal say. Landcare Associations do not have the powers of an authority. They only act at the request of land owners and land users, who use their services on a voluntary basis.

The idea of establishing Landcare Associations arose in Bavaria in 1986. While the focus of Landcare Associations initially was on the preservation of endangered animal and plant species, their tasks now comprise also the preservation of landscapes and the promotion of value chains in rural areas. Because diverse agricultural landscapes can only be preserved in the long-term if there is a market for products that are produced there by sustainable means, Landcare Associations are engaged in regional marketing projects and in the provision of support to regional initiatives for local products. Currently, Landcare Associations work in twelve of Germany's sixteen federal states.

Since 1993, DVL as the umbrella organisation has supported Landcare Associations by providing training and performing lobbying work. It promotes the exchange of experiences and assists Landcare Associations through conferences and manuals.

Features of Landcare Associations:

- *Parity (conservationists, farmers and local politicians have an equal say)*
- *Voluntariness*
- *Regionality*





III. Example: The Landcare Association Neumarkt in der Oberpfalz



The Landcare Association Neumarkt i.d.OPf. was established in 1995 for the purposes of conventional landscape conservation and advisory services for farmers. Since then, it has developed and now also addresses the topics of ecological water management, compensatory and replacement measures, and specific species conservation measures. Its marketing of high-quality regional and nature conservation products such as lamb, free-range beef and apple juice under the regional brand "Juradistl" is one of Germany's most successful regional initiatives. The association also performs professional awareness-raising work and has an environmental education centre. DVL contracted the Landcare Association Neumarkt i.d.OPf. to contribute its expertise and more than 20 years of practical experience to the project.

As in Romania, nature and landscape conservationists in Bavaria had to overcome challenges resulting from far-reaching structural changes in the agricultural sector like the loss of small scale family-farms. During the foundation phase of the Landcare Association Neumarkt i.d.OPf., it was also necessary to convince decision-makers of the need for a new type of organisation. Today, the Landcare Association Neumarkt i.d.OPf. is an association that operates in different fields, e.g. landscape preservation, regional products' development and marketing, environmental education, and water renaturation. Its activities have contributed to a sustainable rural development in its region. However, although the Landcare Association Neumarkt i.d.OPf. is very successful, securing financial resources and developing new fields of work remain on its daily agenda – which is typical for Landcare Associations.

Achievements of the Landcare Association Neumarkt i.d.OPf.:

- *Preservation of the mosaic-type cultural landscape*
- *Preservation of biodiversity*
- *Assistance to local farmers in implementing directives and securing funding*
- *Marketing of nature conservation products*
- *Awareness for cultural landscapes, their products and diversity*
- *Development of sustainable tourism*





IV. Learning about framework conditions

The first step towards an analysis of options to establish a Landcare Association is to study the framework conditions. We, therefore, made five advisory visits to Romania in order to study the situation at national and regional level in depth. The greatest nature conservation challenge in the Harghita County is the preservation of the mosaic-type landscapes with high biodiversity, in particular the hay meadows of the Carpathian Mountains. They are threatened by discontinuation of the present land use and conversion to pasture land or forests.

Romania is organized as a central state with many decision-making competences at the national level. Visits to the capital of Bucharest, including meetings at the Ministry of Environment and at the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, enabled us to familiarise ourselves with administrative structures and to study how EU environmental policies and instruments, such as the EU Biodiversity Strategy, the EU Natura 2000 network, and the Water Framework Directive, are implemented. Developing and implementing national and regional implementation strategies and securing funding have been discovered to be a challenge.

During numerous personal meetings and visits to different organisations, valuable information has been gathered, for example about the general economic situation, purchasing power, as well as about challenges in the agriculture and forestry sector in the project region. Traditional agriculture in the Harghita County takes place in numerous small farms and tends to operate on a subsistence basis, which is why additional sources of income are needed to ensure its continuation. At the same time, its continuation is important to preserve valuable landscapes and to realise potential developments like sustainable tourism as an additional income source.

Analyzing framework conditions:

- *Which ministries are responsible for which subjects?*
- *What is the country's administrative structure like?*
- *How are EU requirements implemented?*
- *How high is the average income in the target region?*
- *How high is the purchasing power in the target region?*
- *What is a traditional agricultural business like?*
- *Which local markets are there for regional products?*





V. A Landcare Association as facilitator

Despite various policies and instruments, such as the Framework Convention on the Protection and Sustainable Development of the Carpathians (Carpathian Convention) and Natura 2000, the regulation of landscape-related processes at regional and local level in Romania seems to be a challenge. For instance, non-regulated construction is threatening old-growth forest pastures and endangered species that have their habitat there.

A Landcare Association with the mandate to coordinate goals and processes could be suitable to preserve natural assets of the Carpathian Mountains while also enabling regional economic development. Agricultural and nature conservation policies are highly influencing landscapes. This also applies to the mosaic-type landscape of the Carpathian region. Therefore, the provision of information and advice to farmers and the cooperation with politicians through a Landcare Association could facilitate exchange and cooperation.

A Landcare Association could serve as a facilitator for the region by initiating, assisting and coordinating processes, landscape preservation measures and marketing initiatives in order to preserve cultural landscapes and assist local development.

Reasons to establish a Landcare Association

- *Do you lack goals for landscape development?*
- *Do you lack a coordinator in the region?*
- *Is cooperation with regional or national politicians necessary?*
- *Do you need an initiator for taking action?*





VI. Possible fields of activity of a Landcare Association in the project region

A key element of the project's advisory process was to assess the current activities of the Pogányhas Association and to identify possible new fields of activity of a Landcare Association in the Harghita County. Because the highly biodiverse mountain hay meadows in the Romanian Carpathian Mountains are threatened by discontinuation of the present land use and conversion to pasture land or forests, the key activity for a Landcare Association in the project region would be the implementation and enhancement of traditional landscape preservation. In order to preserve and enhance traditional forms of land use, the marketing of high-quality regional products, which are produced locally without pesticides and mineral fertilizers based on traditional farming, would be very important. Products could be, for example, pasture milk, regional fruit products and high-quality meat products. Local products and the influence of their production on the landscape also provide an excellent reference point for the cooperation with local people and the potential of sustainable tourism, which this species-rich region in the Carpathian Mountains has. Raising awareness of nature conservation, landscape conservation and environmental protection through public relations work and environmental education could also be essential fields of activity.

Evolving administrative procedures and occasional changes in funding instruments can be challenging, in particular for small farmers lacking experience with application procedures. Hence, consulting services are important to ensure that small farmers also benefit from EU agricultural funding. Therefore, a Landcare Association could develop an advisory service for farmers in and outside Natura 2000 areas. An additional field of activity could be local assistance with the implementation of the Water Framework Directive.

Identifying fields of activity:

- *What are the major problems?*
- *How can a local association assist farmers?*
- *How can the local population be engaged?*
- *Which legal requirements are there for environment and nature conservation?*





VII. Establishing a network

The core principle of Landcare Associations is the concept of a “round table” with nature conservationists, farmers and local politicians having an equal say. It is therefore a great advantage if a Landcare Association can be developed based on existing structures and networks in the region in question. This was the case in Harghita County thanks to the existing Pogány-havas Association and its supporters, like farmers, politicians, and private persons. In other regions in European countries, organisations facilitating rural development or implementing Natura 2000 could play a similar role.

When analysing and extending existing structures and networks, the following questions need to be reflected: Is the basic principle of equal representation of nature conservationists, farmers and local politicians already in place or possible to be arranged? Is one of these groups dominant? Is one of these groups under-represented? Which stakeholders in the region have not yet been included in the network of partners? It is important to also think about partners for funding and future fields of activities.

An approach that over-emphasises nature conservation and species conservation in all matters will most likely not prove effective in practice. It is essential that also farmers, as land owners and/or users, are involved. Furthermore, without the support of local politicians, attainment of the goals will be far harder.

In the case of Harghita County, it was found that two further regional development organisations should be cooperated with more closely. Other possible partners, such as LEADER groups, local supermarkets and eco-sponsors, should also be included in the network.

Are all partners on board?

- *Nature conservationists?*
- *Farmers?*
- *Politicians and authorities?*
- *Tourism representatives?*
- *Regional enterprises?*





VIII. Financing Landcare Associations

In Germany, personnel, equipment, and activities of Landcare Associations are financed by a combination of public and private funding as well as membership fees.

The identification of financing sources is key to the establishment of a Landcare Association. Range and conditions of state funding programmes differ from country to country. A specific landscape conservation programme, such as the one in the German state of Bavaria, is lacking in Romania. In the project region, the current use of funding from private foundations and from other European countries is important and should be continued.

Nevertheless, new financing sources should be sought for, including Romanian state funding, of foundations and eco-sponsorships by regional companies. When calculating, which membership fees would be appropriate, factors like labour price, running costs, available state and private funding, as well as donations have to be considered.

Especially during the foundation phase in the Harghita County, EU LEADER funding and membership fees of local governments could assist the development process and the first measures to be taken. Funds for the implementation of Natura 2000 can be used, inter alia, for advisory services for farmers, which also provide assistance in applying for funds of EU agri-environmental programmes. Direct funding from the revenues of the sale of high-quality regional products is also conceivable. When calculating the costs of landscape preservation measures, it should be borne in mind that these reflect, inter alia, wage levels, which also differ from country to country.

Are there funding programmes for:

- *Contractual nature conservation programmes?*
- *Landscape preservation programmes?*
- *Water, peatland or climate protection?*
- *Establishment and management of regional products?*
- *Advisory services?*
- *Sustainable tourism?*
- *LEADER groups or activities?*





IX. Steps towards establishing a Landcare Association

Personal contact with all relevant local organisations and actors is essential when initiating the establishment of a Landcare Association. In the project case, we found that five visits to the project region over a period of two years and two visits by key Romanian stakeholders to the Landcare Association Neumarkt i.d.OPf. have been suitable for making real progress towards the goal of establishing a Landcare Association in the Romanian Carpathian Mountains.

Personal meetings and group discussions gave a more complete picture of the local situation over time and provided the opportunity to increase the knowledge and expertise of relevant actors with respect to a sustainable improvement of the environmental situation. Several larger meetings involving keynote speeches and subsequent debates as well as an international conference on the management of extensive grasslands in mountain regions have been important further steps towards the establishment of a Landcare Association in the project region. The identification of potential initial projects and the reflection of these project ideas with stakeholder groups, prior to being presented during the pre-constitutive meeting of the Landcare Association, have been an essential part of the process. The next step is the constitutive meeting for founding a Landcare Association in the project region.

Steps to establish a Landcare Association

- *Talk with all stakeholders in the region*
- *Find out about wishes / concerns of stakeholders*
- *Find supporters for the Landcare Association*
- *Define first actions of the association*
- *Invite all key stakeholders to an information event*
- *Find out and define the possible legal status for the Landcare Association*



” *Through the project, we not only gave impulse for the creation of a new Landcare Association, we also found new partners. We are looking forward to seeing the Landcare Association prospering in the Carpathians. Let’s work together for our diverse cultural landscapes in Europe!* “

Marie Kaerlein and Werner Thumann

