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EUROPEAN GARDEN AWARD 2022

1st Prize: Protection or development of a cultural landscape

Project: Urbancows, Pärnu, Estonia

In May 2019, we combined the judging of nominations for the European Garden Award with a workshop in Bad Homburg on the “importance of development, evaluation and creation of cultural landscapes”. Main topic was the role of cultural landscapes in society, their constant change, preservation, management and, last but not least, a creation of new cultural landscapes. Of course, we could not ignore the definitions of what cultural landscapes are. These are very different, depending on the point of view or rather, the context in which we talk about cultural landscapes. There is no clear and concise definition of this, but the one which is a very simple and short one is from UNESCO World Heritage Convention, that says: *“The term “cultural landscape” embraces a diversity of manifestations of the interaction between humankind and its natural environment. Cultural landscapes often reflect specific techniques of sustainable land-use, considering the characteristics and limits of the natural environment they are established in, and a specific spiritual relation to nature.”*

Natural processes are always present in cultural landscapes. If cultural landscapes are not maintained through their use, they get simply overgrown with vegetation.

This is exactly what happened to “coastal meadow and urban cattle complex” of Pärnu town. This protected coastal area overgrew with reed after traditional grazing of livestock stopped here in the 1970s–80s. It was necessary to reintroduce traditional cattle grazing which is a challenge in an urban environment. Using cattle for managing protected coastal meadows in such an urban environment is not impossible but needs large investments and commitment of several stakeholders.

The general aim of the LIFE+ URBANCOWS project was to improve the conservation status of the coastal meadow and coastal lagoon habitat complex in Pärnu Coastal Meadow Nature Reserve. It was achieved by clearing approximately 300 hectares from reed and bushes followed by the reintroduction of cattle grazing, traditional management in Pärnu coastal meadow and lagoon habitat complex.

Another goal was raising the awareness of both the local community as well as the visitors of Pärnu town about the nature values of the protected area and attract people to visit this area. During the project the infrastructure necessary for grazing (fences, shelters, etc.) and attractive for visitors (information boards, observation towers, nature trail) was established together with preparing the area for the continuous management in the future. The coastal meadow complex

of Pärnu regained its historical appearance, popularity among visitors and favorable conservation status during the project.

The hiking trail forms a coherent whole with nearby birdwatching towers. The circuit is 0.5km long. At the eastern end of the track is an 8m high observation tower overlooking the coastal meadows protected area. The project was implemented under the coordination of the Environmental Board and financed by the European Commission.

Ten nominated projects or landscapes in this category deserved careful consideration, because of their diversity. The jury had to compare and evaluate vast spaces where natural and cultural landscapes intertwine, outstanding agricultural landscapes and cultural landscapes that could also fall into the category of historical landscapes. This year's award-winning project or the landscape seemed simply fun to us from the beginning. One of the main reasons for this were main actors in this space: cows. When I first saw this nomination, I also thought it was another rather paradoxical case where somebody inhabits and uses cows to hold back natural successive processes in the natural landscape, which in past was not related to cattle at all. Of course, in this case cows were part of the everyday image of the landscape and were crucial to restore the former land use and preserve cultural landscape of coastal meadows through many years. Like in many similar cases worldwide, a specific wildlife is also present in the space and beside an interesting grassland area, the coastal meadow is a rare and endangered habitat. These areas are the only possible habitat for several endangered plants, animals and birds. That is an additional advantage of the project, because natural processes in the space can be explain to and observed by the visitors.

Sometimes restoring the former traditional land use can create new problems in the space, because the use of space and even the whole spatial context change. However, in the case of Urban cows we don't have to fear that. Although cattle breeding is not as important as it used to be, the use of cows to maintain the stage of the cultural landscape is now put into a new context. On one hand, this cultural landscape is placed in an urban environment, between the beach and the summer resort center and animals become a tourist attraction. On the other hand, the project is restrained enough to create an elegant architectural solution with small interventions (in addition to re-grazing in the space) - a wooden bridge over the pasture - from which a view of the characteristic landscape and the already mentioned stars - cows is possible.

Because of all that was said, the jury decided to award the project the first prize in the category "Protection or development of a cultural landscape".

Congratulations to all "urban cowboys": initiators, authors, executors and guardians of the project.