

„Operation Corncrake“



The Varde River valley
(Photo: John Frikke).

“Operation Corncrake” – An Agricultural and Environmental Project for the Varde River Valley and the Meadows around Ho Bay in Denmark

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Introduction

The Varde River runs into the Ho Bay (Ho Bugt) at the most northerly part of the international Wadden Sea Area. This is a unique area. It is the only major waterway to the Wadden Sea, which has not been altered through straightening or the construction of dikes or locks in the estuary.

Therefore, the surrounding widespread meadows constitute a very special type of nature. The meadows are flooded from time to time, and for the sections near the coast, the floods contain both saltwater and brackish water. This creates conditions for a very special flora and fauna.

Because of these very particular natural conditions, the Varde River valley and the meadows around Ho Bugt have attracted a great deal of attention, especially with regard to nature conservation. On account of the original occurrence of a wide range of distinctive bird species, it has been designated as an EU Bird Protection Area, EU Habitat Site and a Ramsar Area.

However, the wide area of meadowland has been used for a very intensive form of agriculture for more than two decades. In large areas of the meadows, grass with a notably high protein content is grown, and this is dried and used to produce grass pellets for animal fodder. This practice has unfortunate consequences for the water environment of the Varde River and the Wadden Sea and, also, significantly depletes the conditions for the original and very important flora and fauna in the estuary. Consequently, the populations of many of the bird species which used to be a distinctive feature of this unique valley and salt marsh landscape have now been significantly reduced or have completely disappeared from the area.

Initiatives for a Joint Project

As a result, in 1995, the first initiatives to discuss the connection between the continued agricultural exploitation and the restoration of the original natural conditions were started. These discussions led to agricultural organizations (mainly Varde Landboforening) joining forces with public autho-

rities to establish an agricultural and environmental project in the area. The project started with an investigation which described the past and present conditions of the river valley and the meadows and predicted its future development. This investigation covered a wide range of aspects and was carried out from the perspective of possibilities to introduce different, more environmentally and naturally friendly, methods of agricultural exploitation.

On the basis of this investigation, the following objectives were set for the agricultural and environmental project:

- to secure the area as a dynamic part of the Wadden Sea with its natural flora and fauna, including breeding and resting birds,
- to reduce the leaching of nutrients into the aquatic environment, and
- to ensure compensation of the owners or users of the land for any loss of income and to give them a high level of influence.

The area covered by the project consists of nearly 3,000 ha of particularly vulnerable agricultural land (ESAs) in the Varde River Valley and around Ho Bugt, of which approximately 2,500 ha are made-up of salt marshes and meadows included under the provisions of §3 of The Danish Nature Protection Act (see Figure 1).

The overriding intention of the project is that the agricultural use of the meadows should be intensified through subsidized schemes for environmentally friendly methods. This is to be achieved by raising the quality and levels of the groundwater, by stopping the use of fertilizers and pesticides, and by placing special conditions on hay harvesting and grazing.

Individual plot owners participate voluntarily in the project, which is conducted on the basis of twenty-year operating agreements. A special fund of nearly DKK 4 millions annually for the duration of the project has been set aside to finance such agreements.

To create the possibility of including larger, continuous areas in the project, a distribution of land within the project area has been undertaken. This has, to a considerable extent, succeeded in “grouping” the plot owners who are positively disposed towards the desired changes in the agricultural exploitation of the meadows.

Establishment of a Demonstration Area

The second round for applications took place in 1998, and plot owners were showing increasing interest in participating in the project. In order to create additional interest in the project, a demon-

Figure 1
Map of the project area
and the 13 sub-areas
which consist mainly of
low meadows (shaded).





Black-tailed godwit *Limosa limosa*
(Photo: John Frikke)

stration area was also established in 1998 in Kravnso Meadows (Fig.1, sub-area 13), in the central part of the project area. Here, agreements have been made for 60 hectares of land by which improvement of the groundwater quality and the extensification of agricultural methods have been undertaken since 1998. The idea is to allow the plot owners from other areas of the project to observe the agricultural and environmental consequences of the extensification project.

In the demonstration area, work has been started to monitor the groundwater level, the agricultural development and the changes in the flora and fauna of the area which will take place in the coming years. The information collected is to be used for planning future initiatives in the valley.

Start of "Operation Corncrake"

The application round in 1998 was surprising successful and, as a result, 405 ha of meadow land in three sub-areas (Fig.1 sub-areas no. 4, 11 and 13) are now included in the project as of 1999. This is a very good starting point for "Operation Corncrake" and The National Forest and Nature Agency and the steering committee for the project is working very hard to be ready with the installations which should make the changes of the water levels in the project areas possible from September 1999.

The agricultural and environmental project is run as a co-operative venture between the local agricultural organizations, the National Forest and Nature Agency, the Danish Directorate for Development and the County of Ribe. In order to secure that relevant information is available, this group regularly arranges information meetings and publishes newsletters about "Operation Corncrake".

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