

European Award for ELO-run LIFE+ 3WATER project!

For the first time ever, the European Commission has handed out awards to nature projects that have achieved outstanding results in certain categories. The LIFE+ 3watEr project, coordinated by the European Landowners' Organization (ELO) received the first prize in the category of 'cooperation'. The project aims to strengthen the pond area of Midden-Limburg in Belgium through a combination of economy, ecology, and education. The success of this project is largely due to the good cooperation between private landowners, nature organisations and the administration. According to the Flemish Minister for Environment, Nature and Culture, this is again proof that cooperative efforts can achieve great results for the environment.

The 3WATER project has been working for some years to improve the Pond Area of Midden Limburg, near Hasselt in Belgium. During the project, several dozen islands have been created where birds can breed safely, heathlands have been improved and many dikes and ponds have been actively restored and improved. This has all been done while paying attention to economic necessities and the creation of added value for visitors. The area is in the largest complex of ponds and waterways in Belgium.

The project received the European Commissions' Natura 2000 Award due to its innovative cooperation between private landowners, nature organisations and several government bodies. New European and Flemish environmental regulations are often seen as infringing on the rights of private owners, and this has often led to discord in the past. Because the 3watEr project has taken the wishes of private landowners into account from the start, a much larger area has become available for restoration, and – much more importantly – hugely increased the acceptance of the project in the area.

According to Thierry de l'Escaille, Secretary-General of the ELO "the participation of private landowners in this project shows that we are committed to providing a green and prosperous countryside, and that private actors can be just as effective as public bodies in protecting biodiversity". Among the attention paid to business owners was making good agreements that ensure that local fish farmers could continue their work while simultaneously improving habitats on their terrain.

The 'Natura 2000 awards' were handed out for the first time this year to attract more attention to the European Commission's work to protect Europe's nature. Natura 2000 is a network of nature sites that makes up almost 20% of Europe where biodiversity is accorded special protection. The works of the 3watEr project follow the philosophy of these European areas, where there is a special care for nature, but where people can also live and work.

Although the current project is nearing completion, the partners participating in 3watEr have all committed to maintaining their efforts for at least 20 years.