Expert input sheet

Conservation and management of continental Grassland in Belgium

Contributor
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Habitat(s):
6430 - Hydrophilous tall herb fringe communities of plains and of the montane to alpine levels

Biogeographical region:
Continental

Member state:
Belgium

Region(s) (if applicable):
Wallonia

Issues and pressures
This habitat is patchily distributed all along the water courses but is rarely in a good conservation status. The main issues are water pollution (eutrophication coming from urban and agricultural run-off), the still active expansion of urbanization which causes the destruction of natural river sides, and water abstraction (due to urbanization, agriculture, forestry). The expansion of invasive alien species (*Impatiens glandulifera*) is also a concern for this habitat.

The main pressures and threats mentioned in the 2013 reporting are the following.

Pressures
A02.01 - agricultural intensification
E01.01 - continuous urbanisation
H01.04 - diffuse pollution to surface waters via storm overflows or urban run-off
H01.08 - diffuse pollution to surface waters due to household sewage and waste waters
J02.07.01 - groundwater abstractions for agriculture
J02.05.02 - modifying structures of inland water courses
J02.12 - Dykes, embankments, artificial beaches, general

Threats
E01.01 - continuous urbanisation
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J02.07.01 - groundwater abstractions for agriculture

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Conservation requirements
The habitat should be better prospected in order to locate (and protect) the patches of habitats still in a good conservation status.

All possible measures aimed at reducing the water pollution (fertilizers, urban run-off) should be encouraged. Water abstractions should be more strictly framed in order to avoid drying-up of former wet grasslands and river fringes.

The problem of invasive alien species is harder to grip if not tackled at early stages because these plants (e.g. Impatiens glandulifera) are very hard to eradicate once they are well established.

Conservation management
The implementation of the Nitrate Directive has already ensured a better water quality especially in intensive agricultural regions. Also more and more water-treatment plants ensure a better water quality. Some habitat patches are integrated in a nature reserve or located inside the Natura 2000 network where the legislation imposes well-oriented constraints (no new drainage, no new conifer plantings along a stripe of at least 12 m wide along water-courses) for the habitat’s conservation (legal acts "Arrêté Mesures Générales" and "Arrêté Mesures Particulières" passed by the Walloon Regional Government in 2011). Even though they concern only marginally habitat 6430, different Life projects are worth being mentioned (LIFE "Prairies Bocagères" in the Famenne Region, LIFE "Herbages" in the Lorraine Region, LIFE “Ardenne liégeoise”, all aiming at conservation and restoration of different habitats including hydrophilous tall herb fringe communities. This was also the case for past LIFE “Croix Scaille”, LIFE “Plateau des Tailles (PLTTailles)”, “camp militaire (Natura2MIL)” and LIFE “Saint-Hubert”).

Species specific management:
Yes

Specific measures for both the Large and the Violet copper include the absence of (herbaceous) vegetation cuttings on large sections of watercourses and abandoned meadows, and the use of a grazing management rather than a mowing management (if a management is needed, which is not necessarily the case).

Violet copper (A 4038 - Lycaena helle)

Large copper (A 1060 - Lycaena dispar)

Barriers and bottlenecks
This habitat is hard to locate (high dispersion) along all Walloon watercourses and its mapping is thus very time-consuming.
Two main issues (water quality, invasive alien species) are difficult to handle on a local scale and depend mostly on larger-scale policies.

Even if the information about the danger of trading and transplanting invasive alien species (in gardens and ponds, from where they can escape into the wild and cause almost irreversible damage to the biodiversity of the river-linked habitats) is enhanced, the risk remains at a worrying level.

**Solutions and opportunities**
More water-treatment plants should be constructed in order to limit the pollution due to agricultural and urban run-offs.

The efficient application of the Nitrates Directive could deliver good results (limitation of run-offs coming from farming activities).

A better communication at the citizen level could raise the awareness for these apparently “abandoned” habitats that are nevertheless biologically very worthy.

**Cross cutting issues**
These habitats are in continuous danger of being further urbanized or included/used in the agricultural or the forest activities.

Water quality improvement is only possible through regional/national/transnational policies, even if water-treatment plants already act on more local scale. This is also the case with the modification (daming, straightening) of the watercourse structures that are (at least) partially linked to regional policies.

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**Lessons learned / best practice**
As mentioned above, the work done by NatagriWal agents (ex-Naturawal), whose function is to encounter farmers (inside and outside the sites) and to suggest incentives in order to carry on with their current practices (if they are relevant), already delivers many good results. This approach is the best way to raise awareness among farmers on the conservation of biodiversity while taking into account their financial situation and practical problems. A recent report produced by NatagriWal about their missions states that in 2014 115 farmers heavily impacted (in terms of surfaces) by the Natura 2000 constraints have been encountered and proposed solutions (agri-environmental compromises).

As said above some LIFE projects had or still have the protection of this habitat in their objectives.
Opportunities for joint action
More exchanges on information could be done with experts in other regions and countries. Also interesting results delivered in adjacent regions on the topic could be more actively searched.

References
Link to the wallon section of the 2013 Reporting:

Link to the official portal for Agro-Environment Schemes in Wallonia:

Link to NaturaWal: http://www.naturawal.be /

Link to « Arrêté Mesures générales » et « Arrêté Catalogue »:
http://environnement.wallonie.be/legis/consnat/cons045.htm


Life projects:
http://ec.europa.eu/environment/life/project/Projects/index.cfm?fuseaction=search.dspPage&n_proj_id=4297 (Bocages)

http://ec.europa.eu/environment/life/project/Projects/index.cfm?fuseaction=search.dspPage&n_proj_id=4319 (Herbages)


http://ec.europa.eu/environment/life/project/Projects/index.cfm?fuseaction=search.dspPage&n_proj_id=2920 (Croix Scaille)


http://ec.europa.eu/environment/life/project/Projects/index.cfm?fuseaction=search.dspPage&n_proj_id=2916 (camps militaires)
http://ec.europa.eu/environment/life/project/Projects/index.cfm?fuseaction=search.dspPage&n_proj_id=2469 (Saint-Hubert)
