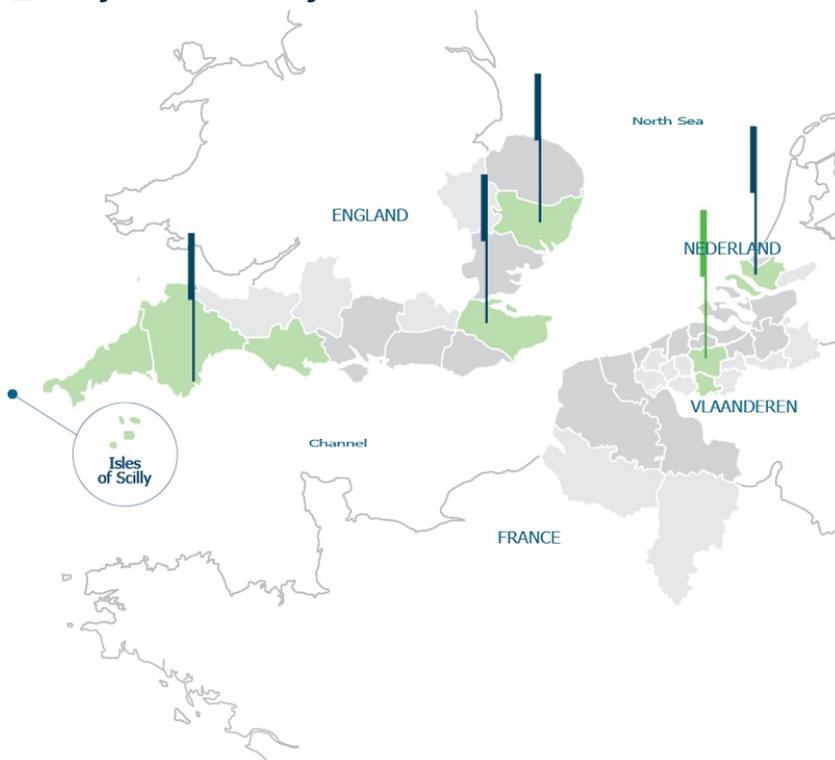


BALANCE

Balancing nature and recreation in peri-urban and rural areas



■ Project summary



The BALANCE project aims to develop and to evaluate new methods and practices enhancing the availability and quality of green areas in peri-urban areas in order to provide a safe and healthy living environment. It will involve the local communities during the different project phases. Respecting the balance between nature, development and recreation is of major importance to make the 2 Seas area attractive for inhabitants and visitors. Another goal of the BALANCE project is to increase political attention for green areas with a socio-economic study and by communicating throughout the project implementation. The project supports crossborder development

of sustainable tourism in ecologically vulnerable areas and creates a better living environment for the inhabitants as an important building block for the regions competitiveness and attractiveness.

■ Activities

What was the project trying to achieve?

The BALANCE project aims to develop and implement new methods and best practices to balance nature development and recreation possibilities in peri-urban areas in the maritime region, by using a bottom-up approach with local people. The related objectives are: a) jointly collect and share experiences and methods for developing, creating and managing natural spaces and habitats in urban areas, combined with recreational infrastructure; b) jointly collect and share experience and methods to deal with public participation and the bottom-up

approach in "balanced" projects; c) execute investments to improve the quality and accessibility of new green sites in rural and (peri)urban sites on different locations in the 2 Seas programme area, based on the expertise of the cross-borderness, d) jointly evaluate the socio-economic effects of these new sites in the different locations, e) spread the experiences collected in the project to other actors responsible for developing, implementing and managing new balanced sites f) to report to policymakers and make them aware of the multiple positive effects of similar projects. By implementing the experiences, results and best practices of other 2 Seas project such as Urban Habitats, STEP, Natura People and ATC, the project BALANCE creates an added value for the region.

What were the activities implemented?

BALANCE aims to ensure creation and maintenance of sustainable habitats in peri-urban and rural areas to expand and increase the resilience of sensitive priority wildlife in areas subjected to high recreational and urban related uses. The creation and maintenance of natural habitats is an essential component to delivering high-quality living environments in and around large human settlements. A number of studies were done. Besides the studies, work is also done on the field. The greenways in Schelde-Leie were adapted to give them a higher ecological value (LP). Tidal nature areas are created at two locations along the river Spui in Holland (PP2). In Kent 5 ha of chalk grassland and 5 ha of woodland were created (PP3). Heathlands, wetlands and coastal habitats in Southwest England were enhanced (PP5). The community has been involved in establishing a balance between the urban community recreational needs and nature. In Cyclopark, community involvement consolidated local 'ownership' in the establishment of the green corridor. Through the creation of the Cyclofriends Group, a local community group that is active within the peri urban area, understanding the need to balance the area for both recreation and nature was broadened and improved (PP6). Events were held with landowners to encourage the take-up of agri-environmental schemes to optimise habitat for Cornwall's chough population (uptake of grazing and protection of nests) (PP5). In Flanders, farmers and landowners were contacted to inform them on possible agri-environmental agreements to raise the ecological value of the lands adjacent to the greenways (LP). Through joint workshops with all partners, experiences are exchanged and implemented in the realisation of nature areas. The second activity in the BALANCE project revolves around the improvement of the accessibility of green areas of each project partner for the different identified target groups. By improved accessibility, we mean physical access, through physical construction or restoration of infrastructure, eg. paths, and mental access by involving, educating and engaging people and encouraging them to enjoy, respect and help protect sensitive wildlife and habitats. There are 3 different kinds of subactions in this activity: - Study of the network of paths in the different green areas, resulting in a plan for the physical paths which should be preserved and the new ones that should be arranged. - Physical construction of new paths or improvements to existing paths. - Enhance 'mental accessibility' by informing, involving and engaging visitors, eg. by developing an information centre and interpretation facilities, organising workshops or festivals and events, etc. The positive socio-economic effects of the activities and investments implemented in BALANCE, are researched and emphasized. In each region, interviews were done with a standard questionnaire. The overall data were studied and crossborder recommendations were written down in a report. In Suffolk a detailed socio-economic study of 3 long distance routes is available.

■ Results

What were the key results of the project?

For nature and accessibility, there were many results: - realisation of 5 ha of chalk grassland and 5 ha of woodland in Kent - realisation of nature areas along the river Spui - restoration and enhancement of heathlands, wetlands and coastal habitats in South-West England - restoration of 10 greenways in Schelde-Leie region - planting of trees - fencing and deer control at Arne - 5 kms of innovative multi-use routes, 3 bridges, 2 accessible ramps and 2 gates, 2 crossing points are constructed, BMX track and Mountain bike route created - new family trail installed at Radipole - PP4 inspired Suffolk Wildlife Trust & other organisations to use the BALANCE standard advisory signs for dog owners at nature reserves, a new trail for heathland nature on the Sailors' Path was developed, improved routes cross the AONB & specific sites e.g. Suffolk Coast National Nature Reserve. A number of studies were done: - study on the ecological opportunities for nature and landscape directly linked to the greenways - Tourism strategy for 3 long distance routes - detailed socio-economic study of 3 long distance routes - socio-economic report with crossborder recommendations for local and regional policymakers - study on the effects of recreational watersport activity on an internationally important wintering waterbird populations at Exe estuary - The management plan for the greenways and the study of the opportunities of a bridle path network along greenways in Schelde-Leie region are ready.

Did all partners and territories benefit from the results?

The main target group and beneficiaries of the cross-border BALANCE project are "users" of the project areas. These are the inhabitants of the cities in the neighbourhood of the BALANCE projects. They have greatly benefited from the project results/investments. In addition, visitors and tourists will benefit from the recreational possibilities in these regions. The beneficiaries of the project are closely involved in the project. The beneficiaries are school children, commuters, walkers, cyclists, horse riders, mountain bikers and other recreational users of green space, of different ages. They were consulted and gave input for the development of the different regions. A second target group of the BALANCE project are the professionals in nature and recreational infrastructure management. They were invited to the project conferences and expert workshops in the Netherlands, the UK and Flanders. A third target group are the local entrepreneurs. Some entrepreneurs sponsored some of the Balance results e.g. Suffolk's explorer guides and information boards. More recreation and more visitors and tourism provide opportunities to local entrepreneurs. The results of the socio-economic study are very useful to them to get insight in the profile of the visitors. The fourth group consists of policymakers at the local, provincial and regional level, responsible for ensuring the development of rural and (peri) urban areas. The results of the BALANCE project are communicated to these policymakers. All partners/ territories did benefit from all of these results.

What were the effects / outcomes for the territories involved?

Each partner's project resulted in easier access to nature sites, increased knowledge, a general feeling of wellbeing for the people living near the nature areas and the visitors. A direct increased breeding success occurred as a result of the habitat restoration. RSPB had a proven success of using waste from the reserves as biomass fuel. The project resulted in community ownership of species protection. More knowledge was gained by the partners about possibilities

to get economic revenues/benefits from nature sites. The effect for all Territories involved is that the public is more aware of the existing habitats, the effort it takes to maintain this, and the fact that the partners and Europe feel responsible and assist (financially) to provide healthy and enjoyable living surroundings.

■ Distinctiveness

What was the real added-value of doing this cross-border project?

Different partners have different approaches to the same tasks. These were sometimes small things, such as organising events mainly focused on kids (RSPB - workshops with kids), VLM would probably not have had the idea to organise nature/greenways workshops for kids. Another thing was involving volunteers. All partners used them, but clearly the English partners had a lot of experience on how to organise this, give them responsibility and use them for all kinds of tasks, going from taking questionnaires, to managing the landscape/infrastructure created. Also involving entrepreneurs more, and mentioning catering/sleeping/shopping possibilities on leaflets and information boards, was an inspiration for the Dutch and Flemish partners. The English partners were highly impressed by the extensive cycling networks in the Netherlands and Flanders. Although these last two learning points may not have led to direct results in the Balance project, but they are things that certainly will be kept in mind and incorporated in future projects.

Have any synergies been developed with other projects or networks?

4 of the Balance partners have developed cluster projects with other partners/projects. KCC is partner in the Proximity cluster, Suffolk County Council is associated partner in the proximity cluster. RSPB and VLM are partners in the Care-Lands cluster. The Proximity cluster will support and empower tourism providers, in the private and volunteer sectors, to develop innovative and sustainable products and services that can be marketed specifically to the near-by tourism markets. This capitalises on the resident population of the region encouraging repeat as well as new visitors. The aim of this cluster is to increase and enhance the near-by tourism market in the 2 Seas Region. The Care-Lands cluster will work on carbon reduction and the use of renewable energies in protected nature and landscape areas. The partnership will also identify businesses who want to be engaged in carbon reduction.

What are the key messages , key lessons learned you would like to share?

Different type of activities are developed to balance nature and recreation development and to develop a bottom up approach. Nature conservation and public recreation are compatible when managed and communicated carefully. But different audiences require different messages and methods of dialogue. Every partner learned a lot from his own activities and the exchange between the different partners about technical, communicative and organizational issues. Some specific lessons learned are: • With some small additions newly created nature reserves can become much more attractive for recreants. • The specifications demanded for infrastructure need to be of high quality and compatible to the landscape. This gives best value for money. • Keeping up with and taking advantage of technological advances ie smart phone and ipad apps, to engage with a younger audience. • Obtaining sponsorship from local business eg breweries to enhance budget to good effect around communications • Celebrate and launch



your achievements creatively and in style A general lesson was that it was not (most often) possible to follow the planning of the different activities. If you want to work bottom up you need a less detailed planning of activities and a strong supervision.

■ Project Information

Title	Balancing nature and recreation in peri-urban and rural areas
Total project budget	€ 6 696 319
ERDF	€ 3 348 159
Priority & objective	Priority 2 d. Promote, improve and manage nature, landscapes, natural heritage, and relations between urban, peri-urban and rural areas
Timeframe	2009-06-01 - 2014-04-30
Lead partner	VLM (Vlaamse Landmaatschappij)
Project Coordinator	Denys Toon(caroline.simoens@vlm.be)

