

„M323“

Nature Conservation Projects that Protect Rural Heritage

Imprint

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Introduction

Rural areas take up the largest parts of Austria. There, our farmers are doing valuable work, supplying us with food and raw materials. The rural area is also vital for leisure and recreation, which are indispensable to our health and wellbeing.

We need a common Agricultural Policy to guarantee a comprehensive agriculture in Austria and the European Union. Only by providing appropriate programmes and the necessary funds we are able to convey certainty for planning to the farmers and support competitive economies. Furthermore, high quality food products and living space are guaranteed for the consumers.

Maintaining and improving the economic and ecological functions of rural areas is important to me. It is one of the central objectives of the programme "Rural Development". The protection of nature, landscapes and biodiversity therefore is of fundamental importance. Funding measure 323 of the Rural Development programme specifically funds nature conservation projects. Possibilities under M323 include hedge planting, restoration of valuable natural habitats, the creation of ecological networks, the development of management plans for NATURA 2000 sites and awareness raising through consulting, events and guided nature tours.

More than 800 projects have taken place in Austria under this measure since 2007, making Austria the one country within the European Union generating the most activities in this area. These projects have been very successful because of the high level of support to project applicants provided by the provincial authorities that accompany and operate this funding programme, as well as the Ministry of Environment. We hope that this brochure will inspire you to start taking small steps for the protection and continuation of a lively rural area.

Niki Berlakovich
Minister for Agriculture

Amphibians



Securing
Amphibian
Migration
Routes

“One of Vienna’s largest amphibian populations lives near the busy road ‘Exelbergstraße’. The habitat offers ideal conditions for amphibians, including a highly protected species, the Italian Crested Newt. However, due to the road the population is at risk – during one migration period we counted about 9,000 individuals crossing it.

Through our project ‘Amphibian Protection Exelberg’ the city of Vienna is building a modern amphibian tunnel system that guarantees a safe road crossing for amphibians, all year round. Because the area next to the road is pretty steep, the tunnel system has to be built using an excavator. To avoid a total road block we are building it step by step. The amphibian tunnel consists of a guidance system made from zinc coated sheet steel. It works like a fence, preventing the animals from crossing the road and guiding them to the eight tunnel passages. The passages need to be slightly humid on the inside, otherwise the amphibians will not enter the tunnel.

So far, the tunnels have been accepted by the amphibians. We are carrying fewer and fewer individuals across the road, but are still finding them in the spawning grounds. The tunnel system ensures the survival of the amphibian population all year round and their offspring are also safe during migration.”

“The passages need to be slightly humid on the inside, otherwise the amphibians will not enter the tunnel.”

Eva Csarmann

Association Amphibienschutz
Wienerwald



FACTS

- » **Project Duration:** 2010–2013
- » **Supported measures:** Planning and construction of 8 amphibian tunnels and a 1 km long, double-sided guidance system, made from zinc coated sheet steel.
- » The busy road “Exelbergstraße” crosses the habitat of a large population of the Italian Crested Newt, listed in the Habitats Directive, and of nine other amphibian species populations.
- » The amphibian tunnel system protects approximately 9,000 individuals each year.
- » **Received funding:** € 99,000 (for the first of four construction stages)

WORTH KNOWING ABOUT M323 The M323 directive supports measures that contribute directly to species protection and habitat conservation. These include expenses relating to planning, personnel, excavation works and the installation of nesting aids. Major focus points are habitats and species in NATURA 2000 areas.



The European Roller



Preserving Natural
Habitats Through
Innovative Products

“In the meadows of the ‘South East Styrean Hills’ NATURA 2000 site the locally rare European Roller still finds appropriate breeding grounds and hunting areas. Because of structural changes in agriculture, little use had been seen for the nutrient poor hay harvested from those protected meadows. Thus, the preservation of the protected meadows was uncertain.

Our association ‘Verein Lebende Erde Vulkanland’, which campaigns for the protection of the European Roller, started a project on the thermal utilization of hay from protected areas. During the project we bought a pelletizing plant and adapted it so that it could be used to pelletize hay. We worked with local farmers and set up a network to transport and store the hay bales.

Together with the farmers we developed mixed pellets consisting of poor quality hay and corncobs. The mixed pellets burn much better than the pure hay pellets and even passed a fuel test. Pure hay pellets are being used as fibre food for pigs, which prefer them to their usual food. Through this process, farmers save up to € 100 per ton of food, produce high quality animal feed from their own region and at the same time support the protection of meadows in a NATURA 2000 site.”

“The pigs prefer our hay pellets to their usual food.”

Andreas Breuss
Association L.I.V.E.



FACTS

- » **Project Duration: 2008–2011**
- » **Supported measures: Purchasing and installation of a pelletizing plant, development and optimization of the pelletizing process, development of an organisational structure, logistics, research into the quantities of unusable hay, information for land owners, and preparing agreements for hay disposal.**
- » **Each year about 500 tons of hay are being converted into pellets using a pelletizing plant.**
- » **The nutrient poor growth of about 100 ha of protected hay meadows can be re-utilized.**
- » **The utilization of the hay enables a long term conservation of the meadows as hunting areas for the endangered European Roller.**
- » **Received funding: € 300,000**

WORTH KNOWING ABOUT M323 The M323 directive supports the development of innovative and economical ways to sustainably use protected areas.



Awareness Raising



Experiencing
Nature

“Computers and television rob us of our time. People often stay at home, losing touch with their natural environment. More and more children are growing up this way.

One important goal of our project ‘Nature Spectacle – Experiencing and Understanding Nature’ is to bring people outdoors again. We want to take them out into nature.

This year, we are offering more than 80 guided tours in 16 selected nature reserves, all over Upper Austria. Our programme includes a wide variety of outdoor trips, such as Segway-tours, treasure hunts, theatre in the forest and a large choice of guided hiking tours. We provide information on all our trips, dates and guides on our website. Our programme is also publicised by state museums, where everyone can get more information.

For my guided trip I have gained permission to enter protected mire where we look at wildlife species living in ponds with magnifying glasses, such as the Yellow bellied toad and Ramshorn snail. We feel out the quaking bog and I tell stories about the evolution of the mire and the rare pearl fish.

It is important to me that people get back in touch with their natural surroundings, because the better we know something, the more we are willing to protect it.”

**“With our project ‘Nature Spectacle’
we bring people outdoors.”**

Martina Huemer

Nature guide



FACTS

- » **Project Duration: 2010–2013**
- » **Supported measures: Planning and implementation of 80 different activities connected to environmental education, marketing, public relations and organisation of an international conference about environmental education.**
- » **During 2011, over 200 guided tours involving more than 4,000 participants were held in 16 protected areas all over Upper Austria.**
- » **The activities are led by 76 certified nature and landscape guides.**
- » **Received funding: € 610,928**

WORTH KNOWING ABOUT M323 The M323 directive supports measures that raise awareness for nature protection, such as events, guided tours, nature trails, the production of brochures and more.



Scops Owls



A Dedicated
Farmer Saves
Endangered
Habitats

“Scops Owls are threatened with extinction. More than a third of the total Austrian population lives close to our community of Köttmannsdorf. They still find suitable places to nest and large insects to eat in our traditional orchards.

Through the ‘Scops Owls Species Protection Project’ we have been able to install suitable nest boxes in our region over the period of many years. We construct the nest boxes, attach them in agreement with local landowners and check them regularly. Some of the nest boxes are equipped with infrared cameras, to scientifically monitor the owls’ behaviour. To prepare future habitat areas for the Scops Owls, we have also set up our own tree nursery where we cultivate ancient varieties of fruit trees and plant them in communities in our region.

During the project we also created the ‘Scops Owls Nature Trail’ that raises awareness for our traditional landscape as an important and sensitive habitat. Many of our visitors remember stories and information we have shared with them, even many months after their visits.

The great thing is that every year we have more owls. When we started installing the nest boxes in cooperation with Birdlife Carinthia, we ringed 12 young owls and this year we ringed almost 70. Even scientists have been surprised by this development.”

“People know the Scop Owl’s call again now.”

Ernst Modritsch
Farmer



FACTS

- » **Project Duration: 2007–2013**
- » **Supported measures: Installation and maintenance of nest boxes, scientific monitoring of the Scops Owls breeding habits, dietary analysis, planting of regionally characteristic fruit trees, redesign and implementation of the “Scop Owls Nature Trail”, development of a regional nature conservation plan, a telephone information service, education work and establishment of an information desk, and public relations.**
- » **Throughout the project, about 3,000 fruit trees have been planted on the holdings of 400 landowners to provide future nesting sites.**
- » **35 local farms are involved in cultivating the Scops Owls key habitat area of about 200 ha and pay particular attention to the needs of the birds.**
- » **Received funding: € 450,000**

WORTH KNOWING ABOUT M323 The M323 directive supports expenses for scientific research that is essential to the conservation and development of valuable natural resources and of the regionally characteristic cultural landscape.



The Red-Backed Shrike



Restoring an
Endangered
Habitat

“The Red-backed Shrike is characteristic for the ‘Moosberg’. The meadows and bushes of this area provide a perfect environment for this locally rare bird species. However, many of the meadows have not been mown for years, leading to encroachment of tree species, causing the number of breeding pairs to decrease. Without our involvement, this bird would certainly have disappeared from the region.

We started the project ‘Implementation of the Moosberg Management Plan’. As a first step, an ornithologist undertook a mapping of the breeding sites. Then we protected the most important areas by buying them and trying to link them together. Through the project we were able to either buy the areas off the landowners for the full market value or to offer them equivalent areas, in exchange for their land. As a next step, we cleared the young forest on the hill under the supervision of ecological experts. The cleared areas are now being used as pasture in order to avoid encroachment. The sheep do not endanger the nests, they just bypass them.

At the entrance to the protected area we placed information panels to increase the awareness of the importance of this protected area. Everyone now knows about the breeding period of the Red-backed Shrike. And the massive decline in the number of breeding pairs has been stopped.”

“The massive decline in the number of breeding pairs has been stopped.”

Bernd Rauscher

Department Bodenordnung,
Land Tirol



FACTS

- » **Project Duration: 2009–2011**
- » **Supported measures: Ornithological surveys, vegetation analysis, research on grasshoppers, purchase of areas, purchase of hay barns, clearing and transport of encroaching trees, ecological supervision, public relations and visitor information.**
- » **Protection of Red-backed Shrikes breeding habitats via the purchase and exchange of an 40 ha adherent area.**
- » **Before the start of the project, 75% of the 19 ha area of calcareous grasslands were in a poor conservation status. By the project the conservation status of the major part of the meadows could be improved.**
- » **Received funding: € 384,670**

WORTH KNOWING ABOUT M323 The M323 directive supports the development of management plans as well as the practical implementation of conservation measures for protected areas and species which are not overlapping with agri-environmental measures.

Dry Grass- lands



Rural
Conservation
with Voluntary
Support

“In former times, steep meadows and dry grasslands in the NATURA 2000 Area ‘Wachau – Jauerling’ were used for pasture but this traditional use of the land hardly exists anymore. To maintain the rich biodiversity of those grasslands, we now have to mow them regularly. Finding volunteers that are willing to do this hard work is difficult.

Through our project ‘Wachau Volunteer – Youth for NATURA 2000’ we get young people from all over the world to help us conserve Wachau’s rural protected areas. Our volunteers come from Mexico, Japan, South Korea, Sweden, England, Ireland and Austria. At the beginning of the project we were not sure whether there were any volunteers willing to do such hard work for free but we ended up with more volunteers than expected.

We run two work camps every year, each for two weeks. Before the young people arrive, we have to prepare everything. Together with the volunteers we mow the stony, steep meadows and clear scrub which is very exhausting. We show young people the animals and plants that are benefitting from their work, such as Feather Grass, Mountain Apollo or the European Mantis. Every year, our local accommodation services and gastronomy are looking forward to the arrival of our volunteers because of the added value to our region.”

“We show young people the animals and plants that are benefitting from their work.”

Ronald Würflinger
Arbeitskreis Wachau



FACTS

- » **Project Duration: 2010–2012**
- » **Measures Supported: Organisation of the project weeks, accommodation, food, transport, personnel costs, equipment, educational materials (brochures), entertainment programme.**
- » **From 2010 to 2012, 12 international project weeks and 15 individual project days, involving about 300 volunteers are taking place.**
- » **A substantial part of the project expenses goes to local accommodation services and gastronomy.**
- » **Received funding: € 187,763**

WORTH KNOWING ABOUT M323 The M323 directive supports educational measures and working activities that directly protect valuable habitats and improve the awareness for habitats and for necessary maintenance measures.

Floodplain Areas



A Community
Protects the
Remaining
Floodplain Areas

“The small sized ‘Wulka-Au-floodplain’ near to Antau is the last remaining floodplain in the district of Mattersburg. The valley around the river Wulka is densely developed and local communities have to cope with regular floods.

Through our project ‘Wulka – Antau Community Reserve’ we are protecting a valuable area of habitat that also provides a natural flood protection. There are mainly gravel bars because of the great power of the flowing water. However, mud banks provide a habitat for species like the Banded Demoiselle and Ornate Bluet. Therefore, the Wulka creek will be enlarged to increase the number of mud banks. We will also build a steep wall to create kingfisher breeding sites and will continue the construction of a fish ladder.

Old pollarded willows along the water almost collapse due to the lack of management. Nearby, wet meadows have not been cultivated for a long time either. Both are real hot spots for bats and woodpeckers. With this project we want to motivate farmers to restore those meadows and trees.

Furthermore, we will make the area accessible to residents by building a small path. Based on habitat maps we will manufacture information boards to introduce the floodplain and its inhabitants. This will enable us to communicate the importance of this area as a habitat, a green lung and a natural flood protection.”

“The project aims at creating a positive view of the floodplain areas.”

Kurt Graf

Association BERTA



FACTS

- » **Project Duration: 2011–2014**
- » **Supported measures: Project management, habitat maps for the preparation of a management plan and environmental education, implementation of modelling and cultivation activities on the creek and development of an information system.**
- » **Over the project, pollarded willows along the water will be professionally cultivated, preserving the habitats of a number of endangered species.**
- » **The wet meadows, which are lying fallow, will be regularly mown by a local farmer.**
- » **Received funding: € 25,000, machinery use will be implemented by the local community to a major part Funding Received: € 25,000**

WORTH KNOWING ABOUT M323 Project size is not relevant for this funding source. Thus, small projects can be funded as well as major projects, previously funded over the LIFE-programme.



Meadows and Pastures



Species Rich
Meadows in
the Spotlight

“Colourful flower meadows are very popular but only few people know that their rich variety results from traditional land use.

The ‘Vorarlberger Meadow Championship’ increases the understanding of the ecological and cultural value of well-managed meadows and those rich of species. The championship provides a way of communicating the work of farmers and their contribution to nature conservation and cultural landscapes.

Our expert team inspects every submitted meadow together with the farmers. We reason over whether the species assemblage is typical for the habitat and if the actual use comes up to the standards of the habitat.

The winners are honoured in a closing event, organised by the provincial government of Vorarlberg. They are invited to a specialist excursion and every participant receives a description of his meadow with photographs and a species list as a souvenir. Many of them are amazed that they have up to 60 different plant species in their meadows, even orchids and insectivorous plants. The Meadow Championship now also takes place in other Austrian federal states, Germany, Switzerland and South Tyrol.”

“Many of our participants are amazed that they have up to 60 different plant species in their meadows.”

Markus Grabher

Umweltbüro Grabher



FACTS

- » **Project Duration: since 2007**
- » **Supported measures: Public relations, inspection of the meadows and pastures by experts, field surveys, development of botanical descriptions, an award ceremony and a two day specialist excursion.**
- » **About 10% of the farms in Vorarlberg participated in the meadow championship. All participants receive management proposals for the improvement of the ecological state of their meadows.**
- » **Received funding: € 47,000 per year**

WORTH KNOWING ABOUT M323 The M323 directive supports innovative approaches in the educational field – e.g. competitions or expositions emphasizing the farmer’s pride on their landscape.

Forest



Systematic
Improvement of
the Forest
Environment

“We have been participating in several nature protection programmes on our agricultural land for many years. The protected areas border our forest. To promote species diversity there as well, I decided to prepare a management plan for my forest. Furthermore, it is a useful addition to our ‘School on the Farm Project’ where we communicate the importance of biodiversity in agriculture and forestry.

A biologist visited us for the individual farm advisory. Together, we inspected the forest and worked out several environmental measures. For example, I will protect the edges of my forest against wind and frost by reforesting with native species. Wild shrubs offer nesting sites for birds and other small animals and their fruit enrich the animals’ food supply. This, in return, increases the natural control of parasites like bark beetles. Furthermore, we marked rare tree species such as elms, black alders and wild cherries and prioritised them over economically cultivated trees. When thinning, I ensure the promotion of regionally characteristic hard woods. In our region they are more sustainable than spruce monocultures.

In my opinion, natural forest management plays an essential role in creating healthy and stable forests for the future.”

“Environmental measures are tailored to our forest.”

Martin Lichtmannsperger
Farmer



FACTS

- » **Project Duration: since 2009**
- » **Supported measures: Local information meetings, individual farm advisory visits, forest inspections, development of a management plan for the forest, and information and educational materials.**
- » **In Salzburg, about 320 farms participate in the programme “Environmental Forest Measures”.**
- » **A management plan for the forest was developed for 20 farms, including an analysis of possibilities to improve their environmental protection.**
- » **Received funding: € 150,000 (2009–2010)**

WORTH KNOWING ABOUT M323 The M323 directive provides funding for individual farm advisory visits to ensure a practice-oriented support and the implementation of the appropriate measures.

The M323 Funding Measure in Austria

The M323 funding measure is part of the Rural Development Programme. It is based on Article 57a of the EU Regulation 1698/05, titled "Conservation and upgrading of the rural heritage". The overall objective of this measure is the preservation and development of natural resources as well as the diversity and characteristics of our rural areas for future generations.

Austria designed funding measure 323 (M323) as the most important instrument for funding nature conservation projects. One of its focus areas is the implementation of the Birds and Habitats Directives. Projects located outside of NATURA 2000 areas are also supported to ensure the connectivity of natural habitats. Furthermore, a number of national and transnational projects are being implemented.

All projects are **co-financed with EU funds to a 50% rate of the total funding amount**. The remaining funding is financed by the federal and regional governments. For some projects national support is provided exclusively by the regional governments.

If a project attracts a high level of public interest, up to 100% of the total sum can be funded.

The following measures may be supported:

- » Management Plans and Nature Conservation Plans with farmers and foresters (at farm level)
- » NATURA 2000 Management Plans and Landscape Conservation Plans
- » Management of protected areas and conservation of protected areas
- » Basic works necessary to conserve and improve important habitats
- » Species and habitat conservation projects
- » Restoration of valuable natural habitats (rivers, creeks and wetlands, ...)
- » Investments in outdoor recreation and education (visitor guidance and education centres in protected areas)
- » Land purchase in the interests of nature conservation
- » Awareness raising events
- » Investments with the aim of raising awareness (nature trails, brochures, exhibitions)

There are no limitations to the eligibility of applicants: associations, as well as NGOs, farmers and foresters, individuals, companies and regional authorities can apply for project funding. This is of particular importance, as successful nature conservation work depends on a wide range of stakeholders.

The **official agencies** responsible for applications are the regional nature conservation authorities, which also offer project consultancy. Vienna is the exception with the agricultural chamber being the official agency for Vienna. A brochure called "Tips for applying for M323 projects" helps potential applicants to prepare their applications correctly. The brochure can be downloaded at: www.netzwerk-naturschutz-le.at

The approval/rejection of projects will take approximately two to four months, depending on the delivered documents.

For the funding period 2014–2020, the Rural Development Programme will change and thus also the funding procedures for measures now supported under M323. Guidelines and tips for the period after 2013 will be published by the regional nature conservation authorities. Further information: www.netzwerk-naturschutz-le.at; www.umweltdachverband.at

Contact points for information, the applications and the approval of M323 projects are:

Burgenland

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Styria

Amt der Steiermärkischen Landesregierung
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Carinthia

Amt der Kärntner Landesregierung
Abteilung 8 – Kompetenzzentrum Umwelt,
Wasser und Naturschutz
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Tyrol

Amt der Tiroler Landesregierung
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Upper Austria

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Vorarlberg

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