

REPORT ON SURVEY RESULTS "PUBLIC OPINION ON NATURE PROTECTION IN LATVIA"

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Sub-Action A.6.3: Opinion polls to estimate general public awareness on nature conservation issues covered by the Project

From time-to-time public shows an increased interest in certain nature preservation issues, where the interests of nature conservation and the national economy often collide. It happens as a result of public events that do not leave society indifferent such as deforestation, waste management in nature. In this survey taking place from July to December 2021 at the project beginning, the initial opinion of Latvian society on nature conservation in Latvia was determined in order to take into account the obtained results on the public's knowledge, attitude and actions in nature conservation, when implementing the goals and tasks of the LIFE integrated project LatViaNature.

The survey covered the entire Latvian society, the survey sample including gender distribution, age groups and spatial coverage of respondents throughout the territory of Latvia. The responses of 1064 respondents were valid for processing the survey results, of which 39.8% were men, 60.2% - women. In the division by age groups, 13.1% were young people from 16 to 25 years, from 26 to 35 years - 20.3%, from 36 to 45 years - 20.6%, from 46 to 55 years - 22.5%, from 56 to 65 years - 15.7%, from 66 to 75 years - 6.1% and over 75 years - 1.8% of the respondents. Geographically, the actual place of residence for 25.5% of the respondents was in Vidzeme region, 21.7% in Riga, 16.2% in Pierīga, 13.4% in Kurzeme, 12.5% in Zemgale, 8.8% in Latgale. 1.9% of the respondents did not indicate their place of residence.

The issues to be solved in the LIFE-IP LatViaNature were specially highlighted in the survey on nature conservation, including the following topics or project missions: motivational mechanisms for private landowners, strengthening nature preservation through their actions; public understanding and willingness to engage in voluntary nature protection work; preparation of amendments to the regulation of nature conservation planning; attitudes towards biologically valuable grasslands and actions in the demand for products from biologically valuable grasslands. The results obtained in the public opinion survey will be used in communication with the public about less understood nature conservation issues, as well as about the problems indicated by the respondents. In the opinion of the public, special attention should be paid to events exploring and educating on nature conservation – how, when and what every resident of Latvia can do to preserve nature's values.

Overall, the results of the survey show that Latvian society believes that it is important to take care of nature (indicated by 96.6% of the respondents). 86% of the respondents believe that man is dependent on nature. Slightly fewer respondents (66.6%) believe that their daily decisions and choices affect nature. The results of the survey show the tendency that the society as a whole supports nature conservation "in words" (i.e. passively), while the level of involvement and support for specific activities, actions and measures in the careful use of nature is decreasing.

The society is concerned about the ability to create a nature conservation policy in Latvia, its cooperation with other sectoral ministries and landowners who have some restrictions in the management of their property for the purpose of nature conservation.

In the survey section on the use of nature's values, the majority of the respondents (72.2%) often go out into nature to find a balance for physical well-being and mental health, to relax from everyday life. 66% often observe and explore living nature and the processes taking place in it and are interested in them. Relatively rarely the public uses nature as a natural resource in business, a source of inspiration for creative artistic activity and meditation or religious experience.

In the public's self-assessment, knowledge about nature is considered good (73.3% of the respondents), average - 25%, and poor - 1.6%. The public's knowledge is most considered good (57%) on animal species, on invasive species - 49% of the respondents, on plant species - 46.9% of the respondents considered their knowledge as good. 40% of the respondents indicated that their knowledge about more nature-friendly management methods, which are an alternative to nature-degrading methods in forestry and agriculture, was average or poor. 52% of the respondents evaluated the knowledge of websites where they can share observed nature values and report violations in nature as average and poor. At the same time, 93.6% of the respondents indicated that they tried to improve their knowledge about nature. The public trusts science in general, researchers, experts whose conclusions and opinions are recommended to be used in communication with the public.

55% of the respondents support the creation of new protected nature areas or the expansion of existing ones, 39% do not support it and 6% of the respondents have no opinion.

In the question section on supported actions in nature conservation, the results of the survey showed that the society as a whole less often supports new types of management methods that have not been used in nature conservation in Latvia in recent decades, for example, 39.3% support controlled forest burning. There is significant public support (88.5%) for cleaning overgrown rivers, while much less support (56.4%) is for preserving fallen logs in the forest. It would be necessary to educate the public more about these different practices, explaining the benefits in nature conservation.

The involvement of individuals in the implementation of specific nature protection measures through voluntary work, involvement in non-governmental organizations, donations for nature protection is low. Only 15% of the respondents are fully engaged in voluntary nature protection work, 11.3% have joined an environmental or nature protection related non-governmental organization and 12.4% definitely support nature protection with donations. There is no consensus on the question of reducing the amount of state forest felling in favour of the public good for public recreation (49% support, 45% do not support and 6% have not made a choice).

A significant number of respondents (27%) chose the answer "I don't know" about the actions related to compensation and support mechanisms for nature conservation and the appropriateness of their support, because they had not personally encountered these actions to be able to evaluate them. The support mechanisms, their amounts must be communicated to the public in an easily understandable way (comparing to market prices) about the existing support as it is public money and is used in the interests of the public good.

The final question block of the survey was about the products that can be obtained from natural grasslands. The respondents consider the most typical products from natural grasslands to be medicinal plants, herbal



teas, honey and its products, and fodder. The lowest priority is for obtaining textile materials (e.g. wool) and biomass from natural grasslands. The respondents indicated important factors that would influence their choice to buy products from natural grasslands: the product is as close as possible to the consumer - the buyer, trust in the supplier, reliability of the quality of the product content. 60% of the respondents would be willing to pay up to 20% higher price for a product obtained from natural grasslands compared to an alternative product. However, the summary of comments indicates the continuation of educational work concerning the importance of natural grasslands in the preservation of biological diversity, as well as the products that can be obtained from natural grasslands.

In the obtained research results, there is no significant statistical correlation between the place of residence of the respondent in a specially protected nature area or outside of it, similarly with the type of housing and the age structure.

The project team, the Nature Conservation Agency, the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Regional Development and also other project partners are recommended to use the obtained research results in creating and ensuring communication with the public, incl. landowners. The results of the research shed light on several problematic topics in the context of nature conservation and balanced development, which can be used when creating educational events and activities that invite the public to more active involvement in order to move from a passive role to an active one with adequate knowledge of nature and the preservation of its diversity.

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The information reflects only the LIFE-IP LatViaNature project beneficiaries' view and the European Commission's Executive Agency for Small and Medium-sized Enterprises is not responsible for any use that may be made of the information contained therein.

