



PRESS RELEASE: 'THE CONCLUSIONS OF DUNKIRK'

On 12, 13 and 14 June, 143 dune experts from 13 European countries (*) gathered at the premises of the Université du Littoral - Côte d'Opale (Dunkirk, France) to examine the measures needed to protect and restore biodiversity and the natural processes of coastal dunes and sandy beaches. This international workshop was organised in the framework of the French-Belgian cross-border LIFE+ nature project 'FLANDRE', which stands for 'Flemish And North French Dunes Restoration'.

The coastal dunes are home to a particularly rich biodiversity, make an essential contribution to the well-being of local people and tourists, and provide a nature-based and sustainable contribution to protection against rising sea levels. However, the quality and surface area of coastal dunes is deteriorating due to urbanisation, climate change, nitrogen deposits, intensification of agriculture and the emergence of invasive exotic plant species. In order to keep our coasts and dunes alive, additional measures are urgently needed.

The main conclusions of the international workshop are as follows:

1. There is a need for close cooperation between experts and practitioners in coastal defence and in ecology in order to develop coastlines that are resistant to rising sea levels, imitating natural processes as much as possible. An example of such natural processes is the transport of sand between the sandbanks in the shallow sea, the beach and the dunes, which together form a single ecosystem.
2. Sand drift under the influence of the wind is necessary for a healthy dune ecosystem. It is due to sand drifts that new dune slacks are created and that the dune soils are provided with the lime that is necessary for the preservation of the lime-loving dune vegetation. It is therefore advisable to maintain or restore un-vegetated areas of sand in dune areas.
3. Invasive alien plant species threaten the vulnerable native dunes vegetation. There is a need for:
 - international knowledge building and knowledge sharing on methods to effectively control those invasive exotic plant species;
 - without delay, consistent eradicating of those invasive alien plant species.
4. On heavily urbanised coasts, such as the Flemish coast, the coastal dune belt is spatially fragmented into isolated dune sites. The presence of densely built up areas and numerous roads between these remaining dune sites prevents the natural movement ('migration') of native animal and plant species from one dune area to another. As a result, isolated populations of plant and animal species typical of the dunes are at risk of local extinction. On the sea side, the beaches and, inland, the transition zones between dunes and polders at both ends of the urbanised zones offer

the only open spaces in which migration corridors for dune plants and animals can be developed through nature-friendly measures.

The international company also paid a site visit to the cross-border dunes complex 'Dune du Perroquet - De Westhoek - Domein Cabour - Dune fossile de Ghyvelde' between Bray-Dunes, De Panne and Ghyvelde and admired the particularly great natural heritage importance of this unique complex of dunes. It has also been observed that the spatial and ecological cohesion between 'De Westhoek' and 'La Dune du Perroquet', as well as between 'De Westhoek' and the 'Old' dune belt of Cabour, is now being artificially broken up by roads, among other things, and that there is a need to restore ecological connections between the various subareas.

The representatives of the European Commission also indicated that the recent mid-term evaluation of the LIFE programme for the period 2014-2020 demonstrates the effectiveness of the LIFE programme in providing solutions to environmental problems. Based on the positive outcome of this evaluation, the European Commission has proposed an increased budget of € 5.45 billion over 7 years for the future LIFE programme 2021-2027.

The international workshop "Coastal Dunes and sandy beaches, Dunkirk 2018" aims to be the start of a renewed permanent international European network of experts in the management of coastal dunes and sandy beaches. Every three years, the experts should meet to share their knowledge and experience and to evaluate the progress at European level of the ecological recovery of coastal dunes and sandy beaches. With the numerous contributions, the organisers of the workshop hope to have inspired participants from 13 European countries to launch new LIFE projects on nature management and coastal protection in times of climate change and sea level rise.

Contact person: Jean-Louis Herrier, LIFE+ Nature Project Manager 'FLANDRE'.

What is LIFE+?

LIFE is the European financial instrument for the environment. This programme shall finance actions contributing to the development and implementation of European environmental policy and legislation.

What is FLANDRE?

FLANDRE stands for Flemish And North French Dunes Restoration. FLANDRE is a joint project of the Agency for Nature and Forest of the Flemish Government, the French Conservatoire du Littoral and the French Département du Nord. The total cost of the LIFE+FLANDRE project is EUR 4 066 454, of which 50% is co-financed by the European Union through the LIFE Programme.

This project aims to protect and manage the coastal dunes between Dunkirk (France) and Westende (Belgium) as a transboundary natural park.

The project officially started on 2 September 2013.

The deadline for implementation is 1 March 2020.

The coastal dunes forming the LIFE+ FLANDRE project area cover a total of 3 280 hectares, of which 2 200 hectares on Belgian territory and 1 080 hectares on French territory.

More info: www.lifelandre.be - LIFE+12 NAT/BE/000631/FLANDRE

The project partners thank the Laboratory of Oceanology and Geoscience (LOG) of the Université du Littoral - Côte d'Opale (ULCO) for its contribution to the organisation of the workshop and for making its staff and premises available for the workshop.

(*) We received representatives from Belgium, France, Denmark, Germany, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Malta, Portugal, Spain, the UK, Sweden and Hong Kong. Dune area managers, project implementers of other LIFE projects as well as scientists all exchanged knowledge.

