Federal Agency for Nature Conservation

PraxisInfo 10

Meaningful engagement in nature restoration at the local level

ASSESSMENT

MONITORING AND EVALUATION

BROAD ENGAGEMENT
INFORMATION SHARING
ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT

PLANNING AND DESIGN
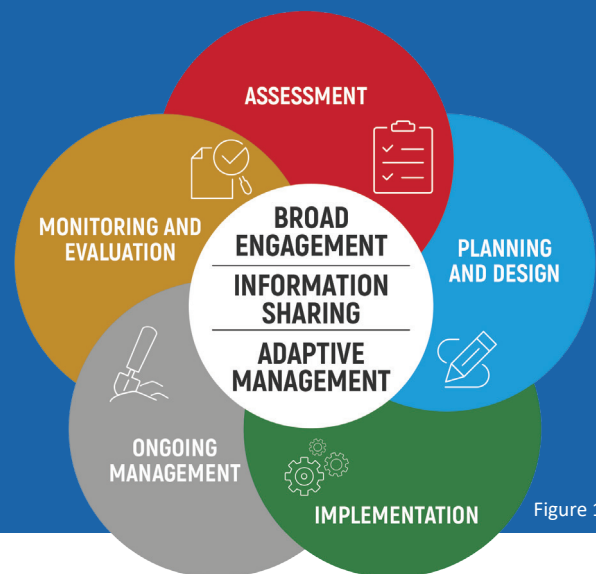
ONGOING MANAGEMENT

IMPLEMENTATION

Figure 1

Practical recommendations and good practice examples stemming from the international workshop "Making people part of ecosystem restoration in Europe" (17th-19th October 2023, Bonn, Germany)

Assisting in the recovery of degraded nature (encompassing ecosystems, landscapes, land and water) is both a genuine concern and a professional task for many diverse actors: rural and urban planners, municipal authorities and NGOs, dedicated foresters and farmers, private sector initiatives and green businesses, restoration experts and volunteers, civil society and applied research.

People initiating restoration projects and driving the change on the ground (called restoration leaders in the context of this PraxisInfo) are usually well equipped with technical knowledge and aware of formal regulations. Yet, they cannot achieve a sustainable positive impact without broader support. **Meaningful stakeholder engagement is therefore at the core of successful ecosystem restoration[1]**.

This information sheet shares important considerations and examples of good practices on how to develop a roadmap towards **restoration projects that are**

implemented in an inclusive, just, trustful and equitable manner and entail effective stakeholder engagement processes at all project stages (from assessing the potential restoration site to post-implementation).

It is important to highlight that the restoration process (see Fig. 1) is not linear, and the proposed steps and reflections may be conducted repeatedly, simultaneously or in a different order than presented. As such, practices associated with broad engagement, information sharing and adaptive management should be implemented throughout the restoration process as "cross-cutting" subcomponents.

For a deeper understanding of the engagement opportunities in restoration initiatives, we recommend consulting further dedicated resources.

For whom:

Individuals and organisations planning to initiate and implement a nature restoration project

Key words:

- Nature restoration
- Stakeholder engagement
- Participation
- Communication
- Landscape governance
- Local communities

Figure 1: The five components of the restoration process along with cross-cutting subcomponents that apply throughout (Source: Standards of practice to guide ecosystem restoration, Nelson et al. 2024)

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1   As defined in the Standards of practice to guide ecosystem restoration (Nelson et al. 2024)

Initiating restoration actions

Public **awareness of the importance of nature** restoration is among the key prerequisites for winning acceptance and overcoming barriers for implementation of restoration actions at the local level.

Awareness can **lead to a meaningful engagement** in restoration, transforming people affected by or interested in the restoration measures into stakeholders as well as rights and knowledge holders. They can **bring in knowledge, vision and ambition** for restoring degraded land and define the long-term impact of restoration.

Apart from understanding the concept and practical implications of restoration, **re-discovering or building deeper connections between people, nature and landscapes** is a critical component for reaching acceptance of restoration measures.

Success of the restoration measures often relies on the ideas, attitudes and actions of many individuals or groups. To ensure these are appropriately considered and utilised, it is important to **explore the roles, capacities and capabilities of various actors**, and bring them together for deliberation and joining forces.

The **needs, concerns and interests of local actors** have the potential to drive or hinder restoration actions and have to be recognised and acknowledged from the very start.

Some questions for reflection by restoration leaders

- What does this area (considered for restoration) currently mean for the people who are one way or another connected to it?
- How do people engage with the landscape, what do they know about it, how do they perceive it and what do they want it to be like in the future?
- How do local actors understand restoration? What is their current attitude towards restoration?
- Do I have a sufficient overview and understanding of local actors, who could benefit or face trade-offs from the restoration measures? What are their interests and power relationships? Have I considered the most vulnerable and affected groups?
- What do I need to do to engage local actors continuously in the restoration process? Am I the right person to do this?
- Which regulations and framework conditions do I need to consider? Can I get key decision-makers on board? Who are they in my case?
- How can I facilitate interactions to negotiate a joint way forward, potentially reaching shared goals and objectives?

Examples from practice

Gaining interest and trust
Recognising the deep interconnectedness between people and their natural surroundings is key to raising acceptance for nature restoration. Programmes like the **Endangered Landscapes Artist Residencies** use **art, traditions and culture** to tell the story of people's past and present relationship with the local landscapes, and thus build a bridge to mainstreaming restoration and to widening participation in it.

ℹ️ For more information visit:
www.endangeredlandscapes.org/our-approach/celebrating-art-and-culture/

Aiming at shared vision
Restoration can deliver benefits to the landscape and its people: inspiration, social, natural and financial returns. The **4 Returns Framework** developed by the Dutch NGO Commonland is a holistic approach to restora-

Artist Residency example: Recording singer Sylvia Dan in the landscape

tion which seeks to reach a **shared understanding and vision for the landscape** among the actors involved. It helps build a landscape plan balancing competing stakeholder demands in a mosaic of different management approaches.

ℹ️ For more information visit:
www.commonland.com/4-returns-framework/

Planning, designing, implementing and managing the measures

Actively engaging stakeholders through all stages of the restoration process takes time and resources. Yet this is a necessary investment to ensure that measures are **well-adapted to the local context** and **locally supported**. Both are prerequisites for lasting success.

To select the **most suitable engagement methods**, it is key to understand and consider the case-specific conditions, dynamics and legal frameworks that define interactions with and between actors. **Barriers** to participation need to be **identified and addressed**.

Tailored communication is essential to gain interest and commitment locally and to ensure transparency throughout the restoration process.

Unconventional approaches and tools can help involve different actors, for example through participatory storytelling, art, interviews during landscape walks, hands-on activities in nature, joint mapping and modelling etc.

Participation is a right, but not an obligation. Inspiration and motivation by local actors deserve to be recognized and nurtured.

To formally structure engagement, many formats are available. For example, actors can merge their interests, ideas and efforts by establishing local partnerships for restoration (e.g. associations for co-managing landscapes) or professional associations (e.g. agri-environmental collectives).

Openness and flexibility are important for restoration leaders to incorporate the results of participatory processes into project plans, adjust measures and enhance management adaptively. This might be a challenge if project frameworks are rigid, yet participation is only effective and fruitful if engaged actors are truly able to make a difference.

Some questions for reflection by restoration leaders

- Who can help me to better understand the environmental condition, cultural and socio-economic context and local uses of the area?

- To what extent do the given framework conditions of my project restrict/allow true inclusivity? Which choices can be made collectively (e.g. co-designing measures)? What can help the project be more adaptive?

- What are suitable ways to establish multilateral communication with local actors in a transparent and trustful way?

- Do I have sufficient understanding which barriers might prevent the actors' involvement? How can I help them get on board (e.g. through funding opportunities, fair benefit distribution, celebrating and communicating successes, avoiding "participation fatigue", increase identification with the landscape/project)?

- What strategies and tools can I use to address potential challenges in collaboration and mediate conflicts?

- How can I ensure the results of the actors' engagement are actually transposed into the project's planning and outcomes? Are there procedures to facilitate (resp. formalise) this?

- Do I have pre-conceived notions or do I approach the restoration process in a way that might not align with the expectations and needs of local actors (e.g. due to educational, cultural background)?

- Am I open to learning new/alternative approaches for planning, design and implementation to ensure the restoration process matches the local context?

Examples from practice

Diversifying communication
Within the **project REWILD_DE**, researchers strive for communication among the actors as well as for creating a multi-perspective on the landscapes through organising **landscape walks**. In these walks, participants share personal stories related to the local nature, e.g. their experiences from the childhood.

ℹ For more information visit:
www.ufz.de/rewild_de/

REWILD_DE: Landscape walk

Examples from practice

Joining forces

In the case of the **Model forest of the Aterno Valley** in Abruzzo, Italy, municipalities formed a formal association with individuals, NGOs, enterprises and public bodies. The **association** puts emphasis on re-connecting people to the local nature, facilitates joint planning and management of the local forests and supports knowledge transfer. It aims to revitalize the valley and promote environmental, economic and social sustainability.

ℹ️ For more information visit:
www.forestamodellovalleaterno.it

Model forest of the Aterno Valley: Stakeholder meeting

A similar approach was taken by the actors in the **Communidade de Montes de Teis** in Galicia, Spain. In this case, the established **communal forest association** united aspirations and efforts of the local activists and volunteers, as well as secured long-term support from schools, farmers and governments, making it possible to restore a significant area of the native forest.

ℹ️ For more information visit:
www.custodia-territorio.es/novedades/comunidad-de-montes-de-teis-polo-de-custodia-del-territorio

Communidade de Montes de Teis: Restoration action with volunteers

Innovative systems involving financial support can also facilitate successful restoration as long as there is room for self-governance. In the **Netherlands**, more than 40 **agri-environmental cooperatives** operating across the country demonstrate improved implementation of environmental measures in the agricultural sector. In this scheme a group of farmers forms a collective and receives a government contract along with a financial subsidy. The collectives in turn are responsible for the contracts with individual farmers and determine the specific conservation measures at the farm level. Collectives offer ecological guidance and a flexibility of measures and payments.

ℹ️ For more information visit:
www.boerennatuur.nl

Agri-environmental cooperative: Implementing measures in the field

Monitoring, evaluation and scaling out of the restoration actions

Engagement of local actors is important to set r**elevant objectives and contextually appropriate indicators** for monitoring and evaluation of the restoration process and success.

Participatory monitoring, for example in the form of **citizen science**, can be useful to raise awareness of restoration benefits and create a network for further action (e.g. follow-up restoration projects and environmental stewardship).

Overall, the progress of nature restoration also depends on the ability to **embrace failure**. Critical reflection throughout implementation and thereafter can help **reframe sustainable restoration** measures.

Individual restoration initiatives can have a **spill-over effect**, for example through the involvement of nearby communities and knowledge sharing. Also, **cross-project learning and collaborations** are extremely valuable for disseminating good practices and lessons learned, as well as for increasing public outreach and acquiring resources.

Further scaling out of restoration actions requires **increasing usability, visibility and accessibility of the project outputs** (e.g. demonstration sites for raising awareness; handbooks and toolboxes with practical value for implementation, guidelines tailored to specific policy instruments; presenting negative examples as important lessons learned, involvement of local media).

Some questions for reflection by restoration leaders

- Have I agreed with local actors on the objectives of the restoration measure and jointly identified clear, measurable indicators to monitor progress?
- How can regular monitoring and timely evaluation help me ensure the fair and equitable distribution of benefits and potential trade-offs?
- Can I be (or provide) a trusted long-term contact for local actors, to maintain an open flow of information both ways?
- Am I approaching the restoration process in a flexible manner that allows me to react to unexpected outcomes as well as changes in framework conditions and/or relationships?
- What lessons have I learned from successes and failures so far? How can I share them (within and beyond the context of my restoration project) to guide and inspire others?
- Are there more permanent structures which can be developed from the restoration initiative (e.g. co-management systems), to sustainably support local actors beyond the project period?
- How can I best acknowledge and celebrate local contributions in public outreach communications about the initiative?

Examples from practice

Participatory monitoring
In the project **FLOW, citizen science groups** monitor water quality in small rivers and streams across

FLOW project: Citizen science in action

Germany. This type of involvement not only helps collect valuable data, but also motivates volunteers to generate media and political attention for freshwater protection as well as to plan future restoration measures based on the monitoring results.

ℹ For more information visit:
www.flow-projekt.de

Spill-over effect
Ecosystem Restoration Communities is a global community-centred ecosystem restoration movement, which disseminates knowledge and good practices between and across small-scale initiatives, while also supporting the development of sustainable livelihoods.

ℹ For more information visit:
www.ecosystemrestorationcommunities.org

In my opinion, a good restoration project should be…

Figure 2: World cloud created from the workshop participants' responses

About the workshop

Nature restoration is an important solution for tackling biodiversity loss, climate change and other societal challenges. However, the social dimension of such measures deserves more attention. To explore this topic in greater depth, the Federal Agency for Nature Conservation (BfN) organised the international workshop "Making people part of ecosystem restoration in Europe" in a hybrid format from 17th to 19th October 2023. The workshop brought together around 60 representatives of European governmental and non-governmental organisations, research institutions, think tanks and local communities.

Literature

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