



ATTITUDES OF FARMERS TOWARDS NATURE CONSERVATION IN SELECTED AREAS OF DRY GRASSLANDS IN EASTERN SLOVENIA

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Abstract

Gorjanci, Haloze, Kum and Pohorje are four Slovenian areas in which the Natura 2000 network seeks to preserve important European habitat types of grasslands along with their species. This article presents a survey of attitudes towards nature conservation and Natura 2000 sites among farmers who in the period 2015–2020 actively participated in a LIFE project aimed at the management and conservation of dry grasslands. Compared to other residents of Slovenia, the farmers participating in the project are more aware of Natura 2000 sites and have a more positive attitude towards them. As a result of the project, a significant share of farmers changed their views on the importance of preserving species-rich grasslands (58%) and on agricultural practices carried out in them (43%).

Keywords: Natura 2000, dry grasslands, agriculture, raising awareness, regional development, Slovenia

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ODNOS KMETOV DO VARSTVA NARAVE NA IZBRANIH OBMOČJIH SUHIH TRAVIŠČ V VZHODNI SLOVENIJI

Izvleček

Gorjanci, Haloze, Kum in Pohorje so štiri slovenska območja, na katerih se v okviru omrežja Natura 2000 skuša ohranяти evropsko pomembne habitatne tipe travišč ter njihove rastlinske in živalske vrste. Članek predstavlja rezultate anketiranja o odnosu do varstva narave in območij Natura 2000 med kmeti, ki so na teh območjih v obdobju 2015–2020 aktivno sodelovali v LIFE projektu, namenjenem upravljanju in ohranjanju suhih travišč. V primerjavi z drugimi prebivalci Slovenije so v projektu sodelujoči kmetje bolj ozaveščeni o Natura 2000 območjih in imajo do njih bolj pozitiven odnos, zaradi projekta pa je pomemben delež kmetov spremenil pogled na pomen ohranjanja vrstno pestrih travišč (58 %) oziroma na kmetijske prakse na njih (43 %).

Ključne besede: Natura 2000, suha travišča, kmetijstvo, ozaveščenost, regionalni razvoj, Slovenija

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1 INTRODUCTION

This article presents the results of a survey of attitudes towards nature conservation and Natura 2000 sites among local farmers who previously participated actively in the LIFE project aimed at preserving dry grasslands in four Natura 2000 sites in Eastern Slovenia. In the survey we attempted to ascertain the extent to which the project influenced changes in farmers' attitudes towards dry grasslands and farming on them, and their opinion of Natura 2000 was further compared with the results of Slovenian public opinion polls. A positive attitude of the local population is crucial for the successful management of protected areas. Therefore, it is useful to evaluate the scope and approaches of nature conservation projects in this regard.

In the selected Natura 2000 areas – Haloze, Pohorje, Kum and Gorjanci – in the period 2015–2020 the LIFE project Conservation and management of dry grasslands in Eastern Slovenia (Life to Grasslands) took place with the aim of long-term conservation of selected important European habitat types of grasslands and the plant and animal species dependent on them. The primary criterion for the selection of project areas was therefore the presence of dry grasslands, and in order to determine the results of the project, a study of the broader impacts of project activities, particularly their socioeconomic aspects, on the local population and economy was conducted. Part of this study also focused on identifying the positive and negative impacts of the project on farms that were involved in carrying out specific project activities. To this

end they were surveyed in the final, fifth year of the project not only regarding their experience related to project participation, but also regarding their attitude towards nature conservation.

The successfully implemented LIFE project was also the basis for the establishment of a new agriculture, environment and climate payments intervention (conservation of dry grasslands) (MKGP, 2021), which will include all four selected Natura 2000 sites in the next programming period.

Although the Life to Grasslands project was primarily focused on nature conservation campaigns, an important part of the project partners' activities was also related to education and raising awareness of the local population about the importance of dry grasslands, Natura 2000 sites and nature conservation more generally. Our study is therefore based on the assumption that participating farmers in the project for conservation and management of dry grasslands show a higher level of awareness of Natura 2000 sites and have a more positive attitude towards them compared to other residents of Slovenia.

2 THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY

The project and the study took place in four areas in the eastern part of Slovenia that are home to important European habitat types of dry grasslands, which are protected in the European Union under Natura 2000. Natura 2000 is the largest network of protected areas in the world, whose aim is the protection of rare and endangered species as well as habitats and their long-term conservation, but which does not exclude human activities within them (The European environment..., 2019). There are a total of 355 Natura 2000 sites in Slovenia, covering 7,682 km² or 37.9% of the country's territory, the highest share in the European Union countries, where Natura 2000 averages 18.5% of a country's territory (EEA, 2021). In the areas of Haloze, Kum and Gorjanci, the habitat type 6230 – Species-rich *Nardus* grasslands is protected under Natura 2000, and in Pohorje the habitat type 6210 – Semi-natural dry grasslands and scrubland facies on calcareous substrates (*Festuco-Brometalia*). The presence of both important European habitat types is linked to extensive agriculture or grazing and is threatened on the one hand by intensification of agriculture (increased input of nutrients, mowing that is too frequent, additional sowing of mixed grasses, overgrazing, introduction of invasive species) or land use change (plowing of fields, construction of tourist and other infrastructure), and on the other hand due to the abandonment of meadows and pastures that used to be regularly mown or grazed, resulting in the land becoming overgrown (Calaciura, Spinelli, 2008; Debeljak et al., 2020; Galvánek, Janák, 2008). Fragmentation of grasslands hinders pollination as well as seed dispersal and cross-fertilization (Peterken, 2013), while intensification of agriculture leads to erosion of

farmers' knowledge about their grasslands. Mowing, hay spreading, turning and raking have recently become fully mechanized (Zwitter, Rasran, 2022). Close observation of grasslands during the growing season greatly improves farmers' understanding of grassland ecology, but young farmers have lost touch with grasslands and the changes caused by intensification are no longer properly perceived (Zwitter, Rasran, 2022).

In Slovenia, each habitat type (6230 and 6210) is present in less than 2% of Natura 2000 sites, and grasslands occur mostly in higher lying areas, on diverse soils that are poor in nutrients and have developed on siliceous or calcareous rocks. In addition to maintaining biodiversity (herbs, orchids, butterflies, birds, grazing animals, etc.), grassland conservation is also important for erosion prevention, runoff regulation and many other ecosystem services (Calaciura, Spinelli, 2008; Debeljak et al., 2020; Galvánek, Janák, 2008). (Late) mowing and extensive grazing are recommended for the conservation of dry grasslands in Slovenia, but threats must also be prevented, among which intensive use, eutrophication, abandonment of grasslands and high-trunk orchards, overgrowth, fragmented ownership, erosion, pressures from other economic activities, and aging of the local population and its low level of environmental awareness have been identified (Debeljak et al., 2020; Life Conservation..., 2021). In general, grassland habitat types are among those in the worst condition in Slovenia. In 2019, according to experts, only 27% of grassland habitat types had a favorable conservation status (Petkovšek, 2020).

As part of the Life to Grasslands project, efforts are being made to establish a favorable condition and preserve selected dry grasslands, as well as convince farmers that farming and ensuring food security are possible while still protecting nature, for which cooperation between experts and local residents is essential (IRSNC, 2020). The Slovenian local population in protected areas usually perceives nature protection as a development barrier and not as an opportunity, and for the most part declines to play an active role in the development of their areas (Lampič, Mrak, 2007; Lampič, Mrak, 2008; Rodela, Torkar, 2011). However, an attractive landscape, which is shaped significantly by among other things the presence of species-rich grasslands, is a key factor in the choice of holiday location (Potočnik Slavič et al., 2016). Studies in other countries also show that environmental awareness does not always lead to active participation in solving environmental problems in protected areas (Dimitrakopoulos et al., 2010), so efforts are being made to increase the involvement of diverse stakeholders in the planning and management of protected areas, from experts in various fields to landowners, businesses, and entire local communities (Chan et al., 2007; Kamphorst et al., 2017; Magda et al., 2015; Pietrzyk-Kaszyńska et al., 2012). A positive attitude of the population is key to the successful functioning of nature conservation areas and can promote protection and sustainable management activities (Brankov et al., 2019). The most important precondition was the belief of the local population that living in a nature conservation area adds to the quality of life and that the activities have financial support (Nastran, Černič Istenič, 2015; Šorgo et al., 2016).

Table 1: Basic characteristics of project areas and farms surveyed.

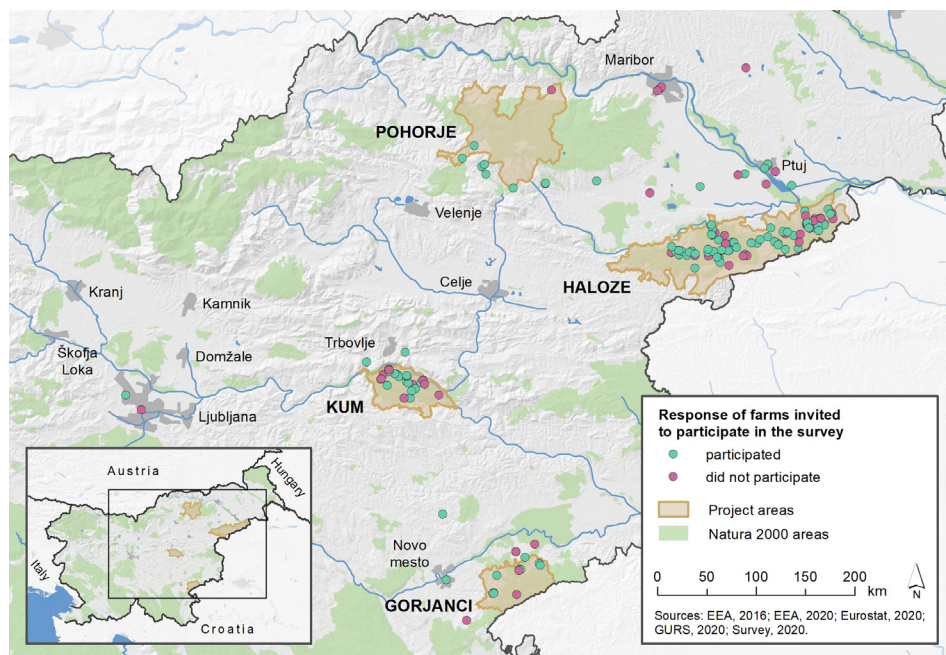
	Number of settlements	Area (km ²)	Population, 2020	Number of farms in the project	Surveyed farms	
					number	share
Gorjanci	27	75.9	3,829	18	12	66.7
Haloze	83	276.2	12,527	100	67	67.0
Kum	21	75.6	4,372	30	20	66.7
Pohorje	10	198.5	3,506	13	8	61.5
Total	141	626.2	24,234	161	107	66.5

Sources of data: SURS, 2020; Vintar Mally et al., 2020.

The areas in which the project activities took place included 141 settlements with a total area of 626.2 km² and 24,234 inhabitants (Table 1). In terms of area as well as in terms of population, the largest project area was Haloze (Figure 1). In this Pannonian region, low tertiary hills predominate, but the relief is extremely varied, so steeper slopes, especially in the western part, are an important limiting factor for agriculture. The eastern part of Haloze has traditionally been more oriented towards viticulture, while the higher and steeper western part has remained predominantly forested (Pak, 2012). Of all the project areas, Haloze has the largest share of overgrown agricultural land. As a result of this process, land use has changed significantly in recent decades and now more than half of the project area is covered by forests and about a quarter by grassland, while permanent crops (vineyards and orchards) cover only about 5% (MGKP, 2016). The project also included the central part of Gorjanci, a plateau and the easternmost Slovenian Dinaric Karst region (Perko, 1999). The central part of Gorjanci studied is relatively sparsely populated, and the area has greater than average forest cover for Slovenian conditions (with forest covering about two-thirds of the area). Among agricultural areas, meadows predominate (around 17%), while fields and gardens account for less than 6%, and permanent crops around 5% (MGKP, 2016). The smallest area included is Kum, which is also the most densely populated. Kum is a Prealpine region, dominated by forest (71% of the area), amidst which sparse settlement consisting of isolated farms and hamlets has been preserved in the cleared areas. The surrounding valleys are significantly more attractive for settlement and the economy. Most of the area is karstic, so the central areas of Kum have no surface river network, and meadows predominate among agricultural land (ARSO, 2020; MGKP, 2016). The fourth project area covered only the western part of the Slovenian Prealpine region of Pohorje. It is the least populated (under 18 inhabitants per km²), and large swathes lie above 1000 meters in elevation, which significantly affects the conditions for agriculture, since highland climate features predominate in the highest places. The most common form of settlement in the area is dispersed settlements

and isolated farms (ARSO, 2020; Žiberna, 1999), and as much as 86% of the area is covered by forest, with occasional grassland areas scattered within (10% of the area) (MGKP, 2016).

Figure 1: Project areas and survey response of farms.



In all four project areas (hereinafter referred to as Haloze, Pohorje, Kum and Gorjanci for those parts of the Slovenian regions of the same name that were included in the project), we conducted a survey among all farms whose land was involved in the activities of the Life to Grasslands project over the previous four and a half years. Activities for the conservation of dry grasslands that took place on the land holdings of the participating farmers included removing overgrowth, preparing new meadows and pastures for extensive use, restoring or rejuvenating high-trunk orchards and similar. Local farmers and residents were thus not only exposed to education and awareness raising but were also actively involved in the project with their land and labor, and in return the project financed the purchase of agricultural equipment for their use and the assistance of third parties (e.g. for clearing brush from land) (Debeljak et al., 2020). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the originally planned field survey was conducted entirely by telephone in the second half of May and the first half of June 2020, by a single interviewer, in order to ensure maximum uniformity in asking questions and comparability of answers.

We invited all 161 farms who were actively involved in the project and for whom we had contact information to participate in the survey. Two-thirds of them, or 107 farms, agreed to take part, on whose behalf the farmers themselves (74.8%) or their closest family members who were familiar with the project activities responded (Table 1). Haloze has the greatest influence on the overall results, as more than 60% of farms that participated in the project and the survey are from this area. All farms surveyed had land included in the project in one of the project areas, although the location of the respondent's residence and farm address may be outside the area (Figure 1). Due to the high response rate, the sample is representative of the entire set of farms that participated in the project.

In addition to the attitude towards nature conservation and Natura 2000 sites, the survey also determined the degree of satisfaction with participation in the project and perception of the socioeconomic and environmental effects of project activities. This article does not give particular attention to the broader topic of the socioeconomic effects of the project, though it should be noted that these effects can also have a significant impact on the attitude of residents. In this particular case, we primarily investigated changes in farmers' views on the importance of preserving species-rich grasslands and their farming methods as well as respondents' views of Natura 2000. Two survey questions were identical to those in a national public opinion poll on Natura 2000 in Slovenia (Raziskava..., 2019), which enables a direct comparison of the results of both surveys. Although numerous studies on nature protection areas have been published, we found almost none that allowed direct comparison of results, while comparisons with national surveys in Slovenia are also limited by the fact that their results are not reported at the level of regions or smaller areas.

The majority of respondents were men (74.8%), as heads of the agricultural holdings were predominantly male. It is important to note that the respondents are a socio-economically diverse group. They include elderly farmers, new entrants to farming, subsistence farmers, farmers with registered supplementary activities, organic farmers and also those who are not interested in switching to organic farming at all.

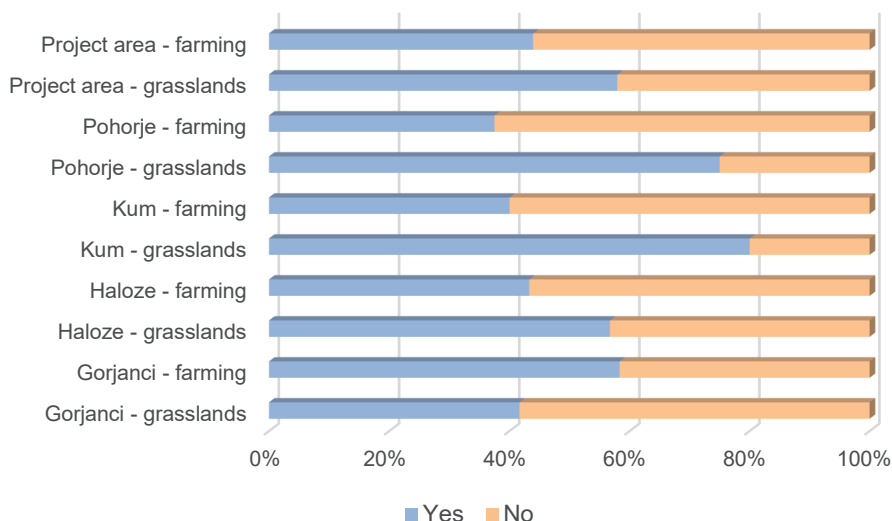
3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Life to Grasslands project took place in existing Natura 2000 areas in which the farmers surveyed cultivate at least part of their agricultural land. In the introductory question, we were therefore interested in whether respondents had already heard of Natura 2000. Of the 107 respondents, 95.3% stated that they had heard of it; only four respondents in Haloze and one in Kum answered in the negative. These results are extremely favorable, especially in comparison with the national public opinion survey (Raziskava..., 2019), according to which fewer than two-thirds of respondents (63.7%) knew of Natura 2000 in Slovenia. Given the intensive cooperation of project

partners with local farmers, we can assume that project activities contributed significantly to the familiarity of the surveyed farmers with Natura 2000. The project also changed the views of most participating farmers regarding the importance of preserving species-rich grasslands.

Out of a total of 107 respondents, 58% stated that they now have a different view of the importance of preserving species-rich grasslands as a result of the Life to Grasslands project (Figure 2). In Kum, as many as 80% were convinced of this, while in Gorjanci this figure was 42%, the lowest. In explaining how their opinion had actually changed, they most often highlighted the knowledge gained and increased awareness of the importance of plant species in grasslands (25 statements), the importance of grassland diversity (22) and the maintenance of dry meadows (13). They emphasized the importance of later mowing for dry grasslands so that the grass matures and produces seeds, as well as the importance of preventing overgrowth and preserving grasslands. The results indicate the strong role of raising the awareness of the local population regarding biodiversity and the importance of preserving it even in the case of a rural population traditionally engaged in agriculture, who would be expected to be highly aware of good agricultural practices, adapted to specific local conditions, through their contact with nature. Although respondents value the newly acquired knowledge, they are much less convinced that this will affect their farming methods. Only 43% of respondents reported an impact of the project on changing their views on dry grassland farming in their cultivation practices. The highest share was recorded in Gorjanci (58%) and the lowest in Pohorje (38%). When questioned further about how this different view of farming on dry grasslands is reflected in their practices, respondents most often highlighted methods of grazing, where they delayed the start and are also careful to limit the number of animals in a pasture so as to avoid overgrazing. They prefer grazing to mowing. Where grasslands are mown, the project influenced their decision to delay the start of mowing, which allows the grasses to be successfully propagated beforehand and the grasslands to be preserved. Individual farmers also cited caring for orchards and greater care for grassland in mechanized land cultivation.

Figure 2: Changes in the views of farmers on the importance of preserving species-rich grasslands and farming on dry grasslands due to participation in the project.



Source of data: Survey, 2020.

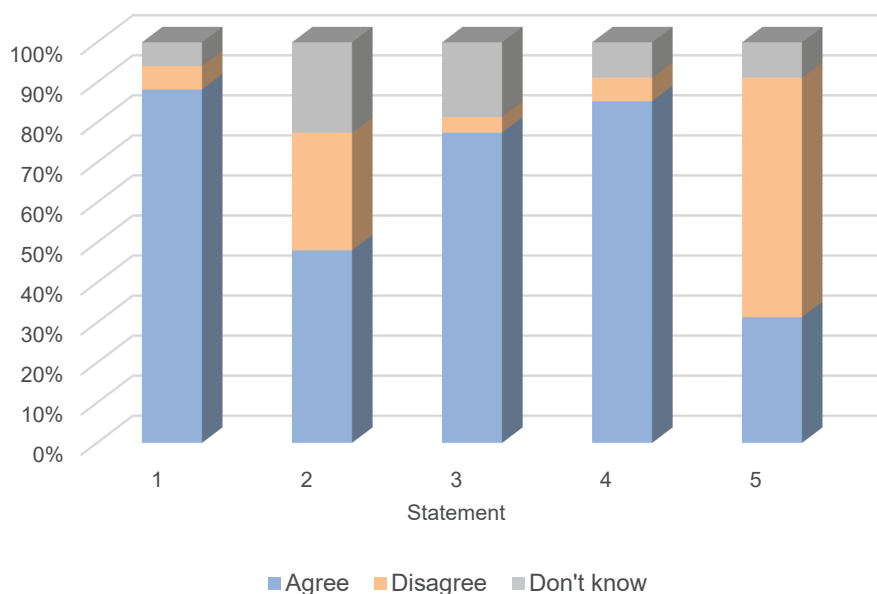
Note: Farming question: Do you have a different view of farming on dry grasslands as a result of the Life to Grasslands project? Grasslands question: Do you have a different view of the importance of preserving species-rich grasslands as a result of the Life to Grasslands project?

Around 78% of respondents were satisfied with the project, and almost three quarters (72%) agreed with the statement that they would like to participate in such a project in the future. Despite the relatively high level of support for project activities, three-quarters of respondents nevertheless did not agree with the statement that as a result of the project they are more interested in sustainable agricultural practices and organic farming. A low level of agreement was characteristic of all project areas. For the time being, farms that would be willing to switch to organic production can only be found among the 18% of respondents who as a result of the project have also become more interested in organic farming and sustainable farming practices. The results show a relatively high degree of reluctance among farmers to transfer theoretically acquired knowledge into their own practices or make a longer commitment to new practices, which was also found in some cases in other countries (Dimitrakopoulos et al., 2010).

Next, among respondents who confirmed that they knew about Natura 2000 we tried to determine their attitudes towards it and their familiarity with management options in Natura 2000 areas by presenting them with five different statements and asking whether they agreed with them. Four statements were the same as in the national opinion poll, only the statement on pride in living in a Natura 2000 area was adapted to project areas, as these are already part of Natura 2000.

Around 88% of respondents agreed with the statement that Natura 2000 signifies nature conservation, while only six respondents disagreed or did not take a position. Even in Haloze, where the level of agreement was the lowest, 84% of respondents still agreed with the statement. However, this is lower by 8.9 percentage points than the figure from the national survey for respondents who associate Natura 2000 with nature conservation (Table 2). While a larger share of those familiar with Natura 2000 is found in the project areas compared to the country as a whole, there is a comparatively smaller share of those who recognize it as an instrument of nature protection.

Figure 3: Agreement of respondents in project areas with statements about Natura 2000.



Source of data: Survey, 2020.

Note: The following statements were presented: 1 – Natura 2000 signifies nature conservation. 2 – Various human activities are allowed in Natura 2000. 3 – If you have forest or if you farm in Natura 2000, you can receive subsidies. 4 – People living in Natura 2000 can take pride in that. 5 – Natura 2000 restricts farming.

Among the respondents in the project areas, opinions were the most divided on the statement that various human activities are allowed in Natura 2000. Of all the claims, this was the one on which the greatest share of respondents could not take a position, and fewer than half (48%) agreed with it. A comparison with the national survey shows that there are no major differences in the two groups of respondents that agreed, but there is an important difference in the share of those who disagree with

the statement, as this was 13.6 percentage points higher in the national survey, at the expense of the share of the undecided.

The third statement asserted that farmers and forest owners in the Natura 2000 area could receive subsidies. In the project areas, 77% of respondents agreed with this, and only four disagreed. Farmers without this kind of knowledge or experience mostly opted for the response "I don't know". Compared to the national survey, a greater share of respondents in the project areas were convinced of the possibility of obtaining a subsidy for agriculture or forestry in the project areas – the difference was 18.9 percentage points. Almost a fifth of the Slovenian population was convinced that such subsidies could not be obtained. The differences in responses are understandable, as farms have considerably more experience in obtaining subsidies than the general public. In the national survey, only 22.4% of respondents were engaged in farming, and 30.3% of respondents owned forest land.

Table 2: Agreement with statements about Natura 2000 in Slovenia and in the project areas.

Statement	Project areas (N=102)			Slovenia (N=1007)		
	Agree	Disagree	Don't know	Agree	Disagree	Don't know
Natura 2000 signifies nature conservation.	88.2	5.9	5.9	97.1	2.1	0.8
Various human activities are allowed in Natura 2000.	48.0	29.4	22.5	48.7	43.0	8.3
If you have forest or if you farm in Natura 2000, you can receive subsidies	77.4	3.9	18.6	58.5	18.5	23.0
People living in Natura 2000 can take pride in that.*	85.3	5.9	8.8	79.5	10.4	10.1
Natura 2000 restricts farming.	31.4	59.8	8.8	68.0	23.0	9.0

Sources of data: Raziskava..., 2019; Survey, 2020.

Note: *In the national public opinion survey the statement was: If I lived in a Natura 2000 area, I would be proud.

A longitudinal study on social values of space and the environment in Slovenia (Hočvar et al., 2018) showed that in the period 2004–2018, support for the protection of natural areas increased in the country. As many as 81.4% of respondents believed that the state should consistently protect all areas of preserved nature, even in the face of local opposition. Moreover, in the same opinion poll in 2018, the population of Slovenia most often cited the proximity of nature (61.0%) and a clean (unpolluted) environment (55.6%) among the five most important features of a place to live, immediately after

security with a low crime rate (77.5% of respondents), which shows how highly valued nature is in the country. The results of the national survey from 2019, in which almost 80% of respondents agreed with the statement that they would be proud to live in a Natura 2000 area, can also be understood in this context. Only a tenth saw no reason to be proud. In the project areas in 2020, respondents were even more convinced that inhabitants of Natura 2000 areas can take pride in this. All respondents in Pohorje and about 84% of respondents from other areas agreed with the statement.

The greatest differences in the results of the two surveys could be seen regarding the statement that Natura 2000 restricts farming. Fewer than a third of the respondents in the project areas agreed with the statement, whereas more than two-thirds of the respondents in the national survey did (68.0%). Significant differences also exist between project areas, as no one in Pohorje agreed with the statement, while in Haloze 36.5% of respondents regarded Natura 2000 as a restriction for agriculture. In general, project areas where the majority of the population live in the Natura 2000 area and are also engaged in farming have been shown to be more aware of the practical consequences of nature protection measures, and surprisingly less aware of what Natura 2000 is primarily intended for.

We also found that almost half of all respondents, thanks to this primarily nature conservation project, have begun to identify new development opportunities for agriculture in their area, from new farming practices to opportunities to engage in supplementary activities on farms and generate additional income. In this way, the project has clearly succeeded in linking environmental efforts in their local environments with the search for opportunities for progress in the social and economic fields, which is also extremely important for achieving the long-term goals of sustainable development.

4 CONCLUSIONS

A survey of the attitudes of participating farms in the LIFE project Life to Grasslands, which took place between 2015 and 2020 in four dry grassland areas in Slovenia, showed that respondents display a more positive attitude towards Natura 2000 sites compared to other Slovenian residents. To a greater extent, they expressed pride in living in Natura 2000 areas, and to a lesser extent they saw this form of nature conservation as an impediment to agriculture or other human activities, and were much more aware of the possibilities for financial support that they can receive for their agricultural activities. 95.3% of respondents were familiar with Natura 2000, significantly above the national average (63.7%). The only deviation is the finding that respondents from the project areas equated Natura 2000 with the conservation of nature to a somewhat lesser extent. This could also be the result of project activities aimed at raising awareness of economic opportunities in areas where special attention

needs to be paid to nature conservation efforts. Nevertheless, we can confirm the initial assumption that farmers participating in the project of conservation and management of dry grasslands are more aware of Natura 2000 sites than other inhabitants of Slovenia and have a more positive attitude towards them.

We also found that the project helped to identify new development opportunities for agriculture and significantly changed the view of farmers on the importance of preserving species-rich grasslands, especially concerning greater awareness and knowledge of plants, grassland diversity and the importance of maintaining dry grasslands. However, we noticed a significant gap between the higher level of awareness of the farmers involved in the project and the actual implementation of new farming practices. In just under half of the participating farmers, the project also influenced changes in certain agricultural practices, most often in grazing and methods of mowing meadows. However, farmers have remained relatively reluctant to make more radical changes to farming (e.g. switching to organic production), although many have shown readiness for them in principle and over time. As a result, additional education of farmers will be needed, as well as efforts from various stakeholders in the field of environmental protection and the promotion of sustainable agriculture, in order to transfer awareness into regular agricultural practices to a greater extent.

The success of the project is reflected not only in the way of thinking of the surveyed farmers, but also in the new agriculture, environment and climate payments scheme as a “conservation of dry grasslands” intervention, which is included in the strategic plan of the upcoming programming period (MKGP, 2021). This is the only intervention in a scheme that is entirely results-oriented. Since it has already been tested in the field at the time of the project implementation, it is expected to be more successful than past agri-environment measures related to grasslands, which have been identified as highly ineffective (Kaligarič et al., 2019).

In interpreting the results of the survey, it should be noted that the attitudes of the respondents during their lives are shaped by many factors and thus project activities could only influence them to a limited extent. Also, the farms involved in the project represented only a minority of all those who farm in the project areas, so their opinions cannot be generalized to the entire areas of Gorjanci, Haloze, Kum or Pohorje. Nevertheless, it is these farms that have gained knowledge and experience in the LIFE project that can be an important driving force in their local communities in the future. Through following established good practices, the effects of projects can spill over to other stakeholders (Magda et al., 2015) who have not participated actively in the project, and positive experiences with the project also open the door to other similar approaches.

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ODNOS KMETOV DO VARSTVA NARAVE NA IZBRANIH OBMOČJIH SUHIH TRAVIŠČ V VZHODNI SLOVENIJI

Povzetek

V članku so predstavljeni rezultati raziskave odnosa do varstva narave in območij Natura 2000 med kmeti, ki so v obdobju 2015–2020 sodelovali v LIFE projektu Life to grasslands. LIFE projekt je bil namenjen ohranjanju suhih travišč na štirih Natura 2000 območjih v vzhodni Sloveniji; Haloze, Pohorje, Kum in Gorjanci. V zadnjem letu trajanja projekta (2020) smo z anketiranjem sodelujočih kmetijskih gospodarstev skušali ugotoviti, v kolikšni meri je projekt vplival na spremembo stališč kmetov o suhih traviščih in kmetovanju na njih, njihovo mnenje o Naturi 2000 pa smo dodatno primerjali z rezultati slovenskih javnomnenjskih raziskav. Čeprav je bil projekt primarno usmerjen v doseganje naravovarstvenih ciljev, se je pomemben del aktivnosti projektnih partnerjev navezoval tudi na izobraževanje in ozaveščanje lokalnega prebivalstva o pomenu suhih travišč, območij Natura 2000 in varstva narave nasploh. Posledično je preučitev izhajala iz predpostavke, da bodo v projektu ohranjanja in upravljanja suhih travišč sodelujoči kmeti v primerjavi z drugimi prebivalci Slovenije izkazovali višjo stopnjo ozaveščenosti o območjih Natura 2000 in imeli do njih bolj pozitiven odnos.

V preučevanih predelih Haloz, Kuma in Gorjancev se v okviru Nature 2000 varuje habitatni tip 6230 – vrstno bogata travišča s prevladujočim navadnim volkom (*Nardus stricta*), na Pohorju pa habitatni tip 6210 – polnaravna suha travišča in grmiščne faze na karbonatnih tleh (*Festuco-Brometalia*). Obstoj obeh evropsko pomembnih habitatnih tipov je vezan na ekstenzivno kmetijstvo ali pašo in je v Evropi ogrožen na eni strani zaradi intenziviranja kmetijstva, na drugi strani pa zaradi opuščanja rabe v preteklosti košenih travnikov in pašnikov, kar vodi v zaraščanje. S projektom Life to grasslands so tako skušali predvsem vzpostavljati ugodno stanje in ohranjanje suhih travišč, vzporedno pa v praksi dokazovati, da je možno kmetovanje oziroma zagotavljanje prehranske varnosti ob sočasnem varovanju narave (IRSCN, 2020). Domače in tuje študije namreč kažejo, da sta odnos in vključenost lokalnih kmetov izjemnega pomena za uspešno upravljanje naravovarstvenih območij, četudi okoljska ozaveščenost kmetov oziroma lokalnih prebivalcev ne vodi nujno v njihovo aktivno udeležbo.

Aktivnosti za ohranjanje suhih travišč, ki so potekale na zemljiščih sodelujočih kmetov, so vključevale odstranjevanje zarasti, urejanje novih travnikov in pašnikov za ekstenzivno rabo, obnavljanje ali pomlajevanje visokodebelnih sadovnjakov in podobno. Lokalni kmeti in prebivalci torej niso bili deležni le ozaveščanja in izobraževanja, temveč so bili v projekt aktivno vključeni s svojimi zemljišči in opravljenimi urami dela, v zameno pa so se iz projekta financirali nakupi kmetijske opreme, ki so jo prejeli v uporabo, ter pomoč tretjih oseb (npr. za čiščenje zemljišč) (Debeljak et al., 2020).

K sodelovanju v raziskavi o učinkih projekta je bilo povabljenih vseh 161 kmetijskih gospodarstev, ki so bila v projekt vključena z zemljišči na enem izmed projektnih območij, odzvali pa sta se dve tretjini oziroma 107 kmetijskih gospodarstev. Anketiranci so v primerjavi z drugimi prebivalci Slovenije izkazovali bolj pozitiven odnos do Natura 2000 območij in bili o njih tudi bolj ozaveščeni. V večji meri so izrazili občutek ponosa na življenje v Natura 2000 območjih, v manjši meri so v tej obliki varstva narave videli oviro za kmetijstvo oziroma druge dejavnosti ter se bistveno bolje zavedali možnosti finančnih podpor, ki so jih lahko deležni za svoje kmetijske dejavnosti. Naturo 2000 je poznalo 95,3 % anketirancev, kar je bistveno nad nacionalnim povprečjem (63,7 %). Odstopa le ugotovitev, da so anketiranci s projektnih območij v Naturi 2000 v nekoliko manjši meri prepoznali varstvo narave. To bi lahko bila tudi posledica projektne aktivnosti, ki so bile usmerjene v ozaveščanje gospodarskih priložnosti na območjih, kjer je treba posebej paziti na naravovarstvena prizadevanja.

Projekt je pripomogel k prepoznavanju novih razvojnih priložnosti za kmetijstvo, od novih praks kmetovanja pa do možnosti ukvarjanja z dopolnilnimi dejavnostmi na kmetijah in ustvarjanja dodatnega zaslужka, kar je potrdila skoraj polovica vseh anketiranih. S tem je projekt očitno uspel doseči, da so se okoljevarstvena prizadevanja v njihovih lokalnih okoljih povezala z iskanjem možnosti napredka na socialnem in ekonomskem področju, kar je izjemnega pomena tudi za doseganje dolgoročnih ciljev trajnostnega razvoja.

Projekt je pomembno spremenil pogled kmetovalcev na pomen ohranjanja vrstno pestrih travnišč, predvsem v smeri večje ozaveščenosti in poznavanja rastlin, pestrosti travnišč in pomembnosti vzdrževanja suhih travnikov. Rezultati kažejo na veliko vlogo ozaveščanja lokalnega prebivalstva o biotski pestrosti in pomenu njenega ohranjanja tudi v primerih, ko gre za podeželsko prebivalstvo, ki se tradicionalno ukvarja s kmetijstvom, in od katerega bi pričakovali, da je že prek stika z naravo visoko ozaveščeno o dobrih kmetijskih praksah, prilagojenih na specifične lokalne razmere.

Zaznali smo tudi znaten razkorak med višjo stopnjo ozaveščenosti v projekt vključenih kmetov in njihovim dejanskim uresničevanjem novih praks kmetovanja. Čeprav anketiranci cenijo pridobljeno znanje, so bili v bistveno manjši meri prepričani, da bo to vplivalo na njihov način kmetovanja. Le slaba polovica (43 %) sodelujočih kmetov je poročala, da je projekt vplival tudi na spremembo določenih kmetijskih praks, največkrat pri paši in načinu košnje travnikov. Do bolj korenitih sprememb kmetovanja (npr. preusmeritev v ekološko pridelavo) pa so bili kmetje še razmeroma zadržani, čeprav so mnogi na načelni ravni in v daljšem časovnem obdobju zanje izkazali pripravljenost. Posledično bodo potrebna še dodatna izobraževanja kmetov ter napor različnih deležnikov s področja varstva okolja in spodbujanja trajnostnega kmetijstva, da se bo ozaveščenost v večji meri prenesla v redno kmetijsko prakso.