



LEADER and environmental sustainability

LEADER case study Promoting the transition to a Green Economy

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When the environmental measures under the RDP in 2007-2013 were not taken up well by the farming community, it was decided to let LEADER be in charge of promoting wetlands, natural pastures and other biodiversity projects across the Åland Islands in the next programming period (2014-2020).

Consequently, the topic of 'environment and nature' features strongly in the current local Åland LEADER development strategy. It is represented as one of four focus areas, but also as a horizontal theme across the entire strategy. Furthermore, relevant selection criteria have been developed by the Local Action Group (LAG) and applied to all applications. As such, extensive emphasis has been placed on projects relating to nature and the environment.

Initially progress was slow, but after people started to think more broadly and imaginatively about the environment and how it can effectively be connected to other rural development issues, project ideas started to flow abundantly from across the entire LEADER area. Now, **more than half of all 57 LEADER projects** in Åland have an environmental theme.

A number of actions proved instrumental in inspiring and shifting mindsets, leading to a better understanding of what a 'green' and 'circular' rural economy can do for the 65 Swedish speaking islands in the north east of Finland.

Undoubtedly, global, national and local environmental agendas have increased the awareness of environmental issues. However, translating theory into practice and implementing specific environmental action requires a more dedicated effort. Here, working in **collaboration with others at a local level** was key for Åland LEADER. Being based in the same building as other relevant local organisations is helpful. Even though located in a relatively small LEADER community (30 000 people), the LAG is mindful of how important **networking and communicating** is, and this has made a huge difference in **promoting the environmental topic successfully**.

When the first four projects were completed, the LAG decided to promote them as role models to inspire and generate ideas for further projects. Working jointly with the various rural stakeholder organisations and with the LAG members was instrumental to the promotion effort. **Creating a direct face-to-face dialogue** with the local community members made the projects tangible and highly visible, which in turn was essential to stimulate interest and trigger project ideas.



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It was important to get across the **multi-dimensionality** of environmental projects. For example, even a simple sedimentation / wet pond has not only an agricultural purpose, but simultaneously can increase biodiversity, serve as an enjoyable recreational site, and encourage sporting activity for locals and tourists throughout the year.

To envisage the multiple benefits of any project requires **creativity in the project design phase**. Where needed, external environmental expertise was sought, often through the collaboration with local associations. LEADER staff offered flexible, hands-on assistance throughout. Importantly, staff ensured that the **learning from past projects** directly informed new project design.

Åland LEADER showed that by applying its community-led-local development approach, its know-how in integrated development, and its close community relations, it achieved what would have been impossible to accomplish under conventional RDP measures.

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