

“Here, the forest can do what it wants”

At the EXPO, the large-scale conservation project “Middle Elbe” is a model for natural eco-systems

“Feeding the Planet, Energy for Life” is the theme of the EXPO 2015 in Milan. Nature is the energy source for all life. All over the world, large-scale conservation projects are helping to make sure that this source does not dry up. One such project has been implemented along the “Middle Elbe” in the German federal state of Saxony-Anhalt since 2001.

A green carpet with yellow dandelion spots lies upon the pond, and fresh May greenery shines from the oaks. The frogs croak from a backwater. The Elbe – Germany’s second largest river – flows by less than ten metres away. This old dyke, built around 1850, is a sight to gladden the heart of any conservationist. Astrid Eichhorn points out some washed-up deadwood: “Nobody tidies up. Here, the forest can do what it wants.”

The core zone of the biosphere reserve “Middle Elbe” runs through the Steckby-Lödderitzer Forest in the heart of Saxony-Anhalt. It comprises a still largely continuous riverside forest complex – one of the largest and last of this kind in Central Europe. UNESCO designated the Steckby-Lödderitzer river landscape and the Vessertal in the Thuringian Forest as the two first biosphere reserves in Germany back in 1979. In 1988, the reserve was expanded to include the Dessau-Wörlitzer cultural landscape. The biosphere reserve “Middle Elbe” was created in 1990 by incorporating other areas. The reserve was around 43,000 hectares in size. With the declaration of the Middle Elbe Biosphere Reserve on 20 March 2006 and a comprehensive consultation process in the region, the area was almost tripled to 125,743 hectares.

It is thanks to this protection that here on the River Elbe an enormous species diversity of flora and fauna has been conserved. The Elbe beaver, on the list of animals threatened by extinction, is once again at home in its original habitat. Dr. Astrid Eichhorn manages the Middle Elbe Project Office, which works for the WWF Deutschland (World Wide Fund For Nature) in Dessau, Saxony-Anhalt. “Protection on its own”, she says, “does not guarantee the conservation of a unique natural environment. Humans must also take suitable measures that allow autonomous development of such natural ecosystems.”

In 2001, the large-scale conservation project “Middle Elbe” was founded for this purpose. The “assisted area of representative importance for the country as a whole”, as the Federal Agency for Nature Conservation officially categorised it, comprises around 9,050 hectares, about 1,020 of which are currently owned by the globally active conservation organisation WWF, so that a “genuine” riverside forest landscape can be restored there. The overall budget for the around 60 measures in this large-scale project comprises 30.3 million Euros. 75 percent of this comes from the federal government, 15 percent from the federal state of Saxony-Anhalt and ten percent from the WWF.

What does “genuine” riverside forest landscape mean? “For example, that the spread of non-indigenous plants is stopped”, explains Astrid Eichhorn: “The American red ash was still being planted here until into the 1950s, because it adapts particularly well to the environmental conditions. Unfortunately it is pushing out the native ash, which, together with the oak and elm, is typical of our hardwood riverside forest.”

In order to counteract this and make it easier for the oak to multiply and spread, 88,000 plants were grown from the seeds of centuries-old “flood-experienced” riverside trees which have since been planted out. Furthermore, there are contracts with the leasers of green land about special care measures which favour the development of biodiversity.

The conservation and/or restoration of a “genuine” riverside landscape also includes the retaining of its typical ecosystem, which is created by flooding and drying out. In order to allow the riverside a constant exchange with the river, the alternation of high and low water, the majority of the project measures have to do with the shifting back of the dyke. “Riverside land is fertile and farmers do not like giving it up. The WWF has looked for equivalent replacement areas for those affected or paid them compensation”, explains Astrid Eichhorn.

Before any work had been done to create the new dyke, the floods of 2002 came along and returning more space to the Elbe became a controversial topic. For Project Manager Eichhorn and her partners from the Saxony-Anhalt Regional Office for Flood Protection and Water Management, from the Regional Ministry for Agriculture and the Environment and from the Middle Elbe Biosphere Reserve, there began a very intensive period of communication with the population in the neighbouring locations.

In concrete terms, this meant finding compromises between nature conservation and flood protection for 7.3 new kilometres of new dyke. The first spade-thrust for the DIN-approved new dyke construction was in 2010. The construction work has been divided into four sections, the third will be completed this year, the last next year. In 2017 the old dyke is to be slit open in ten places. “When it is rising, the Elbe can then flow through openings approx. 200 metres wide at these places”, says Astrid Eichhorn.

We are now standing at a dyke point close to the village of Obselau near Aken. Here, the new dyke branches off from the old one. A modern construction with infiltration swale and dyke defence path on the land-side – a joy for flood protection. When the Elbe flooded in 2013, sandbags for securing the dyke still had to be transported by wheelbarrow. Astrid Eichhorn and her project partners say that they have noticed an increase in acceptance of the large-scale conservation project since then.

At EXPO 2015, the large-scale conservation project “Middle Elbe” is a showcase model for the retention of natural ecosystems, and explicitly for synergy between nature protection and flood defence. In a replicated riverside landscape with forest and corn field, the visitor can simulate a flood using a rocker. One can then see how natural flood areas absorb the masses of water, cause the level of the floodwater to sink and make their contribution to the cleaning of the water.

Meanwhile, real nature in the Steckby-Lödderitzer Forest is increasingly taking over the new dyke. Clover is currently clearly in the dominant position. A botanist will soon be taking an expert look at it, says Astrid Eichhorn and talks about target biotopes. She points to a thistle: “This tap-rooting plant certainly does not belong on the dyke.” Humanity can here lend a hand to the natural dynamic – in this case with a mixture of seeds from grasses and plants typical of the riverside, which will strengthen the dyke with their flat roots.

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caption: The UNESCO Middle Elbe Biosphere Reserve is an exemplary model of the successful synergy of nature conservation and flood defence – Project Manager Dr. Astrid Eichhorn on the new dyke, which branches off from the old one (to the right) at Aken in Saxony-Anhalt. On the left, one can see the co-called defence route.

18.05.2015

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