

HISTORY OF NATURE CONSERVATION IN ESTONIA

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The historical development of nature conservation ideas can be divided into a number of phases. A simple division identifies five phases in the international development of nature protection in Europe, as in Estonia: (1) the common law phase, (2) the phase of narrow regulations restricting the use of nature resources, (3) the protection of nature monuments and species protection, (4) the establishment of multifunctional protected areas, and (5) the nature protection outside protected areas, cross-sectoral approach to preserving landscape and biological diversity. First, the roots of nature conservation stem from folk religion. Records from the 13th century speak of sacred trees and groves that were worshipped and preserved. The era of narrow restrictions on the use of natural resources followed. According to historical documents, in 1297 the Danish King Erik Menved issued a strict order to prohibit the cutting of coastal woods on four islands near Tallinn. This is the first known Act at the national level to establish nature conservation over a relatively large area in Estonia. The more systematic study of nature and propagation of nature conservation ideas started in the middle of the 19th century. The first protected area in Estonia was established in 1910: a bird sanctuary was created on the Vaika islets of the west coast of Saaremaa. The first Nature Conservation Act was passed in 1935. World War II and the starting Soviet Era disrupted the nature conservation activities. It was not until 11 July 1957 that the third Nature Conservation Act was passed; it was the first Act on nature conservation in the Soviet Union. The first protected area based on international principles – Lahemaa National Park, the first national park in the entire Soviet Union – was established in 1971. In 1981, Lahemaa became the first Estonian protected area to receive a development plan, the predecessor of the modern management plan. One of the key nature conservation decisions in newly independent Estonia was to preserve the continuity of protected areas: areas that had been granted protection in the Soviet era remained under conservation in the Republic of Estonia, regardless of land ownership. The Protection of Natural objects Act enacted in 1994 served as the foundation of this principle. From the mid-1990s, nature conservation in Estonia has been characterized by assumption of the obligations of EU nature conservation and applying the concept of the nature protection outside protected areas, cross-sectoral approach to preserving landscape. Currently, the primary basic piece of legislation governing nature conservation in Estonia is the Nature Conservation Act (2004). As of 2010, Estonia is party to around ten international treaties that directly or indirectly deal with protection of flora and fauna.