

inspirational book

A joint approach to nature

in the main water systems

Benefits for nature  
as a collective challenge



LIFE IP

} Deltanatuur



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# Foreword

It is my great pleasure to present to you this ‘inspirational book’: A joint approach to nature. This book and the Nature Benefits Plan in Main Water Systems jointly comprise the main outcomes of the LIFE IP Delta Nature programme. For me, the LIFE IP Delta Nature programme was an extraordinary journey with an inspiring steering group. It was a journey that led us towards collaboratively thinking outside of the box and coming up with new ideas.

The final result is something we can all be proud of: practical ideas for how we can maximise benefits for nature, not just in specific Natura 2000 areas but also more broadly in those regions (the Nature Benefits Plan), as well as how different parties can work together on effective approaches to achieving those benefits – the topic of this ‘inspirational book’!

Both products are based on the same core idea: we need robust ecosystems that fit into the natural processes of a particular region or water system. This calls for insights, flexibility and learning to deal with the unpredictability of nature. It also calls for clear decisions, such as the decision to use the ecosystem as a guiding principle (along with water and soil) and to mainstream nature inclusivity in our work.

Taking a joint approach to nature is something we can do at multiple levels: in policymaking, in regional development and within specific programmes and projects. This ‘inspirational book’ provides tips that are relevant at all those levels, so that stakeholders can more easily and effectively achieve benefits for nature.

We identified these tips with the help of scientists and in particular by learning from real-life field projects that served as incubators for the new approach. After all, effective approaches to coordination and collaboration must be rooted in practical experience. The input and leadership of colleagues in those real-life field projects was therefore crucial to our success.

I feel certain that this ‘inspirational book’, in tandem with the Nature Benefits Plan, will be a helpful resource for policymakers, contracting authorities and project implementation partners as they play their part in creating a stronger and more robust natural environment for the Netherlands.

**Donné Slangen**

Chair of the LIFE IP Delta Nature steering group



# 1. Introduction

We need to come up with a different approach to achieving nature objectives in our main water systems and we also need to establish better forms of collaboration. That is the conclusion drawn by the LIFE IP Delta Nature programme, which has also delivered the ingredients for more effective ways of approaching these objectives.



## 1.1 If you work on nature... you touch on other interests too. And vice versa.

### **The Netherlands depends on nature and the services it provides**

Diverse nature reserves, robust ecosystems, high biodiversity, the restoration of the typical natural environment of the delta. When it comes to our natural environment, we have big ambitions and statutory obligations. That is not surprising, because these ambitions and obligations are very much in the interest of the Netherlands. Not just because of the intrinsic value of nature, but also because of the essential services that nature provides for our health, agriculture, horticulture, fisheries, recreation, well-being and so on: collectively known as ecosystem services.

### **And yet, it is difficult to get nature projects off the ground.**

Time after time, nature projects come up against substantial obstacles. Often, it is tricky just to bring the various nature objectives together: Natura 2000, the Water Framework Directive, the Netherlands Nature Network and so on. It is even trickier to combine these nature objectives with other functions within a particular area, such as water safety, recreation, fisheries and shipping. Success then depends on the determination of different parties to achieve an outcome together. However, not every party perceives that as a shared interest, not even when that party is itself ultimately dependent on nature's ecosystem services.

“Consequently, many nature projects spend a disproportionate amount of money, energy and time on the collaborative process. At the same time, the benefits to our natural environment often fall short of our ambitions and obligations.”

### **The solution: a different approach to nature**

It is time for a different approach. If we want to make real progress on our nature objectives in the main water systems, we will need to take a different approach to achieving nature benefits. The LIFE IP Delta Nature programme has delivered new insights into this.

#### **LIFE IP Delta Nature: achieving greater nature benefits in the Netherlands**

The LIFE IP Delta Nature programme has given impetus to nature in the main water systems with new insights into nature objectives and the challenges associated with approaching those objectives. The two main outcomes of the programme are:

- the Nature Benefits Plan in Main Water Systems 2021: a step-by-step approach for achieving robust ecosystems in the main water systems, as a foundation for our nature objectives.
- a joint approach to nature: 'benefits for nature' as a collective challenge (this 'inspirational book').

A joint approach to nature is the result of a large number of research projects, case studies, the monitoring of collaborations and discussions. The insights provided in this 'inspirational book' are based on the input of scientists, project leaders, contracting authorities, hands-on experts and other stakeholders.

## 1.2 Effective approaches to nature benefits: new ingredients

As a contracting authority, how do you set the right prerequisites for achieving nature objectives in the main water systems? As a project leader, how do you foster effective collaborations? This 'inspirational book' draws on research and case studies to set out the ingredients for a new approach, centred on the natural environment of the main water systems.

### **Consolidating nature objectives**

Contracting authorities for nature projects (national and provincial policymakers) as well as project leaders for implementation projects will benefit from the findings set out in this 'inspirational book'. One important point of entry lies at the national and regional policy level: this is where the fragmentation of various nature objectives and budgets begins. And this is therefore also where part of the solution can be found: join things up, establish over-arching frameworks for the natural environment and pool budgets.

### **See nature as a physical foundation**

Nature is not a function that should compete with other functions. Rather, it is part of the physical foundation, made up of soil, water and ecosystems. This physical foundation determines how we can make sustainable use of our resources. A thorough analysis of the physical foundation, including nature, will bring to light opportunities for comprehensive planning and design.

### **Take a comprehensive approach from day one**

Working towards nature objectives is seldom, if ever, the only pressing task within a particular region. There are almost always other challenges, such as sustainable energy production, creating climate-resilient landscapes, limiting nitrogen emissions, housing construction, etc. Consider all these challenges from the start, from the perspective of the physical foundation, to avoid repeatedly going over the same ground.

## 2. Scrutinising approaches and forms of collaboration



Everyone has a story to tell about project management approaches and collaboration. LIFE IP Delta Nature has added to this existing body of hands-on experience with scientific research and a thorough analysis of monitoring data. This has delivered new insights into opportunities and obstacles to achieving nature benefits.

## 2.1 Insights from science

### **Nature objectives are situated in a range of policy terrains**

Wageningen Environmental Research (WENR) conducted a variety of research projects for LIFE IP Delta Nature, including a study of the governance constraints to implementing Natura 2000 in the main water systems. WENR found that nature objectives for the main water systems arise out of nature policy, water policy and spatial planning policy. The nature objectives from these different policy terrains converge within projects and regions. It then often turns out that not all objectives are compatible with each other.

### **Bringing nature objectives together requires coordination at different governance levels**

In practice, it is tricky to coordinate different nature objectives, not least because policies for nature, water and spatial planning emerge out of multiple governance levels:

- **water policy:** mainly at the national and regional level (for example, the National Water Programme and regional watermanagement plans);
- **nature policy:** mainly at the European level and at provincial levels (such as Natura 2000 and the Netherlands Nature Network);
- **spatial planning policy:** at national, regional and provincial level (local environmental visions, for example).

Bringing together nature objectives therefore requires not just horizontal coordination (between ministries, for example) but also vertical coordination across different governance levels that may not be equivalent in terms of their culture, mandate and dominance. This lack of equivalence can be seen in the difference between a ministry and a local authority, for example, and makes collaboration difficult. An additional dilemma is that those in charge of policy are not always in charge of budgets for their implementation.

“With more parties on board, you ultimately broaden the commitment, but governance becomes more complex: each party brings different interests and financial rules to the table. You end up with an increasingly tangled web.”

### **Collaboration has improved, but coherence needs more work**

The Programmatic Approach to the Main Waters (PAGW) has brought together various parties that work on nature policy and water policy for the main water systems. This national implementation programme aims to establish a robust natural environment in our main water systems, through the restoration of natural processes, the creation of a sufficient number of good-quality habitats and good connections between them. The programme brings together water-based and nature-based objectives, giving an impetus to collaboration. The various participating parties have jointly established targets for 2050 in which the importance of soil, water and ecosystems serves as a guiding principle.

The crucial next step is to strengthen coordination with other aspects of nature and water policy. This would include the conservation objectives articulated in Natura 2000, dealing with the negative impacts of shared use on the natural environment and the frameworks that are therefore needed for issuing permits and for funding management and maintenance.

### **A tangled web of funding streams and responsibilities**

When the consultancy firm Lysias conducted an analysis of funding streams for the natural environment in our main water systems, it revealed a gradual shift in the way that various government authorities interpreted their roles and responsibilities. This evolution has led us to a situation where we have a variety of frameworks and programmes for the natural environment in our main water systems, with a variety of budgets. Now that there is a growing focus on pursuing a comprehensive approach to problems and solutions, we find ourselves dealing with a very complex playing field.

### **Recommendation: comprehensive regional vision and funding strategy**

It is essential to work together well on nature objectives, but this will only be effective if authorities establish supportive prerequisites at regional and national levels. WENR has advised bringing national-level nature objectives together into a single framework and bringing regional-level objectives together into a comprehensive regional vision, anchored in policymaking. Lysias also calls for a comprehensive approach at the regional level and advises bringing together available resources from the various existing programmes to create a multi-year funding strategy. This should be based on the principles of integration, area-specific policy and collective funding.

### **Climate buffers: the innovation dilemma**

Eight nature organisations are working together on ‘natural climate buffers’ in wet regions, with nature and climate adaptation measures being designed in an integrated way. The organisations have joined forces as part of the Coalition for Natural Climate Buffers, and they see this approach as the foundation of comprehensive regional planning. Their efforts align with the national government’s decision for planning to be guided by water and soil considerations.

This approach has already proved effective in solving problems associated with high river-water levels and flooding around cities. Climate buffers can also deliver benefits to other areas, including climate adaptation and mitigation objectives, the energy transition, the nitrogen challenge and housing construction challenges. It is not always easy in practice, particularly because of the ‘innovation dilemma’: it is easier and safer to opt for familiar technical solutions than for less familiar innovative solutions. That is why every regional planning process calls for new, bespoke forms of collaboration.



## **2.2 Insights from the field**

### **Collaboration is a prerequisite to achieving nature benefits**

LIFE IP Delta Nature included the monitoring of approaches to nature-related projects in the main water systems (in 2017 and 2021). A number of project organisations participated in this by completing a questionnaire. The results showed that project leaders typically faced challenges related to faltering collaboration between participating parties and a lack of clarity about roles and responsibilities. These challenges can partly be attributed to the fragmentation of nature objectives and budgets across various policy terrains (see 2.1). A lack of clarity about the scope of projects and their outcomes often leads to extensive consultation without the parties actually moving any closer together.

### **Effective collaboration as a success factor**

The completed questionnaires revealed that choosing the right type of collaboration with the right parties is a key success factor for projects. Conversely, a less optimal choice can lead to a never-ending process. P2, a project management agency, and Daalder, a consultancy firm, developed a tool for LIFE IP Delta Nature called the Gear Box: an instrument that enables project leaders to design effective collaborations (see the box in chapter 3). The Gear Box can also be used to identify why a partnership is not running smoothly.

### Partnership or network

The creators of the Gear Box analysed the collaborations involved with various nature projects in the main water systems and provided recommendations based on those analyses. The analyses revealed that projects are more likely to succeed if the parties:

- work together to identify comprehensive objectives;
- work together at the start to establish the quality standards that the outcome needs to meet;
- opt for tailored forms of partnership at both the local and regional level;
- explicitly articulate the nature of the collaboration: so that it is either literally a *partnership* (with partners pooling contributions and the burden of risk) or a *network* (maintaining lines of communication and voicing interests, often without a mandate).

The latter point in particular was an eye opener for some project leaders: if your collaboration has the characteristics of a network, you cannot expect to come up with concrete solutions for high-quality, comprehensive regional benefits. A network can, however, serve other purposes: it can help parties communicate, keep each other up to date and get to know each other's priorities. It can also identify opportunities for parties to actually come together in a partnership.

“You often have to devote more energy to the process than to achieving the actual objectives.”

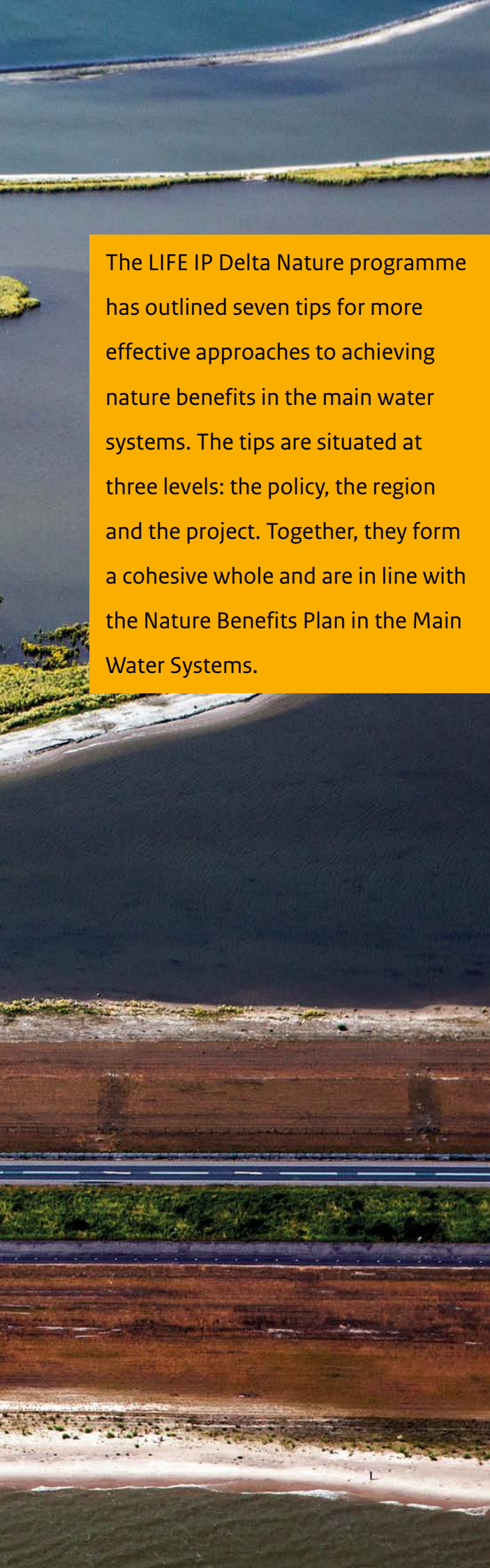
#### Eems-Dollard: cross-border collaboration

The Eems-Dollard estuary is located partly in the Netherlands and partly in Germany. Both countries share responsibility for managing the quality of its natural environment. In recent years, they have invested in a collective message: Germany and the Netherlands are working together to achieve an ecologically healthy estuary with strong ecological resilience and the ability to withstand the impacts of climate change.

For a long time, the collaboration between the two countries was limited to exchanging information. A meeting between the directors from both countries led to a recognition that this was a 'network collaboration' and that there was an opportunity to work together more intensively on projects in some areas. Three concrete projects were chosen for this, including the creation of a shared sediment management strategy. The contracting authority was assigned to the Eems-Dollard sub-committee within the Permanent Dutch-German Border Waters Commission.

An aerial photograph of a coastal waterway. The water is dark blue-grey, winding through several islands and peninsulas covered in dense green vegetation. In the foreground, a multi-lane road with a blue and white striped center line runs horizontally across the frame. Below the road, there is a strip of brownish, marshy land and a sandy beach meeting the ocean. The overall scene is a mix of natural coastal features and human infrastructure.

3. Ingredients for effective approaches to achieving nature benefits in the main water systems



The LIFE IP Delta Nature programme has outlined seven tips for more effective approaches to achieving nature benefits in the main water systems. The tips are situated at three levels: the policy, the region and the project. Together, they form a cohesive whole and are in line with the Nature Benefits Plan in the Main Water Systems.

### 3.1 Seven tips for effectively approaching nature objectives

## A clear policymaking framework



#### 1 Consider the ecosystem as a guiding principle, along with water and soil

The Government's National Strategy on Spatial Planning and the Environment stipulates that planning in the Netherlands be based on water and soil considerations. Ecosystems are inextricably linked to the water and soil system. By creating robust ecosystems, appropriate to the natural water and soil system, we can create a sustainable foundation for nature objectives as well as for the use and management of other activities.



#### 2 Approach nature benefits with a single, clear framework for all nature objectives

Bring national and provincial nature objectives for the main water systems together into a single clear framework and make it easy to link budgets together. Ensure that the objectives of Natura 2000 and the Water Framework Directive are seamlessly connected by considering the entire ecosystem. This is a prerequisite for successful projects. If it is well organised at the policy level, there is then no need to undergo negotiations for each individual project. That saves a lot of time and energy.



#### 3 Make nature inclusivity the norm for all types of usage and design

Nature is important to everyone. Any problems in the natural environment will hinder the activities of businesses in the immediate vicinity and further afield. This includes fisheries, ferry services, energy production and agriculture. The nitrogen crisis over the past few years has made this crystal clear. It means everyone has a stake in achieving nature objectives. Be explicit about this and ensure that policies standardise nature-inclusive processes and designs in every sector.

“Incorporating nature inclusivity from the start is more effective than compensating nature after the event.”

## Area-specific and comprehensive



### 4 Identify the physical foundation in an area-specific way

The physical foundation comprises water, soil and the ecosystem, and its appearance will vary depending on the characteristics of a particular area. If we are really going to centre water, soil and the ecosystem as a guiding principle, it is important for that physical foundation to be concretely defined within a regional planning process. Nature objectives must be based on this physical foundation, but so too must the use and design of other functions. That is why it is important that all users work together to clearly identify the physical foundation and any potential improvements to it. The area-specific physical foundation forms the link between policy and implementation projects.



### 5 Operate in both a nature-inclusive and comprehensive way: it is the reality of this era

Every square kilometre in the Netherlands has to serve multiple objectives, including the main water systems. This is particularly true now that we are facing major social challenges such as restoring biodiversity, dealing with climate change, the energy transition, housing construction challenges and the agricultural transition. We cannot do everything everywhere, so we have to make choices. Nature objectives can also conflict with each other within a particular region. That is why it is advisable to start by establishing a comprehensive regional vision (based on the physical foundation) and to formalise this at the administrative level. Such a vision also needs a shared area-specific funding strategy that brings together the various sectoral budgets, drawing on the duty of care principle, the user pays principle and the compensation principle.

### Spuimonding: nature and the vitality of villages

Two special nature reserves are located at the mouth of the river Spui in Haringvliet: the Korendijkse Slikken and the Beninger Slikken. The Society for the Preservation of Nature in the Netherlands (Natuurmonumenten) wants to boost these nature reserves by adding the neighbouring Leenheeren polder to them. This plan was initially met with resistance, because the polder includes productive agricultural land. That is why previous attempts to make the polder a Natura 2000 area were largely abandoned. But local administrators and residents have changed their minds since then.

The municipality of Hoeksche Waard is an ageing community. Essential facilities, such as the supermarket, are at risk of disappearing. The Society for the Preservation of Nature took stakeholders to the local nature reserves to show them how these reserves attract a lot of visitors who then also buy something from the supermarket, go for a meal in the local cafe and get their bicycle repaired. This led to a change of heart, with people recognising that nature development can be a way of maintaining the vitality of a village.

“The State has to play an active role in ensuring that objectives are approached in a comprehensive way and that they are regionally coherent.”

## Programmes and projects with achievable objectives



### 6 Ensure that all parties share responsibility for a comprehensive solution (spare the project leader)

Virtually all projects, including nature projects, have multiple objectives. In almost every case, this leads to a lengthy and complicated process whereby each party wants to get the best outcome for their own interests. Contracting authorities for these projects need to establish better prerequisites if they are to achieve genuinely comprehensive solutions. Establishing a comprehensive regional vision is an important first step (tip 5). When such a vision is translated into projects, it is essential that all parties share responsibility for the full result. This could be achieved by, for example, creating comprehensive covenants in which parties set agreements relating to the quality they all expect of the final outcome and on the collective funding of the project.



### 7 Be careful in choosing forms of collaboration

When parties have to work together to achieve certain objectives, they need to use a different form of collaboration than when they are just maintaining a dialogue or brainstorming together in a casual way. That is why it is important to make it explicit from the start what the collaboration is supposed to achieve and what form of collaboration is the best fit. Often, a particular programme or project will need more than one form of collaboration. The Gear Box can be helpful in making a choice (see box). It also helps if a clear escalation pathway is identified at the start of the project, in the event of a stalemate. The project leader can then direct the decision-making process to the right place, for example if it turns out that different project objectives cannot be reconciled.

“Be willing to go back to your contracting authority if you haven’t been provided with the right prerequisites.”

# 7 tips for effectively approaching nature objectives



## Policy steering



1. Consider the ecosystem as a guiding principle, along with water and soil



2. Approach nature benefits with a single, clear framework for all nature objectives



3. Make nature inclusivity the norm for all types of usage and design



## Steering in spatial areas



4. Identify the physical foundation in an area-specific way



5. Operate in both a nature-inclusive and comprehensive way: it is the reality of this era



## Project management



6. Ensure that all parties share responsibility for a comprehensive solution (save the project leader)



7. Be careful in choosing forms of collaboration

### The Gear Box: working together in the right gear

The Gear Box is a tool that helps with the effective design of a new form of collaboration. It can also be used to analyse why an existing collaboration is faltering and what to do about it. The Gear Box can therefore be used to design, test and improve collaborations.

It does this based on four key questions:

1. Is the collaboration possible at all?
2. Does the collaboration make sense?
3. Is the collaboration working?
4. Is the collaboration delivering results?

The tool provides a number of checkpoints for each question.

The four questions can be seen as a gear box: if you work through each gear in the right way, you achieve an effective collaboration. If the collaboration falters, you need to switch down a gear and analyse the questions again.

## 3.2 Coordination with the Nature Benefits Plan in the Main Water Systems 2021

### Two ambitions

The tips given above for approaching nature objectives cross over in various ways with the strategy set out in the Nature Benefits Plan in the Main Water Systems 2021. The Nature Benefits Plan links together two ambitions: achieving Natura 2000 objectives in the main water systems and creating robust ecosystems.

### Achieving nature objectives at the national level

The Nature Benefits Plan includes a step-by-step plan for achieving nature objectives in the main water systems at a national level. If necessary, the Netherlands is prepared to modify the specific regional objectives if they appear to be incompatible with a robust ecosystem. This is in line with the tip to establish a clear framework for nature objectives (see tip 1).

### Robust ecosystems as a foundation

A central pillar of the Nature Benefits Plan is the role of robust ecosystems: ecosystems that fit in with the natural processes of a particular region or water system. By creating robust ecosystems, we can create a sustainable foundation for nature objectives. This fits in with the idea of making the physical foundation of water, soil and ecosystems the guiding principle for design, management and use (tip 3). That is why it is essential for the physical foundation to be defined collectively with all the relevant parties and to be formalised administratively. This is also an important strategic step in the Nature Benefits Plan in the Main Water Systems.

### Oostvaardersoevers: new connection, new parties

Oostvaardersoevers is a plan for connecting the natural environment of the Markermeer lake with the diked marshland of the Oostvaardersplassen and Lepelaarplassen nature reserves. All three regions will benefit from the plan. The connection will enable the exchange of nutrients and animals, making the ecosystems more robust.

The process of looking 'over the dike' has also generated new connections between different parties. LIFE IP has helped introduce the plan into the IJsselmeer area regional agenda and into Panorama Markermeer-IJmeer. National and regional authorities have already come up with a preferred alternative and worked together to put funding in place. For the next phase – the plan elaboration – the parties involved will seek to identify a suitable form of collaboration, which will include using the Gear Box.

# 4. New steps



More effective approaches to nature objectives are both possible and necessary. The LIFE IP Delta Nature programme has delivered new insights into this. Those insights have resulted in the seven tips provided. But that does not mean there is nothing else to say on the topic of effective approaches to achieving these objectives: some of the tips also call for political-administrative decision making. This requires administrators to have the courage to take those new future-proof steps.

#### **Clear decisions**

Important prerequisites for effective approaches to achieving nature objectives include joining up the various objectives and budgets (bringing them together into a single framework), defining nature as being part of the physical foundation and making nature inclusivity a guiding principle of all functions. This calls for clear decision making at the national and regional level.

#### **Comprehensive regional vision**

Creating a comprehensive regional vision also requires political-administrative input. These regional visions will have administrators deciding which challenges are to be taken on within a specific region and what budgets are available for achieving a comprehensive final outcome. They give project leaders a clear framework at the start of a project and mean these discussions will not be necessary for each individual project. This can accelerate the process.

#### **Effective approaches and collaborations: next steps**

The insights and tips in this 'inspirational book' will be used in the Programmatic Approach to the Main Waters (PAGW) and the Nature Benefits Plan in the Main Water Systems. They will also feed into the new LIFE IP projects All4Biodiversity and Climate Adaptation.



## Publication details

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