

Lizard Lane, Management Plan Audit

On 9 April 2018 a visit was paid to the Lizard Lane in Soest, Netherlands to audit the Conservation Management Plan of the proposed VCA-area Lizard Lane. I met with Renée van Assema, the ecologist of the drinking water company Vitens, and Irma Bakkers of the Utrechts Landschap. They are the responsible leaders of the Lizard Lane initiative.

Introduction. Lizard Lane is the proposed heath corridor between three large natural areas: the water extraction location Soestduinen, the military base Vlasakkers and the former airbase Soesterberg managed by the provincial 'Utrechts Landschap'.

The project falls under the Green Deal of the Dutch Government, a programme to remove barriers to help sustainable initiatives get off the ground and biodiversity benefitting from new infrastructure works. The project is an initiative of the drinking water company Vitens and the Utrechts Landschap and also involves the transmission system operator Tennet, the Ministry of Defense, the municipality of Soest and a private landowner.

Objective. The objective of the Lizard Lane is to create an ecological corridor between the areas in order to enhance the natural ecosystems with viable populations of amongst others reptiles and insects.

Overview of the conservation area. The Conservation Management Plan contains a concise description of the area and its conservation. A map is included with location, size and ecoregions. The area is a 3 km long corridor with an area of 22 ha of heath and fringing forest. It is next to a mayor railway track and situated under a high voltage power line.

Biodiversity baseline conditions. The area exists of disturbed woodland and degraded heathland. In the past part of the area has been cleared for heathland but due to a lack of maintenance the heath is partly replaced by grasslands and shrubs. The baseline conditions of the Lizard Lane are described in the management plan. The area connects the former air force base Soesterberg, a large unique nature reserve, the military training ground Vlasakkers, a rich heath and oak stobbes area and the water extraction location Soestduinen. These three areas have their own management plans with baseline conditions. The management plan describes the invasive species and the plan to eradicate them.

Conservation impact assessment. In the development of the management plan the stakeholders were closely involved and the plan gives the requirements and wishes of each of the 6 stakeholders. A SWAT analysis addresses the key internal and external factors potentially impacting the achievement of the objectives. The external broader landscape analysis gives the importance and the high potential of addressing the opportunities. The SWAT analysis is based on specific area-based conservation in the support of the broader landscape management.

Conservation actions & monitoring. The management plan includes a set of conservation intentions. During the audit, the long-term objective was discussed. This is an increase of biodiversity in the area and the strengthening of the corridor function between the major conservation areas. The conservation measures are focussed on the restoration of the heath and the fringing vegetation in line with the requirement under the high voltage power line.

The management plan follows the core guidance for establishing and reporting on a conservation area as set out in the IFC Performance Standards. In the context of the IFC Performance Standards notably PS 6 the Lizard Lane corridor can be considered as halfway between a modified and natural habitat. Natural habitats are areas composed of viable assemblages of plant and/or animal species of

largely native origin, and/or where human activity has not essentially modified an area's primary ecological functions and species composition. The performance standards request that natural habitats will not be significantly converted or degraded. The objective of the corridor is the restoration of the degraded areas into natural habitats; the intended operations are directed to that objective.

The relevant organisations cooperate in the management of the biodiversity. The first actions are physical actions like the removal of fences, the removal of the fertile top layer, the removal of invasive species and creation of a dike to shield the railway. An important element is the small-animal passage under the regional highway N413 and probably still other passages. The initial monitoring will be focussed on the restoration of the natural habitats. Further monitoring will be worked out. Key species like the sand lizard and two Red List species of butterflies will be part of the monitoring. Of course as being a corridor the monitoring should be linked to the overall monitoring of the larger landscape. A more detailed monitoring programme will be added to the VCA Management plan as an attachment when ready.

Overall audit assessment. The Lizard Lane corridor was visited on 9 April 2018. The responsible managers of Vitens and of the Utrechts Landschap were interviewed and the conservation area was visited together with them.

The audit considers the assessment of the baseline conditions and the potential impacts, as described in the management plan, to be sufficient for establishing an effective set of conservation actions. The intention is to create a natural habitat adapted to the local conditions and requirements of the high voltage power line and the private landowner. The planned actions are coherent, strategic and realistic and will have a positive impact on the biodiversity of the proposed VCA corridor area but also on the larger landscape.

The Lizard Lane provides an important corridor. The VCA status could strengthen the wider conservation importance by considering to expand the corridor with the three larger conservation areas under one VCA regime.

The audit considers the management plan compliant with the VCA Standard. During the coming year the foreseen actions are the reconstruction of the area with reshaping of the fringes, restoration of the heath and removal of the exotic species in the field and the construction of a small-animal passage under the regional highway.

The monitoring of key species like the sand lizard and two species of butterflies will be elaborated and added to the management plan.

Conclusion: My conclusion is that the Lizard Lane conservation corridor should be registered as a Verified Conservation Area (VCA).

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