

The « Farmer and the Bird » project **The starting point : a bird**

Everything emerged from the necessity of insuring the survival of a bad known, shy and secretive Bird : the **Corncrake (Crex crex)**, and from a region known as one of the nicest european natural wetlands : the **angevines valleys** consisting both of Loire valley and Basses Vallées Angevines Valleys.

These vast meadows are a main flood expansion area, and have the most important biological diversity of the whole region. But without the pactive and knowledge of the farmers, they would be colonized by low tree vegetation formations and would loose their qualities.

In the 90'ies, menaces were hard on the survival of the Corncrake inhabiting these valleys, resulting from the following phenomenons :

- Important trend to agricultural abandon : flooding characteristics being a hard agricultural constraint, added to rationalisation & optimization of herbal production tendancies, resulted in the reduction of the number of farmers.
- Then, abandonned meadows and increase of poplar plantations resulted in the closing of landscapes characteristics, reduction of biodiversity interest, and slowing down of flood evacuation capacities.

The classification of the Basses Vallées Angevines as a **Site of Scientific Interest** in **1984, was the starting point of the recognition of its importance.**

A COLLECTIVE AKNOWLEDGMENT

At the beginning of the 90'ies, all the actors of the valleys were mobilised because they started to get really concerned by lmand abandonment and the disappearance of an exceptional habitat.

Farmers, agricultural professional organisations, ecologists, hunters, fishers, foresters, llocal communities and towns, administrations... worked together to create a Steering Committee which elaborated the first agri-environmental measures Programm. These voluntary contracts for farmers, aim at maintaining meadows and at delaying hay cutting as late as possible in the season for birfds in general, and for the Corncrake in particular.

FARMERS INVOLVED

Concerned by their valleys, farmers developped a unique farming context by adapting their farmingg techniques to the habitat to be protected (grazing following flood constraints, cows fed on grass, hedge maintenance, hay cutting...).

Their regrouped in june 2001, and formed an organisation named « Farmers of the Angevines Valleys », and set their objectives :

- Insure the lpong term survivance of their farms, through preserving the environment so as to maintain and promote the natural equilibriums of these valleys
- Share their passion
- Have seats representing Farmers to participate to the valleys developement decisions.

THEIR APPROACH :

The work started when a group of farmers expressed their wish to get involved in a commercial promoting approach for their beef meat. A specific Prescription identifies a precise territory and the cows alimentation on grass.

At the same time, an incitative programme « cows meat on extensive herbal systems » was proposed by ANDA (Association Nationale pour le Développement Agricole), aiming at sustaining and accompany the emergence of local development projects.

The action started in autumn 97, with an initial state of meat farming in these sectors. The Conseil Général de Maine et Loire (département) gave its aid to the project and allowed it to be carried out by

cofinancing Advice and Studies time with ADASEA & Chambre d'Agriculture. The **Trade mark « The Farmer and the Bird, beef from the valleys »** was put on the market in **august 2001**. It has the originality to show the strong link that bonds the work of a Farmer and its actions towards the environment/the survival of a menaced species.



« **The Farmer and the Bird, beef from the valleys** » funds its approach on the Prescription « **Bœuf Verte Prairie** » (BVP) developed by Interbev as the very base to get access to selling the meat in average surface Commercial Shops. The meat can then benefit from the certification **Critères Qualité Certifiés (CQC)**.

The communication concept BVP aims at promoting beef meat traditional products issued from specialised animal races. BVP is centered on the quality of products and food security but has nothing to do with preserving the environment.

Therefore, this base is completed by a Chart specific to « **The Farmer and the Bird, beef from the valleys** ». This makes the specificity of these farms towards promoting natural habitats, preserving the environment and food quality. The farmers becoming members establish a direct link between the production system (grass importance) and their engagement towards environment (agri-environmental contracts).

Around 30 farmers have become members (out of a potential of 200).

A POSITIVE AND FULL OF HOPE EVOLUTION :

Since the beginning of agri-environmental measures, the situation really changed with respect to meadows maintenance (farms maintenance, reduction of abandoned surfaces), poplar plantations (specific forestry settlements were developed) and natural habitats preservation for their botanical and ornithological interest.

Privileged relations were constructed between farmers and the different local partners of the valleys. This knowledge resulted in very rich exchanges and improved comprehension of everyone's points of vue. Spontaneous contacts with LPO are now a current practice for farmers who will let LPO know about the first Corncrake's arrivals in spring, for example.

Moreover, being completely recognized for their knowledge and practice was an essential point for valleys farmers, and corresponds really to the idea they have of their profession : maintaining the landscape and really be farmers (grow and produce).

On the side of product promotion, the gain increase is not only economical, but also in a better knowledge of the production channels, of its quality signs, and of the possibilities to break free and identify while respecting EEC settlements. The relation to shops was also a great discovery, encouraging the necessity to pursue information et organise farm visits for consumers. The real start of meat commercialisation in a supermarket **Système U** was done in january 2004. After this test year, and the in focuses that were necessary on both sides, sells are now regular. The next step will be to encounter other Supermarkets' Directors to enlarge the number of selling points.

Unexpected but important gain, this approach allowed farmers of the group to :

- keep hope in their production**
- have the privilege to present their actions and profession** to different organisations. They can therefore better explain and show the day to day fonctionment of a valley farm.
- confirm themselves as actors / relationships for the valleys' future.**