

Information Sheet on Ramsar Wetlands

1. Country: Belgium 2. Date: 15-06-92 3. Ref: BE004

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5. Name of wetland: The 'Blankaart' and 'Yzerbroeken'

6. Date of Ramsar designation: 27-09-84 (160 ha), extended to 2360 ha in 1988.

7. Geographical coordinates: 50°59'N, 02°51'E (50°57'-51°01'N, 2°47'N-2°51'E)

8. General location: Located in the Province of West-Vlaanderen, in the municipalities of Diksmuide and Lo-Reninge.

9. Area: 2360 ha

10. Wetland type: S 4 T* M 6

11. Altitude: 3 - 5 m (Ostend reference level, average lowest low tide)

12. Overview: A shallow fresh water lake and a complex of seasonally flooded grasslands in the floodplain of the river Yzer. The site is internationally important for wintering waterfowl. On a Belgian scale, the area has also important breeding populations of ducks and meadow birds. The lake and some pastures are owned and managed by a private nature conservation organisation.

13. Physical features:

The 'Blankaart' is a shallow fresh-water lake and originates from earlier peat exploitation (since 1550). The total 'Blankaart' area is about 70 ha with 30 ha of open water. The lake has gradually been silted up, resulting in wide expanses of reedbeds and fringing willow. At most places, the water depth of the lake is below 1 meter. The lake is located in the polders, at the edge of a higher sandy loam area. Water from this sandy loam area flows into the Blankaart lake and then to the river Yzer where a pump is controlling the water level of about 1600 ha.

The lake is surrounded by large, wet grasslands (mainly hay fields) in the floodplain of the river Yzer. The 'Yzer' is a small river (75 km). Due to a large sluice system in Nieuwpoort, there are no tidal effects since a very long time. As the water of the river Yzer can only be discharged into the sea twice a day with low tide, some parts of the river valley (maximum 4000 ha) and the Blankaart area are flooded during periods of high rainfall, mainly in winter.

14. Ecological features:

The water of the Blankaart lake contains almost no vegetation because of the hypertrophication (see further). Since the end of the 70thies, the extensive reedbeds have been largely overgrown by fringing willows. This is caused by a lowering of the water table and the silting up of the lake. The reedbeds are colonised by species as *Urtica dioica* and *Calystegia sepium*, causing a decline of rare species as *Lathyrus palustris* and *Ranunculus lingua*.

The ecological character of the grasslands in the valley of the Yzer has also changed markedly during the last decades, mainly by a lowering of the water level resulting in an agricultural improvement. The grasslands are now dominated by artificial mono-specific cultures of *Lolium multiflorum*, etc. At the transition of the polders to the sandy loam area, there are still some hedgerows. In the centre of the Ramsar area, a large artificial water reservoir (60 ha) has been constructed in 1975-76.

15. Land tenure/ownership of:**(a) site**

The 'Blankaart' lake and some 5 ha of the surrounding hay fields are owned by the largest private nature conservation organisation in Flanders ('Natuurreservaten'). The grasslands in the floodplain of the 'Yzer' are the private ownership of a large number of people, mainly farmers.

(b) surroundings

The surroundings of the area exists of more intensively managed agricultural land, mainly owned by farmers.

16. Conservation measures taken:

Since 1959, the Blankaart lake is protected as a nature reserve of which 71 ha is owned by 'Natuurreservaten', a private nature conservation organisation. An adjacent park (10 ha) is owned by the state. A management plan for this total area of 81 ha has been implemented. Winter mowing and removal of willows is carried out to maintain the reedbeds.

Fishing or shooting is not allowed.

Originally, the Ramsar area was restricted to the lake and its immediate surroundings (160 ha). In 1988, the Ramsar site was extended by approximately 2200 ha as compensation for the reduction of another Ramsar site 'Galgenschoor' near Antwerp "in the urgent national interest" (Article 4.2 of Convention text). However, no specific or additional protective measures have been taken as a consequence of their inclusion in the Ramsar-list.

On physical planning maps, the Blankaart lake is designated as nature reserve and the surrounding grasslands along the river Yzer as ecologically important agricultural landscape.

The total area has also been designated as a Special Protection Area (SPA) under the European Community Wild Bird Directive (date: 04/09/79). The Belgian Government has received however twice a warning of the European Commission because of an insufficient protection of the area in practice.

17. Conservation measures proposed but not yet implemented:

There are plans for dredging the Blankaart lake. Indeed, silting up of the lake - mainly as a result of changed agricultural practices during the last decades - is still a major problem.

There has been an agreement within the Flemish Government about the maintainance of appropriate water levels but the local water authorities refuse to fulfil this agreement.

There are also plans for a pilot project in this area in which farmers will receive a financial compensation for farming in a manner that is less harmful for nature.

18. Current land use: principal human activities in:**(a) site nature conservation**

agriculture (mainly hay fields and cattle)

water recreation on the river Yzer (with increasing intensity during recent years)

(b) surroundings/catchment

agriculture (more intensive, changes of permanent grasslands to arable land)

19. Disturbance/threats, included changes in land use and major development projects:

(a) at the site:

The water quality of the Blankaart lake and the river Yzer is very bad due to agricultural pollution and the absence of sewage pipes in some of the surrounding villages. This eutrophication, in combination with the lowering of the water table for agricultural development (which is part of the policy of the local Polder authorities) seriously affects the ecosystems of the Blankaart reserve. A severe ruderalisation of the reedbeds is one of the results. The reed vegetation has become totally overgrown by competitive species as *Urtica dioica*, *Calystegia sepium* and *Calamagrostis canescens*. Several species of reed birds have disappeared during the last decades: Bittern *Botaurus stellaris*, Great Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus arundinaceus*, Water Rail *Rallus aquaticus*,...

The lowering of the water level also seriously affects the grasslands (hay fields) in the Yzer valley. As a result of decreased flooding, better drainage and nutrient input, earlier and more frequent mowing becomes a general practice. This causes conflict with breeding birds and gives plant species no chance to seed. A serious problem is the over-fertilization in the area. This even gives problems for the catchment of drinking water. Further, there are plans to build a new pumping station, although these seem to be postponed very recently.

A reallocation is planned in the ecologically most valuable part of the floodplain of the Yzer, although land consolidation has been announced to respect ecological values.

(b) surroundings:

The intensive agriculture in the higher sandy loam area and the absence of sewage pipes in some surrounding villages are responsible for the eutrophication of the Blankaart lake and the ditches in the floodplain of the river Yzer. Sediments from agricultural land in the sandy loam area (arable land) are causing a silting up of the Blankaart lake.

20. Hydrological and physical values:

Water from the Blankaart lake and the river Yzer is used for drinking purposes. The water is pumped up in a large reservoir, in the centre of the Ramsar site. The bad water quality however has become a serious problem.

As the river Yzer can flood free in a large area of about 4000 ha during high rain falls (mostly Ramsar site), inundations in other parts of the valley (with villages and improved farmland) are prevented.

21. Social and cultural values:

The nature reserve of the Blankaart is very important for conservation education and scientific research. A visitor centre is run by the managing organisation 'Natuureservaten'. Boating on the river Yzer becomes an increasing water recreation aspect.

22. Noteworthy fauna:

Internationally important for wintering waterfowl and waders. Some maximum numbers of duck species during the last winters are: Wigeon *Anas penelope*: 19200, Teal *Anas crecca*: 4900, Gadwall *Anas strepera*: 160, Shoveler *Anas clypeata*: 850.

Also large number of waders, especially during large floods of the river Yzer: e.g. in November-December 1991: Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus*: 19000, Dunlin *Calidris alpina*: 4200, Snipe *Gallinago gallinago*: 3600 and Ruff *Philomachus pugnax*: 1350.

Raptors in winter include Hen Harrier *Circus cyaneus* (20-40), Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus* (3-4) and Merlin *Falco columbarius* (3-5).

Important breeding birds are Little Grebe (10-25 pairs), Shoveler *Anas clypeata* (100-120 pairs), Garganey *Anas querquedula* (10-20 pairs), Blacktailed Godwit (70-90 pairs), Lapwing (140-170 pairs), Whinchat *Saxicola rubetra* (2-3 pairs) and Marsh Harrier (8-10 pairs) (figures for 1991-1992).

Some mammal species as Ermine *Mustela erminea* are abundant. The otter *Lutra lutra* disappeared in the early 1970ies. A rich fish fauna existed until the sixties, with some commercial exploitation until 1959.

23. Noteworthy flora:

The area has an important botanical value. In the reedbeds of the Blankaart lake, rare species as *Lathyrus palustris* occur. *Ranunculus lingua* has probably disappeared recently. The original water vegetation of the lake, dominated by *Nymphaea alba* and *Nuphar luteum*, as well as *Scirpus lacustris*, has totally disappeared as a result of eutrophication.

Along the ditches in the surrounding wet grasslands occur *Butomus umbellatus*, *Apium inundatum*, *Oenanthe lachenalii*, *Typha latifolia* and *Typha angustifolia*, in the water *Myriophyllum spicatum*, *Zannichellia sp.* etc.

24. Current scientific research and facilities:

Weekly counts of waterfowl and yearly censuses of breeding birds are carried out by the Institute of Nature Conservation. Several hundreds of birds are ringed annually.

Botanical and entomological research is continuing (Ghent University). Frequent control of water quality by the (bevoegde) authorities. Also hydrological research (sedimentation etc.) by the Institute of Nature Conservation.

25. Current conservation education:

'Natuurreservaten', owner of the Blankaart site, has a permanent visitor centre near the lake since 1991. In the same year, a hide has been built near the lake. Every year, there are more than 150 guided excursions in the Blankaart area. During summer holidays, special educational activities are organised for children.

26. Current recreation and tourism:

There are some footpaths trough the area. There is also an increasing water-recreation in the river Yzer (boats, canoes, fishing).

27. Management authority:

Blankaart lake: Natuurreservaten vzw.
Koninklijke St.Mariastraat 105
B-1030 Brussel
Belgium

There is no active management of the large grasslands in the floodplain of the river 'Yzer'.

28. Jurisdiction.

Ministry of the Flemish Community, Department of the Environment and Infrastructure.

29. Bibliographical references:

30. Reasons for inclusion: 3 (a), 3 (c) 1 (a)

31. Map of site: