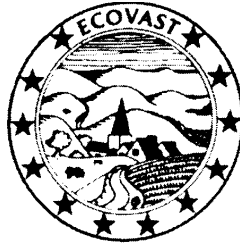


EUROPEAN COUNCIL FOR THE VILLAGE AND SMALL TOWN



A Position Statement on Strategy for the rural regions of Europe ECOVAST 2006

Global society and Europe are now deeply involved in the most serious and dramatic changes of recent history. These are due to several coinciding events – among them are increases in population, bad functioning of food distribution, over-reliance on fossil fuels, rapid progress of technology and scant attention to ethics and ecology of development. Human ecology is the key to sustainability of the built and natural heritage.

Europe can and should take a leading role in addressing and improving responses to global processes, based on an approach that recognises the unique identity of the many different parts of the continent and on experiences drawn from history, culture and agriculture.

In the context of the decisions of the European Parliament, in June 2005, and the European Council, in December 2005, on a **European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development** (EAFRD), ECOVAST presents a POSITION STATEMENT to monitor progress made since 1994 ECOVAST document “A Strategy for Rural Europe”

ECOVAST wishes to see rural communities involved in Integrated Rural Development within and beyond the farm gate – in active partnership with the producers: farms and food, forests, fishing, mineral workings, energy and landscape management.

The unique economic, social, cultural and environmental characteristics of rural small towns and their hinterland of villages and landscape are of specific and high value for all Europeans: in particular, for connecting markets for rural produce with the products and producers in their hinterlands. Small Towns and villages are an asset of Europe, and ECOVAST is embarking on a project entitled Action to Strengthen Small European Towns ‘ASSET’.

The variety of rural contexts (e.g. coastal, islands, peri-urban areas – the landscapes around towns, remote places, flood plains and mountain regions) requires to be recognised in Rural Development policy by a flexible approach, enabling local communities in civil society to influence local policies, methods of applying finance and implementation.

The fundamental appearance and characteristic features of European Rural Regions are the landscapes – most of them a result of the labour of farmers throughout history. Other elements of civilisation (e.g. settlements, areas of retail and industry, infrastructure for traffic, energy supply and tourism) are shaping the regions and landscapes but, in the majority of places, agricultural character in its different expressions, including woodland and other habitats, is the basic element of the countryside.

So farmers offer two products to society for which they should receive appropriate income: food and landscape. Production of food has been a central and traditional part of the farmers’ identity,

while "landscape" was created as a by-product of their work. We are fortunate to appreciate the value of this secondary product. Landscape is now beginning to be seen and understood by the public and the governments as an additional part of the farmers' identity. The move towards the "New Agenda 2000" is the European political consequence. The farmers are now paid for their land holdings on an area basis, and also for shaping, caring and developing the landscapes that are distinctive of the rural regions. This desirable approach is an essential component of rural sustainable development.

Many of these issues were addressed in a paper by the European Parliament Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development entitled "A bid from the Countryside" 14 June 2005. It was prepared for the Joint Conference in Brussels of the European Parliament and the European Commission, and it outlined the European Union's future rural development strategy in the light of the Lisbon and Göteborg Agenda.

Attending that Joint Conference, representing ECOVAST, my personal views on three headings of that report were:

Competitiveness, applied globally, can be seen to be damaging the unique qualities of rural places, people and their activities. The imperative for rural areas is not competition but collaboration, partnership and joint working, not least between farmers and others in local communities. Rural areas have to compete, for political support and funding, with urban areas that have more votes per hectare.

Cohesion requires recognition that the trend of rural de-population is now seeing reversal, already prevalent where I live, in the south of the United Kingdom. Although not yet experienced in other states, this 'counter-urbanisation' can lead to a disparity, between relatively wealthy incomers from urban areas and the indigenous rural people, that requires to be addressed. It has some benefits – for example the people moving from urban areas, or from other states, can use and repair traditional rural buildings. They can bring new skills to a locality that can be harnessed for civil society activity. Migration across continents, probably intensified by climate change, may become a greater challenge in the longer term.

Sustainability of rural settlements, landscapes and habitats - the assurance of continuity – requires recognition, whilst acknowledging that landscapes have always been subject to change throughout history. Climate shifts will cause change. Blinkered spatial policies, founded on a priority to settlements that have public transport, can lead to clustering of services in larger urban areas and the withering away of hitherto viable rural places. The landscape, itself a valuable spiritual and economic resource for tourism and an incentive for economic investment, needs local people to manage the animals and vegetation essential to its appearance and habitat. If people are less present in the countryside, the countryside, as we know it, will degenerate.

Now Europe has the historic opportunity to play a universal leading role in offering a distinctive way of addressing the threats of globalisation.

After that conference, and before the June decision of the European Agriculture Ministers, ECOVAST was among the non-government organisations present that supported the apparent consensus in favour of the emerging EAFRD, by issuing a statement entitled "Yes to Rural Europe". That called for rural partnerships at a local level, based on the LEADER approach.

Philip A Turner, President of ECOVAST

Grateful thanks to the following members of ECOVAST who have contributed to this position statement, including: Arthur Spiegler, Austria, Ralf Bokermann, Germany, Michael Dower, England

YES TO RURAL EUROPE

Long-term investment in people and European integration

2005

Meeting together in Brussels on June 13 and 14th, civil society organisations, LEADER groups and national rural networks from 19 EU Member States offer a solution to the current stalemate on the future of Europe.

While Europe is divided between net-payers and beneficiaries, defenders and critics of the CAP and those who are for or against the Constitution, thousands of people working at local level in rural areas have come forward with comprehensive proposals for meeting all three Lisbon objectives of competitiveness, cohesion and sustainability.

Europe is, in fact, mostly rural: rural areas cover 90 percent of Europe's land surface and the majority of its population (57%). The formula proposed by the rural networks - who represent a large proportion of these people - is based on an integrated rural development approach, initiated and promoted by the Commission. This approach benefits all stakeholders and sectors: rural communities, farmers, entrepreneurs, environmental groups, and people who rely on and benefit from rural areas - whether they live in the countryside or the city.

Participative rural development methods, perfected or tested in LEADER, have shown that they mobilise the energy, creativity and resources of the private sector as well as local people, producing more jobs and a better environment for a lower cost than many traditional European Programmes.

The partnerships that have been created in all European countries including the new member states are open to all these stakeholders.

They have succeeded in all three axes of the Rural Development Regulation. Partnerships have brought policies for marketing, new technology and quality for the benefit of producers and the many SME's in rural areas. Local communities benefit from the environment as a resource rather than just a cost. They offer a way of making complex European programmes much more accessible to local people. This is one of the main avenues for European citizens to become involved in shaping the future of Europe.

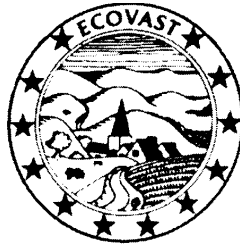
Rural initiatives and movements from 19 countries have come together for the first time to speak with one voice. If Europe really wants to advance towards the Lisbon objectives then it should build on the commitment and experience of existing or emerging rural partnerships. Together with the national governments, it must invest more in integrated rural development.

www.preparenetwork.org www.telefonica.net/web/elard

ECOVAST, with FORUM SYNERGIES, is founder member of the PREPARE Network which has the aim to promote multi-national exchange between those who are involved (as individuals or organisations) in rural development anywhere in Europe.

(ELARD) The European Leader Association for Rural Development is a non-profit making association founded in 1999 and formed by several hundreds of European Local Action Groups (LAG's) that manage the LEADER+ Community Initiative and/or national Programmes for Rural Development, as well as other programmes or initiatives not related directly with rural development

EUROPEAN COUNCIL FOR THE VILLAGE AND SMALL TOWN



POSITION STATEMENT 2006 *Strategy for Rural Europe*

A strategy shows where we are, where we want to go and how we can get there.

In 1994, *ECOVAST published A Strategy for Rural Europe.*

This may be found in full at Appendix 1.

It told us where we were then positioned in the context of policies and action for the continent's countryside.

Many changes affecting the countryside were explained.

It set out what ECOVAST would wish to see happen.

It had proposals. Much has happened in the last decade or so. A great amount of policy change has taken place at European level that has been in line with desires. Much remains to be done at national and local levels. A completely revised strategy is not yet necessary, but it is useful to set out the current position so that fresh objectives can be considered and then the means to achieve them can be addressed.

Below, ECOVAST comments on the current position in Europe related to points 1-15 of the Summary of the 1994 Strategy

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- 1 Europe's countryside, and the people who live in it, are affected by major forces of change. ECOVAST calls for action to protect their well-being, in the interest of all Europeans.

That call to action is a relevant in 2006 as it was in 1994, more so in the light of enlargement and intensifying global influences.

- 2 We seek a balance, and mutual support, between people and the environment. We look for integrated action between different arms of government, and between government and local people. We expect the local people to be consulted and involved.

ECOVAST's International Committee will continue to influence the European Commission, European Parliament and Council of Europe, to implement the Rural Development Programme, respecting subsidiarity, by devolving programmes through national governments to regional and local levels.

ECOVAST's Small Towns Project (ASSET) will provide opportunities for regional governance and agencies to make effective partnership with small towns and their connected villages and to encourage support from regional and national agencies and government.

ECOVAST's national sections and individual members will play their part in influencing national governments to improve the ability of local people, in villages, small towns and wider countryside, to engage in the regional policies and programmes for the benefit of rural areas.

- 3 Determined action is needed to revive and strengthen the economies of Europe's rural

regions.

Much has been achieved the last decade to improve the economic viability of rural areas of member states, notably Ireland and Spain. Action now requires focus upon the member states that joined the EU in 2004, especially those in Central and Eastern Europe, and the current Accession States. ECOVAST, as co-founder (with Forum Synergies) of PREPARE (A pre-accession partnership for rural Europe) will continue to enable the people and non-government organizations to engage effectively with their governments to enable integrated rural development.

- 4 We wish to see farming sustained throughout rural Europe. The emphasis in farming policy should move from quantity of food to quality of food. Farmers should be enabled to gain income through adding value to farm products, and other economic activity. They should be paid to act as stewards of our heritage.

The shifts in the Common Agricultural Policy towards agri-environment funding and rural development provide the springboard for a new emphasis on food production and consumption on a local or regional basis, branding the quality of products with the quality of the landscape and heritage.

- 5 Forestry policy should be reviewed to place greater emphasis on the multiple purposes that it can serve, to benefit the countryside and rural people.

Crops of woodlands and fields should be utilized to contribute to a new localness in the production and consumption of non-fossil fuels, whilst enhancing the pattern of landscapes that encompass and relate to towns and villages.

- 6 Manufacturing and service industries should be encouraged, on a base of regional resources and local entrepreneurship. Telecommunications can greatly assist this process.

Western Europe now has many examples of the strong role that rural enterprise is playing in regional economies, and instances of small enterprises moving from cities to rural locations to enjoy the quality of life. Broadband communication has enabled much more people to work from home. ECOVAST wishes to encourage such enterprise in member states and other European countries that see advantages in reviving rural economic activity through diversification of agricultural buildings and land.

- 7 Rural tourism should be promoted in a way which respects the character and capacity of the receiving areas.

ECOVAST has actively promoted Heritage Trails (in Slovenia, Bulgaria, Croatia and Slovakia) and Wine Trails (the Witranet project in Italy, Greece, Portugal and Austria) and supports the principles of eco-tourism. ECOVAST is in accord with Europa Nostra in concern for the topic addressed in Malta in May 2006, *“Cultural Tourism: Its Encouragement and Control”* exploring the inevitable dichotomy between enjoying the economic, educational and recreational benefits of cultural tourism and the various pressures it places upon the cultural heritage which lies at its heart.

- 8 Rural people should be enabled to gain good housing with modern amenities, while respecting local traditions of building. Government should sustain rural services, and encourage the social and cultural vitality of rural communities.

Sustainability of rural communities is dependent upon access to a range of services and housing that can be afforded by people of rural families that wish to continue to live in the local area. ECOVAST urges national and regional governments to ensure that their policies are carefully ‘proofed’ so that that they may bring benefits to rural areas, and

ECOVAST wishes to see spatial planning policies that have a particular focus upon rural areas, in order to reduce rural disadvantage.

- 9 Governments and peoples should accept the need for long-term stewardship of Europe's heritage of wildlife, landscape and culture. Effective systems should be introduced and pursued in each country to assess, protect and maintain features of heritage value, and to extend public understanding of the heritage.

This heritage, and that of the built environment, contributes greatly to the attraction of investment to rural areas, through tourism and also by encouraging enterprises to seek locations that have quality of life advantages for their employees and clients. Globalization runs counter to cultural heritage.

Bio-diversity and landscape heritage are threatened by changes due to global warming and the perceived economies of scale of global enterprises. ECOVAST desires to emphasise the 'local' – that which relates to the environs of villages and small towns.

Assessment of these issues and wider public understanding is essential. In encouraging life-long learning, ECOVAST desires to co-operate with APURE (the European Rural University).

- 10 Responsibility for action lies with the rural people themselves, and with local authorities and a wide range of non-government organisations.

ECOVAST, in focusing on that local heritage, joins with EUROPA NOSTRA in the strengthening of European citizenship towards sustainable development. The European Rural Development Regulation encourages local partnership. ECOVAST applauds the notion of local governance as extending from purely statutory and elected bodies to include non-government organisations and associations of citizens.

- 11 Regional and national government should recognise the special qualities of rural areas and the needs of rural communities; and should reflect these in integrated Rural Strategies and in all relevant sectoral policies.

ECOVAST believes that the approach to integrated rural development, crystallised in the Cork Declaration of 1996, embracing the social, economic, environmental and cultural dimensions of action for the future sustainability of rural areas, continues to be an effective way forward. ECOVAST urges national and regional governments towards such integrated policy, joining up across departments and divisions of responsibility, and upwards and downwards between the national and local levels.

- 12 The Council of Europe should sustain and extend its interest in the countryside, and particularly in the architectural heritage, the protection of the countryside and coastline, and integrated rural development.

ECOVAST, as an International Non-Government Organisation (INGO) recognised by the Council of Europe, sees the human rights of rural people, to enjoy and be responsible for the rural heritage, to be a fundamental component in the future health of Europe.

- 13 The European Union should rapidly extend its effective involvement in, and stimulus to, rural development and environmental protection, both within the 12 countries and in its aid to Central and Eastern Europe.

With a European Union now of 25 nations and set to grow even larger, the call from ECOVAST is 'join us' – as a member (organization or individual) – or as a partner in the ASSET Small Towns Project, or as a collaborator in influencing those that make decisions, from European to local levels, affecting rural towns and villages. ECOVAST has been pleased to serve on the Rural Development Advisory Committee of the European Commission, and to be invited to rural conferences of the Commissioners and European Parliament, and we will continue to collaborate in influencing policies and programmes.

- 14 The Governments and peoples of Central and Eastern Europe should grasp their new opportunities to strengthen their rural economies and revive their rural culture.

ECOVAST, with PREPARE, is offering its assistance to other NGOs and local organizations in Accession States. The Small Towns Project, ASSET, will encourage the linkages between regional agencies and small towns and villages throughout the present EU and all the continent of Europe.

- 15 ECOVAST, as a pan-European association, is committed to the pursuit of these purposes, and will play an active role in the widespread partnership which is needed to serve and enhance rural Europe.

The challenge now is to extend membership of ECOVAST and activity throughout Europe, engaging with partners to support small towns and to involve local people in the conservation of the heritage of landscape and traditional buildings.

Conservation has been defined as '*... the wise use and continuance of supply of a scarce resource...*' Max Nicholson, *The Environmental Revolution*, Hodder and Stoughton 1969 (Pelican S paperback 1972).

Abundant countryside may diminish without the urgent attention of people who live in urban as well as rural areas. Those who have the skills and motivation to care for rural places are a scarce resource. ECOVAST is keen to see the continuance of both the rural places and the rural people.

APPENDIX 1