Guard or gardener? Rethinking nature stewardship or protection

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Have you ever considered the difference between nature stewardship and nature protection? For most, they are synonyms describing the same thing – a caring attitude towards our environment. However, behind these two concepts lie two different philosophies and relationships with nature. This difference was pointed out decades ago by one of Estonia's greatest thinkers, Uku MASING, who distinguished between two contrasting roles: that of the guard and that of the gardener.

For MASING, **nature protection** *(looduskaitse)* is the role of the guard. It stems from the word "to protect" and presupposes a threat against which nature, as an external object, must be defended with restrictions and prohibitions. This approach sets man and nature as adversaries, where one regulates the actions of the other. **Nature stewardship** *(loodushoid)*, however, is the role of the gardener. It comes from the word "to hold" or "to care for," signifying active care, understanding, and coexistence. A gardener does not stand outside the garden but acts within it, knowing that by keeping the garden, they are also keeping themselves.

As the Estonian polyhistor Uku MASING said: "Nature Protection is defending against someone, while Nature Stewardship is preserving for something."

This philosophy is not mere theory but a practical model. Strong and lasting nature stewardship takes social psychology into account – how people feel about the choices they make. Prohibitions and coercion create conflict and resistance. "Nudging," however, as practiced by the **landowners conservation co-operation**, The Nature Fund *(Loodushoiu Fond)*, invites people to think and choose for themselves.

At the heart of their work is overcoming the "conservation vs. landowner" antagonism. When landowners feel they are not being pushed into a corner but are being listened to, change emerges that is their own and therefore lasting. They did not wait for someone to ban something; they reached agreements themselves. The success of this approach is evident in the results of an Environmental Investment Centre - supported nature protection project led by landowners: 100,000 hectares of land under hunting agreements using lead-free ammunition.

Such collaboration highlighted a new need: being a good gardener also requires knowledge. Building on this success, a comprehensive course and materials on ecological restoration have been developed with the support of the **Erasmus+ WESEM** project. These materials are designed for vocational schools and advisory centers seeking to enhance landowners' knowledge. They offer training in a field where more expertise is needed to become better stewards of the land. They align with the idea of stewardship rather than locking land away from landowners' use.

Ultimately, words and actions have power. Do we create a system based on force and confrontation, placing the landowner in the role of a prisoner monitored by a guard? Or one based on trust and free will, where the landowner is the gardener of their own land? Lasting nature stewardship cannot be created by command – it must grow from free choice and the understanding that by caring for nature, we are caring for ourselves.

More information about the material created by landowners for landowners:wesem-erasmus.eu