



Title

In Belgium; our BirdLife Partner Natuurpunt has crossed the symbolic threshold of 20,000 hectares of nature reserve management. The organisation has been a consistent champion for the protection of Flemish countryside and now 68% of the land it manages is owned by the association, the remainder being rented.

The managed nature reserve area has increased greatly in recent years. With the purchase of a 34 hectares area in the valley of the Dijle River at Mispeldonk (Bonheiden) Natuurpunt now manages 1.5% of the total area of Flanders. The Flemish countryside has become a refuge for many endangered plants and animals so the responsible management of vulnerable species is essential to their survival in the long term. In 2001, when Natuurpunt emerged from a fusion of the associations "Natuurreservaten vzw" and "De Wielewaal", the association managed 10,740 hectares - slightly more than half of what it manages today. This strong growth is made possible thanks to funding from various donors, in particular the Flemish Government, and with the support of fund-raising activities among the general public.

In the rather unique Flemish system, once an area is recognised as a nature reserve by the government it is eligible for much needed grants that allow for proper management and protection measures of the reserves. The official recognition of the Natuurpunt reserves by the Flemish government is a crucial component to the organisation's success in conservation. At present, the Flemish government recognises a total of 14,410 of the 20,000 hectare nature reserves. This means that Natuurpunt pays the costs of a third of the total area managed entirely with private funds.

In recent years, significant efforts have been made by the government to raise the surface area they approve for nature reserve grants. In 2013, the Flemish Ministry for Nature and Environment made great progress in officially recognising an extra 1,200 hectares of nature and this year an extra 1,500 hectares will be added. In terms of conservation, this type of governmental support is a great example of the incredible achievements that environmental groups can accomplish when their goals become a part of the political agenda.