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## WORLD HERITAGE CULTURAL NOMINATION – IUCN COMMENTS

### SÖDRA ÖLANDS ODLINGSLANDSKAP (THE AGRICULTURAL LANDSCAPE OF SOUTHERN ÖLAND) (SWEDEN)

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#### 1. FIELD VISIT

Peter Ogden, May 2000

#### 2. CONSULTATIONS

In addition to the field mission IUCN has also consulted with three external reviewers.

#### 3. IUCN ASSESSMENT

##### i) Natural Values

The nominated area of the Agricultural Landscape of Southern Öland (ALSO) consists of the southern third of the Baltic island of Öland. The area covers 56,323ha, including 6,069ha of coastal marine area. The bedrock consists mainly of limestone with some clay shales and sandstone. ALSO is dominated by a central limestone plateau, the Stora Alvar covering an area of 250 km<sup>2</sup>. Dolines ("swallow hole" cavities) and hog's back (dorsal-shaped strings of limestone) form part of the distinctive karst landscape and glacial deposits form fertile plains of glacial clay. Öland has a dry temperate climate which fluctuates quite radically. The Swedish highlands cast a rain shadow on the island and the summers are dry. Spring and autumn can bring rain and inundated soils, and winters are characterised by snow and occasionally violent blizzards.

Climatic conditions, geology and traditional low input farming practices have all contributed to the plant diversity of the nominated area. ALSO is part of the "Öland and Gothland" Centre of Plant Diversity identified by IUCN/WWF and is characterised by many southern species at the northern extreme of their range. Four species are endemic to Öland (Alvar wormwood, Öland bedstraw, Öland rockrose and the alpine catchfly) and several other species are found solely in Öland and Gotland.

Coastal grasslands and the Alvar communities are particularly important. The limestone bedrock and karst alvar are colonised by lichens and mosses and by annuals, stonecrops and grasses in the fissures and areas where soil and moisture have accumulated. Moist grassland may occur in temporary pools, *vät*, and Alvar lakes provide habitats for aquatic plants. Stora Alvar, provides a steppe-like ecosystem, with rich refuges of plants and invertebrates. The area is kept open and the ecosystem is maintained by an ancient grazing regime which continues today. Meadows and other coastlands also have a distinctive flora containing populations of orchids and other chalk-loving species. Livestock grazing and the cutting of grass for hay help maintain these coastal meadows and their plant diversity.

The nominated area is also important for birds. More than 380 bird species have been recorded and 150 of them are known to breed in the area. The island lies on a major bird migration route. Migrating birds, especially waders and geese, gather and find food and rest on the East Coast and on the Ottenby Peninsula at the southern tip of the island. Over 50 million birds use the Ottenby Peninsula annually. Both the East Coast and Ottenby have been designated Wetlands of International Importance by the Ramsar Convention and Important Bird Areas by Birdlife International. The maintenance of meadows by traditional methods is important for migratory and resident bird communities throughout the nominated area.

Traditional low impact farming has also allowed a number of agricultural weeds to persist in Öland. Plants such as Rye brome, thorn buttercup and shepherd's needle have vanished from rye fields in other agricultural areas in the Nordic countries. The most important populations in northern Europe of the fungus *Porinia punctata* exist on Öland where they depend on grazing by horses. The stone walls of the nominated area also provide habitat to an abundant lichen flora. One stone wall can harbour over 50 lichen species. Without current regimes of

farming and grazing management the biodiversity of the area would quickly deteriorate. Traditional human use is therefore a precondition for the preservation of the area's current level of biodiversity.

## **ii) Comparison with Other Areas**

The nomination document states that "no other alvar of this magnitude in the world has such a long and unbroken history of grazing as Stora alvaret." Other smaller alvar or limestone plateau areas exist in Sweden (Gotland and Vättergöland on the mainland) and in north-west Estonia. In North America, near the Great Lakes, there are also limestone plateau areas similar to the Nordic alvars but these contain different flora and fauna. The nomination document does compare ALSO to some other karst areas with similar vegetation in Europe. Similar areas are found in Romania, Hungary, Italy, the Balkan Peninsula, the south of England (Salisbury Plain, limestone grasslands) and the Republic of Ireland (the Burren, a karst area of 520km<sup>2</sup> which includes a 260km<sup>2</sup> national park). It notes that these areas have not been subject to the same traditional grazing practices as ALSO where the continuity of land use in goes back to the Stone Age. However, one IUCN reviewer noted that traditional grazing practices, also relatively unchanged for thousands of years, persist in the Burren in the Republic of Ireland. In the Burren the ancient practice of reverse trans-humance is still carried out whereby cattle are grazed in highland areas during the winter to allow the growth of grasses during the spring and summer.

IUCN would note that the focus of the nomination on limestone plateau areas or "alvars" is too narrow a basis for comparison and that ALSO should be compared more broadly with other karst areas. Given that karst areas cover large areas in many parts of the World, IUCN feels that there is not enough information available to complete a rigorous comparative analysis. There is clearly a need for a global comparative study to assess the cultural landscape values of other karst areas as well as other areas under traditional grazing regimes.

## **4. MANAGEMENT ISSUES**

Most of the nominated area is protected by national legislation or by International nature conservation agreements. Some 82% of ALSO is subject to Landscape Protection policies: 22% protected as Nature Reserves; 4% as Special Protection Areas (SPA); 62% proposed SPAs; and 68% proposed SCIs. Some 39% of the area is currently subject to EU Environmental measures and another 13,900ha of land is proposed for inclusion in the Natura 2000 network. The East Coast and the Ottenby peninsula are designated Important Bird Areas and RAMSAR sites.

Well-structured, low input farming respects the land's capabilities and coupled with current conservation practices, protects and enhances the biodiversity of natural ecosystems. A Stewardship Agreement exists between all the relevant stakeholders promoting the integrated management of the area. This reflects the participatory approach to encouraging sustainable development taken by the government authorities. Tourism is developing within this approach in full recognition of the environmental, cultural and social capacities of the area. The IUCN/ICOMOS mission was informed that that the current management prescriptions and Stewardship Agreement would form the basis of a comprehensive management plan, which would include the establishment of a representative management body, should the site be inscribed on the World Heritage list.

The area adequately covers integrity issues both in terms of its geographical size and the clear definition of its boundaries. Beyond the Northern boundary, differences in landscape character, agricultural patterns and administration are clear. The 300m maritime zone is justified given the importance of the shoreline for migrating and nesting sea birds.

One of the reviewers of this nomination noted that many important wetland sites within the nominated area were converted to dry pasturelands in the late 1800s. Draining these wetlands destroyed crucial habitat for resident and migratory species and altered the water tables and year-round water régimes of large areas. As the need for grazing areas has been reduced, it is suggested that an attempt be made to restore these wetlands.

## **5. IUCN SUMMARY**

The Agricultural Landscape of Southern Öland has interesting biodiversity values which are actively protected and conserved through existing traditional agricultural land management practices and through effective local planning and management systems. The area illustrates how modern agricultural support schemes when used sensitively in a commercialised consumer society, can conserve the traditional character, biodiversity and cultural values of an area. . However, while the Agricultural Landscape of Southern Öland may merit inclusion on the

World Heritage list, IUCN considers that further comparative studies would be desirable in implementing the Cultural Landscape category generally.

## **6. RECOMMENDATION**

IUCN supports the ICOMOS position to inscribe this site as a Cultural Landscape. However, IUCN notes that this site raises a number of issues relating to Cultural Landscapes, such as the need to give greater attention to comparative assessment. In view of the fact that Cultural Landscapes have now been in existence for eight years, IUCN considers that it would be timely to implement a rigorous evaluation of Cultural Landscapes which would involve, in the first instance, discussions between the Advisory Bodies.

At its twenty-fourth ordinary session the Bureau recommended to the Committee that this property be inscribed on the World Heritage List on the basis of cultural criteria (iv) and (v).