

Farm animals as a functional element of natural environment

Summary

Alarming disappearance of a number of plant and animal species or even entire natural habitats of high conservation value has become a clear impulse to preventing measures and consequently, the initiatives to stop the unfavorable processes. Lenient grazing of farm animals is considered an effective tool for widely understood conservation of nature. However, the negative effect of too intensive grazing practices should be also borne in mind when disturbed ecological stability of land may occur as a result of the erosion process, caused by over-grazing and stock treading damage. Importantly, the appropriate animal species' match encourages appropriate grazing on land of conservation value. A detailed analysis of vegetation changes on the grazing land indicates that the use of farm animals of native breeds to limit the secondary plant succession on completely abandoned land contributes to protection of floristic biodiversity and maintains landscape richness. Besides, it improves the conservation of farm animal genetic resources as well as valuable habitats. It was noted that animals exhibit a very selective grazing behavior, e.g. sheep did not select the species typical of xerothermal psammophilic grasses such as *Corynephorus canescens* and *Cladina mitis*. Actually, sheep damaged these species with hooves while roaming the land searching for feed. In consequence of the active protection implementation (conservation grazing), the secondary succession of trees and shrubs was limited as these plant species were nibbled or damaged by grazing animals. The highest decrease was reported in the second and third research year in the plant group up to 30 cm high and within a range 30-80 cm. During the free-range grazing practices aiming at conserving valuable natural habitats, the animal welfare was ensured and permanent control of available nutritional resources performed. In many cases, the introduction of conservation grazing for active protection of natural habitats has conferred the first benefits, i.e. an increase of the numbers of bird breeding species. The research results of the studies mentioned in the present paper fully support the use of farm animals for active protection of nature and at the same time, highlight the necessity of economic tools' introducing to promote the proposed solutions.

KEY WORDS: lenient grazing, natural environment protection