

EU focus on nature protection



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Directorate-General for the Environment

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Preface

Action to protect our natural heritage has played an increasingly important role in European Union policy for almost 30 years. In 1973, the first action programme for the environment came into effect. In April 1979, the 'Birds Directive' was the first EU law designed to preserve the natural environment, both for us and for generations to come. Back in 1951, the six founding nations that signed the Treaty of Paris and established the European Coal and Steel Community had their eyes on developing these industrial sectors rather than assessing their impact on the environment. But by the 1970s, international attention was focusing on the growing damage our modern lifestyle was inflicting on the natural world and its resources.



Since then, care for the animals, birds and plants and landscapes native to our part of the world has become an integral part of EU policy-making. Decisions on crucial issues such as transport, energy and agriculture can no longer be taken without regard for their impact on wildlife and the countryside. Many EU citizens have become aware of the threat to our natural environment, and have made their voices heard in demands for action at local, national and European levels.

The EU's 15 Member States extend from the Arctic Circle in the north to the warm Mediterranean waters in the south. From the windswept Atlantic coasts to the Alpine peaks, the Union covers a vast range of natural habitats with a stunning diversity of flora and fauna. But almost everywhere, this 'biodiversity' is in danger. That is why the EU has introduced new, stronger tools — both legal and financial — for safeguarding the natural environment.

Some people believe that protecting nature must mean cutting living standards, putting economic development into reverse, and limiting individual freedom to enjoy the natural world. The EU takes a different approach, based on the fact that people are part of nature, and the two work best in partnership. We believe care for the environment can improve Europeans' quality of life, as well as boosting economic sectors such as forestry and tourism. Wildlife protection can coexist with social and economic interests, but to make this happen we must implement 'sustainable development' — finding ways of improving our quality of life without causing harm to the environment, future generations, and the people of both the rich and developing worlds.

The EU recognises that the support and involvement of people at local level, at the 'grass-roots', is vital to safeguarding natural habitats and wildlife. But the Union can also make a difference. First, Europe-wide legislation provides a coherent framework within which national and local authorities, NGOs and individual conservationists can act. Secondly, EU funding programmes offer vital support for initiatives aimed at preserving biodiversity.

This brochure outlines the EU's strategy for nature protection.



Nature protection – the issues

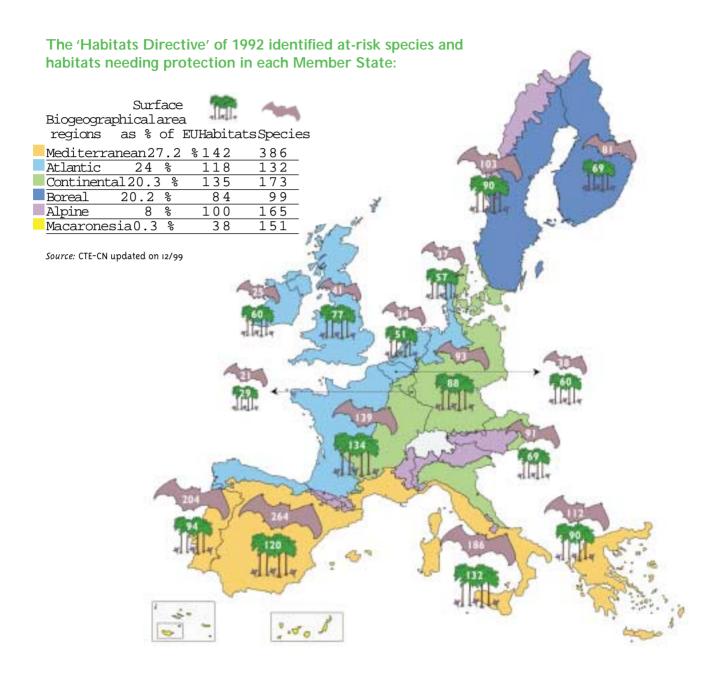
Species and habitats

The 15 Member States of the EU cover most of Western Europe, with a surface area of over 3 million km² and a population of 370 million. Our rich natural heritage encompasses a huge diversity of life forms, and landscapes of awesome and contrasting natural beauty. It includes several thousand types of habitat, home to 150 species of mammal, 520 species of bird, 180 species of reptile and amphibian, 150 species of fish, 10 000 plant species and at least 100 000 species of invertebrate.()

Yet despite improved conservation policies in Member States, many species are declining rapidly. Today, half our mammals and one-third of reptile, bird and fish species are endangered. Pollution and fishing seriously threaten marine species such as monk seals and turtles. Birds like the slender-billed curlew are so rare that they risk extinction, while even numbers of common species such as the skylark and garden warbler have fallen dramatically. There are 3 000 species of plant under threat — 27 of them in danger of dying out.



^{(&#}x27;) Figures from the European Environment Agency (EEA), Copenhagen, 1995.



Many of these species are at risk because of the loss of their natural habitats. Within the last few decades, human activities such as farming, industry and tourism have taken over huge tracts of land, expelling indigenous wildlife, or confining it in meagre or inadequate territories. River ecosystems and estuaries – home to many varieties of flora and fauna - have undergone severe damage throughout Europe. Other important habitats are slowly disappearing. Heathland steppes and bogs have shrunk by 60-90 %, and over the last century, 75 % of the dunes in France, Italy and Spain have gone. For centuries, traditional agricultural practices maintained a balanced environment for wildlife. Birds like the chough, for instance, depended on grazed pastures, and haymaking propagated populations of field herbs. But these have been replaced by intensive methods that drive away or destroy birds, animals and wild plants.

Pollution

Pollution and accidents also degrade the natural environment. In December 1999, the tanker *Erika* sank 60 kilometres off the French coast. Oil spilling out of the crippled vessel polluted some 400 kilometres of the Brittany coastline, and damaged or destroyed up to half a million seabirds.





In the countries of central and eastern Europe now waiting to join the EU, the legacy of careless industrial development poses even greater risks for nature. In Romania, the leakage of cyanide from Australian-owned mining activities last year poisoned hundreds of kilometres of river, destroying ecosystems and killing tonnes of fish.

Every year, Europeans throw away hundreds of millions of tonnes of waste, some of it hazardous. Waste takes up land space, and releases pollutants that damage soil, water and air quality. At the same time, our demand for natural resources such as water and timber is in danger of exceeding supply. Unplanned tree-felling destroys forests, and increasing demand for fresh water — coupled with soil erosion — is leading to desertification in parts of the south. Along coastlines, overfishing is decimating fish stocks. All these activities are threatening wild species and their habitats.

Climate change

Another threat to Europe's native flora and fauna comes from climate change. The evidence is increasingly clear that human activities are producing a build-up of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, and warming up the Earth's climate. By 2100, average temperatures in Europe are expected to rise by between 1 and 6°C. If unchecked, the pace of climate change will be too fast for plant and animal species in different climatic zones to be able to adapt or migrate in time. The consequences for wildlife could be disastrous.

GMO's

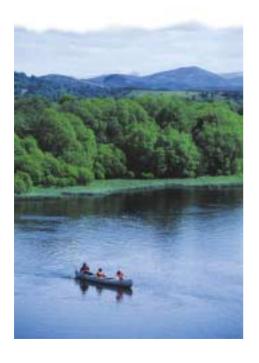
The release of genetically modified organisms into the environment could have as yet unknown impacts on biodiversity.

A shared interest

With our natural heritage under threat from so many sources, it is in our own interests to halt the damage. We want generations to come to be able to enjoy the natural beauty we see around us. Furthermore, many people's lives are enriched by leisure activities that depend on the natural environment, be they birdwatching, fishing, rock-climbing, scuba-diving or simply walking the dog. Fresh water and clean air are vital to our quality of life, and pollution of these basic elements puts human health at serious risk.

There are also important economic factors at stake in preserving key natural resources. Well-managed forests sustain biodiversity, but they are also a long-term economic asset. Good soil quality is the foundation not only for natural growth but also for successful farming activities. Coastal zones are home to about one-third of the EU's population, as well as some of the richest and most fragile natural habitats. Loss of these habitats through overdevelopment also affects the welfare of local communities.

Above all, nature protection, far from limiting people's freedom, can offer new opportunities for tourism. Tourism is one of the fastest growing industries in the world. It generates some 6 % of Europe's GDP and employs a significant proportion of the workforce. In the past, 'mass tourism' has brought environmental devastation particularly to coastal and mountain areas. But as more people enjoy greater prosperity, coupled with shorter working hours and longer retirement, there is a growing appetite for new experiences such as 'eco-tourism'.



Sustainable Tourism Charter (2)

- Respect the limits of carrying capacity
- 2. Contribute to heritage conservation and enhancement
- 3. Preserve natural resources
- 4. Support the local economy
- 5. Promote the involvement of local residents
- 6. Develop appropriate highquality tourism
- 7. Make protected areas accessible to everyone
- 8. Develop new forms of employment
- Encourage behaviour that respects the environment
- io. Serve as a model for other economic sectors and influence their practices

New initiatives are finding ways to reconcile tourism with the natural environment, and involving local communities and interest groups. The European Charter for Sustainable Tourism, developed by the Europarc Federation, is currently being tested in 10 European pilot areas.

Enlargement

Nature conservation will be a crucial issue for the candidate nations. When the central and eastern European countries (CEECs), Malta and Cyprus join the EU, they will bring a 58 % increase in land area, with many unspoiled landscapes, forests and parks. Enlargement will enrich the EU's biodiversity: the wolf population alone will increase from 3 200 to 10 250. But these countries must adopt new standards to protect their natural heritage.



^(°) More details can be obtained from the French Federation for Regional Nature Parks; e-mail:

Isagaert@parcs-naturels-regionaux.tm.fr

At international level

The EU and its Member States have made international commitments to protect nature through signing up to a series of conventions:

- Ramsar Convention on the Conservation of Wetlands (1971)
- Helsinki Convention on the Baltic Sea (1974)
- · Barcelona Convention on the Mediterranean (1976)
- Bonn Convention on Migratory Species (1979)
- Berne Convention on European Wildlife and Natural Habitats (1979)
- Convention on the Protection of the Alps (1991)

And most importantly, the 1992 Rio Convention, which established the principle of sustainable development.



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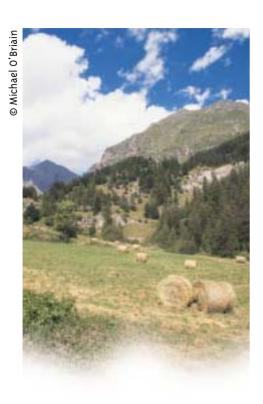
What is the European Union doing?

Nature conservation, like all aspects of environmental protection, is an issue that cannot be successfully tackled by individual countries alone. It affects all EU citizens equally. Migratory birds do not respect frontiers. Many key habitats, such as Alpine regions or coastlines, span national borders, and when pollution enters river waters it flows downstream through different States. For this reason, a binding, Europewide approach is crucial to successful preservation. However, the EU realises that practical action has to be taken on the ground, and with the support of local people and their communities. So environmental laws respect the principle of 'subsidiarity' - leaving it wherever possible to national and local authorities to decide on their priorities and manage their programmes. The Union's role is to support and coordinate initiatives, and check that governments are living up to their obligations.

The Maastricht Treaty of 1992 affirmed that the EU must incorporate environmental protection into everything it does.



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EC Treaty Article 6

"Environmental protection requirements must be integrated into the definition and implementation of ... Community policies and activities ... in particular with a view to promoting sustainable development."

This 'mainstreaming' approach means that all major EU strategies — like the common agricultural policy or cross-border road or rail networks — have to be balanced against preserving landscapes and wildlife. The 1992 CAP reforms, for example, helped to reduce the use of nitrogen and phosphorus fertilisers by 25 % and 30 % respectively. 'Agenda 2000' identified environmental protection as a major objective of CAP reform and set its sights on integrated farming that achieved both economic viability and care for nature. Agri-environmental measures were designed to offer financial incentives to farmers who provide environmental services or adopt more nature-friendly farming practices.

Legislation

The most important EU laws on nature conservation are the Birds Directive (1979) and the Habitats Directive (1992).

The **Birds Directive** focuses on the long-term preservation of all wild bird species in the EU. It identifies 181 endangered species and sub-species for special care. Member States are responsible for designating special protection areas (SPAs),

Main EU instruments on nature protection

- Commission Recommendation 75/66/EEC of 20 December 1974 on the protection of birds and their habitats
- · Council Directive 78/659/EEC of 18 July 1978 on fresh waters and fish life
- Birds Directive: Council Directive 79/409/EEC of 2 April 1979 on the conservation of wild birds
- Council Regulation (EEC) No 348/81 of 20 January 1981 on imports of whales, etc.
- Convention on the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources (1981)
- Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (1982)
- Council Directive 83/129/EEC of 28 March 1983 on imports of seal pups skins and products
- Habitats Directive: Council Directive 92/43/EEC of 21 May 1992 on the conservation of natural habitats and wild fauna and flora
- Council Regulation (EEC) No 2158/92 of 23 July 1992 on protecting forests against fire
- Commission Decision 97/266/EC of 18 December 1996 on site information for Natura 2000 sites
- · Council Regulation (EC) No 338/97 of 9 December 1996 on trade in wild fauna and flora
- Council Directive 1999/22/EC of 29 March 1999 on wild animals in zoos
- Regulation (EC) No 2494/2000 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 7 November 2000 on the conservation and sustainable management of tropical and other forests in developing countries
- Commission Regulation (EC) No 191/2001 of 30 January 2001 suspending the introduction into the Community of specimens of certain species of wild fauna and flora

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and particularly for the conservation of migratory birds, which are a natural asset shared by all Europeans.

Over 2 700 SPAs have been classified, covering almost 7 % of EU territory (over 219 000 km²). As a result, populations of some severely threatened species are recovering. But action varies from country to country, and some important sites are still not protected. There is a long way to go before we have an SPA network capable of fully safeguarding Europe's scarcest and most vulnerable birds.

The **Habitats Directive** aims to protect wildlife species and their habitats. Member States must identify special areas of conservation (SACs) and draw up management plans combining their long-term preservation with people's economic and social activities, to create a sustainable development strategy.

The Directive identifies some 200 types of habitat, 200 animals and over 500 plant species as being of Community Interest, and requiring protection. It also singles out habitats and species (like the wolverine and monk seal) in imminent danger of disappearing and needing urgent help.

Together, the SPAs and SACs form the Natura 2000 network — the cornerstone of EU nature protection policy.



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Natura 2000

The creation of the Natura 2000 network is the cornerstone of Community nature conservation policy. Introduction of effective conservation and management measures for the sites is a huge undertaking, that requires the participation of all national and local operators and strict selection of sites at Community level.

Today, over 12 000 sites have already been proposed, covering more than 420 000 km² (13 % of EU territory).

Member States are responsible for making a scientific assessment of national conservation needs and drawing up a list of sites for protection, based on common criteria. The European Commission then selects the sites of Community importance in consultation with national authorities, which must designate them as SACs by 2004 at the latest. Member States have to prepare management plans or measures for the conservation of each individual site, although the methods they use are up to them.

Article 6 of the Habitats Directive lays down important principles on managing the sites, and the balance between conservation and economic, social and cultural needs. The whole aim of the Directive is to promote sustainable development while protecting biodiversity, so Natura 2000 sites are not intended only to be nature reserves excluding all human activity. The EU

believes the network can coexist with economic progress, and that activities of benefit to the community —

farming, hunting, tourism and many others—can develop as long as they do not conflict with conservation. Indeed, all the local players need to be involved in planning and managing sites from the earliest stage, so that nature protection is not imposed on an unwilling public, or regarded as a restriction



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or threat to people's livelihoods. The programme is not designed to put jobs and living standards at risk, but rather to enhance the quality of life for us all. Natura 2000 must grow in partnership with people.

National authorities have supplied data describing every conservation site, already amounting to more than 9 000 paper maps and 220 digital data sets. With the help of the EU's Joint Research Centre (JRC), the European Commission has launched a geographic information system (GIS) database, which will eventually provide online information about every Natura 2000 site in Europe.

The Union co-finances measures to support nature conservation, and has already paid out over EUR 250 million as 'pump-priming' money to help launch hundreds of projects in all the Member States. Environmental initiatives will draw on support from a variety of sources, including the Structural Funds, the Cohesion Fund, and agri-environmental resources. The EU is also co-financing the development of the Natura 2000 network through the LIFE-Nature programme.

LIFE-Nature

The LIFE programme was set up in 1992, and has now entered its third phase, to run until 2004. It is devoted entirely to developing EU environmental policy, and has three strands. One of them is LIFE-Nature.

Almost half of LIFE III's EUR 640 million budget is dedicated to nature protection. The programme now extends to candidate countries, and includes special funds for publicity. LIFE-Nature has already funded hundreds of projects throughout the EU.

Life-Nature project examples

Counting wolves in Greece

In 1997, the NGO Arcturos launched the first steps to conserve wolves in Greece with the support of LIFE-Nature. Very little information existed, and estimates put the wolf population at no more than 300 animals. With EU support, the project has been able to carry out extensive fieldwork and canvas the views of farmers and stockbreeders. This has enabled the NGO to compile an accurate picture that puts the current wolf population at around 500-700. What is more, the numbers are stabilising and even increasing.

Restoring biodiversity in Sweden

'Alvar' is the name of a type of habitat comprising hard limestone rock covered with a thin layer of soil. Alvar lands are found on the islands of Åland and Gotland, and in parts of Sweden and Estonia, and have a highly specialised flora and fauna. The 'Stora Alvaret' (Great Alvar) on Åland covers 25 000 hectares and is the largest in Europe.

Since the Stone Age, alvar has depended on grazing by animals, but in recent decades trees and shrubs began to invade the habitat. In 1996, a LIFE-backed project to protect and restore the alvar got under way. It involved clearing and erecting fences around large areas, and informing local farmers of the natural and cultural value of

grazing. The project is creating well-established grazing lands that sustain the habitats and species characteristic of the area, and has successfully raised local landowners' awareness of conservation.

New life for the British oak

Atlantic oakwoods are found on the western coasts of Scotland, England, Wales and down to France, Spain and Portugal. In the British Isles, these old oakwoods host an extremely rich lower plant and fern flora, and are a stronghold for migrant songbirds.

Traditionally, local communities used these trees as a renewable supply of timber and firewood, bark for tanning leather, and as shelter for livestock. But more recently, the planting of conifers and invasion by alien rhododendron species has damaged the native biodiversity.

The 'Atlantic Oakwoods' project set out to preserve and regenerate this habitat, as a forerunner to establishing special areas of conservation. This has involved the challenge of winning over absentee private landowners, as well as local communities, to the benefits of saving the trees, and developing long-term local partnerships.

Action for the future

Protecting nature and wildlife is one of the four priorities of the newly proposed 6th EU environment action programme (2001-2010). (3)

Its objectives include:

- · protecting and restoring natural systems
- · halting the loss of biodiversity both in the EU and globally
- · protecting soils against erosion and pollution
- slowing the taking of land for infrastructure and development

Achieving these objectives will require a range of measures over the next 10 years. For example, Member States need a unified policy for dealing with disasters and accidents that threaten the natural environment, such as chemical explosions or wrecked oil tankers. The EU is helping to develop long-term preventive strategies and early-warning tools, together with ways to handle emergencies, for instance through satellite surveillance.

The Union is also aiming to develop new strategies for protecting soils and the marine environment, and will introduce an integrated coastal zone management (ICZM) policy to reconcile social, economic and environmental needs in these areas (4). It will support programmes for sustainable forest management, and extend the Natura 2000 programme.



⁽³⁾ Environment 2010: Our Future, Our Choice, European Commission 2001, ISBN 92-894-0261-X

⁽⁴⁾ EU Focus on coastal zones, European Commission 2001, ISBN 92-894-1151-1

Long-term plans for success

- I. EU-wide laws to protect our natural heritage exist, and have an important role to play, but they are not being put into effect properly by national governments.
 Member States have an obligation to meet the commitments they themselves have agreed to, and one of the Commission's priorities is to ensure this happens. Some countries have lagged behind in drawing up lists of Natura 2000 sites, for example. This holds up the whole process of building the network and putting in place a comprehensive nature protection strategy.
- 2. To gain the widespread and active support of EU citizens, the aims and principles of Natura 2000 need to be better known and understood. Until now, awareness has been too limited to the world of conservationists. If, where appropriate, Natura 2000 sites are to attract tourists and boost local economies, for example, they have to be widely publicised.

 Involving local stakeholders is a crucial aspect of any nature protection initiative, and so communication must be a priority. In Austria, for instance, a LIFE project aimed at protecting brown bears set

up a 74-strong advisory group involving local authorities and stakeholders from groups ranging from beekeepers to schools. In the UK, a project on marine life distributed leaflets to over 30 000 boat users. And a biodiversity project in Yyteri, Finland, organised coverage via local newspapers, radio stations and TV.



4. Above all, nature protection must be a partnership, with all the players convinced that their wishes and interests are taken into account. It cannot succeed in any other way. That is why the active support of every EU citizen in local projects and initiatives is so important. Where problems arise, it is often local people themselves who can find solutions, and this kind of 'bottom-up' approach is always most effective. It entails honesty and transparency in keeping communities informed, and building the climate of trust so vital to success.

Public and private bodies, NGOs, governments and individuals all have a role to play in saving our natural heritage. The most important resource is people's effort, enthusiasm and commitment.



Further information

Directorate-General for the Environment is the arm of the European Commission responsible for matters of environment, civil protection and radiation protection. The Environment DG produces regular reports and other publications covering the full spectrum of environmental themes, including nature.

policies can be found on the Environment DG's website on the Europa server:

http://europa.eu.int/comm/environment/. The site also includes an on-line catalogue of publications, many of which are free of charge, and a nature conservation homepage:

http://europa.eu.int/comm/environment/nature/home.htm, including a list of the nature protection services in the Member States.

More information on European environment

Questions about European environmental and nature policies should be sent to:

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Environment DG Information Centre BU9 0/11 Rue de la Loi/wetstraat 200 B-1049 Brussels E-mail: envinfo@cec.eu.int

Other useful sources of information are:

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Website: http://www.eea.eu.int

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