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NATURA 2000

managing our heritage

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Towards shared management of our natural heritage

Europe's rich diversity is built on the mutual respect of different identities. Our biodiversity, of inestimable biological, aesthetic and genetic value, is one element of this. It is our moral duty to manage this natural heritage responsibly, and preserve it for future generations. Though still rich, it is fragile. Safeguarding it is therefore a matter of vital importance to the Union.

Nature conservation has been a central pillar of Union environment policy since the early 1970s. The "Birds" and "Habitats" Directives constitute a solid legal basis for the protection of rare and endangered species and natural habitats. Over 250 million ECU of Community co-financing has gone towards hundreds of nature conservation projects in all the Member States.

The Union's Council of Ministers has now decided to take up a major challenge: to create, on the eve of the third millenium, a network of sites protected at Community level. This network, known as "Natura 2000", will play a key role in protecting natural resources.

To ensure the project's success, each Member State can choose the mechanisms it will use to implement the relevant conservation measures on its territory. These must take account of scientific, economic, social and cultural requirements. The success of Natura 2000 therefore depends on the full participation and commitment of all the countries concerned.

The creation of Natura 2000 is also a unique opportunity to demonstrate how environmental concerns can be integrated into other policies. Nature conservation is an integral part of land use policy which can be compatible with numerous economic activities, and even create jobs.

I hope that this brochure will give readers a better understanding of Natura 2000, and encourage discussion about the sites of Community interest to be protected.

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A rich but fragile natural heritage

The fifteen Member States of the European Union cover the major part of Western Europe, with a surface area of over 3 million km² and a population of 370 million. Differences in climate, soil, topography and the influence of human activities have created a great variety of natural and semi-natural habitats which are home to a multitude of species.

The European Union has several thousand types of natural habitat which are 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[1]. These figures testify to the immense wealth of Europe's natural heritage, synonymous with diversity of life forms, scenic beauty and a particular quality of life.

Endangered species

Despite progress in the nature conservation policies of the Member States, the populations of many species are continuing to decline rapidly. It is not only rare species that are affected. Recent studies show a sharp drop in the populations of common species such as the garden warbler (*Sylvia borin*) and the skylark (*Alauda arvensis*).

Today, half our mammal species and a third of reptile, fish and bird species are endangered. Marine species (monk seal, turtles, etc.) affected by pollution and fishing are among the most threatened. The Slender-billed Curlew and the sturgeon have become so rare that their short-term survival could be in question. As for plants, 3,000 species are endangered and 27 threatened with extinction.

Natural habitats in decline

The dramatic decline in the populations of many species is primarily due to the deterioration of the natural habitats necessary for their survival. In a few decades, the intensification of many human activities - agriculture, forestry, industry, energy, transport, tourism, etc. - has led to the loss or fragmentation of natural habitats, leaving little room for wildlife or confining it to a meagre portion of Community territory.

River ecosystems and estuaries, of vital importance to many species, have been severely damaged throughout Europe. Other habitats of great biological value are now a fraction of their original size. Heathland, steppes and peat bogs have shrunk by 60-90%, according to the Member States. Since the beginning of the century, 75% of the dunes in France, Italy and Spain have disappeared.

For centuries, traditional forms of agriculture and pastoral activities were a way of managing semi-natural habitats. The abandonment of these activities have led to a general impoverishment of biodiversity and variety of landscape.

[1] *Environment in the European Union 1995, Report for the review of the Fifth Environmental Action Programme - European Environment Agency, EEA Copenhagen, 1995.*

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Atlantic biogeographical region

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Boreal biogeographical region

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Alpine biogeographical region

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Continental biogeographical region

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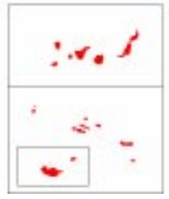

Macaronesian biogeographical region

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Mediterranean biogeographical region

Preserving biodiversity together

To encourage better management of Europe's natural heritage, the Community has gradually been implementing a nature conservation policy on its territory. In 1973, the priorities were established in the first Action Programme for the Environment. Ten years later, specific financial instruments were created for nature conservation.

Successive revisions of the Treaties have strengthened the legal basis of this policy. In 1992 the Maastricht Treaty reaffirmed the obligation to incorporate environmental protection into all European Union policies. The fifth Action Programme for the Environment specifies nature conservation and the preservation of biodiversity as major priorities.

Community legislation comprises two Directives: the "Birds" Directive[1] and the "Habitats" Directive[2], which are concerned with the protection of natural habitats, fauna and flora and the creation of a European network of protected sites.

[1] Council Directive 79/409/EEC of 2 April 1979 on the conservation of wild birds.

[2] Council Directive 92/43/EEC of 21 May 1992 on the conservation of natural habitats and of wild fauna and flora.

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The "Birds" Directive, a first step towards combating species decline

Adopted in 1979, the Birds Directive is concerned with the long-term protection and management of all bird species living in the wild state on Community territory and of their habitats.

The Member States are responsible for protecting all these species, especially migratory birds, a natural asset shared by all Europeans. It is their duty to preserve the natural habitats where the wild birds live.

181 species and sub-species which are endangered because of their low numbers and/or restricted range benefit from specific conservation measures. The Member States must classify the most appropriate areas as Special Protection Areas. Well-known birds such as the white stork, the crane and the griffon vulture are benefiting from these measures.

Although over a 1,600 sites have been classified as Special Protection Areas, covering a surface area larger than Benelux (more than 100,000 km2), there are still many sites of ornithological interest to be conserved in most of the Member States.

The "Habitats" Directive, a common framework for biodiversity

This Directive, adopted in 1992, the year of the Rio summit on the environment and development, is the main Community instrument safeguarding biodiversity. It introduced the obligation to preserve habitats and species of Community interest. Each Member State is responsible for identifying and designating as Special Areas of Conservation sites which are important for the protection of the species and habitats covered by the Directive. These areas will benefit from statutory or contractual measures and, where appropriate, management plans which will ensure their long-term preservation by integrating human activities into a sustainable development strategy.

Together, the Special Areas of Conservation designated by the Member States will make up the European network of protected sites, Natura 2000. All the Special Protection Areas created under the "Birds" Directive will form part of this network.

Each Member State can choose the mechanisms it uses to participate in this joint enterprise. The Commission is helping to set up the network and ensure that the common goals become reality. ■

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Habitats and species of Community interest

These are habitats whose natural range is very small or has shrunk considerably on Community territory: peat bogs, heathland, dunes, coastal and freshwater habitats, etc. Also included are outstanding examples of typical characteristics of the European Union's six biogeographical regions (Alpine larch forests, Atlantic salt meadows, etc.). Approximately 200 types of habitat are classified by the Directive as natural habitats of Community interest.

The species of Community interest include those which are endangered or becoming endangered, as well as certain endemic species. The Directive identifies nearly 200 animal species and over 500 plant species whose habitats require protection. To take account of differences between the Member States, certain species of Community interest benefit from an exemption clause, in countries where their populations are not threatened (e.g. Lynx in Finland).

Urgent measures for certain priority habitats and species

The European Union has a particular responsibility for the conservation of natural habitats which are in danger of disappearing (posidonia beds, lagoons, alluvial forests, etc.) or species threatened with extinction (wolverine, monk seal, etc.). Classified as priorities, they must benefit from urgent protection measures.

The Natura 2000 network will include a representative sample of all habitats of Community interest, especially priority habitats. It will thus ensure that all fauna and flora of Community interest receive sufficient protection to guarantee their long-term viability.

Since these Directives entered into force, the situation of some of the habitats and species concerned has changed. Scientists should therefore evaluate the conservation measures that have been taken to enable the European Commission and the Member States to adapt these Directives after consulting specialized committees (the Habitats and Ornis committees).

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The "Habitats" Directive: an overview

Definitions

Art. 1 Principal terms: conservation status, habitat types and species of Community interest, priority habitat types and species, etc.

Art. 2 Aims of the Directive

Conservation of natural habitats and habitats of species

Art. 3 Definition of the Natura 2000 network

Art. 4 Establishment of national lists of Sites of Community Importance and Special Areas of Conservation (SACs)

Art. 5 The Council's role in identifying Sites of Community Importance proposed by the Commission

Art. 6 SACs: conservation measures and management plans

Art. 7 Obligations relating to Special Protection Areas ("Birds" Directive)

Art. 8 Conservation and Community cofinancing

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Protection of species

Art. 12 to 16 Measures to protect endangered animal and plant species

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Other dispositions

Art. 20 to 21 Role of the Habitats Committee

Annex I Natural and semi-natural habitat types whose conservation requires the designation of SACs

Annex II Animal and plant species whose conservation requires the designation of SACs

Annex III Criteria for selecting sites for SACs

Annex IV Animal and plant species in need of strict protection

Annex V Animal and plant species whose taking in the wild and exploitation may be subject to management measures

Annex VI Prohibited methods and means of capture and killing

“Natura 2000”, a major challenge for the Union

The creation of the Natura 2000 network is the cornerstone of Community nature conservation policy and a major challenge for the fifteen Member States. Introducing effective conservation and management measures for the sites is a huge undertaking. It requires the participation of all national and local operators and strict selection of sites at Community level. To carry out this operation successfully, the European Commission and the Member States must proceed in three stages.

Preparation of national lists

The habitats and species covered by the “Habitats” Directive are recognized as being endangered or sensitive throughout Europe. However, knowledge of their distribution and conservation status varies widely from one Member State to another. The first step in the designation process is therefore a scientific assessment at national level of each habitat or species of Community interest. On this basis the important sites can be identified and proposed in the form of national lists presented to the European Commission.

The sites are preselected on the basis of common criteria: degree of representativity, ecological quality of the habitat, size and density of the population of the species concerned, degree of isolation of the species relative to its natural population range, surface area occupied, etc.

Identification of Sites of Community Importance

The second stage, with the support of the Nature Topic Centre of the European Environment Agency, is the identification of the Sites of Community Importance which will form the Natura 2000 network. The selection is done by the European Commission in collaboration with the Member States. Each site proposed on a national list is evaluated on the basis of its relative value, its importance as a migratory route or transboundary site, its total surface area, the co-existence of the various types of habitat and species concerned and its unique character as a biogeographical region. The sites on national lists which contain priority habitats or species are selected as Sites of Community Importance.

In cases where a Member State overlooks an exceptional site, the European Commission can suggest adding it to the list, if it can be scientifically demonstrated that the site is essential for the preservation of habitats or species covered by the Habitats Directive. After discussion with the Member State concerned, the final unanimous decision rests with the European Union’s Council of Ministers.

Designation of Special Areas of Conservation

When a site is selected as a Site of Community Importance, the Member States must designate it as a Special Area of Conservation within six years, i.e. at the latest in 2004. The sites which are most endangered or most important for conservation must be designated first. This six-year period should be used by the Member States to gradually introduce the measures required to conserve and manage the sites.

The special case of the Birds Directive

The Birds Directive also provides for the designation of sites to conserve the habitats of the most endangered bird species as well as for migratory bird species. Particular importance is given to the conservation of wetlands. However, all the sites are designated as Special Protection Areas in a single stage. They are then directly incorporated into the “Natura 2000” network. The conservation aims are similar to those of the Special Areas of Conservation. ■

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“Natura 2000”, your questions answered

Is it the purpose of Natura 2000 to create reserves for endangered species and habitats?

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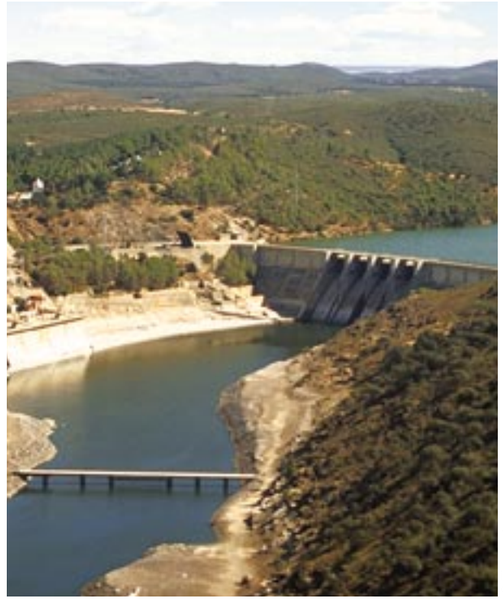
The “Habitats” Directive is contributing to the general aim of sustainable development. Its objective is to encourage the preservation of biodiversity while taking account of scientific, economic, social, cultural and regional requirements. The purpose of the Natura 2000 network is therefore not to create nature sanctuaries where all human activity will be systematically excluded. The preservation of biodiversity in the designated sites may require human activities to be maintained or encouraged. For instance, some types of meadow have to be mown or grazed so that they do not become fallow, which would lead to the disappearance of certain endangered species.

However, human activities must remain compatible with the conservation aims of the designated sites. When the management plans are being prepared, the Member States must assess each activity so as to prevent any deterioration of habitats or danger to the species for which the site was designated.

What are the management obligations with regard to the Natura 2000 sites?

Article 6 of the Directive obliges the Member States to establish conservation measures. Management plans, specifically designed for the sites concerned or integrated into other development plans seem to be the best way of achieving this. Objectives can be identified, problems foreseen and solved with the owners or users of the site, implementing mechanisms defined and long-term conservation plans established.

Each Member State is free to choose the method and type of measures to be taken. Whether statutory, adminitrative or contractual, they must prevent any deterioration of the site and if necessary restore them.



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Once a Natura 2000 site has been designated, can any projects or new activities be authorized there?

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Article 6 of the Directive explains the situation clearly: any new plan or project likely to have a significant effect on a Natura 2000 site must take account of the natural value which determined the integration of the site into the network. An appropriate assessment of the effects of the project on the site’s conservation aims is therefore required. The national authorities are free to authorise an activity provided that the assessment shows that it will not have an adverse effect on the site.

If it is found that the activity will adversely affect the site, and there are no alternative solutions, the activity concerned may only be carried out on the site if it is declared to be of major public interest. The Member State must then take all the required compensatory measures and inform the Commission thereof. However, if a site hosts priority habitats or species, the only considerations which may be raised are those relating to human health, public safety or the environment. If there are other imperative reasons of overriding public interest, the Commission will be asked for its opinion.

Can the cost of managing Natura 2000 be evaluated at present?

Under the terms of Article 8 of the Directive, each Member State estimates the amounts needed for the conservation of sites hosting priority habitats or species and informs the European Commission. The Commission must participate in the co-financing of measures essential for the conservation of the Natura 2000 sites.

Since the beginning of the 1980s, the European Commission has been financing nature conservation projects in the Member States. The current Community LIFE fund is already supporting the creation of Natura 2000 by financing activities on future network sites. However, the nature component of the available LIFE funds will not be sufficient to meet the needs of all the sites in the long term.

Other resources should be mobilised with the integration of the Community environment policy into other Community policies. Henceforth, agri-environmental measures will cofinance the management of outstanding sites by farmers. The Structural Funds, the Cohesion Fund and several Community initiatives are supporting the sustainable economic use of natural sites. ■

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Beyond "Natura 2000"...

By helping to establish the Natura 2000 network of sites and afterwards the appropriate elements connecting them, the European Commission is demonstrating the Union's credibility in respecting its international commitments.

With regard to nature conservation, the "Habitats" and "Birds" Directives are the Community's main contribution to the conservation of biodiversity as defined by the Rio Convention (1992) or, earlier, by the Berne Convention on European Wildlife and Natural Habitats (1979). They are also in line with the general principles of more specific conventions such as the Ramsar Convention on the conservation of wetlands (1971) the Bonn Convention on migratory species (1979) and conventions on specific regions: the Helsinki Convention on the Baltic Sea (1974), the Barcelona Convention on the Mediterranean (1976) and the Convention on the protection of the Alps (1991).

The creation of "Natura 2000" is thus part of a wider environmental strategy being implemented by the European Union.

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NATURA 2000

In accordance with the commitments made in 1992, it is developing a range of instruments designed to increase environmental responsibility in all the sectors of activity concerned and at all levels of society: integration of the environment into the Common Agricultural Policy, industrial eco-labelling, impact studies, etc.

The Union is also stepping up its role in international activities and cooperation for sustainable development, especially with its neighbours in Central and Eastern Europe.

If you wish to be kept informed of the European Commission's nature conservation activities, please send us your full address, stating your choice of language (English, French or German) to:

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TRMF 02/04
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Fax: + 32 - 2 - 296 95 56

You will receive the Natura 2000 newsletter free of charge three times a year.

You can also access the Commission's internet server at the following address:

http ://europa.eu.int/en/comm/dg11/dg11home.html

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