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The New Nature Restoration Regulation

Environment

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Natura 2000 nature and biodiversity newsletter January 2025

Group photo of the College of the von der Leyen Commission with all 27 Commissioners. The new European Commissioner for Environment, Water Resilience and a Competitive Circular Economy - Jessika Roswall - is on the far left in the third row.

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Cover: View to the lake in the bog.

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Restoring drained peatlands under agricultural use in the EU by rewetting them would significantly reduce the greenhouse gas emissions of the EU's agricultural sector.

The Nature Restoration Regulation

The Restoration Regulation sets legally binding targets and obligations for different types of ecosystems

The EU Nature Restoration Regulation entered into force on 18 August 2024. It aims to restore a broad range of degraded ecosystems, habitats and species across the EU's land and seas by creating a common legal framework for their large-scale restoration, building upon and complementing existing EU legislation.

The overall objective at EU level is to implement restoration measures on at least 20% of Europe's land and sea areas by 2030, and in all ecosystems in need of restoration by 2050.

Legally binding targets

To achieve this objective, the Regulation sets out a series of legally binding targets and obligations that are to be met by each Member State. Having the same targets for all EU countries will ensure that restoration measures are undertaken on a sufficiently large scale to have a significant impact on Europe's biodiversity.

The restoration targets cover biodiversity-rich, rare or typical habitats already protected under existing EU legislation and in need of restoration, as well as other heavily degraded ecosystems, such as agricultural, urban and forest ecosystems.

Tackling these is equally important as it will not only help reduce the existing pressures on biodiversity but also ensure that such ecosystems can once again deliver the full range of services upon which our wellbeing and prosperity depend, including food security and climate change adaptation.

Several of the restoration targets are quantified with clearly defined milestones and deadlines (e.g. improve 30% of habitat area in not good condition by 2030) which

The Regulation has four overarching objectives:

- To ensure the long-term and sustained recovery of biodiversity and resilient ecosystems through the restoration of degraded ecosystems
- To contribute to achieving the EU's objectives concerning climate change mitigation and adaptation and land degradation neutrality
- To enhance food security
- To contribute to meeting international commitments

Ensuring policy coherence through the Nature Restoration Plan

Restoring nature is essential not only to reverse biodiversity loss but also to to increase the resilience of ecosystems and of our economies to the impacts of climate change

provides a common reference point against which to measure progress and impacts on biodiversity across all EU Member States.

For some habitats and ecosystems however, too little is known about their distribution and condition to be able to set measurable targets at this stage. One of the first objectives of the Nature Restoration Regulation is therefore to build up a solid knowledge base in order to fill existing gaps in data. Common monitoring protocols and measurable targets can then be set under the Regulation for these ecosystems as well in due course.

Taking a strategic approach

In order to ensure that restoration measures are planned in a strategic manner, each Member State must prepare a national Nature Restoration Plan using an agreed format developed for that purpose. The Plan should contain detailed information on how that country intends to meet each of the restoration targets (e.g. areas targeted, type of measures, timetable, financing) up to 2032.

It should also provide at least a strategic overview of the national targets and measures planned to 2040 and 2050, to be further elaborated as new data becomes available and in function of progress made.

A central feature of the Nature Restoration Plan is that it must clearly identify all possible synergies with other relevant EU policies and laws, for instance in relation to water policy, climate change and renewable energy, or in the context of agricultural, forestry, marine and fisheries policies. This will ensure the restoration measures are well coordinated and achieve significant gains not just for biodiversity but also for other major EU policy sectors, and for society as a whole.

Ensuring such policy coherence is fundamental to the success of the Nature Restoration Regulation since many of the restoration actions cut across several policy sectors and build on existing legislation and strategies. It will be one of the big challenges of the Regulation to create planning and implementation structures that make best use of potential synergies between these different policies and that generate win-win solutions wherever possible.

Member States should also ensure that the preparation of the Nature Restoration Plan is open, transparent, inclusive, and that the public, including all relevant stakeholders, is given early and effective opportunities to participate in its preparation.

Nature Restoration Plans

Member States have two years until 1 September 2026 to prepare and submit their draft Nature Restoration Plan. This lead-in time will enable them to carry out the necessary preparatory work to help identify the most urgent and feasible restoration measures to be implemented by 2032, and to develop a strategic overview of additional measures that will be required to achieve all restoration targets, at the latest by 2050.

This preparatory work will include, amongst others, the mapping of all areas that are not in good condition, the identification of areas to be targeted for restoration and the restoration measures needed, as well as a timetable for their implementation and estimated financial needs. The plan should also describe their approach to the monitoring that will be used to assess the effectiveness and impact of the restoration measures once implemented.

The first two years should also be used for intensive dialogue with other policy sectors in order to identify and capitalise on any potential synergies, especially in relation to climate change mitigation and adaptation, land degradation and disaster prevention.

Restoring biodiverse ecosystems: an insurance policy for EU's long term sustainability and resilience

Restoring degraded ecosystems back to good health not only improves biodiversity but also improves their overall resilience. This, in turn, has multiple other benefits for society as a whole:

- ***Food security** is directly dependent on a healthy natural environment. Soil and agroecosystem restoration helps maintain vital pollinator populations and improve agricultural productivity. Landscape features, such as hedgerows and flower strips, contribute to natural pest control and erosion reduction while improving water and nutrient availability for crops. This, in turn, supports resilient food production that uses fewer chemical pesticides, fertilisers and needs less irrigation.*
- ***Climate change:** Restoring ecosystems to good condition is also our best insurance policy against climate change. Improving and increasing the area and health of forests, wetlands, peatlands and seagrass meadows not only increases carbon sequestration but also helps prevent or mitigate the devastating effects of climate related disasters such as floods, heatwaves and storms.*
- ***People's health, well-being and quality of life** depends on nature both directly and indirectly. Increasing urban green spaces improves their availability and accessibility for people, with benefits for both physical and mental health, and overall well-being. Urban green spaces also help to alleviate the impacts of heat, noise and air pollution and offer space for physical exercise, social interaction and relaxation.*

Adapted from EEA Briefing on the importance of restoring nature in Europe https://bit.ly/4iowhxd.

Additionally, it will give Member States time to consult and actively engage with the public, and all other stakeholders during the preparation of the Nature Restoration Plan.

The Commission then has six months to assess the plans and propose recommendations to ensure they adequately meet the targets and obligations set under the Regulation. The final Nature Restoration Plans should be published by Member States by September 2027. Thereafter, the Plans will need to be reviewed by 2032 and then at least every 10 years in light of the monitoring results and progress made.

Monitoring

To measure the effectiveness of the restoration measures and their impacts on biodiversity, the Regulation sets out a series of monitoring requirements for each restoration target. This will ensure that progress can be assessed regularly and the measures adapted if needed.

For most ecosystems, the monitoring obligations are built upon existing monitoring programmes (e.g. EU Copernicus satellite data), indicators (e.g. common bird indicator) and data sets (e.g. on EU protected habitat types). For some however, there is first a need to develop common EU wide monitoring methodologies to collect all the necessary data in order to assess the condition of the ecosystems and identify those areas where restoration is most needed (e.g. pollinators).

Member States will also need to set the 'satisfactory levels' to be achieved for the indicators for urban tree canopy cover and urban green spaces, for pollinator populations, and for agricultural and forest ecosystem indicators. The Commission will assist Member States in this process by establishing a guiding framework for determining such 'satisfactory levels'.

This data collection and target-definition phase will necessarily take time to put in place and yield results. Member States must therefore make every effort to build up sufficient knowledge quickly so that they can introduce the necessary restoration measures as soon as possible.

Reporting

Once the Nature Restoration Plans have been published, Member States will have to report back regularly on progress made in their implementation.

Starting in June 2028 and at least every three years thereafter, Member States should report on progress made on certain elements of their Nature Restoration Plan (e.g. the area restored per ecosystem, the number of barriers removed or additional trees planted). The European Environment Agency (EEA) will then analyse this data to assess national progress in reaching the targets and obligations of the Regulation.

In addition, starting in June 2031 and every six years thereafter, Member States should report more comprehensively on progress in implementing all aspects of their Nature Restoration Plans. They should also provide an overview of the monitoring results to check whether the restoration measures are achieving the desired impact or if supplementary measures or adjustments need to be made to the Restoration Plan.

The EEA will then aggregate the information from these six yearly reports in order to provide an EU wide overview of progress towards meeting the overall targets and obligations under the Regulation.

River Gave de Gavarnie with Cirque du Gavarnie in the distance, France.

Financing

The financing of the Nature Restoration Regulation is expected to come from various sources, including different EU funding programmes, national budgets and private financing initiatives and investments.

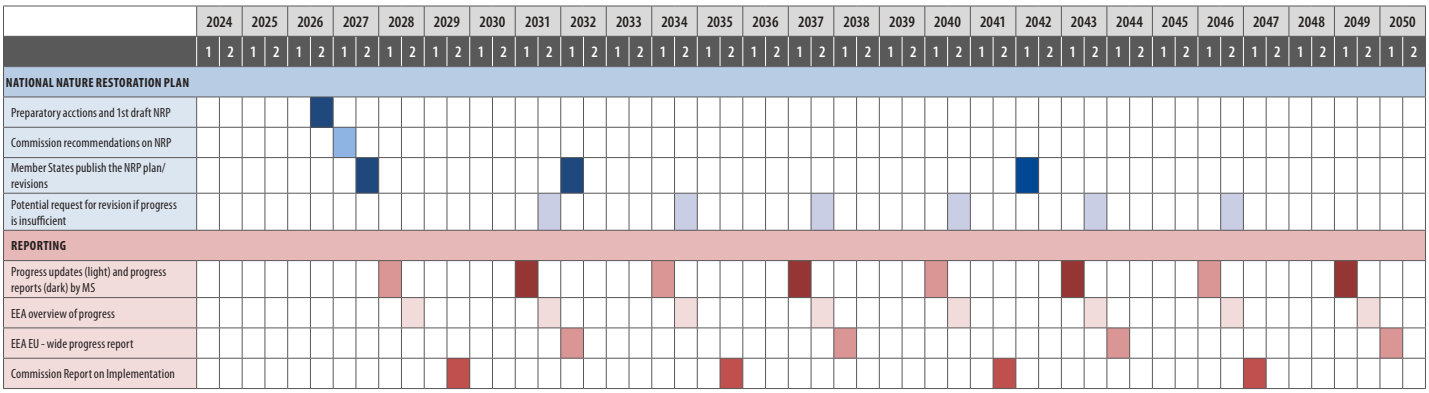
As regards EU funding, there are already a wide range of possible sources of funding available under the current Multiannual Financial Framework (2021–2027), such as the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), the European Maritime Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund (EMFAF), The European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), Cohesion Fund, Horizon Europe or the LIFE programme.

Furthermore, the EU has made a political commitment to progressively increase the share of its annual spending to biodiversity objectives. This should increase from 7.5% of the total budget in 2024, to 10% in 2026 and in 2027 respectively (equivalent to 14 billion a year).

In 2025, the Commission will provide an overview of the financial resources available at Union level for implementing the Regulation as well as an overview of the funding needs provided in the Nature Restoration Plans. This will make it possible to identify if there are any remaining funding gaps. If appropriate, the Commission will propose further financial measures to address these gaps - such as the establishment of dedicated funding - which can be then discussed in the context of the next MFF post 2027.

For more information go to: https://bit.ly/41q9FWY

Key Dates for Nature Restoration Regulation



The Nature Restoration Regulation's specific ecosystem targets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Target 1: Restoring Terrestrial, Coastal and Freshwater Ecosystems

Coverage	● **terrestrial habitat types** listed in annex I of the Regulation, identical to terrestrial habitat types in Annex I of the Habitats Directive ● **terrestrial habitats of species** listed in annex II, IV, V of the Habitats Directive and of all wild birds protected under the Birds Directive
Obligations and targets	Member States shall put in place measures necessary to: ● **improve areas of habitat types** to good condition. To be done on 30% by 2030 of the total area covered by all habitat types not in good condition, giving priority to Natura 2000 sites, then on 60% by 2040, and 90% by 2050 for each group of habitat types. ● **re-establish Annex I habitat types** in areas where they no longer occur. To be done on at least 30% of the additional surface needed to reach the total favourable reference area for each group of habitat type as quantified in the Nature Restoration Plan by 2030; then 60% by 2040 and 100 by 2050. ● put in place **restoration measures for habitats of species** covered by Habitats and Birds Directives where needed to ensure the long-term survival of the species. In addition, Member States shall: ● ensure that areas subject to restoration reach their objective and **do not subsequently deteriorate** ● aim to prevent habitat types that are already in good condition or that are necessary to meet the restoration targets from deteriorating significantly Exceptions are possible under certain conditions provided it is duly justified

Target 2: Restoring Marine Ecosystems

Coverage	● **marine habitats** listed in Annex II of the Regulation, classified into 7 groups ● **marine habitats of species** listed in Annex III of the Regulation, annex II, IV & V of the Habitats Directive, or covered by the Birds Directive
Obligations and targets	Member States shall put in place restoration measures necessary to: ● **improve areas of marine habitat types** to good condition. To be done on at least 30% of the total area covered by habitats in groups 1-6 not in good condition, then on at least 60% by 2040, and 90% by 2050. For habitats in group 7 not in good condition this should be done on a percentage (to be determined) by 2050, and on two thirds of that percentage by 2040. ● **re-establish marine habitat types** in areas where they no longer occur To be done on at least 30% of the additional surface needed to reach the total favourable reference area for each group of habitat type by 2030, then on 60% by by 2040 and 100% by 2050 ● put in place restoration measures for **habitats of marine species** covered by the Regulation where needed to ensure the long-term survival of the species. In addition, Member States shall: ● ensure that habitats that are subject to restoration reach their objective and **do not subsequently deteriorate** ● aim to prevent habitat types that are already in good condition or that are necessary to meet the restoration targets from deteriorating significantly. Exceptions are possible under certain conditions provided it is duly justified

Target 3: Restoring Urban Ecosystems

Coverage	Cities, towns and suburbs, including at least their urban centres, urban clusters
Obligations and targets	Member States shall ensure that there is: ● no net loss of urban green space at national level by 2030 ● no net loss of urban tree canopy cover in urban ecosystems by 2030 Member States shall achieve: ● an increasing trend of total urban green space at national level from 2031 onwards, until a satisfactory level is reached. ● an increasing trend of urban tree canopy cover in each urban ecosystem area, until a satisfactory level is reached

Target 4 Restoring River Connectivity & the Natural Functions of Foodplains

Coverage	Rivers, lakes and related floodplains (including freshwater habitat types and habitats of species protected under the Nature Directives)
Obligations and Targets	Member States contribute to ● restoring to good condition areas of habitat types and habitats of species protected under the Nature Directives and Article 4 of the Restoration Regulation ● restoring 25 000 km of rivers into free-flowing rivers in the EU by 2030 Member States shall: ● remove barriers by 2030, 2040 or 2050 according to their Nature Restoration Plan, giving priority to obsolete barriers ● implement complementary measures to improve the natural functions of the related floodplains by 2050 ● ensure that, once restored, the natural connectivity of rivers and the natural functions of related floodplains is maintained

Target 5: Restoration of Pollinator Populations

Coverage	All wild pollinating insects
Obligations and targets	Member States shall: ● improve pollinator diversity and reverse the decline of pollinator populations by 2030 ● thereafter, achieve an increasing trend of pollinator populations until satisfactory levels are achieved ● identify and implement the restoration measures identified in the Nature Restoration Plan ● monitor pollinator diversity and pollinator populations annually until 2030 using a science based methodology adopted by the Commission by 2028 and ensuring that monitoring comes from an adequate number of sites to ensure representativeness.

Target 6: Restoring Agricultural Ecosystems

Coverage	All types of agricultural ecosystems (eg arable land, grassland, permanent crops, agri-forestry) and including agricultural habitat types and habitats of species protected under the Nature Directives.
Obligations and targets	Member States shall: ● enhance biodiversity in agricultural ecosystems ● achieve an increasing trend at national level of at least two of the three following indicators for agricultural ecosystems until satisfactory levels are reached ○ grassland butterfly index, ○ stock of organic carbon in cropland mineral soils, ○ share of agricultural land with high-diversity landscape features ● achieve a measured increase in common farmland bird index at national level (indexed in September 2025 at 100): ○ for Member States with historically more depleted populations of farmland birds: 110 by 2030, 120 by 2040 and 130 by 2050 ○ for Member States with historically less depleted populations of farmland birds: 105 by 2030, 110 by 2040 and 115 by 2050 ● restore organic soils in agricultural use constituting drained peatlands on: ○ 30% of such areas by 2030 (of which at least quarter is rewetted) ○ 40% of such areas by 2040 (of which at least third is rewetted) ○ 50% of such areas by 2050 (of which at least third is rewetted)

Target 7: Restoring Forest Ecosystems

Coverage	All types of forest ecosystems (including forest habitat types and habitats of species protected under the Nature Directives
Obligations and targets	Member States shall: ● enhance biodiversity in forest ecosystems ● achieve a measured increase at national level of the common forest bird index measured from the period August 2024 to December 2030 and every six years thereafter until satisfactory levels are reached. ● achieve an increasing trend at national level of at least six of the seven following indicators for forest ecosystems measured from the period August 2024 to December 2030 and every six years thereafter until satisfactory levels are reached: ○ standing deadwood ○ lying deadwood ○ share of forest with uneven aged structure ○ forest connectivity ○ stock of organic carbon ○ share of forests dominated by native tree species ○ tree species diversity ● contribute to the planting of at least three billion additional trees by 2030 at union level in full respect of ecological principles

A potted history of Natura 2000 through the eyes of the Natura 2000 Newsletter (1996-2025)

1990s

Setting up the Natura 2000 network

Key events

May 1992	Adoption of Habitats Directive and EU LIFE I Regulation (1992-1995)
June 1992	Adoption of the International Convention on Biological Diversity
June 1994	Deadline for Transposition of Habitats Directive into national laws
July 1996	LIFE II Regulation (1996-1999)
June 1998	Bath Conference to engage with stakeholders on Natura 2000
Oct 1999	First ever European LIFE Week (later became Green Week), attended by over 2000 people

Action priorities

- *Ensuring correct transposition of the Habitats Directive into national laws*
- *Increasing the classification of SPAs*
- *Identifying proposed Sites of Community Interest in MS via nationwide inventories*
- *Showcasing Natura 2000 in practice via LIFE projects*
- *Raising awareness and engaging stakeholders in establishing the Natura 2000 Network*

2000s

Extending the Natura 2000 Network from EU-15 to EU-27

Key events

2000	LIFE III Regulation adopted (2000-2007) open to accession countries
2001	Adoption of the first EU list of SCIs for the Macaronesian Region
2002	CBD adopts Global Strategic Plan to reduce the loss of biodiversity by 2010
2003	Commission publishes first estimate of financing needs of Natura 2000 for 15 MS
2003-6	Adoption of further EU lists of SCIs for 5 other Biogeographical Regions
2004	Ten new MS join the EU and new biogeographical process launched to adopt SCIs for these countries
2004	Sustainable Hunting Agreement
2006	EU Biodiversity Action Plan to 2010
2007	Bulgaria and Romania join EU (now 27 MS)
2008	LIFE + Regulation adopted (2008-2013)
2009	First EU Health Check of species and habitats protected under Nature Directives

Action priorities

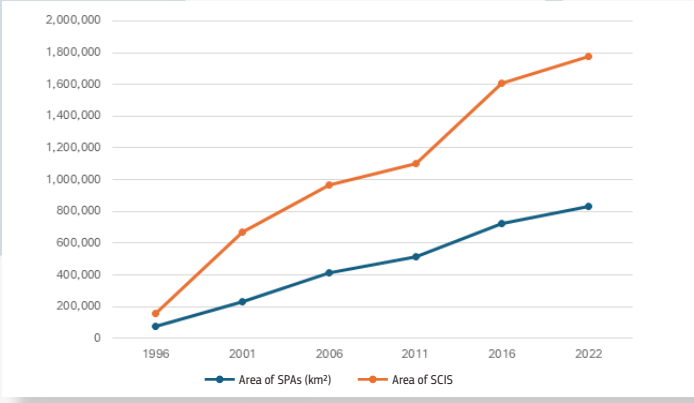
- *Adopting EU lists of Site of Community Importance (SCIs) via the Biogeographical process*
- *Preparing for the Habitats and Birds Directives in 12 new Member States (including new species/habitats)*
- *Protecting Natura 2000 sites: applying the Article 6.3 permitting procedure*
- *Securing funding for Natura 2000 network through its integration into other policies*
- *Improving the implementation of Natura 2000 in the marine environment*

Growth of Natura 2000 network (1996 to 2022)

The Natura 2000 network has grown substantially over the last three decades. In 1996, the network contained less than 2.000 sites covering can 150.000 km² (EU-15). By 2022, it had grown to over 27.000 sites covering over 1.2 million km² (EU-27). Today, it covers almost 18% of the EU land area and around 9% of the surrounding seas.

	1996	2001	2006	2011	2022
N° SPAs	1.551	2.885	4.317	5.347	5420
Area of SPAs (km²)	73.986	232.062	412.564	517.340	832.641
N° SCIs	211	14.912	20.582	22.594	23.815
Areas of SCIS (km²)	85.687	436.887	552.193	583.888	946.903

N° of sites and areas coverage in Natura 2000



2010s

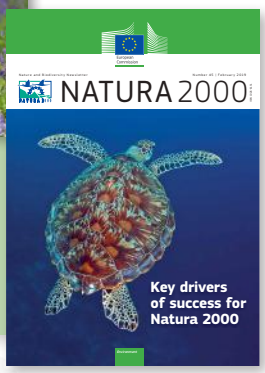
Managing, integrating and funding Natura 2000

Key events

2010	Launch of the Public Natura 2000 viewer
2011	EU Biodiversity Strategy to 2020
2011	2nd assessment of the financing needs of Natura 2000 (introduction of PAFs)
2012	First estimation of the economic value of Natura 2000
2012	Launch of the Large Carnivore Initiative
2013	Croatia joins the EU (now 28 MS)
2014	Adoption of a new LIFE Regulation (2014-2020) introduction of LIFE integrated projects
2015	2nd EU Health Check of species and habitats protected under Nature Directives
2016	Fitness Check of the EU Nature Directives
2017	EU Action Plan for nature, people and the economy
2017	21st of May designated as European Natura 2000 Day

Action priorities

- *Designating SCIs as Special Areas of Conservation (SACs)*
- *Developing Site Specific Conservation Objectives and Measures for all sites*
- *New biogeographical process to facilitate discussions between MS and with stakeholders on managing Natura 2000*
- *Stepping up designation and protection of marine Natura 2000 sites*
- *Natura 2000 and sustainable development – publication of sector specific EC guidance on Article 6.3*
- *Further integration of the funding/management of Natura 2000 in other EU policies and programmes (e.g. CAP)*
- *Raising awareness of Natura 2000 via launch of European Natura 2000 awards*
- *Placing Natura 2000 in context of wider Biodiversity initiatives (Green infrastructure, Invasive alien species, MAES, TEEB)*



2020s

Scaling up conservation for EU biodiversity

Key events

2020	EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 to step up action to protect nature and reverse the degradation of ecosystems
2020	New LIFE Regulation (2021-2027)
2020	Third Health Check of species and habitats protected by Nature Directives (2013-2018)
2021	New Licencing system for branding Natura 2000 products and services
2022	Launch of a new Task Force for the recovery of birds on Annex II of Birds Directive
2023	Updated summary of the investment needs and priorities for Natura 2000
2024	Adoption of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF)
2024	Adoption of the new EU Nature Restoration Regulation

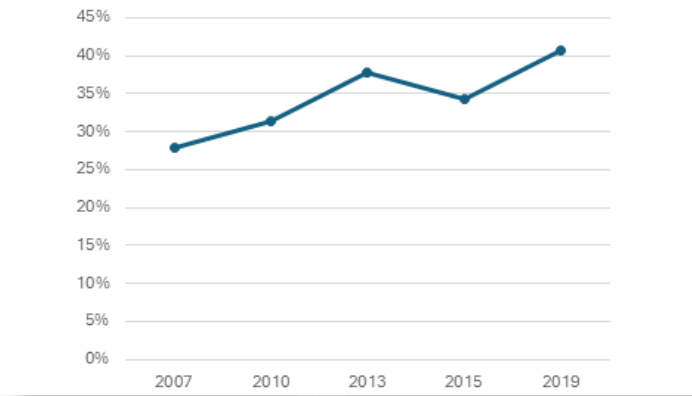
Action priorities

- *Complete the setting of SSCOs and SSCMs for all sites*
- *Effectively manage Natura 2000 sites*
- *Scaling up conservation action through LIFE Integrated projects (future SNAPs)*
- *Working towards legally protecting 30% of the EU's land and sea by 2030*
- *Adopting a new Nature Restoration Regulation to restore at least 20% EU's land and sea*

An increasing awareness of Natura 2000 amongst Europeans

Over the years, more and more Europeans have become aware of the Natura 2000 Network and of its importance for Europe's biodiversity. When the first Eurobarometer on European attitudes to biodiversity was conducted in 2007, almost 28% of Europeans had already heard of Natura 2000. By 2019, this had increased to almost 41% - this is equivalent to 183 million Europeans!

Percentage of Europeans who have heard of Natura 2000 (EU-27)



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Natura 2000 award ceremony.

The 2024 Natura 2000 Award winners

Natura 2000 Award

Last year, the biennial Natura 2000 Award celebrated its 10th anniversary. The Award is designed to reward excellence in the management of Natura 2000 sites and showcase the added value of the EU network for local communities and economies. In doing so, it also pays tribute to the countless people who are working tirelessly on making Natura 2000 a practical success on the ground.

Thanks to all this hard work, Europeans can continue to enjoy Europe's rich and varied biodiversity and benefit from the many other ecosystem services the Natura 2000 network offers society, be it in terms food security, water regulation or climate regulation. Evidence has shown that well managed nature sites shield us against the devastating effects of extreme climatic events such as floods and droughts, coastal erosion and wildfires.

Last year, the Natura 2000 award attracted a record number of applications (102) from 25 Member States. In total 96 eligible initiatives were submitted under one of the five categories: Conservation on Land, Marine Conservation, Communication, Working Together for Nature, and Cross Border Cooperation. The Conservation on Land and Working Together for Nature categories proved to be the most popular.

The sixth award – the European Citizen's Award – was chosen directly by the public. Over 20,000 people cast their vote for their favourite project last year, which is a testimony of the strong interest people have in learning about the many remarkable initiatives underway to save Europe's nature.

The Polish initiative to protect the black stork drew the most votes. It was closely followed by the Belgian Wolf Fencing team for their work in promoting peaceful co-existence with wolves and the Nature's guardians from Spain for their work in tackling environmental crime.

All eligible applications were assessed by an evaluation panel of external experts who selected a short list of 27 finalists. A jury, made up of representatives from the European Commission, the Council presidency (Belgium), Committee of the Regions and stakeholder organisations, then selected the winners for each of the five award categories. The awards were announced at a high profile ceremony held in Brussels on 29 May 2024.

Full details are available on: https://bit.ly/4eoCW78

Natura 2000 Award winners 2024

Conservation on Land

Executive Vice-President Maroš Šefčovič, Director-General Florika Fink-Hooijer, and representatives of the Estonian Fund for Nature and the University of Tartu.

Title: Conserving and restoring mire habitats in Estonia
Applicant: Estonian Fund for Nature, University of Tartu, Archaeovision

Funded by the EU LIFE programme, the "Mires Estonia" project implemented a large-scale restoration programme of key mire habitats across six Natura 2000 sites.

The project successfully restored the natural water conditions of nearly 8,000 hectares of mires in Estonia. This was done by blocking over 300 kilometres of drains and installing 2,500 dams to reduce water loss. Sphagnum moss was also sown to speed up the regeneration of mire habitats. More than 600 volunteers from 16 countries helped with the restoration actions and subsequent monitoring work.

In addition, a major communication programme was launched to explain the importance of restoring mires and the vital role they play in tackling climate change. In addition to the many guided walks, educational films, seminars, conference presentations etc, the project also produced a practical handbook on mire restoration which provides an overview of the best practice techniques developed over the past six years. The project and the handbook have since been widely promoted across the EU and beyond and are regularly cited as a good practice example of largescale mire restoration that contributes to both climate and biodiversity objectives.

Meanwhile, as the water regime recovers, many of the species associated with mires, including rare and threatened species protected under the EU Nature Directives have already returned to the new restored areas.

https://bit.ly/3YxyQnu


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Marine Conservation

Executive Vice-President Maroš Šefčovič, Jury member Viktor Berishaj (EuroNatur, representing conservation NGOs), and representatives of Ocean Alive

Title: Conservation and restoration of "blue forests" in the Sado Estuary, Portugal
Applicant: Ocean Alive

In the Sado Estuary, in Portugal, the decline of seagrass meadows, caused by inappropriate navigation and anchoring practices, has led to a scarcity of marine life which has, in turn, contributed to demise of the local fishing community.

The Portuguese NGO Ocean Alive carried out a series of conservation and restoration measures across six seagrass meadows and salt marshes within the Natura 2000 'Estuário do Sado' site. This involved, amongst others, the installation of mooring floats made from recycled purse seine nets to avoid damaging the seagrass. A major clean-up operation was also undertaken to remove marine litter that had accumulated in the estuary of the years. In total, over 25 tons of marine waste (plastic, glass, metal, fishing gear and lead) were removed.

The NGO actively involved the local fishing community, decision-makers and scientists in these actions which not only helped to raise their awareness of the importance of such habitats for their own livelihoods but also secured their longterm support for the future protection and sustainable management of these habitats.

Local fisherwomen were also enlisted to help map and monitor the seagrass meadows across the entire estuary. This was part of a strategy to create new professions for local fisherwomen based on their unique knowledge and experience. Ocean Alive is now aiming to replicate this work in other sites such as Ria de Aveiro (Portugal).

https://bit.ly/4foeOD5


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Working together for Nature

Executive Vice-President Maroš Šefčovič, Jury member Roby Biwer (Committee of the Regions), and representatives of the LIFE IP Wild Atlantic Nature.

Title: Ground-breaking agri-environment payment scheme for farmers in Natura 2000 areas in Ireland
Applicant: LIFE IP Wild Atlantic Nature

Wild Atlantic Nature LIFE is a 9-year EU-funded LIFE Integrated Project working with farmers, local communities and landowners to add value to the wide range of services provided by Ireland's Natura network of blanket bogs and associated areas. As part of the project, a voluntary Results Based Payment Scheme (RBPS) was developed which rewards farmers for delivering environmental improvements to their land, such as improved water water quality, biodiversity and climate regulation.

The RBPS directly links farmers' agri-environment payments to the ecological condition of their land through a scorecard-based approach that assesses different habitat types, and captures the level of environmental services provided. In this way, the farmers' skills, expertise and knowledge of their land is placed at the heart of the project. The pilot scheme was rolled out across 63,000 ha of blanket bog and associated land within eight Natura 2000 sites across northwest Ireland. Over 800 farmers participated in the scheme, having received training in environmental assessments and land management.

Thanks to its success, the pilot scheme led to development of a wider Agri-Climate Rural Environment Scheme (ACRES) under Ireland's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) Strategic Plan. ACRES is a farmer-friendly scheme designed to help address biodiversity decline while delivering income support for up to 50,000 farming families in Ireland, to the value of €150 million per year. ACRES will be rolled out over 85% of Ireland's terrestrial Natura 2000 network including blanket bogs, other bog habitats, grassland, woodland/scrub and associated species.

https://bit.ly/3CnrE68

Communication

Executive Vice-President Maroš Šefčovič, Jury member Etienne Aulotte, and representatives of the Associazione culturale Artetica.

Title: From the woods to the web and back: communicating to promote community engagement and citizen science in Northern Italy
Applicant: Associazione culturale Artetica

The Artetica Cultural Association, a local NGO working in a small community in the Friulian countryside of Northern Italy, implemented an intensive communication programme to raise awareness amongst local stakeholders and communities of the ecological value of the 'Boschi di Muzzana', a 350-hectare Natura 2000 site. The site represents one of the last remaining fragments of a much larger forest complex.

Run exclusively by volunteers, the NGO built up an extensive portfolio of activities to engage nature lovers, local experts, citizens and researchers of different ages and backgrounds in caring for, and appreciating, their Natura 2000 site.

A trilingual website (Italian- Fruilian-English) was set up to share local knowledge, scientific research and cultural events linked to the site. Several books were also produced about the site's biodiversity and cultural history.

In addition, Artetica actively involved various stakeholders in different types of actions in favour of the protected area and lobbied local authorities to address certain damaging activities. The NGO was successful in halting the detrimental mowing of areas rich in rare wild orchids and in reducing the risk of fire by revising the water management plan for the surrounding area to ensure a sufficient level of humidity in the most vulnerable forest areas.

The association's communication programme is now self-funded by its members. Although the programme is aimed at the local community, the communication activities are readily transferable to other Natura 2000 sites and could easily be replicated by other small communities who want to develop similar approaches to protecting their local nature.

https://bit.ly/3YUW6gD

Cross Border Cooperation

Executive Vice-President Maroš Šefčovič, Oana Neagu representing Jury member Niall Curley (Copa-Cogeca, representing economic users), and representatives of the Fundación HAZI.

Title: Grazing to preserve Natura 2000 habitats and species: a Pyrenees example from France and Spain
Applicant: Fundación HAZI

The Oreka Mendian LIFE project set out to develop a common strategy to manage mountain pastures in 23 Natura 2000 sites across the Pyrenees while finding a balance between their conservation and socio-economic use. Led by the HAZI Foundation in partnership with several regional authorities from Spain, the French Conservatoire d´Espaces Naturels en Nouvelle-Aquitaine and Euromontana, the project developed a series of conservation management plans aimed at reconciling the conservation of the valuable grasslands with the provision of fodder and grazing land for livestock.

The plans, which were developed in close cooperation with local farmers and landowners, defined parameters for pro-biodiversity grazing, analysed socio-economic variables, and established the grazing capacity of specific grasslands according to the types of livestock present. The project also restored over 1670 ha of grassland to create additional grazing areas for livestock and so reduce the pressure on overgrazed areas nearby. Drinking troughs and other small infrastructures were constructed (salt licks, scratching posts...) to encourage the livestock back into these areas.

Thanks to the project a "Group of Experts in Pasture Research in the Northern Pyrenees" was set up to continue to exchange knowledge and share experiences. Together, they also produced a best practice manual for mountain pasture conservation which offers over 30 inspiring examples of sustainable mountain pasture management from 18 European countries. All tools and methodologies developed by the project are fully adaptable to other areas in the EU, and have so far been shared with over 1,300 people.

https://bit.ly/48FMRnG

Citizen's award

Executive Vice-President Maroš Šefčovič and representatives of the SGGW Leśny Zakład Doświadczalny w Rogowie.

Title: Best Practices for the conservation and management of the black Stork in Poland
Applicant: SGGW Leśny Zakład Doświadczalny w Rogowie

The black stork is a long-distance migratory bird that requires old, undisturbed and open forests for breeding. In the early phase of nesting, the species is particularly sensitive to disturbances and landscape changes, such as those caused by inappropriate forestry activities.

The Forest Experimental Station in Rogów, and the Committee for the Protection of Eagles, with support from the Polish EU-funded Operational Programme Infrastructure and Environment, implemented a series of actions aimed at improving the protection of the black stork and its habitats in 16 Natura 2000 sites across Poland.

By 2023, the project had protected around 700 breeding sites through the designation of nest protection zones (each of around 2,800 hectares). Forest management practices and human disturbance were restricted in these zones during the breeding season. The protected zones around nesting sites cover a cumulative area of more than 600,000 hectares within Natura 2000, and, together, support over half of the country's breeding population of black stock.

The project also invested resources in assessing and monitoring the stork population. As a result, many details of the spatial ecology of young black storks were discovered for the first time in Poland thanks to the use of GPS-GSM loggers.

The black stork is now one of the most intensively monitored species in Poland. Numerous education and dissemination activities were also carried out targeting stakeholders connected with Natura 2000 forest areas as well as the wider public.

https://bit.ly/48H45ky

natura news

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New LIFE Nature and Biodiversity projects

In October 2024, the Commission announced its approval of 25 new nature and biodiversity projects. The total budget for these projects amounts to €216 million to which the EU will contribute around €144.5 million. Once again, the range of issues being tackled through these new projects is truly impressive.

On land, two projects in Lithuania will aim to secure the recovery of the aquatic warbler *Acrocephalus paludicola* of which there remain fewer than 50 breeding populations in the world. The first project will restore six abandoned breeding sites totalling nearly 4000 ha across 5 countries (Germany, Poland, Lithuania, Hungary and Ukraine) and relocate 760 birds to these newly restored sites to kick start their recolonisation. The second project will develop a warbler-friendly flyway through 22 Natura 2000 sites within Europe, and beyond to also cover their wintering grounds in Senegal.

In Denmark, a large-scale LIFE project with a budget of almost €16 million will reconnect Natura 2000 sites by creating ecological corridors between 15 Natura 2000 sites on the Island of Fyn. In Austria, a second strategic scale project (budget €22 million), this time run by the country's biggest hydro-electricity company, will restore 20 km of the River Enns – a tributary of the Danube. Infrastructures will be removed, new floodplains created and river connections restored between different tributaries.

Several projects will also tackle biodiversity issues in the marine environment. 21 partners from Italy, Spain, Cyprus, Greece and France will, for instance, carry out multiple actions to conserve endangered shark and ray species in 12 areas across the Mediterranean Sea. They will work closely with local fishing communities to reduce bycatch and promote more sustainable fishing practices.

Another marine project involving a consortium of scientists, researchers, fishermen and NGOs from Spain, Italy and Malta will work together to reduce the risk of loggerhead sea turtles getting caught in lost or abandoned fishing gear. The project will also design and test a new generation of smart fishing technology.

Meanwhile in Belgium, a public private partnership aims to reverse the decline of the European Kittiwake *Rissa tridactyla* by establishing a new colony of over 1000 breeding pairs on Princess Elisabeth Island -a recently created artificial energy hub located 45 km off the Belgian coast.

To explore all new LIFE projects go to: http://bit.ly/3YYfU2K

Aquatic warbler (*Acrocephalus paludicola*) will be the target of two new LIFE projects

Natura 2000 and Climate change

In 2021, the EU adopted an EU Strategy on Adaptation to Climate Change and, more recently, a Communication on Managing Climate Risks to boost Europe's adaptive capacity, strengthen its resilience and reduce its vulnerability to climate change. The EU Strategy places a strong emphasis on the large-scale implementation of nature-based solutions to increase climate resilience, highlighting the fact that they are often cost effective, multipurpose, "no regret" solutions.

The EU Climate Adaptation Strategy is also highly relevant to Natura 2000 site managers. Because of its sheer size and scale, the Natura 2000 network – representing roughly 18% of land and 9% of sea – can be expected to continue to hold a very significant proportion of Europe's biodiversity, even in the face of climate change. It also has the potential to play a major role in Europe's overall climate response strategy by offering a wide range of nature-based solutions for mitigating and adapting to climate change.

The Commission is currently preparing guidance on suitable conservation approaches and adaptation strategies for Natura 2000 sites. The aim is twofold: to support a better understanding of how Natura 2000 can be adapted to climate change; and to demonstrate how Natura 2000 can contribute to wider climate change adaptation and mitigation targets in order to increase Europe's resilience.

The guidance, to be published in early 2025, will set out a climate change decision framework to guide the identification and selection of appropriate climate change adaptation measures at network level, site level and in the surrounding landscape and seas. It will also offer practical guidance on key actions that can be taken to help Natura 2000 sites, species and habitats better adapt to climate change.

Tourism and recreational activities in Natura 2000

The opportunity to enjoy well preserved natural areas and their cultural and aesthetic values means that Natura 2000 sites are amongst the top tourism and recreation destinations in Europe. On the other hand, the influx of visitors, and the related services and infrastructures, can pose a number of threats to these, often fragile, ecosystems.

Striking the right balance between nature conservation and sustainable tourism and recreation is a real challenge for stakeholders and especially for local and regional public

Central Bohemian Highlands, a magnet for tourists, Czech Republic

Mediterranean pines (Pinus halepensis) in forest fire, Peloponese, Greece.

authorities who usually bear the final responsibility for both.

To assist them in this task, the Commission is currently preparing a guidance document, supported by practical case studies, on managing both in mutually beneficial ways. The guidance, to be published in early 2025, will offer a set of key principles and operational guidelines to support public authorities and other relevant stakeholders on planning and managing tourism and recreational activities in Natura 2000. In addition, it will provide an overview of the various EU funding opportunities available to support tourism activities in and around Natura 2000 sites.

Further guidance on the Nature Directives

Two additional Commission guidance documents are also currently under preparation. The first aims to provide guidance on the general system of protection of birds under the Birds Directive. It will clarify the obligations arising from article 5 (general system of protection) and article 9 (derogations), highlighting the jurisprudence established through different rulings of the Court of Justice of the EU (CJEU) so far. Various case studies will also be presented to illustrate how the protection can be implemented in practice while fully respecting the legal framework. The annexes will address the use of derogations for two topical species, the Barnacle Goose and the Great Cormorant.

The final Commission guidance focusses on fishing in and around Natura 2000 sites. As commercial and recreational fishing activities can negatively affect habitats and species which are protected in Natura 2000 sites, the guidance will examine how to apply Article 6 of the Habitats Directive and Article 4 of the Birds Directive to the regulation of such fishing activities.

The initiative was announced in the "EU Action Plan: Protecting and restoring marine ecosystems for sustainable and resilient fisheries" which contributes to delivering on the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030. The guidance document is expected to be published in early 2025.

UN Biodiversity Conference

The 16th Conference of the Parties under the UN Biodiversity Conference met in October in Colombia to discuss progress in halting and reversingbiodiversity loss worldwide by 2030 following the adaption of the Kumming-Montreal Global Framework in 2022.

Public funding for nature conservation was at the heart of this latest meeting. While the European Union, together with other Parties, did not endorse the setting up of dedicated fund for nature, the EU committed itself to significantly increasing biodiversity funding to third countries. It announced a series of funding packages for supporting biodiversity actions globally worth over 160 million.

The first measure is a comprehensive €69 million package of actions aimed at enhancing capacity and increasing knowledge in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean. The aim is to strengthen partner countries' abilities to mobilise domestic and international finance for biodiversity through the implementation of Biodiversity Financing Plans.

The second measure is a new €48 million programme to tackle illegal wildlife trafficking by fostering transnational collaboration and building the capacity of law enforcement and justice systems in developing countries. It also aims to reduce demand in key markets for illegal wildlife products.

The third measure is a dedicated €40 million programme to support partner countries' efforts to conserve and sustainably manage biodiversity in the high seas. Amongst others, the program will support the development of strong proposals for future marine protected areas in the high seas, which are key to achieving the Global Biodiversity Framework's target to protect at least 30% of land and ocean by 2030.

At the COP meeting, the EU also presented its exploratory work on the potential for setting up a biodiversity certification and nature credit system as part of the innovative finance instruments toolbox designed to broaden sources of funding to mobilise resources, help companies set nature-positive goals, and reward those who protect and restore nature. Two pilot projects are currently underway to test the feasibility

Humpback Whale, Antarctica.

of such a system, one on wetlands in partnership with France and one on private forests in partnership with Estonia.

More information on https://bit.ly/3OZdQ4C

Rolling out clean energy across Europe

Given the need to speed up the EU's clean energy transition, the Revised Renewable Energy Directive (RED), adopted in 2021, sets as a target to increase the share of renewable energy in the EU's total energy consumption to 42.5% by 2030, with an aspiration to reach 45%. In 2022, an emergency Regulation was also adopted to further accelerate the implementation of renewable energy systems in response the energy crisis following Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Both pieces of legislation call for a simplification and streamlining of the permit procedures for certain renewable energy projects and technologies with the highest potential for quick deployment. They therefore have direct implications for the implementation of the Birds and Habitats Directives, in particular as regards the issuing of permits under Article 6 of the Habitats Directive.

For instance, in the so-called Renewables Acceleration Areas, projects under certain conditions will be exempted from the appropriate assessment under Article 6(3) of the Habitats Directive. Moreover, the planning, construction and operation of certain renewable energy plants (and related infrastructure and accompanying grid) are presumed to be of overriding public interest for the purposes of applying derogations under the Birds, Habitats and Water Framework Directives.

To help Member State authorities fully understand the implications and interactions between the EU' renewable energy legislation and other EU environmental laws, including the Nature Directives, the Commission has recently issued a series of guidance documents on how to improve and streamline permitting procedures for renewables.

The documents are designed to assist Member States in planning their new renewable energy projects while ensuring that the approval of such plans and projects is fully in line with the requirements of both the EU's energy and existing environmental legislation.

For more information: NADEG note on the implications for the Birds and Habitats Directives; Renewable energy recommendations and guidance

Field of solar panels for the production of renewable and non-polluting energy, Abruzzo, Italy.

Downgrading the protection status of the wolf

On 6 December 2024, the Standing Committee of the Bern Convention voted in favour of the EU proposal to adapt the protection status of the wolf from 'strictly protected' to 'protected'. It should be noted that the change will only enter into force on 7 March 2025 (3 months later) unless a third of the Parties object within that timeframe. Until the change is adopted in EU law, the current protection status (strict protection) of the wolf remains applicable in the EU.

After 7 March 2025, the EU will adapt the corresponding annexes of the Habitats Directive. The Commission is already actively preparing a targeted procedural amendment to reflect this change in EU law.

LAST ISSUE OF THE NEWSLETTER

The Natura 2000 newsletter has been providing updates on the EU Nature and biodiversity policies since May 1996. After 55 issues, the time has come to change its format. We would therefore like to thank all our loyal readers for their support over the years. You can continue to be updated on latest events and activities by signing up to DG Environment's newsletters on EU Environment Newsletters - European Commission. Alternatively, you can join DG Environment on social media or explore its website.

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