

Science for Environment Policy

Eastern European birds protected by recent legislation show improved population trends

National bird conservation policies implemented in Eastern Europe in the 1990s have substantially benefited bird populations across the region, a new study has shown. Compared with the period 1970-1990, the population trends of species protected by national legislation improved during 1990-2000, particularly for those species receiving focused attention. Across the 306 species studied, the average rate of decline was much lower after protection than before. This suggests that modern conservation policies in the region were already taking effect.

Conservation policies require careful evaluation to achieve the most effective [biodiversity](#) protection. For bird species, many of which have suffered severe declines, previous research has shown that species protection policies have been beneficial in the US (Endangered Species Act) and Western Europe ([EU Birds Directive](#)¹). However, very little research has been carried out in Eastern Europe. Modern environmental policies in this region were only established more recently, in the 1990s, after the Soviet Union and other similar regimes came to an end.

For this study, researchers used data from ten eastern European countries: Belarus, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Moldova, Poland, Slovakia and Ukraine. They compared the population trends (declining, improving or stable) of 306 bird species between 1970-1990 and 1990-2000, before and after modern conservation policies were implemented.

After 1990, the population trends of those species which had gained protection improved more, compared to pre-1990, than those which remained unprotected. This shows the importance, and efficacy, of modern species protection measures in Eastern Europe, say the study's authors. However, they also note that although protected species showed improvement, on average population trends remained negative after 1990. This demonstrates that although these policies had successfully slowed the decline of many species, they had not managed to halt and reverse them in their first few years of implementation.

The researchers also compared different types of conservation policies. Half of the countries operated 'narrow and deep' policies, where resources were used intensively for relatively few species, often the most endangered. The other half used 'broad and shallow' strategies, where many species were listed as protected, even relatively common or unthreatened species, but with less effort invested in each.

The results showed that in countries which employed 'narrow and deep' policies, population trends of species that were protected in the 1990s improved substantially, and there was also some improvement in unprotected species.

In those that used 'broad and shallow' approaches, species protected in the 1990s also improved, albeit not so markedly (although it should be noted that their population trends were generally better to begin with). Among unprotected species in 'broad and shallow' countries, population trends actually worsened after 1990.

The researchers suggest that a combination of the two approaches might be the most suitable: 'broad and shallow' for most species, with 'deep and narrow' employed for smaller groups of particularly endangered species.

It will soon be possible to evaluate the extent to which these policies have performed since 2000, using new trend data (2001-2012) reported by EU Member States under Article 12 of the Birds Directive, and by other sources in non-EU countries. This project, which will produce a [European Red List of Birds](#) in 2015, is funded by the European Commission, and led by BirdLife International.



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1. http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/legislation/birdsdirective/index_en.htm

