The Benefits of European Policies on Bird Conservation

A European team of scientists has recently investigated the benefits of EU policy instruments on bird conservation by studying bird population trends in Europe following the implementation of the Wild Birds Directive. While their results highlight the measurable benefits of supranational conservation programs, they also suggest that future assessments will require the setting of quantitative objectives and adequate monitoring schemes in order to provide relevant data to assess and improve policy efficiency.

Previous studies have shown a significant decline in bird populations over the last decades, explained by increased anthropogenic pressures on the environment. In Europe, declines in bird populations had led to the implementation of two main EU directives: Council Directive 79/409/EEC on the conservation of wild birds (the Wild Birds Directive) and Council Directive 92/43/EEC on the conservation of natural habitats, wild fauna and flora (the Habitat Directive). Without imposing legal mechanisms on Member States, the Wild Birds Directive established a framework for the conservation of birds, listed species considered to be particularly vulnerable (Annex I listing) and proposed Special Protection Areas (SPA) as a conservation tool for rare species. In view of the intensity and scale of anthropogenic pressures on bird populations and habitats, trans-national conservation measures are likely to represent the only viable solution to their long-term protection. However, evaluations of the impacts of such supranational interventions are scarce and quantitative data limited, which exposes these schemes to criticism and limits opportunities to improve them. It is therefore of significant importance to assess the impacts of such measures quantitatively.

In a recent study, a European team of scientists collected and analysed population monitoring data of breeding birds covering the periods 1970-1990 and 1990-2000 within and outside the initial 15 EU Member States. They used statistical methods to compare population trends before and after 1990, between Annex I and non-Annex I species within the EU15 and between Annex I species in the EU and the same group of species outside the EU. Their mains results are as follows:

- An increase of the population of Annex I species relative to non-Annex I species was found within the EU15. In addition, a difference in trends between Annex I and non-Annex I species inside and outside EU15 did not differ significantly for the period 1970 – 1990, but was significantly higher in EU15 for the period 1990-2000. This demonstrated the positive effects of Annex I listing in states which implemented the Wild Birds Directive.

- The positive association of increasing bird populations and the proportion of land designated as protected areas (SPA) across EU15 countries for all bird species supported the evidence for a causal link between policy intervention and population response. The correlation was higher for Annex I species than for non Annex I species, which is consistent with the fact that SPA designation and management are targeted largely towards Annex I species.

- The lapse in time between policy intervention and detectable population-level response exceeded 10 years.

The authors conclude that these results provide the first strong evidence for a positive impact of a European policy on bird conservation. Although supranational conservation policies can provide measurable conservation benefits, monitoring data is scarce and limits the evaluation of policy efficiency. For future legislation, the authors call for the setting of quantitative objectives and improved support for monitoring programs at policy level. Indeed, integrating monitoring and policy would lead to a better assessment of conservation effectiveness and provide valuable information to improve policy design.

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