

# Science for Environment Policy

## Natura 2000 conservation: how can social-science research enhance conservation outcomes?

**Governance of biodiversity is closely linked to social and economic processes and human behaviour**, appreciation of which can enhance conservation outcomes. This study reviewed findings on the social aspects of Natura 2000, identifying research gaps and recommendations for improving the network's implementation across the EU. The researchers say limited stakeholder participation, negative perceptions of the network and a lack of consideration of the local context hinder the network's effectiveness. They recommend increasing public awareness and compensating private landowners.

**Traditionally, an interdisciplinary approach to conservation issues has been limited, as has collaboration between social and natural scientists.** This is gradually changing as scientists are recognising the importance and ubiquity of human–environment interactions. The global [water](#) crisis, for example, threatens both human societies and freshwater [biodiversity](#). Similarly, [climate change](#) poses serious challenges to society and the environment.

With this in mind, successful conservation initiatives should consider human behaviour and social processes, as they ultimately influence biodiversity. Sustainable conservation initiatives should not only be based on the requirements of species and habitats but also consider economic, social and cultural factors. This is demonstrated by this study, which reviews social-science research with regard to a major conservation initiative: [Natura 2000](#), the world's largest coordinated network of protected areas. Although social, economic and policy research on the network is to date scarcer than ecological research, there is a sizeable body of research focusing on these aspects of Natura 2000. This paper is the first to comprehensively review these studies. The researchers focused on peer-reviewed literature published between 1998 and 2014, gathering a total of 149 publications.

One of the issues important to Natura 2000 that was identified by the review was **public participation**. Although the researchers identified a trend towards more inclusive approaches, stakeholder involvement was overall small scale and of low quality. Similarly, the findings revealed the importance of **public perception** of the establishment, operation and monitoring of the network: although the network was generally perceived as a useful approach for conservation, the review identified some negative perceptions of it, especially as a barrier to economic development.

Several studies also discussed a **lack of flexibility** in regulations, leading to decisions being made based on strict rules and not always being appropriate to the local context. As a result, the researchers recommended better transfer of knowledge from the EU to the local level (e.g. stronger links between EU policy and national, regional and local authorities), more qualified staff (e.g. to facilitate stakeholder participation) and enhanced funding.

In addition to identifying the complexities of the social aspects of Natura 2000, the authors also discuss knowledge gaps. In particular, they say more research is needed to evaluate the effects of participation on conservation (e.g. the extent to which it actually affects biodiversity and improves ecological, as well as social, outcomes). They also recommend efforts to increase awareness and acceptance of the network, such as educational and information initiatives.

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**Source:** Blicharska, M., Orlikowska, E.H., Roberge, J. & Grodzinska-Jurczak, M. (2016). Contribution of social science to large scale biodiversity conservation: A review of research about the Natura 2000 network. *Biological Conservation* 199:110–122. DOI: 10.1016/j.biocon.2016.05.007.

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*(continued)*

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Finally, the authors report that very few studies looked at the costs and benefits of the network, and they could not identify any comprehensive economic analyses. They, therefore, recommend research to quantify the benefits of the network and to develop indicators of its effectiveness, which they say are 'urgently needed' to evaluate Natura 2000. This could facilitate the design of compensation — such as reimbursement to owners of private land to cover the costs of complying with Natura 2000, such as changing the way they farm the land — which is, the authors suggest, one potential solution to improving the public perception of the network.

Overall, although Natura 2000 has been shown to be a successful conservation initiative, this review suggests there are some shortcomings. Although issues vary across EU Member States, there are some common challenges: limited public participation, negative public perceptions, inflexible regulations and authorities, low capacity of local authorities and insufficient consideration of the local context. The authors suggest social-science research could benefit implementation by highlighting the areas that need improvement and thus contributing to an ongoing 'fitness check' of the network.

It is important to note that this review only includes peer-reviewed scientific articles published in English and, therefore, could omit issues covered in other languages or in the grey literature. However, this review does present a reliable overview of knowledge and provides useful recommendations for improving the Natura 2000 network's effectiveness, which could be used alongside existing local recommendations and guidelines.

