

## **SPEECH**

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## **The way forward: Lessons learned for the LIFE programme**

LIFE NATURE thematic conference  
“Protecting Europe’s Nature: Learning from LIFE”



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Ladies and Gentlemen,

This conference is now drawing to a close; I should like to take a few moments to summarise what we have learned during these last two days.

The LIFE programme has seen many successes over the years; many of these in the field of nature conservation. As we have heard earlier this afternoon, the Commission is very active as regards nature protection, as are the Member States.

When developing important policies to help to halt the loss of biodiversity, it is important to know how these policies can be implemented on the ground. In this regard the best practices generated by LIFE nature projects have been very helpful.

As we know many of the national bodies charged with the implementation of the Birds and Habitats directives are also active as beneficiaries of LIFE nature; in the same way some of the most important non-governmental organisations, such as the World Wildlife Fund and Birdlife are also responsible for the implementation of LIFE nature projects. We are happy that these influential actors have been present at this conference because it confirms that the LIFE programme is important when it comes to finding new ways to pursue our goals of nature protection and biodiversity at large. In the LIFE programme we try to achieve this by ensuring that there are qualified people working with the programme and by facilitating the dissemination of results and ensuring their further use.

The positive contribution of LIFE nature has been clearly demonstrated in these last two days; in different types of habitats, with different environmental problems, dedicated project managers (beneficiaries in general) have demonstrated best practices can be applied in other European regions with similar problems.

Examples are: marine projects that find solutions to the well-known conflicts between fishing and conservation actions. Also grassland projects that develop ways to involve a variety of stakeholders or demonstration projects that expand into national or regional agri-environmental schemes.

Furthermore methods for combating invasive alien species: rats or invasive plants. Or conservation measures for large mammals: the wolf or the Iberian lynx. River projects have given us valuable experience on restoration methods, responding to flood risks at the same time as improving the conditions for plant and animals. We have also heard about work on specific habitats, such as blanket bogs, a habitat widely present outside Natura 2000.

Together, with all that, we have seen examples of international cooperation – vultures, seabirds, or of international river catchments areas, for example, the river Sava running through Croatia, Serbia and Slovenia.

**Well so far so good, where do we go from here?**

**Or let me put it another way: how can we develop the LIFE programme to meet new challenges?**

Between 1992 and 2006 the LIFE programme has carried out actions supporting the implementation of the Birds and Habitats Directives. The overriding objective during this period has been to support the implementation of the European network of protected nature areas, Natura 2000. No doubt we need to continue with this huge effort, as it remains an important pillar of the LIFE+ programme and I can assure you, we will do so.

But at the same time it has been increasingly clear that we need to work to protect Europe's wider biodiversity. We realise that the protection of biodiversity calls for measures to improve the situation of plants and animals in the wider countryside. We need to acknowledge that nature does not know borders – of protected areas or nations. Therefore the successful conservation of biodiversity must be based on the population of species and habitats present both in protected areas, and wherever they are found.

This is certainly a very demanding job but the positive side of this demanding task is that we may use the experience from the many successful projects that have taken place within Natura 2000 areas to protect and enhance the condition of the same habitat or species outside protected areas, or in other countries. In responding to this new challenge, LIFE+ biodiversity can support innovative initiatives in this field.

We are only now beginning to learn how to detect the effects of climate change on Europe's natural habitats and species. The examples presented during this conference show that LIFE nature projects offer valuable experience on how to detect changes, and how best to respond to them. In order to overcome the impact of climate change, species should be able to move between key habitats, and our effort should be directed at ensuring that stepping stones are available to guarantee connectivity between those key habitats.

Our hope is that many future LIFE projects will contribute to the solution of these challenges, building on the excellent results obtained to date.

Marine areas will remain a focus of the LIFE programme. We are only now beginning to understand the intrinsic mechanisms operating in the sea, LIFE projects have contributed to this. Marine projects have already provided examples on how to establish better cooperation and stakeholder acceptance. These matters are

paramount in ensuring a sustainable use of the seas that are one of the main areas for the conservation of biodiversity and, at the same time, a crucial basis for human livelihood.

In concluding, I would dare to say that we can be proud of what we have achieved through the LIFE programme; we now need to develop it to meet new challenges. We must find new ways to ensure that the achievements of projects are sustainable. We must make sure that good practice is demonstrated and transferred to other regions with similar problems. We must find innovative ways of applying best practices to the challenge maintaining biodiversity.

I have listened with great interest to the reports from the eight thematic sessions. Clearly there has been a great deal of debate on how best to deal with marine habitats; with the impact of climate change on nature and how we could better tackle invasive alien species.

Let me underline a couple of issues I have picked up among the many interesting points summarised by the eight rapporteurs. For me there are several key messages from these sessions:

A first issue is the value of LIFE nature projects to ecosystem services. We must find a way to highlight and develop this aspect of these projects.

Secondly is how to achieve a balance between investing mainly in Natura 2000 sites and implementing global protection measures for a specific species. With the development of marine sites and the impact of climate change we must explore the possibilities offered by LIFE biodiversity.

The final point is how better to disseminate information which, of course, is linked to the point about the networking of projects – or the setting of the meta-database for

the exchange of information; or awareness raising – as we heard in the recommendation on the issue of invasive alien species

In closing, I would like to take this opportunity to thank all the project managers for the important contribution you have made to ensure the success of your projects, of the LIFE programme, and of our nature protection policies.

Also for you coming here and sharing your experience with us during these two days. Our warmest thanks go also to all invited speakers and to Aminda for animating the discussion. Thanks a lot to Astrale and very particularly to Bent Jepsen for the efficient organisation of this conference as well as to Stefan Welin of the LIFE unit as well as to other colleagues of the unit that have contributed to the preparation of this event.

As we now go forward with LIFE+ I hope that we can count on your commitment and ideas so that we together can make a difference.

Thank you very much.