Europe contains less than 3% of the world’s land mass, but, despite its size, it has a very rich biodiversity. From the Arctic Circle to the warm Mediterranean coastline, from the peaks of the Alps to the vast open plains of central Europe, the diversity of nature on our small continent is truly remarkable.

Few places in the world have such a varied, contrasting and regional patchwork of habitats, wildlife havens and cultural landscapes so tightly interwoven in so small an area – it is this that makes Europe’s nature so special.

Protecting our rich natural heritage ensures that Europe’s unique biodiversity is safeguarded for generations to come. It helps maintain nature’s vital role in our economy and the quality of our lives. Nature provides us with a healthy environment, where the air is clean and the water is fresh. It offers many beautiful places for us to explore, enjoy and relax in. It safeguards us against floods and other man-made disasters. Above all, nature provides a vital source of income and jobs for countless people across Europe, who harvest its natural resources in a sustainable manner.

Europe’s natural heritage is, however, under increasing threat. Even common species are declining at an alarming rate and many valuable natural and semi-natural habitats are being destroyed. As a result, almost half of Europe’s mammals and a third of all reptiles, fish and birds are now endangered.

In the face of this alarming decline, people from all over Europe have expressed concern over the loss of their natural heritage and are calling for action. Governments of the 25 EU Member States have responded by committing themselves to stop the loss of biodiversity in Europe by the year 2010.

Such an ambitious target is best achieved by pooling resources. EU legislation on nature enables all countries to work together within the same strong legal framework to save Europe’s most vulnerable and rare species and habitats across their natural range, irrespective of national borders.

The ‘Birds’ and ‘Habitats’ Directives form the cornerstones of European conservation legislation. Together, they represent the most ambitious ever undertaken to preserve our natural heritage over so large an area. Their aim is to safeguard biodiversity whilst taking economic, social, cultural and regional requirements into account.

At the heart of this legislation lies the Natura 2000 Network – an ecological patchwork of sites, which come together like a jigsaw to provide a safe haven for Europe’s most vulnerable and rare species and habitats across their natural range, irrespective of national borders.

Over 18,000 sites have been included in the Natura 2000 Network so far. These come from every country in the EU and together cover almost a fifth of the EU – an area equivalent to the size of Germany and Italy combined. Some sites are in remote wilderness areas that the majority of us will never see, but others are an integral part of our countryside. As a result, Natura 2000 also helps to conserve many other species and habitats which, although more common, are an equally important part of our natural heritage.

Natura 2000 fully recognises that man is an integral part of nature and the two work best in partnership. Indeed, many sites in the Natura 2000 Network are valuable precisely because of the way they have been managed until now. It is essential therefore that sustainable land-uses are maintained and that those who live and work in Natura 2000 areas are closely involved in decisions over the long-term management of their sites.

From private landowners and users, to recreational groups, conservationists, local communities and individual citizens – we all have an important role to play in making Natura 2000 a success.