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REPORT FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE COUNCIL AND THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

Composite Report on the Conservation Status of Habitat Types and Species as required under Article 17 of the Habitats Directive

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Executive Summary

The first ever systematic assessment of the conservation status of Europe's most vulnerable habitat types and species protected under the Habitats Directive has been carried out as part of the regular six-yearly progress reporting across 25 Member States and 11 (seven land and four marine) bio-geographical regions. The scale of this reporting exercise is unparalleled in Europe and has provided a first overview and point of reference for assessing future trends.

The results, covering 2001-2006, show that only a small proportion of the habitats and species of Community interest are in a favourable conservation status. The reports submitted by the Member States show that grassland, wetland and coastal habitat types are under the most pressure. Grassland habitat types are predominantly associated with traditional patterns of agriculture, which are disappearing throughout the EU. Wetland habitats continue to be converted to other types of land use and also suffer from the effects of climate change. Coastal habitats are under increasing pressure from tourist and urban developments. Some of the species protected under the Directive, such as the wolf, Eurasian lynx, beaver and otter, are showing signs of recovery in parts of the EU but for these and a majority of other species we are a long way from achieving healthy, sustainable populations.

The findings demonstrate that the conservation measures in the Directive as well as funding and other instruments under sectoral policies can deliver positive results. Considerable work remains to be done to build on the progress achieved to date. In particular, the Natura 2000 network should be completed, individual sites may need restoration measures and individual sites and the network will need to be managed effectively and properly resourced.

Lastly, the reports submitted during the current reporting round demonstrate that relatively few Member States invest sufficient resources in monitoring the status of species and habitats within their territories. A good monitoring programme requires expert staff and considerable resources. However, in the absence of reliable data it will be impossible to assess the impact of conservation measures.

Detailed results of the Article 17 reporting exercise can be found on the following website: http://biodiversity.eionet.europa.eu/article17.

1. INTRODUCTION

In 2001 the European Union set the political objective of halting biodiversity loss in the EU by 2010. Under the Convention on Biological Diversity, the European Union agreed to a global target of 'significantly reducing the current rate of biodiversity loss by 2010'. In 2006

in its Communication - 'Halting the Loss of Biodiversity by 2010 and Beyond'[1] - the European Commission reaffirmed the target of halting biodiversity loss by 2010 and set out a road-map - the Biodiversity Action Plan - to achieve this objective.

A prerequisite for both EU and international policy is a reliable measure of the status and trends in biodiversity. At EU level, the information collected and reported by the Member States under the Habitats Directive[2] constitutes an important source of data on the status of some of the most threatened habitat types and most vulnerable species of animals and plants.

2. REPORTING REQUIREMENTS UNDER ARTICLE 17 OF THE HABITATS DIRECTIVE

What the Directive requires

Under Article 17 of the Habitats Directive, Member States must submit information on how the Directive is being implemented every six years. For the reporting period 2001 to 2006, Member States for the first time provided detailed assessments on the conservation status of each of the habitat types (216) and species (nearly 1 182) listed in the Directive and found within their territory.

On the basis of the reports submitted by the Member States, the Commission is required to produce a composite report (this document) including an evaluation of the progress made and the contribution that the Natura 2000 network has made towards achieving the objectives set out in Article 3 of the Directive.

Conservation Status

Article 2 of the Habitats Directive states that 'measures taken pursuant to this Directive shall be designed to maintain or restore, at **favourable conservation status**, natural habitats and species of wild fauna and flora of Community interest' (the habitat types listed in Annex I and species listed in Annexes II, IV or V to the Directive).

Article 1 of the Directive defines the term **conservation status** as applied to habitats and to species. These definitions take into account parameters such as the extent of the area in which the habitat/species is found, the surface of the habitat area, its structure and functions (in case of habitat), the size of the population, its age structure, mortality and reproduction (of species). This forms the basis for developing a common assessment method and reporting format, which was agreed by the Habitats Committee[3] in March 2005.[4] The Commission provided supplementary guidance on the assessment process in 2006.[5]

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1 COM(2006) 216 final, 22.5.2006.

2 Council Directive 92/43/EEC on the conservation of natural habitats and of wild fauna and flora.

3 Regulatory Member States Committee established under Article 20 of the Habitats Directive to assist the Commission in implementing the Directive.

4 Assessment, monitoring and reporting of conservation status — Preparing the 2001-2006 report under Article 17 of the Habitats Directive. Note to the Habitats Committee, DG Environment, Brussels, 15 March 2005 http://circa.europa.eu/Public/irc/env/monnat/library?l=/habitats_reporting/reporting_2001-2007/reporting_framework&vm=detailed&sb=Title.

5 Assessment, monitoring and reporting under Article 17 of the Habitats Directive: Explanatory Notes & Guidelines October 2006.

Bio-geographic Regions

Habitats and species which are typically found together are associated with regions displaying similarities in climate, altitude and geology. From an ecological perspective, Europe can be divided into seven land and four marine bio-geographic regions. Therefore, when an assessment of the conservation status of a species or habitat was carried out by a Member State, the reference area for the assessments was not the territory of that Member State but the respective parts of bio-geographic regions within that Member State (see Box 1 for more information on bio-geographic regions).

The Reporting Process

The reports were submitted in electronic format through the 'Reportnet' System of the European Environment Agency (EEA). National reports were to be submitted by June 2007. Three Member States met this deadline, but Member States were still submitting reports until March 2008.[6] When a report from a Member State was first received, it was screened by the European Topic Centre for Biological Diversity (ETC-BD) of the EEA to assess the quality and completeness of the information. Requests for clarifications, additions and amendments were sent to the Member State with a short deadline for submitting any missing/updated data.

Consultations

Member States were consulted at three stages during the assessment of the data and the preparation of this document. Firstly, they were invited to review the national summaries, which were compiled on the basis of the national reports. Secondly, a public internet consultation was held from 28 July to 15 September 2008 allowing for comments from a wide range of stakeholders. About 2 000 visitors from 700 network locations across the EU were registered and nearly 400 comments were received. 75 % of these comments were considered relevant and integrated in the online database-information ('Data Sheet Info'). Lastly, a draft version of this document was submitted to the Habitats Committee.

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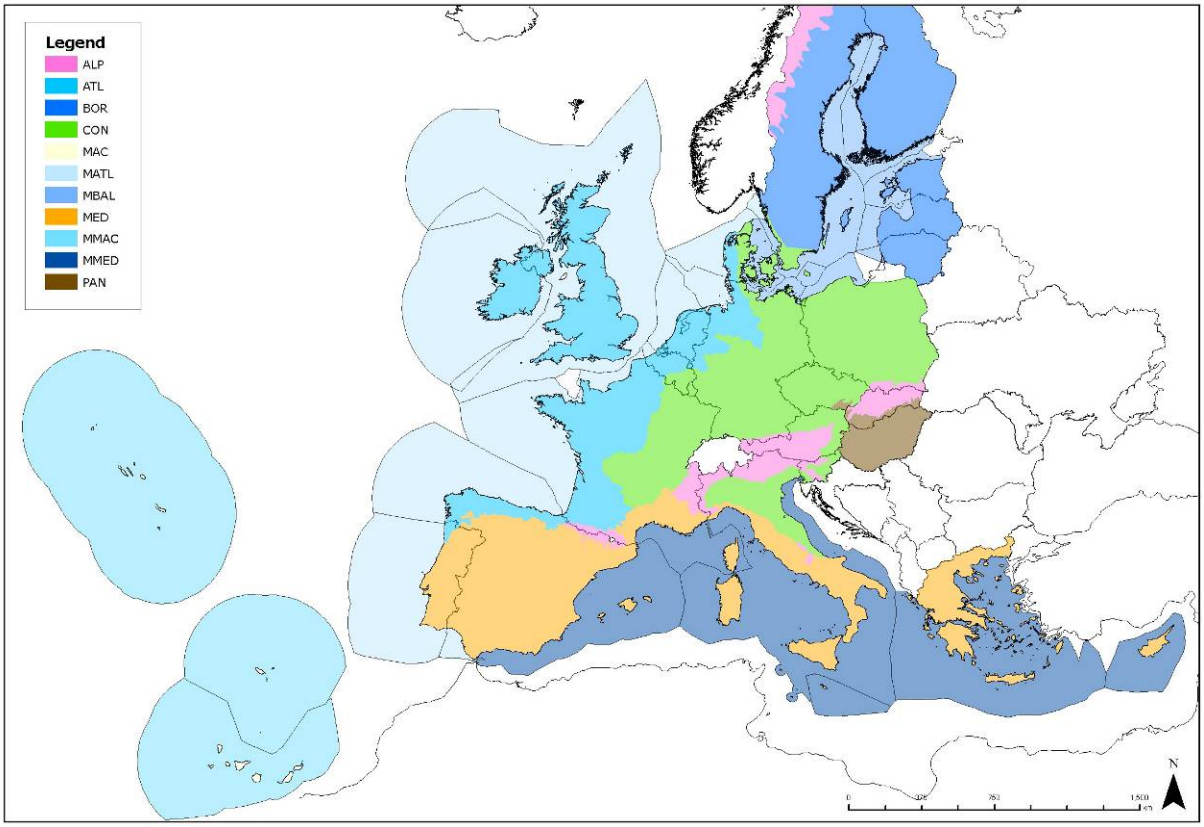
http://circa.europa.eu/Public/irc/env/monnat/library?l=/habitats_reporting/reporting_2001-2007/guidlines_reporting&vm=detailed&sb=Title.

6 Information received after that date could no longer be taken into account.

Box 1: Bio-geographic Regions.



Key for the different bio-geographic regions.

ALP=Alpine; ATL=Atlantic; BOR=Boreal; CON=Continental; MAC=Macaronesian; MED=Mediterranean; PAN=Pannonian; MATL=Marine Atlantic; MBAL=Marine Baltic; MMAC=Marine Macaronesian; MED=Marine Mediterranean

3. DATA COMPLETENESS AND QUALITY

Missing information

Overall, some 13% of regional habitat assessments and 27% of regional species assessments were reported by Member States as 'unknown'. The number of 'unknown' classifications was particularly high for species found in the countries of southern Europe, with Cyprus, Greece, Spain and Portugal all indicating 'unknown' for more than 50% of the species reported in their territories. Many Member States lacked comprehensive and reliable information on bats.

There is a particular problem with the marine environment, where 57% of the marine species assessments and about 40% of the marine habitats assessments were classed as 'unknown'. Many Member States simply lack the necessary information on the status of marine species and habitats found within their territories.

Quality & coherence

Even when information is available, problems often arise due to the different ways in which data is collected and presented. Where feasible, some of these data anomalies were addressed by the ETC-BD during data processing and assessment. The Commission and the Member States are already working to use the lessons learnt in this first reporting exercise to improve the information submitted in the next reporting cycle.

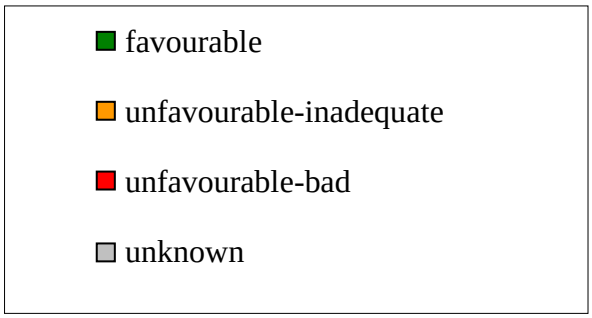
4. THE MAIN MESSAGES FROM THE ARTICLE 17 REPORTS

A) Introduction

The Biodiversity Topic Centre of the European Environment Agency made integrated assessments across bio-geographic regions based on the Member States' reports and using an agreed methodology. The Member State assessments were weighted according to the proportion of that species or habitat found within the national territories. The results were then aggregated to give a single, integrated assessment for each bio-geographical region. In total, 701 habitat assessments and 2 240 species assessments were made at bio-geographic level.

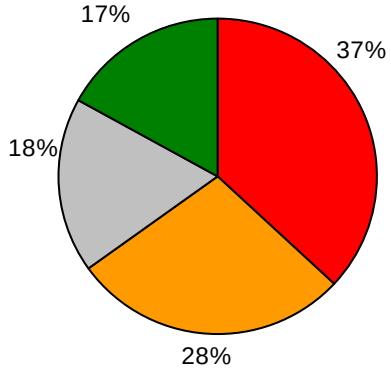
The website (http://biodiversity.eionet.europa.eu/article17) provides more details of the Member State assessments of conservation status and the biogeographic assessment (including maps and data sheets) and a detailed technical report.

In this report, the outcome of the assessments made on the conservation status of a habitat or species is presented in one of four categories: 'favourable' (green), 'unfavourable inadequate' (amber), 'unfavourable bad' (red) or 'unknown' (grey).



B) Status of the habitat types listed under Annex I to the Habitats Directive

At bio-geographic level nearly 65% of the 701 Annex 1 habitat assessments are unfavourable. Only 17% of the habitats assessments are favourable (Fig.1.A).



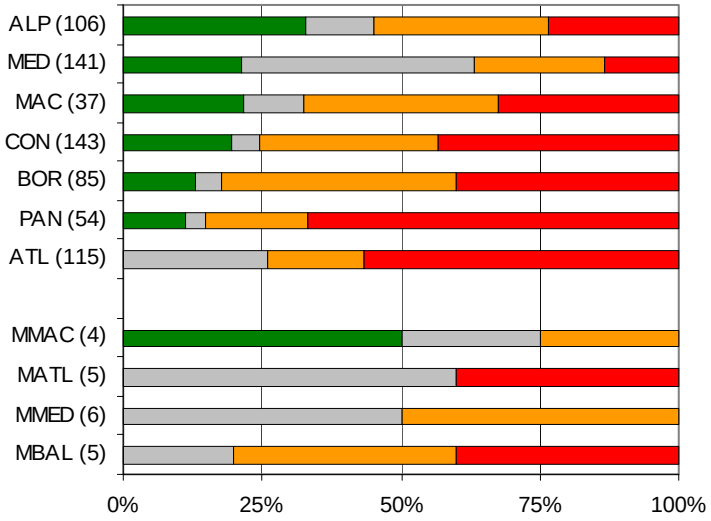


Figure 1.A **Figure 1.B**

Figure 1.A: Summary of the conservation status of Annex I habitats (the percentage relates to the number of assessments made)

Figure 1.B: Summary of the conservation status of habitat types in the different bio-geographical regions (numbers in brackets refer to the number of assessments)

The situation regarding the conservation status of habitats in the different bio-geographic regions (Figure 1.B) shows distinct differences between the regions. None of the habitat assessments from the Atlantic region were favourable, whereas 20 to 30% of habitat assessments are favourable in the Mediterranean and Alpine regions.

Annex 1 to the Habitats Directive includes a wide variety of habitats which are divided into nine groups of related habitat types, such as forests or grasslands. Figure 2 summarises the results of the assessments carried out for each of these nine habitat groups.

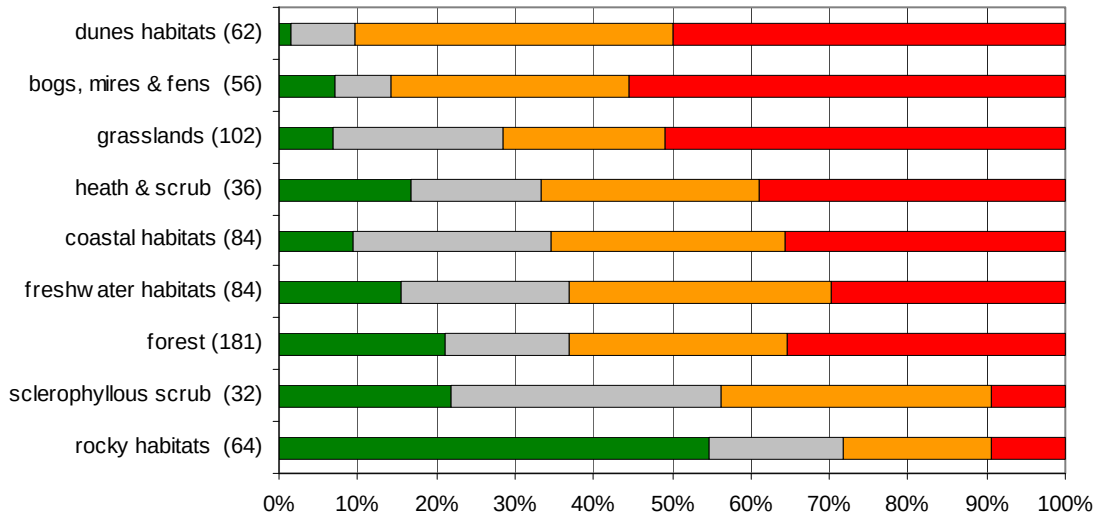


Figure 2: Assessment of conservation status of habitats by habitat group (the number in brackets refers to the number of assessments carried out for each group)

The majority of grassland habitats in Europe require active management. The abandonment of traditional management practices has resulted in a loss of biodiversity in some locations whereas in others the shift towards more intensive agricultural practices is the root of the problem. Grassland habitats are under particular pressure in the Atlantic, Pannonian and Boreal regions.

Bogs, mires and fens require specific hydrological regimes. The status of these habitat types is particularly bad in the Atlantic and Continental bio-geographic regions.

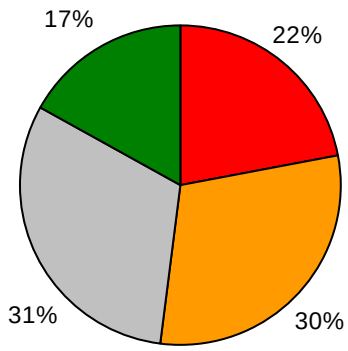
Dune habitats are under severe pressure throughout the EU with almost no favourable assessments. Member States identify coastal, tourism development as the main threat.

Rocky habitats and sclerophyllus shrubs (e.g. different types of screes) tend to have more positive assessments than other habitat groups. One clear exception to this general rule is the habitat type 'permanent glaciers'. This is because glaciers are under threat throughout the EU due to climate change.

With regard to forest habitat types, the situation is quite varied and general trends are less evident.

C) The status of species listed in the Annexes to the Habitats Directive

Overall, across the EU, 2 240 separate species assessments were carried out. Only 17 % of these assessments were favourable, 52 % were unfavourable and in 31 % of cases the status was reported as unknown (Figure 3.A).



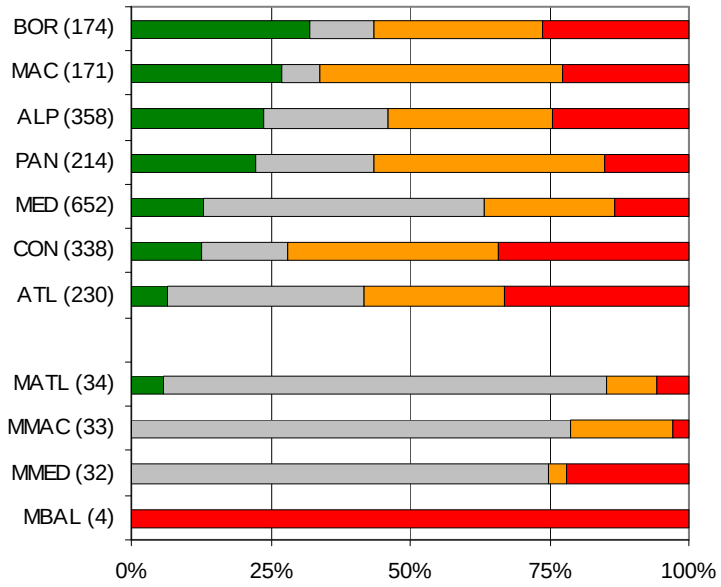


Figure 3.A **Figure 3.B**

Figure 3.A: Summary of the conservation status of species (the percentage refers to the number of assessments made)

Figure 3.B: Summary of the conservation status of species in the different bio-geographical regions (the numbers in brackets refer to the number of assessments)

The Boreal region showed the highest percentage of assessments of conservation status categorised as 'favourable', followed by the Macaronesian and Alpine regions (Figure 3.B). The very high proportion of assessments reported as unknown in the Mediterranean and Atlantic regions makes comparisons very difficult.

In the marine regions, the majority of assessments were reported as unknown, except for the Baltic where the status of all four mammal species was uniformly bad.

With regard to the major taxonomic groups, it is difficult to discern any systematic differences between them with regard to their conservation status across the EU (Figure 4).

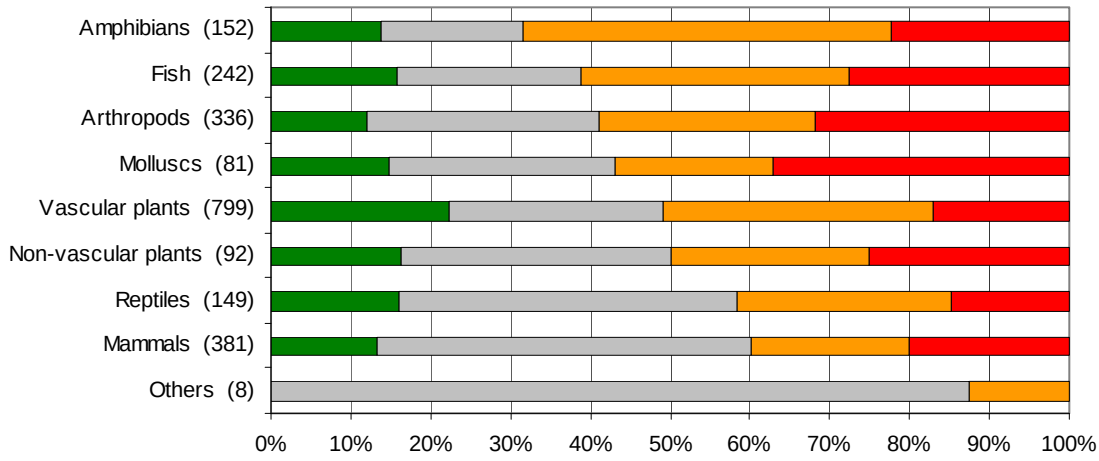


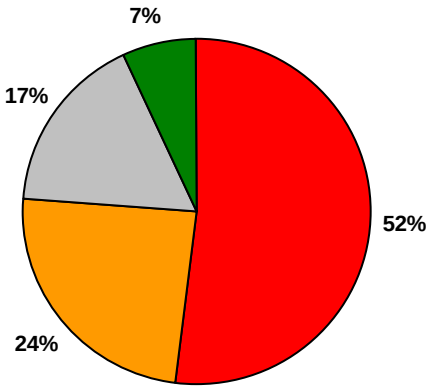
Figure 4: Summary of the conservation status of species by taxonomic grouping (the number in brackets refers to the number of assessments for each group)

D) The conservation status of habitat types associated with agriculture

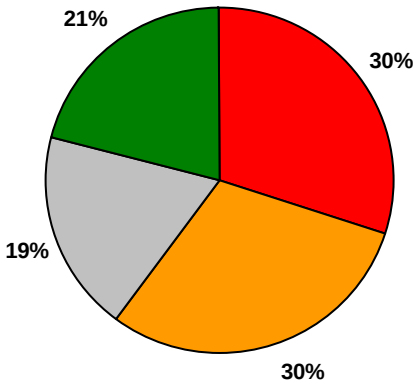
A comparison was made of the results of assessments carried out for habitat types associated with agriculture compared to other land uses (Figure 5). It is clear that habitat types linked to agriculture generally have a worse conservation status, with only 7% of assessments being favourable, compared to 21% for 'non-agricultural' habitats. The situation is particularly severe in the Atlantic region where none of the habitats associated with agriculture were assessed as favourable. The Atlantic region has the highest pressure on agricultural land and includes some of the most intensively farmed areas on the continent. In the Pannonian and Mediterranean regions, the percentage of favourable assessments for these habitat types was 5% and 3% respectively. However, the situation in the Mediterranean region is complicated by the very high percentage of assessments being reported as being 'unknown'. The results from the present reporting period will provide a benchmark against which to assess the impact of the wide-range of biodiversity positive measures being implemented under the Common Agricultural Policy.

Figure 5: Conservation status of habitat types considered as being associated with agriculture compared to those not associated with agriculture

Habitats types associated with agriculture (204 assessments)



Habitats types not associated with agriculture (497 assessments)



E) Habitats and Species affected by climate change

In the reports submitted by the Member States, climate change was indicated as having a negative impact on the conservation status of 42 habitats (19%) and 144 species (12%).

Wetland habitats such as bogs, mires and fens are apparently the most influenced by climate change, with dune habitats also negatively affected.

Among the major species groupings, it appears that amphibians react to climate change more than other groups. Amphibians are strongly associated with wetland habitat types which are affected by climate change (see above). It is also possible that climate shifts may also impact breeding success as temperature changes are often the cue for the start of the breeding season in amphibian species.

5. BEHIND THE HEADLINES

The Article 17 reporting exercise has generated extensive information on the conservation status of over 200 habitat types and nearly 1200 species in 25 Member States and across 11 bio-geographic regions. In this report, the Commission has endeavoured to distil the main results and conclusions but inevitably the process of aggregation and consolidation results in much of the detailed information being masked.

Although the overall message is that the conservation status of many habitat types and species is negative, the more detailed results show that some species such as the brown bear, the wolf and the beaver are recovering and re-establishing themselves in many (not all) areas. For large species such as these to be expanding their ranges means that the right habitats are available and that negative pressures such as hunting and pollution have been reduced.

In addition, for many species and habitat types assessed as being overall in an unfavourable conservation status across a bio-geographic region, a more detailed assessment reveals that the conservation status varies between the Member States. Regional assessments are based on up to ten MS assessments and negative regional assessments often include countries where different assessments have been reported. For example, the dragonfly *Aeshna viridis* was assessed as 'unfavourable-bad' in the Continental region overall but, as shown by Figure 6, the conservation status differs in each of the three countries in which it is present.

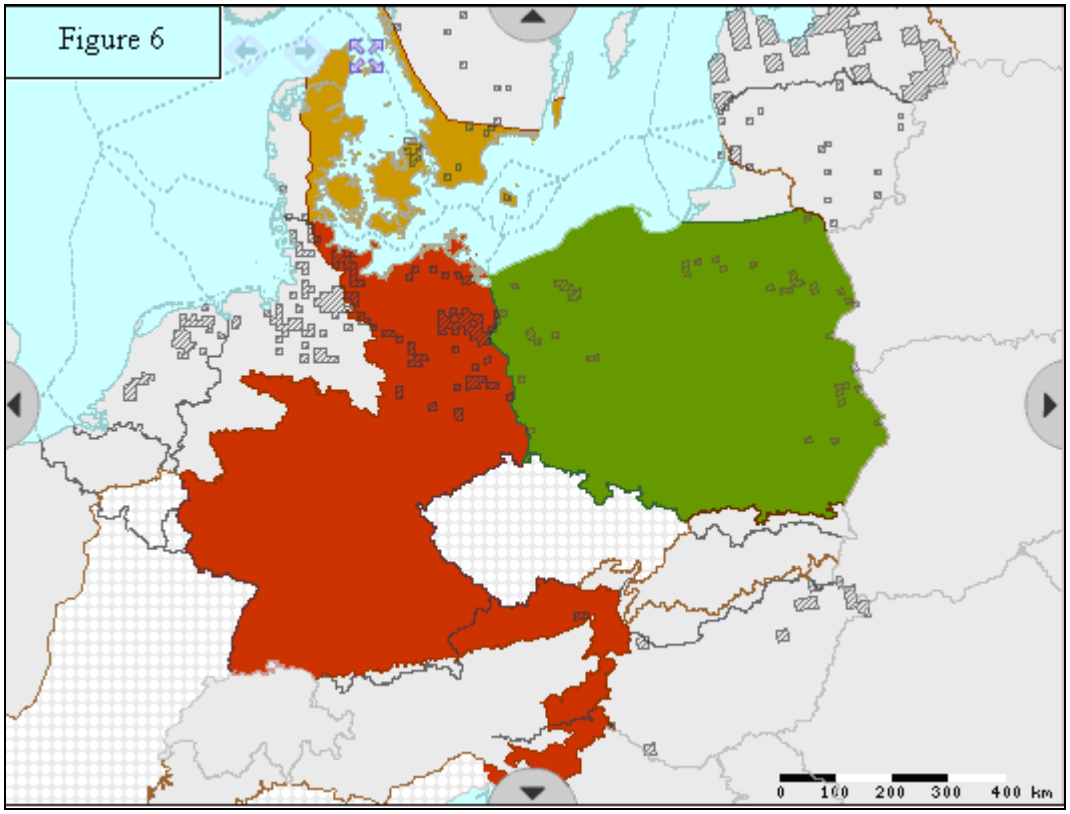


Figure 6: Member State assessments in the Continental region for the Annex IV dragonfly *Aeshna viridis* (green hawker). This species has been assessed as 'unfavourable-bad' for this region (from http://biodiversity.eionet.europa.eu/article17)

Similarly the plant *Arnica montana* has been assessed as 'unfavourable-inadequate' for the Alpine region but Figure 7 suggests that the conservation status at national level changes from favourable in the west to unfavourable-bad in the east. However this is only true for the Alpine region since in 'Atlantic' France and the Benelux countries (Atlantic and Continental), the status of the species is 'unfavourable-bad'.

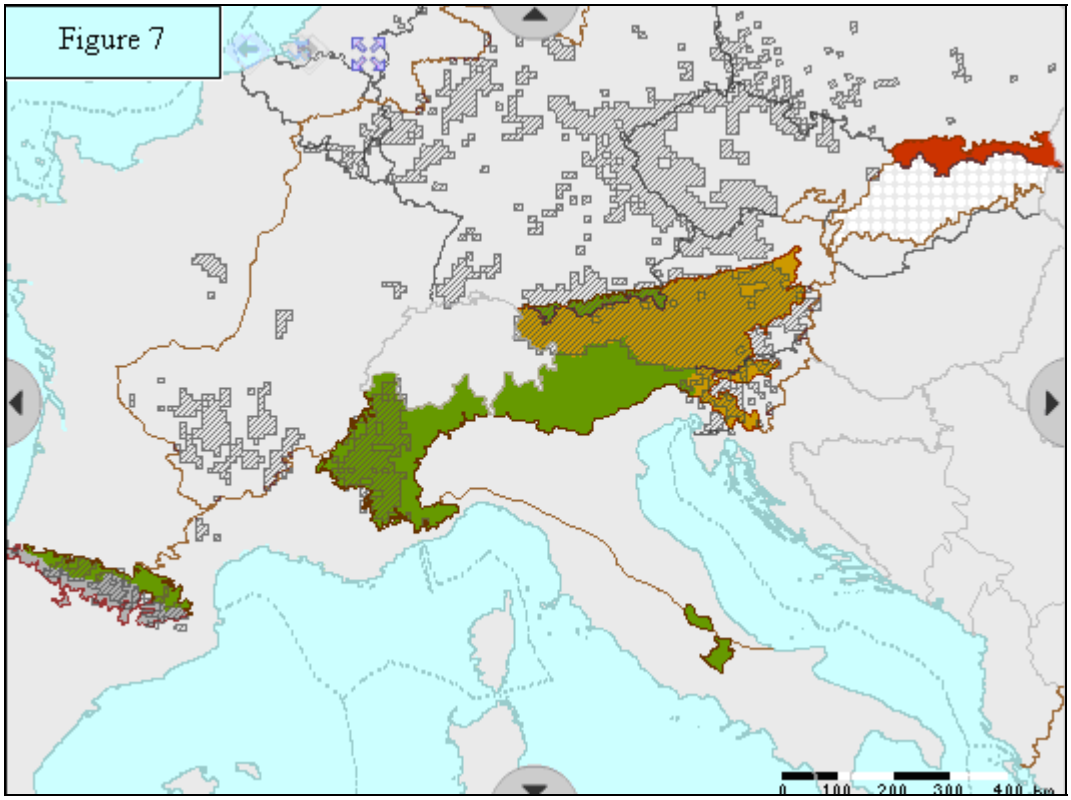


Figure 7: Member State assessments in the Alpine region for the Annex IV plant *Arnica montana*. This species has been assessed as 'unfavourable-inadequate' for this region (from http://biodiversity.eionet.europa.eu/article17)

6. THE LINK BETWEEN CONSERVATION STATUS AND THE NATURA 2000 NETWORK

A) Introduction

The Habitats Directive requires that the Commission's composite report shall address the contribution of Natura 2000 to achieving the objectives set out in Article 3. In particular, Natura 2000 aimed to enable the habitat types listed in Annex I to the Directive and the species listed in Annex II 'to be maintained, or where appropriate, restored at a favourable conservation status in their natural range'.

B) What is Natura 2000?

Under Article 3 of the Habitats Directive, Member States are required to establish a series of protected sites. These sites are part of the Natura 2000 network (comprising sites designated under the Habitats and the Birds Directives), which is the biggest ecological network in the world. Today, nearly 22 000 sites are designated under the Habitats Directive covering some 13.3 % of EU territory. In total, the Natura 2000 network contains over 25 000 sites (Birds and Habitats Directives combined) located on a diverse range of land use types – agriculture, forests, wilderness areas and covering 17 % of EU territory.

C) The Natura 2000 Network and its contribution to achieving favourable conservation status

The Natura 2000 network has developed steadily over the last 15 years (Figure 8) and the land part of the network should be completed by 2010.

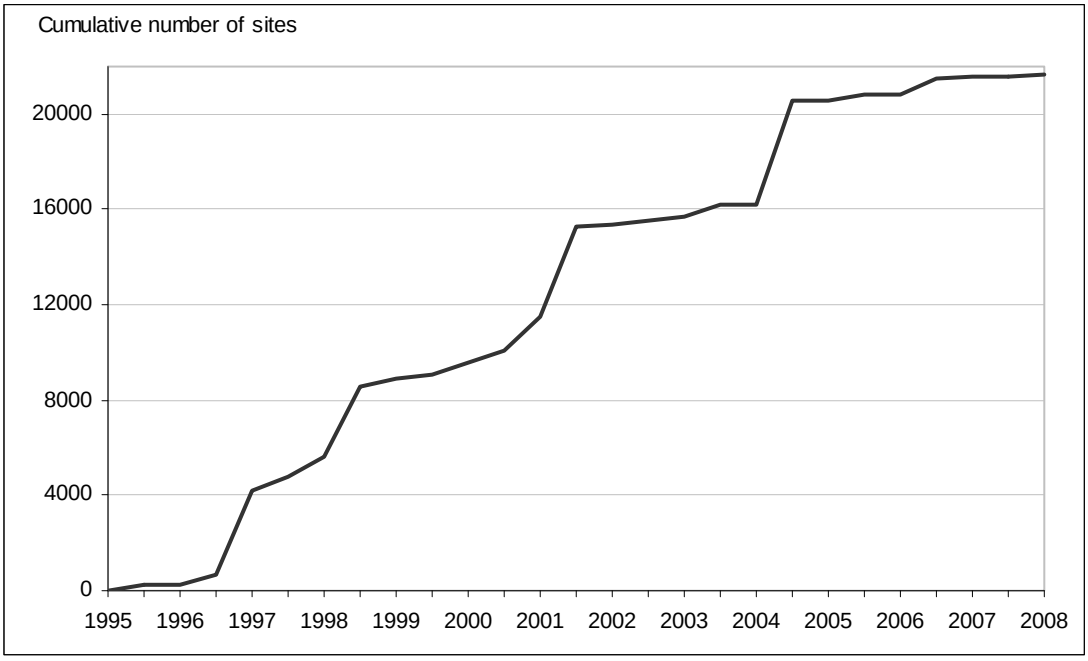


Figure 8. Development of the Natura 2000 network in terms of number of sites

Under the Directive, once a site is formally added to the EU list of Sites of Community Interest, a Member State has six years to develop the conservation measures needed to protect the ecological value of the area. Given the delays in establishing the network and the fact that in many cases, conservation measures are still being developed, it is unrealistic to expect to see at this stage, a clear, positive relationship between the Natura 2000 network and the conservation status of habitat types (Annex I) and species (Annex II) covered by the Directive. This is not to say that there are no positive examples (see sections 3 and 4 above). Indeed there are many cases where Natura 2000 sites, especially those receiving funding through LIFE programmes or rural development programmes, have clearly benefited at local level. Furthermore, there is now clear scientific evidence that Natura 2000 sites designated under the Birds Directive, that was adopted 13 years before the Habitats Directive, contribute significantly to the protection of bird species.[7] By the time the second and third reports are due in 2013 and 2019 respectively, the positive contribution of Natura 2000 to the conservation status of the habitat types and species covered by the Habitats Directive should be clearly discernible.

[7] International Conservation Policy Delivers Benefits for Birds in Europe. *Science* 10 August 2007.

D) Financial Support for Implementing the Habitats Directive

In 2004, the European Commission estimated that the total annual cost of managing the Natura 2000 network was €6.1 billion.[8] Added to this are the conservation measures that Member States take outside Natura 2000 sites to achieve the objectives of the Directive. At EU level, most of the available financial support for nature protection comes from rural development programmes under the Common Agricultural Policy and Cohesion policy programmes. In addition, targeted projects financed under the LIFE programme have also contributed to improving the conservation status of specific habitats and species. There are wide variations in the way the different Member States use the opportunities to support biodiversity provided for under EU funding instruments and the results presented in the present report suggest that in many cases the level of investment will need to increase if Member States are to respect their obligations under the Habitats Directive.

7. CONCLUSIONS

For the first time, the EU has carried out a comprehensive assessment of the status of its most vulnerable habitats and species across 25 Member States and 11 (seven land and four marine) bio-geographic regions. The EU now has a clear point of reference for assessing future trends in the status of its most vulnerable species and habitats. The scale of this reporting exercise on biodiversity is unparalleled in Europe.

Protecting biodiversity is a priority for the European Union and for our policies to be successful we must have a comprehensive and reliable measure of the status of our biodiversity. Therefore, it is vital that sufficient resources are invested in monitoring and reporting under both the Habitats and the Birds Directives. This report demonstrates that many Member States need to invest considerably more in this work and that information is weak or lacking for marine habitats and species.

The results of the 2001-2006 reports show that for many of the habitats and species listed under the Habitats Directive, favourable conservation status has not been achieved either at national or bio-geographic regional level. Nevertheless, there are indications that in some cases the trend is positive. We will need to await the results of the next round of monitoring and reporting before these trends can be confirmed.

A key determinant for the success of the Directive is the level of investments made in biodiversity protection. The increase in EU funding for biodiversity during this decade is of particular importance and its effects and those of policy changes on practice need to be monitored to ensure they are providing a permanent improvement in the situation of biodiversity. Clearly the immensity of the challenge to halt the decline in biodiversity will require greater effort in coming years.

The reports submitted by the Member States indicate that the overall status of grassland, wetland and coastal habitat types is particularly poor. Grassland habitat types are predominantly associated with traditional patterns of agriculture, which are disappearing throughout the EU. In general, the conservation status of all habitat types associated with

[8] COM(2004) 431 final, Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament — Financing Natura 2000.

agriculture is significantly worse than other types of habitat. While in parts of the EU the explanation is related to shifts towards more intensive agriculture, in other areas abandonment of the land and the absence of management is the underlying reason for the decline. Wetland habitats continue to be converted for other types of land use as well as suffering from the effects of climate change. Coastal habitats are under increasing pressure from urban developments.

The land part of the Natura 2000 network is in the final stages of completion and the priority now must be to ensure the development and implementation of appropriate conservation measures for all Natura 2000 sites, including sufficient financial support. For the marine environment, considerable work still has to be done to complete the network.