

## 9360 \*Macaronesian laurel forests (*Laurus, Ocotea*)

### Management of Natura 2000 habitats. Summary



Laurel forest stand in Barranco de Nieto (Tenerife).  
Photo: Andy Gillison

Once widespread throughout mainland Europe, the humid to hyper-humid evergreen forests known as laurel forests were driven close to extinction by advancing glaciers. Now restricted to the cloud belt of the Macaronesian islands, they grow in deep soils at between 500 and 1,500 m.

Laurel forest is closely related to Macaronesian endemic heaths (4050), another priority habitat of the Habitats Directive characteristic of the region. Laurel forests are dominated by tree and shrub species with laurel-shaped leaves, whereas in Macaronesian heaths ericaceous species predominate. As both types are interrelated and often intermixed in natural areas, they are often subject to joint management.

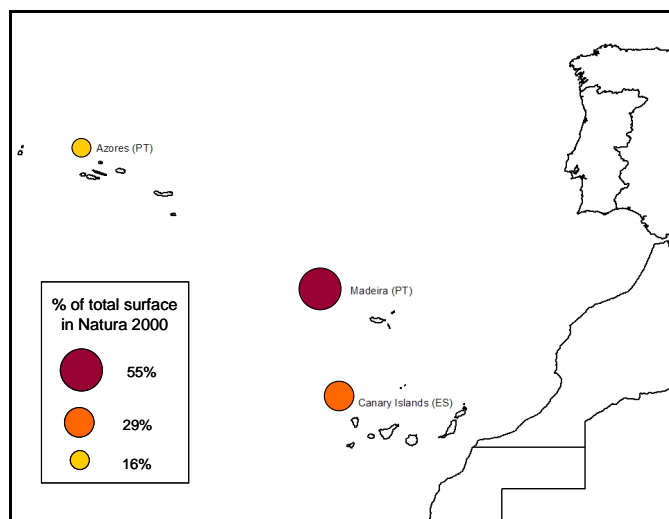
Macaronesian laurel forests have been intensively transformed since the fifteenth century, when the original forest area was largely razed to create farmland and degraded due to forest exploitation and livestock farming. Significantly reduced nowadays, in some areas habitat is still being degraded due to exploitation and livestock. In some cases, habitat reduction has led to fragmentation, threatening habitat diversity and leading to species extinction. Other current threats are the spread of exotic species, a major concern in the Azores and Madeira, and forest fires, especially serious in the Canary Islands.

As a general rule, mature, well developed laurel forests with sound ecological status should not be subject to active management, but rather left to evolve as naturally as possible. Many, however, are highly degraded, which justifies the need for active management to promote restoration.

The recent abandonment of agricultural land has also allowed the recovery of some areas that are currently at a secondary succession stage; proper management will boost habitat recovery.

Care should be taken regarding Macaronesian endemic heaths for, in many cases, they occur as succession phases in laurel forest development. Decisions regarding whether they should be managed to maintain their own features or to evolve towards a laurel forest habitat have to be taken on a case by case basis.

Where necessary, the type of management is chosen according to the degree of habitat development and to local features. The most common situations are: selective cuttings to improve regeneration in stands that have been heavily exploited, conversion of forest plantations into laurel forests, eradication and control of exotic invasive species and recovery of specific threatened species. Ongoing long-term studies involving representative permanent plots further knowledge of laurel forest dynamics.



Percentage distribution of the total surface of Macaronesian laurel forests in Natura 2000

The complete text of the document is available at:  
[http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/natura2000/management/best\\_practice\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/natura2000/management/best_practice_en.htm)

*Management of Natura 2000 habitats is a project launched by the European Commission in January 2007 aimed at defining best practices for management of habitat types included in Annex I of the Habitat Directive (92/43/EEC) that need active recurring management. Twenty six habitat types that are representative of different bio-geographical regions have been considered.*