

The Message from Athens

Background to the Message

From 27 to 28 April 2009, the European Commission organized a conference in Athens to consider the future direction of EU policy on biodiversity protection. The meeting brought together around 250 participants from national governments, international organisations, business, NGOs, interest groups and academia constituting a representative cross-section of stakeholders. It took place one week after the meeting of G8 Environment Ministers in Syracuse Italy and was therefore able to draw on the "Carta di Siracusa" on Biodiversity.

Extensive information on the materials presented and discussed in the conference are available on the DG ENV web-site (http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/biodiversity/conference/index_en.htm).

From 27 to 28 April 2009, the European Commission organized a conference in Athens to consider the future direction of EU policy on biodiversity protection. The conference concluded by presenting "The Message from Athens" which represents the main issues raised by stakeholders and aims to give policy makers an idea of priorities for future action. It is not, however, a binding, negotiated text. Additional comments are welcomed and can be submitted via the conference website.

The Message from Athens

The objective of halting biodiversity loss remains as valid today as it did in 2001 when it was adopted by European Heads of State and Government.

Progress has been made over recent years at the EU level. Covering 17% of EU territory, NATURA 2000 is the largest network of protected areas in the world and is, without question, one of the most significant achievements in EU environment policy. The legal protection of the Birds and Habitats Directives has stopped the destruction of many unique natural areas and EU funding has played a critical role in protecting some of our most endangered species and habitats. Water quality has also improved significantly and sustainable agricultural practices have become increasingly widespread. The Commission has launched new initiatives to tackle illegal logging, to combat global deforestation and to promote sustainable consumption and production.

Despite this progress, scientific indicators show that the EU's 2010 biodiversity target will not be met. The speed and scale of the loss of biodiversity means that urgent actions are needed.

There are strong ethical and moral arguments for protecting biodiversity. Nature is also deeply embedded in our culture and our history. But, on their own, these considerations have not been sufficient to protect nature. There is also an increasing recognition that the benefits that human society derives from nature have a very high value and that long-term human wellbeing is dependent upon the continued delivery of these benefits.

At a global level the annual loss of biodiversity (natural capital) has been estimated at around €3 trillion. If these loss rates are maintained, by 2050 the annual welfare costs due to the accumulated impact on ecosystem goods and services will be equivalent to 7% of GDP. However, the true value of these benefits is not reflected in conventional models of economic growth and until this basic failing is addressed, biodiversity will continue to be lost.

There is a very close relationship between climate change and biodiversity. Climate change will have a profound impact upon ecosystems and will bring about major shifts in the distribution of habitat types and species. Healthy, resilient ecosystems play a major - and cost effective - role in mitigating and adapting to the consequences of climate change.

The way that EU policies relating to agriculture, fisheries, regional development, transport, energy, trade and development are implemented have significant impacts upon EU and global biodiversity. In many of these policy areas progress has been made in integrating biodiversity concerns, but much remains to be done.

EU environmental legislation has contributed significantly to the conservation of biodiversity. However, to be more effective, the separate pieces of legislation should be implemented in a more integrated and co-ordinated manner. A coherent approach to spatial planning needs to be developed and, in particular, the Natura 2000 network should be completed, managed effectively and resourced appropriately.

At a global level, where the target is to significantly reduce the current rate of biodiversity loss, the EU has taken a leading role. However, the impact of European consumption on global biodiversity is an issue that needs to be addressed and biodiversity conservation needs

to be integrated more effectively into all the EU's policies that have an impact at the global level.

Priorities for EU Action

One: a vision of why biodiversity matters

It is necessary to develop and communicate a better understanding of why healthy ecosystems deliver tangible benefits that underpin our economic, social and cultural well-being. The message of "why biodiversity matters" needs to be clear and the sense of urgency in addressing its loss conveyed. The EU institutions and Member States should:

- Develop a clear target regarding biodiversity. The post-2010 target should be ambitious, measurable and clear. It should maintain the emphasis given to the intrinsic value of biodiversity while also recognising the value of healthy and resilient ecosystems and the services they provide.
- Ensure that the post-2010 target developed for the EU includes sectoral sub-targets that address the key challenges facing European biodiversity.
- Mainstream the findings of the study on The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity (TEEB) to demonstrate the strong economic rationale for conserving biodiversity.
- Make biodiversity conservation a priority for future communication programmes. It is essential to engage the public at all levels – including through the education system – in order to build an understanding of "why biodiversity matters".
- Communications need to emphasise the co-benefits possible from tackling biodiversity loss and climate change in an integrated manner.
- Develop alliances with key stakeholders who are directly affected by biodiversity loss.

Two: a better understanding of where we are and what more we need to do

The scientific work of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has shaped the political response to climate change. A strong science-policy interface is also needed with regard to biodiversity – particularly since the drivers for biodiversity loss are more complex than for climate change and the direct impacts are harder to measure. Given existing gaps in scientific knowledge the application of the precautionary principle is particularly important. The EU institutions and Member States should:

- Improve the effectiveness of monitoring the status and trends of biodiversity in the EU.
- Further develop biodiversity indicators based on "SEBI 2010". Indicators need to be robust, clearly understandable, policy relevant and where possible also address the underlying drivers of biodiversity loss.

- Develop a biodiversity baseline against which progress can be assessed.
- Improve the science policy interface, both through developing mechanisms within the EU and, at the international level, where the EU should support the UNEP process to establish an Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES).
- Give a higher priority to biodiversity within EU and national research programmes.

Three: a fully functioning network of protected areas

Protected areas contain our most precious species and ecosystems. They represent the foundation of biodiversity conservation in Europe and their effectiveness has been scientifically proven. The EU institutions and Member States should:

- Complete the terrestrial Natura 2000 network by 2010 and the marine network by 2012.
- Ensure the effective management of the network – which will require adequate funding being made available.
- Support, where relevant, the development of similar networks in overseas territories.
- Improve the connectivity between protected sites with a particular consideration to adaptation to climate change.
- Ensure that the Birds and Habitats Directives are enforced more effectively. Successful management approaches should be identified and good practices promoted. Implementation of the legislation should aim to remove unnecessary administrative burdens.
- Improve communication efforts with regard to the Natura 2000 network.

Four: biodiversity outside of protected areas

Protected areas are essential – but they do not exist in isolation from the rest of the landscape. The state of biodiversity in urban gardens, parks and green spaces, as well as rural areas, is extremely important. This is the biodiversity that most of the European population is aware of and can contribute to. The EU institutions and Member States should:

- Ensure the effective implementation of EU environmental policies (water, air, marine, impact assessment etc).
- Use the restoration and renewal of terrestrial and marine biodiversity as a driver for economic development and the renewal of depressed areas.

- Progressively develop a policy approach based on the conservation of entire ecosystems and the protection of Europe's "Green Infrastructure" within a multi-functional landscape
- Develop EU policies for tackling Invasive Species including, where appropriate, new legislation.
- Implement effective measures to protect Europe's soils which are essential not only with regard to the conservation of terrestrial biodiversity but also for crucial ecosystem services.

Five: Biodiversity and Climate Change

We cannot halt biodiversity loss without addressing climate change. It is equally impossible to tackle climate change without addressing biodiversity loss. Climate change policy needs to be fully complementary with biodiversity policy and these two policy areas must be developed in an integrated manner. The EU institutions and the Member States should:

- Actively support the process of Reduced Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation (REDD) to stop global deforestation. The measures adopted should combine climate mitigation with biodiversity conservation and the interests of indigenous people and local communities.
- Ensure that climate mitigation and adaptation measures are fully compatible with of the objective of conserving biodiversity.
- Promote the implementation of "triple win" of measures that conserve biodiversity while actively contributing to climate mitigation and adaptation.
- Ensure that international climate negotiations respect the above principles.
- Develop and implement adaptation measures for nature conservation.

Six: global biodiversity

At a global level the EU is a leading player with a significant influence in international discussions. However, Europe's consumption patterns mean that our "biodiversity footprint" in third countries is large and is growing. The EU institutions and Member States should:

- Support improved governance structures at the international level for the protection of biodiversity.
- Take measures to assess and then reduce the impact of European consumption and production on global biodiversity loss.
- Increase cooperation with development institutions and partner countries to maximise the positive contribution that the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity can make to poverty reduction.

- Support efforts to complete and implement the global network of protected areas – in particular, in marine areas that are beyond national jurisdiction.
- Work to protect vulnerable international marine ecosystems from destructive fishing practices. Continue work with developing countries to improve fisheries governance in their waters.
- Ensure that biodiversity concerns are fully taken into account by bilateral and global agreements on trade and investment.
- Work to finalise an agreement by 2010, in the context of CBD, on an international regime facilitating access to and equitable sharing of benefits from the use of genetic resources.

Seven: integration of biodiversity into other policy areas

Effective integration of biodiversity concerns into other policies is needed to (i) minimise damage (ii) maximise the positive contribution to nature conservation objectives and (iii) realise the potential of co-benefits resulting from the maintenance and enhancement of healthy ecosystems. Building the EU's 2006 Biodiversity Action Plan the EU institutions and the Member States should:

- Review the impacts that EU policies, and EU funds, have on biodiversity – including biodiversity loss in third countries. Take measure to address negative impacts.
- Ensure, taking the TEEB study as a starting point, that the real value of ecosystem services are taken into consideration when designing relevant EU policies.
- Extend policies on sustainable consumption and production to cover the sustainable use of natural resources.
- Reduce fishing pressure within EU waters to sustainable levels in order to improve biodiversity in the marine environment.
- Promote investment in biodiversity as a part of efforts to "green the economy" and fully exploit the potential that biodiversity restoration and conservation offers in terms of job creation.
- Encourage market mechanisms that take biodiversity concerns into account (e.g. Green Procurement and labelling of sustainable agriculture, forestry and fisheries products) and promote policies that allow EU businesses to profit from protecting biodiversity.

Eight: Funding

Many EU and national funds open the possibility of providing financial support for protecting biodiversity. However, the actual level of financial resources allocated to biodiversity

conservation remains small (especially when compared to the welfare benefits that ecosystem services provide). The EU institutions and the Member States should:

- Evaluate the success of the "integration" approach. If there is evidence that it is not working, then propose a specific funding instrument for biodiversity.
- Mobilise private funding building on experience with climate change and other environmental finance initiatives.
- Involve the finance and banking sectors systematically in the development and implementation of EU biodiversity policy.
- Review the opportunities for making progress on biodiversity a pre-condition for access to some Community funding instruments.
- Ensure sufficient funding for biodiversity conservation in the EU budget-review.
- Identify, and reform, subsidies that have a negative impact on biodiversity.