The Habitats Directive

Celebrating 20 years of protecting biodiversity in Europe
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

4 Map of Natura 2000 sites

5 Foreword

7 Introduction

11 The area protected for nature conservation in the EU has more than tripled
  - Improving marine protection in the UK
  - Over a third of Slovenia in Natura 2000
  - Protecting Cyprus's rich natural heritage

15 Our knowledge of EU biodiversity has increased and has led to better, more targeted conservation action
  - Nationwide inventory for Natura 2000 in Spain
  - Gathering data for Natura 2000 in Bulgaria
  - Conserving seabirds in Portugal

19 Local stakeholders are actively engaged in the management of Natura 2000 sites
  - Managing Natura 2000 sites in France
  - Natura 2000 in Finland’s private forests
  - A public/private partnership for Natura 2000 in Belgium

23 EU countries are coordinating their efforts to conserve Europe's rich natural heritage
  - Conserving north European heathlands
  - EU cooperation for the lesser white-fronted goose
  - Baltic countries working together on the fire-bellied toad

27 Time-honoured land management practices are being maintained for the benefit of nature, and people
  - Farming for conservation in Ireland
  - Reviving coastal farming practices in Estonia
  - Supporting alpine meadows in Slovakia

31 Endangered species are being brought back from the brink of extinction
  - The freshwater pearl mussel in Germany
  - The Abruzzo chamois in Italy
  - The Hungarian meadow viper
  - The Spanish Imperial eagle
  - Saving the marsh fritillary in Denmark
  - Bears in Romania

37 The large-scale destruction of valuable wildlife-rich habitats has been halted
  - Restoring the Danube in Austria
  - Sand dunes in the Curonian Spit in Lithuania
  - Restoring species-rich deciduous forests in Sweden
  - Bringing life back to fen meadows in the Netherlands
  - Restoring raised bogs in Poland
  - Ridding Posidonia beds of alien species in France

43 Natura 2000 provides new opportunities for recreation and tourism
  - Natura 2000 supports rural tourism in Latvia
  - Lake Prespa in Greece – a magnet for nature lovers
  - Hunters – a force for good in Limousin, France

47 New developments must safeguard the integrity of Natura 2000 sites
  - Finding alternative routes for the Via Baltica, Poland
  - Beinn an Tuirc windfarm, Scotland
  - Strategic spatial planning in the Czech Republic

51 Funding for nature conservation in the EU has increased substantially in the last 20 years
  - A sustainable land use model for Gorčko, Slovenia
  - The EU LIFE project for the Yelkouan shearwater in Malta
  - Local authorities working together in Luxembourg
Foreword

Twenty years ago biodiversity in Europe was seen to be approaching a crisis point. Wildlife was declining at an alarming rate, and many valuable habitats were being lost as a result of rapidly changing land use, pollution, ill-considered developments and the persistent expansion of urban areas into the countryside.

Responding to the increasing concern of European citizens, EU governments unanimously adopted an ambitious response – the Habitats Directive – in May 1992. Its purpose was to safeguard the most threatened species and habitats across the EU. Along with the Birds Directive, the Habitats Directive is still at the heart of EU nature policy, and it remains the cornerstone of Natura 2000, the EU’s vast network of protected areas.

Two decades later, on the eve of the Directive’s 20th Anniversary, it is time to take stock of what has been achieved so far. Europeans can be rightly proud of what has become the largest coordinated network of protected areas in the world. The Directive has also gone some way towards halting the large-scale destruction of our most valuable biodiversity assets, and some species and habitats are showing signs of recovery. Our knowledge of their conservation needs has increased substantially, leading to better and more targeted conservation actions, often with the help of LIFE, the EU funding instrument for the Environment, which was created at the same time as the Habitats Directive and also celebrates its 20th anniversary this year.

Another success of the Directive is that it has brought people together in pursuit of a common objective – that of appreciating and saving Europe’s rich natural heritage and protecting our remaining healthy ecosystems. It has nurtured a more integrated and sustainable approach to land use management and development and generated new tourism, recreation and employment opportunities.

But much remains to be done if we are to reach the ultimate objective set out in the Directives – to safeguard nature by bringing all protected species and habitats up to a favourable conservation status across the EU. Currently, only 17% of the species and habitats listed in the Habitats Directive enjoy that status.

The EU’s 2020 Biodiversity Strategy, adopted last year, gives a major new impetus to actions in this area. By setting an ambitious time-bound quantified target in terms of species and habitats it aims at speeding up the full and effective implementation of the Habitats and Birds Directives and thereby setting Europe’s nature on a path to long-term sustainability.

Nature needs our help if it is to recover, but it will pay us back many times over with the ecosystem services it provides. So let’s maintain the momentum, and ensure that progress over the next 20 years is even more marked than it has been over the past two decades.

Commissioner Janez Potočnik
Common dormouse
Introduction

A unique partnership between 27 countries

The Habitats Directive represents the single most ambitious initiative ever undertaken to conserve Europe’s biodiversity. It was adopted 20 years ago in response to a growing concern, expressed by the majority of Europeans at the time, over the relentless decline and wholesale destruction of natural habitats and wildlife across Europe.

Along with the Birds Directive, it sets the standard for nature conservation across all 27 countries of the EU and enables Member States to work together, towards the same objective and within the same legislative framework, to protect our most threatened species and habitats, irrespective of political or administrative borders.

Such transnational cooperation is essential if we are to succeed in stemming the loss of biodiversity in Europe. Wildlife is governed by the forces of nature and does not recognise national boundaries. Thus, if one country attempts to protect a particular species and another does not, the efforts made by the first will be necessarily compromised.

But now, thanks to the two EU nature Directives, every Member State is required to take similar measures in order to conserve the species and habitats listed in their annexes, which are present in their country. This ensures that their entire natural distribution range within the EU can be safeguarded and managed appropriately.

The scale over which this is happening is truly impressive. At the time the Habitats Directive was adopted there were just 12 countries in the EU, today there are 27. Thus, not only is EU nature legislation being implemented over a much larger territory than before, but a far greater proportion of Europe’s rich and diverse natural heritage is being safeguarded for the benefit of both current and future generations.

Natura 2000 – the largest coordinated network of protected areas in the world

The Habitats Directive protects over 1,000 species, and around 230 valuable habitat types, which are deemed to be of European importance.

In contrast to many conservation initiatives of the past, it doesn’t just focus on a few iconic animals, such as rare mammals and birds, but enlarges its field of action to incorporate a much wider range of other equally threatened, but possibly more obscure, plants and animals. For the first time, rare habitat types – such as sand dunes, heathlands, and floodplain forests – are also protected in their own right.

Central to the Directive is the creation of a Europe-wide ecological network of protected sites – the Natura 2000 Network – which is designed to protect these species and habitats across their natural range in the EU. After many years of hard work, the network is now almost complete. Over 26,000 Natura 2000 sites have been designated to date, which makes this the largest coordinated network of protected areas anywhere in the world.

Because of its sheer size, it not only conserves Europe’s rarest wildlife, but also offers a safe haven for countless other animals, plants and healthy ecosystems which, although more common, are an equally important part of our natural heritage.

As such, the value of the Natura 2000 network extends well beyond its ability to protect Europe’s biodiversity. In addition, it provides society with a wealth of valuable ecosystem services, such as fresh water, carbon storage, protection against floods, avalanches and coastal erosion, pollinator insects etc... and offers ample opportunities for tourism and recreation.

Collectively, the ecosystem services provided by the Natura 2000 Network are estimated to be worth around €200–300 billion per year. This is many times greater than the actual cost of managing the network in the first place.
A partnership between people as well ...

The creation of the Natura 2000 Network represents, in itself, a major achievement for nature conservation in Europe. But this is just the start of the process; once sites have been designated under Natura 2000, Member States must take the necessary conservation measures to maintain or restore them to an optimal condition.

In this respect, it is important to note that the Habitats Directive sets out to do more than simply prevent species and habitats from declining further. Its objective is far more ambitious; it aims to bring them back up to a favourable conservation status across their natural range within the EU.

To achieve this, the Directive introduces a modern, flexible and inclusive approach to site conservation that puts people at the heart of the process. It recognises that humans are an integral part of nature and that the two work best in partnership with one another.

Everyone has a role to play in making Natura 2000 a success – be they public authorities, private landowners and users, developers, conservation NGOs, scientific experts, local communities or individual members of the public.

Forging partnerships and bringing people together also make practical sense. After all, the majority of sites in Natura 2000 are already under some form of active land use and constitute an integral part of the wider countryside. Many are valuable for nature precisely because of the way they have been managed up to now and it will be important to ensure that these activities are maintained well into the future.

In this way, the Habitats Directive supports the principle of sustainable development and integrated management. Its aim is not to exclude socio-economic activities from Natura 2000 sites, but rather to ensure that they are undertaken in a way that safeguards and supports the valuable species and habitats present, and maintains the overall health of natural ecosystems.

The Habitats Directive sets the framework for action and lays down the overall objectives to be achieved, but leaves it up to each Member State to decide how best to manage individual Natura 2000 sites in consultation with local stakeholders. The emphasis is very much on finding local solutions to local management issues, while at the same time working towards a shared overall objective – that of conserving Europe’s rich and diverse biodiversity for generations to come.

Preparing for the challenge ahead

After two decades of intensive effort, it is clear that much has been achieved for biodiversity conservation in the EU thanks to the Habitats Directive. But, despite this significant progress, there is still a lot of work to do to bring our rare and threatened species and habitats back up to a favourable conservation status across the EU.

This requires a concerted effort not just on the part of the conservationists, but also from all those who are connected to Natura 2000 in some way so that sustainable solutions are found that are acceptable to all.

As we embark on the next 20 years of the Habitats Directive, let us not lose sight of the fact that investing in Natura 2000 means we are investing in our own future as well.
Thanks to the Habitats Directive

The area protected for nature conservation in the EU has more than tripled.

Our knowledge of EU biodiversity has increased and has led to better, more targeted conservation action.

Local stakeholders are actively engaged in the management of Natura 2000 sites.

EU countries are coordinating their efforts to conserve Europe’s rich natural heritage.

Time-honoured land management practices are being maintained for the benefit of nature, and people.

Endangered species are being brought back from the brink of extinction.

The large-scale destruction of valuable wildlife-rich habitats has been halted.

Natura 2000 provides new opportunities for recreation and tourism.

New developments must safeguard the integrity of Natura 2000 sites.

Funding for nature conservation in the EU has increased in the last 20 years.
Thanks to the Habitats Directive ...
... the area protected for nature conservation in the EU has more than tripled

Thanks to the Habitats Directive, the EU has created the largest coordinated network of protected areas anywhere in the world. The Natura 2000 Network contains over 26,000 sites which have been designated to ensure the survival of our most threatened wildlife and valuable habitats across Europe. Altogether, the sites cover a substantial area – equivalent in size to Germany, Poland and the Czech Republic combined.

Protecting sites for biodiversity is nothing new for Europe; statutory nature reserves have been in place since the start of the 20th Century. However, it was only after the adoption of the EU Habitats Directive and the creation of the Natura 2000 Network that site designation was done on a sufficient scale to have a real impact on stemming the loss of Europe's biodiversity.

Since the Directive has been adopted, the total area protected for nature conservation purposes in the EU has more than tripled. Almost 18% of the EU territory is now included in the Natura 2000 Network, along with a substantial area in our surrounding seas.
Improving marine protection in the UK

The coastline and seas around the United Kingdom have a remarkable marine biodiversity and provide rich natural resources for many activities such as fisheries, industry and recreation. Yet, until recently, actions to protect this fragile marine environment were relatively few and far between.

The adoption of the Habitats Directive marked a significant step change for marine conservation in the UK, and elsewhere in the EU. For the first time, countries had to protect biodiversity in their surrounding seas as well as on land and take measures to actively conserve threatened marine species such as the bottlenose dolphin, loggerhead sea turtle or Arctic tern, as well as valuable underwater habitats such as cold water reefs, *Posidonia* beds or underwater sea caves.

In the UK, major marine surveys were launched to learn more about the state of this secret underwater world and to help identify suitable sites for protection. This resulted in the designation of over 100 UK marine Natura 2000 sites (covering an area the size of Belgium). Before the Habitats Directive came into force there were just three protected marine areas in the UK. Work is now underway to manage the areas in a way that ensures their wise use while, at the same time, safeguarding their rich marine biodiversity.
Over a third of Slovenia in Natura 2000

Slovenia is known for its stunning diversity of landscapes. In the space of just a few hundred kilometres one can travel from the high mountain peaks of the Alps to the vast open plains in the east and on into the mysterious karst region of the south, before ending up in a corner of the Mediterranean.

These contrasting landscapes, combined with a long tradition of sustainable farming and forestry practices, have resulted in an exceptionally rich biodiversity. Recognising the immense social and economic value of its natural heritage, Slovenia has designated over 35% of its territory under the Natura 2000 Network, placing it at the top of the EU list in terms of countries with the largest proportion of their land in Natura 2000.

Protecting Cyprus’s rich natural heritage

Mention Cyprus and people usually conjure up an image of a classic sun, sea and sand destination. Few are aware that, beyond the developed coastline, lies a true nature-lover’s paradise. The island hosts an astonishing variety of rare plants, many of which exist nowhere else in the world. It is also of major importance as a stopover for hundreds of thousands of migrating birds.

Like any other country joining the EU, Cyprus is required to implement the Habitats and Birds Directives from the first day of accession. This has prompted Cyprus to designate more than 28% of its land area as Natura 2000, as well as a further 132 km² of its marine area.
Thanks to the Habitats Directive ...
... our knowledge of EU biodiversity has increased and has led to better, more targeted conservation action

Collecting data on Europe’s biodiversity is a necessarily complex exercise considering the huge number of plants, animals and ecosystems present, yet it is an essential prerequisite for any conservation work. Before the adoption of EU nature legislation, the information collected by Member States was not always systematic or comparable, and tended to focus mainly on a few ‘flagship’ species, such as mammals or birds.

The Habitats Directive, along with its sister directive – the Birds Directive, bring a new strategic focus to biodiversity conservation over the entire EU territory. Together, they require all 27 Member States to pool their efforts in conserving Europe’s most valuable wildlife and habitats. They also enlarge the field of action to cover not just a few iconic species but a whole range of other equally threatened plants and animals, such as amphibians, reptiles, butterflies and freshwater fish. For the first time, 230 wildlife-rich habitat types are also protected in their own right.

Thanks to this concerted action, our collective knowledge of the distribution, threats and conservation status of these selected species and habitats has increased substantially. This has in turn led to better, more targeted and coordinated conservation action across the EU.
Nationwide inventory for Natura 2000 in Spain

When the Habitats Directive was adopted, the Spanish conservation authorities decided to carry out systematic nationwide surveys of all the species and habitat types listed in the Directive and which are present on its territory.

Over 200 scientists, and some 30 Spanish institutions, were mobilised to work on the inventory over a four-year period at a total cost of ca. €5 million, to which the EU LIFE programme contributed 75%. Extensive field surveys were carried out on each of the species and habitat types, and detailed digital maps were drawn up of their distribution across the country. This led to the selection of around 1,450 sites for the Natura 2000 Network which now cover more than a quarter of Spain’s total land area.

Thanks to this comprehensive groundwork, Spain was able to significantly improve its knowledge of the rare and threatened species and habitats present on its territory. Not only is this leading to better more targeted conservation efforts, but it also provides an important baseline against which to measure any improvement or degradation in their conservation status in years to come.
Gathering data for Natura 2000 site management in Bulgaria

Having designated 332 sites for the Natura 2000 Network covering over a third of the country, Bulgaria is now focusing on ensuring the sites are managed for the benefit of the species and habitats concerned. This requires a more detailed assessment of their ecological requirements and conservation needs in the different sites.

With funding from the EU, the government has engaged some 400 experts and volunteers to collect field data on 87 habitat types and 119 species listed in the Habitats Directive. Studies are also being carried out to map the migration routes of 40 bird species. Once collated, the information will be used to draw up and implement detailed management plans for each Natura 2000 site, in close consultation with local stakeholders.

Conserving seabirds in Portugal

Europe’s pelagic seabirds spend most of their time far out at sea, and usually only come on land to breed. Very little is known about their lives. Yet this information is vital if one is to secure their long-term survival. With the help of funding from the EU LIFE programme, a series of marine surveys, involving extensive aerial and ship surveys, was undertaken in the seas around Portugal.

The work has considerably improved our understanding of these elusive seabirds and has helped to pinpoint key marine areas that need to be protected to ensure the long-term conservation of these birds. The innovative survey techniques and methodologies are also being replicated in other countries, like Spain and Malta, with a view to improving the conservation of rare and threatened seabirds elsewhere in the EU as well.
Thanks to the Habitats Directive ...
... local stakeholders are actively engaged in the management of Natura 2000 sites

The Natura 2000 Network includes a wide variety of different sites. Some are very small – covering no more than one hectare, others are huge – stretching out over hundreds of square kilometres. A few are located in the hearts of our cities, others are found in very remote areas, such as mountain tops. But, the majority of Natura 2000 sites are within easy reach of everyone. They are an integral part of our local countryside.

It is clear that, with so many different sites in the network, there can be no ‘one-size-fits-all’ rule for their management. Instead, the Habitats Directive introduces a more modern, flexible and inclusive approach to site conservation – one that recognises sites are best managed as a partnership between different interest groups – be they public authorities, private landowners, developers, conservation NGOs, scientific experts or local communities.

The Habitats Directive sets the framework for action and lays down the overall objectives to be achieved, but leaves it up to each Member State to decide how best to manage individual Natura 2000 sites in consultation with local stakeholders. The emphasis is very much on finding local solutions to local management issues, while at the same time working towards a shared overall objective – that of conserving Europe’s rich and diverse biodiversity for generations to come.
Managing Natura 2000 sites in France

In order to ensure the effective management of the 1,700 Natura 2000 sites in France, the government is working closely with local landowners and users to put in place an agreed management plan for each site. These plans are developed through a local steering committee which is made up of local authorities, landowners and users, representatives from rural agencies, sectoral organisations, nature NGOs and ecology experts, and anyone else who has an interest in the Natura 2000 site.

The committee meetings provide an opportunity for all parties to discuss how to implement the conservation objectives of the site in a way that fits best with the local socio-economic activities and interests in the area. Once a consensus has been reached, the management plan is officially approved by the State. Local landowners or users are then encouraged to enter into different types of management contracts with the local authority to help implement the management plan.

This whole process, which is founded on nurturing an integrated approach to Natura 2000 and which is set within a wider frame of rural development, has proven to be very successful and has won the support of many landowners and users. Over 1,100 Natura 2000 contracts have been signed to date and a significant proportion of the land within Natura 2000 is now being managed with the help of EU funded agri-environmental schemes.
Natura 2000 in Finland’s private forests

Central Finland is at the heart of the country’s timber industry. Here most of the forests are in private hands. In order to overcome the concern that Natura 2000 designation would restrict all activities, the local conservation authority decided to offer each owner within a pilot area the option of having a forest management plan drawn up for their land.

Each plan examines both the economic potential of the forest and its conservation requirements. In this way, the owners not only have a clear idea of what Natura 2000 means for them, but also receive suggestions on how to make money from their forests in a sustainable way. The scheme has proven to be very popular. Few would have invested in such forest plans otherwise.

A public/private partnership for Natura 2000 in Belgium

With the help of EU LIFE funds, a group of local stakeholders and private landowners are restoring one of Belgium’s largest Natura 2000 pond complexes. The site is not only an important area for aquaculture and recreation but is also a last refuge in Belgium for the European tree frog and the bittern.

The project is run by landowners, in partnership with local communities, public administrations and environmental NGOs. Particular attention is being paid to promoting the synergy between ecology, education and economy. This balanced and replicable approach will pave the way for the long-term management of the entire complex for years to come and should also encourage other private landowners to take the lead in managing ‘their’ Natura 2000 sites.
Thanks to the Habitats Directive ...
... EU countries are coordinating their efforts to conserve Europe’s rich natural heritage

The Habitats and Birds Directives represent the single most ambitious and large-scale initiative ever undertaken to conserve Europe’s threatened species and habitats across their entire natural range within the EU. They enable all 27 countries of the EU to work together, within the same strong legal framework, to achieve this common objective, irrespective of political or administrative boundaries.

As wildlife does not recognise national borders, such cooperation is essential. Otherwise, measures taken in one country can be all too quickly negated by the lack of action in another. Now, thanks to EU nature legislation, every Member State must take action to protect those species and habitats listed in the two Directives that are present on their territory.

Having such a common framework to operate in also enables Member States to share information and collaborate with one another on the implementation of practical conservation measures across their national boundaries. Because so many Member States are working together, their combined efforts will have a much greater impact on the conservation of Europe’s rich natural heritage.
Conserving north European heathlands

Lowland heaths once covered vast areas in north west Europe where they formed an important part of the rural economy, providing a valuable source of fuel, grazing and bedding for domestic animals. Such low key activities generated ideal conditions for a wide range of wild plants and animals which have become dependent on the habitat for their survival. However, since the 1950s these valuable heaths have declined by as much as 80–90%.

Lowland heaths are now protected under the Habitats Directive and many of the remaining core areas have been included in the Natura 2000 Network. EU protection has also encouraged countries hosting this valuable habitat to actively share information on their status, threats and on management techniques for their conservation and restoration.

The HEATH project, funded under the EU INTERREG programme, is a typical example of such cross border cooperation between the UK, France and the Netherlands. The project has not only helped to restore over 4,000 ha of prime heathland in these three countries, but has also led to the development of a management model and tool kit that can be applied to heathland management across north west Europe.
EU cooperation for the lesser white-fronted goose

The globally threatened lesser white-fronted goose breeds in the tundra region of northern Europe, and is thought to migrate every winter to warmer climes in the southern part of the EU. Unfortunately, very little is known about its migration route which is hampering conservation efforts.

Conservation experts from five European countries (Finland, Norway, Estonia, Hungary and Greece) have begun a joint conservation programme for the species, using support from the EU LIFE fund. Thanks to the project, much more is now known about the species migration patterns which has in turn allowed measures to be taken to improve the management of several of its key staging and over-wintering sites in northern Greece and Hungary.

Baltic countries working together on the fire-bellied toad

The fire-bellied toad was once a common inhabitant of the agricultural landscape around the Baltic Sea, but recent intensification and land consolidation has led to a significant decline in numbers. The species is now protected under the Habitats Directive and conservation experts from Germany, Denmark, Sweden and Latvia are working together within the framework of a LIFE project to help the species recover across the Baltic Region.

The results of this cooperation are already bearing fruit: the population of the fire-bellied toad has more than doubled in the project sites. The strong scientific network that was built up during the project is also helping to pave the way for further conservation work both in the Baltic Region and beyond.
Thanks to the Habitats Directive ...
... time-honoured land management practices are being maintained for the benefit of nature, and people

The European Union is unique in having a rich mixture of nationalities, cultures, languages and traditions packed in so small an area. This is strongly reflected everywhere in our landscape. For centuries people have been working their land in harmony with local conditions. Such time-honoured practices have in turn considerably enhanced Europe’s biodiversity.

Unfortunately, many of these traditional activities are now disappearing, as farmers and other land-users are being encouraged to intensify their production methods or convert their land to other uses. Those that cannot do so are sometimes forced to abandon their land altogether and go in search of employment elsewhere. This is now a real problem for many of Europe’s marginal rural areas.

As many of the sites in the Natura 2000 Network are still being extensively managed in a nature-friendly way, it will be important to ensure that these activities are maintained, for the benefit of both nature and rural communities that depend on these activities for their livelihoods. In this way the Habitats Directive is helping to keep both our natural and our diverse cultural heritage alive.
Farming for conservation in Ireland

Located along the western Atlantic coast, the Burren is not only one of Ireland’s most iconic landscapes but is also among one of the finest examples of a glaciated karst landscape in Europe. Extending over 600 km², it hosts a whole variety of wildlife-rich habitats protected under the Habitats Directive, including limestone pavements, orchid-rich grasslands and disappearing lakes, known as turloughs.

Farming has been an integral part of this landscape for generations. Thanks to the warming effects of the Gulf Stream and the latent heat-retention capacity of the limestone, the ground hardly ever freezes. As a result, cattle can be put out to graze all winter long. This in turn keeps the grasses and scrubland down and allows the rich plant life that is so unique to this area to thrive. However, in recent years the delicate balance between farming and nature has been heavily disrupted as farmers have been required to take on work elsewhere in order to supplement their farm incomes.

In a bid to reverse this trend, a new agri-environment scheme has been developed, with the help of EU LIFE funds, to re-introduce conservation-friendly farming practices across the Burren. This is not only helping to restore the rich biodiversity of the area, but is also enhancing the sustainability of local farming operations and giving due recognition to the vital role farmers play in maintaining this unique landscape for the benefit of both nature and people.
Reviving coastal farming practices in Estonia

The Baltic coastline harbours a special kind of coastal meadow that is unique to this part of the world. Thanks to centuries of extensive grazing and mowing, these meadows have become exceptionally rich in wildlife. They also provide a vital refuge for hundreds of thousands of migrating birds. However, after the collapse of the Soviet-era’s collective farming system many farmers were forced to abandon their land.

Following their inclusion in Natura 2000, a new agri-environment scheme was introduced to support farmers who agreed to manage their land in a wildlife friendly way as in the past. The scheme has proven to be very popular, over 500 farmers have signed up to it already.

Supporting alpine meadows in Slovakia

Located in the heart of the Carpathians, the Malá Fatra region in Slovakia owes much of its rich biodiversity to the way the alpine meadows and pastures have been managed up until now. Sheep grazing was introduced as far back as the 15th Century and has formed an integral part of the pastoral way of life ever since. Modern agriculture has yet to make its way into these isolated mountains and most farms are still run as small family businesses.

Recognising the social, cultural and natural value of these alpine pastures and meadows which are now part of Natura 2000, a new agri-environment scheme was introduced to offer additional support to local farmers in order that they can continue to manage their land in a way that maintains biodiversity and supports the local economy.
Thanks to the Habitats Directive ...
... endangered species are being brought back from the brink of extinction

The Habitats and Birds Directives set out to achieve much more than simply preventing species from going extinct. Their objective is to bring rare and threatened species back to a favourable conservation status throughout the EU so that their long-term future is assured.

This is a major challenge – and one that requires conservation measures both within Natura 2000 sites and across the wider countryside. In addition to requiring Member States to protect and manage sites that are included in the Natura 2000 Network, the nature Directives also impose a strict protection regime for species outside protected areas in order to ensure that they are not unnecessarily persecuted or over exploited.

The impact of these strong pan-European measures can already be seen today. After decades of continuous decline, many rare and threatened species are now finally on the road to recovery, thanks to the EU nature legislation.
The freshwater pearl mussel

The freshwater pearl mussel is one of the longest living invertebrates. Some specimens can reach one hundred years of age. At one time it was heavily harvested for its precious pearls but today its main threats come from the loss and degradation of its habitat and water pollution. While it is still relatively healthy in parts of northern and western Europe, the population in central Europe has declined by as much as 95%.

Pearl collecting is now illegal thanks to the Habitats Directive and most of the remaining clean fast-flowing rivers and streams where it occurs have been protected under the Natura 2000 Network. A series of habitat restoration projects, supported by the EU LIFE fund, have also been launched in different parts of Europe to help restore the species to a more favourable conservation status.

One such project is located in the border area of Bavaria, Saxony (in Germany) and the Czech Republic. These rivers host some of the most important populations of pearl mussels left in Central Europe but even here their habitats are heavily degraded. The LIFE project carried out a series of measures to help restore these rivers. It seems their efforts have paid off: 10 years on, several young pearl mussels have been found in the rivers. This is the first time the population has increased in 30 years.
The Abruzzo chamois

The Abruzzo chamois once roamed freely across the high mountains of the Appenine Region in central Italy. However, excessive hunting and habitat loss pushed this endemic population literally to the edge of extinction. At its lowest point, there were just 20 individuals left in the wild.

Conservation authorities decided therefore to protect both existing and potential habitats in the Abruzzi Region under Natura 2000 and, with the help of EU LIFE funding, started a major recovery programme for the species. This was accompanied by a widespread information campaign and stricter controls on hunting and tourism. Since the programme started, the population has increased to over 1,000 individuals – its highest in over a century.

The Hungarian meadow viper

The Hungarian meadow viper is one of Europe’s most endangered reptiles. Studies indicate that its total world population – which stands at just 500 individuals – is now confined to just three isolated sites in Hungary and Romania. All are now protected under the Natura 2000 Network.

To help the species expand its range, major conservation projects were launched with the help of EU LIFE funds in Hungary and Romania. Having restored its natural habitats, captive-bred specimens were re-introduced into these areas in order to strengthen the wild population. Already in the short space of time since this re-introduction took place the total population has grown steadily, which bodes well for its long-term future.


The Spanish Imperial eagle

The Spanish Imperial eagle used to be one of the most threatened bird species in the EU, but, thanks to a combination of strict legal protection under the Birds Directive and the designation of its core breeding sites under Natura 2000, plus strategic support from the EU LIFE Fund, its population has increased six-fold in the past 15 years. There were just 50 reproductive pairs left in 1995, compared to 300 pairs in the Iberian Peninsula today.

Since 1992, LIFE has funded a three-phase action programme for the conservation of the Spanish Imperial eagle, with separate but connected projects taking place simultaneously in Castilla y Leon, Castilla la Mancha, Extremadura, Andalucia and Madrid. In total, LIFE has invested more than €10 million into the conservation of this species.

Because many of the best-preserved habitats for the species are located on private land, there has been a particular emphasis on engaging individual landowners in the conservation of the species. To this end, management plans were drawn up and implemented on a range of private estates. Thanks to the close collaboration with these landowners, most are now continuing the conservation work under their own steam.
Saving the marsh fritillary in Denmark

The marsh fritillary butterfly was once a common sight in Denmark, but it now occurs only in a handful of sites across the country. Having protected the six remaining sites under the Natura 2000 Network, urgent conservation measures were implemented, with the help of EU LIFE funds, to stop the species from going extinct altogether.

It is still early days, but studies indicate that the habitat restoration works are starting to take effect: the overall population has been stabilised and the number of larval webs has doubled since the project began. Four new subpopulations have also been found. However, the species’ future is not yet assured, further conservation work will be required to enable the species to expand its range and make it less vulnerable to unpredictable events, such as droughts or floods.

Bears in Romania

Romania harbours around half of the total brown bear population in the European Union. The country still has large tracts of wild, unmanaged forests, especially in the Carpathian Mountains, where the mammals can live in relative safety away from humans. Even here, however, the bear population has been in steady decline as a result of illegal logging operations, unregulated hunting and ill-considered development.

Now that Romania has joined the EU, such activities need to be strictly regulated in line with the requirements of the Habitats Directive. Core breeding and hibernating areas also need to be protected across the country. This has led to Romania designating over 60 sites under the Natura 2000 Network for the species in order to ensure its long-term future.
Thanks to the Habitats Directive ...
the large-scale destruction of valuable wildlife-rich habitats has been halted

Twenty years ago, natural habitats were disappearing from the European landscape at an alarming rate. By the mid 1980s, Europe had already lost half of its wetlands and almost three-quarters of its sand dunes and heaths, through a combination of competing land uses, infrastructure developments, pollution and urban sprawl.

The Habitats Directive has succeeded in putting a brake on their continued large-scale destruction. It is one of the first pieces of conservation legislation to recognise the importance of protecting natural and semi-natural habitat types in their own right – not just because they are vital refuges for wildlife but also because they provide society with many valuable ecosystem services, such as clean water, pollinator bees, flood prevention etc.

Altogether, some 230 rare and threatened habitat types are protected as building blocks of ecosystems under the Habitats Directive, reflecting the rich and diverse landscapes of Europe. From waterlogged blanket bogs in the north to flower-filled maquis in the south, from windswept coastal cliffs in the west to vast dry grassland plains in the east – the wealth of habitats in the EU is truly remarkable.
Restoring the Danube in Austria

The Danube is the EU’s longest river. From its modest origins in the heart of the Black Forest, it wends its way through no less than 10 countries before reaching the shores of the Black Sea. It is recognised as one of the 200 most valuable ecological regions in the world, hosting a particularly rich array of rare habitats and species, including many endemics like the Danube salmon or the Danube clouded yellow butterfly.

The Danube is also of major importance for navigation, fisheries, recreation and industry. In Austria around 80% of the river has been regulated in some way. There are nevertheless important pockets of nature left, which is why over half of the 350 km stretch of the river in this country is included in Natura 2000.

Having experimented successfully with different river restoration techniques, the Austrian government has embarked on a €14 million project to improve the conservation status of these protected valuable habitats and species along the entire length of the Danube in Austria. This strategic approach is not only good news for the Austrian section of the Danube but should also lead the way for other countries to launch similar initiatives along their share of the river.
Protecting the sand dunes in the Curonian Spit in Lithuania

The Curonian Spit is a long narrow strip of land extending over 50 kms along the southern coast of Lithuania, separating the mainland from the sea. The spit harbours some of the largest and most complex dynamic dunes in Europe. However, like many other dunes across Europe, these unique habitats have been damaged by human activities such as afforestation, road construction and tourism.

Most of the spit and the surrounding coastal lagoon are now included in Natura 2000 and work has begun to restore parts of the damaged dune habitats to their former glory. Measures are also being undertaken to reduce the impact of tourism, by channelling visitors away from the most sensitive areas.

Restoring species-rich deciduous forests in Sweden

Söderåsen harbours one of the largest continuous tracts of deciduous forests in northern Europe. Nowadays, such large areas of dynamic, naturally developing, deciduous forests are few and far between and what still exists is generally degraded. Yet they remain among the most species-rich habitats in southern Scandinavia, thanks to the presence of a large number of old trees and decaying wood.

Even in Söderåsen the natural forests are no longer in an optimal condition. Work has therefore begun, initially with the help of LIFE funds, to remove exotic plantations and other unwanted trees in order to allow the original forest to regenerate itself and eventually expand its range.
Bringing life back to fen meadows in the Netherlands

The Ilperveld fen may be just 6 kms away from Amsterdam’s central station, but as one enters the area one has the distinct impression of stepping back in time. All around are uninterrupted views of large flat fens, criss-crossed by myriad ditches and canals. Every now and then one might catch a glimpse of a farmer taking his cows out to the meadows by boat, or a flock of birds flying overhead, but other than that – nothing – just peace and tranquillity.

It has not always been like this. Originally the area was used for hay-growing and pasture. But with time, farming stopped and the meadows became overgrown with soft rush. By the 1980s the site was being used as a municipal dump and the thousands of meadow birds that once inhabited the area were long gone.

The site has since been protected as a Natura 2000 site, and a large amount of restoration work has been undertaken to remove the soft rush and restore the fen meadows and surrounding ditches. Farming and cattle grazing has also been re-introduced to maintain the wet meadows in good condition for the benefit of the rare meadow birds which have since returned. The area is now also very popular with bird watchers, nature lovers and school parties.
Restoring raised bogs in Poland

Raised bogs were once a characteristic feature of the Baltic Sea Region of Poland but over the centuries large areas have been drained for agriculture and dug up for peat. It is estimated that there are now only about 80 bogs left in the region. These have since been protected as Natura 2000 sites in recognition of their high nature conservation value.

Shortly after Poland’s accession to the EU and with the help of the LIFE fund, a major restoration project was launched on 23 of the sites to restore their natural hydrology and remove the invading trees. The project also led to the development of a national action plan for raised bogs in Poland which should pave the way for further restoration work on these valuable, yet still highly vulnerable, habitats.

Ridding Posidonia beds of alien species in France

Named after the god of the sea, Posidonia beds are a vital refuge for all types of marine life ranging from tiny sea creatures to large turtles and dolphins. Unfortunately, many areas have already been destroyed by human activities, which is why they are now protected under the Habitats Directive.

The latest threat comes from an invasive alien algae, Caulerpa taxifolia, which escaped from an aquarium and is now taking over the Posidonia beds. In France, scientists have been working on eradicating the species from their marine Natura 2000 sites. They have also produced an identification and eradication guide based on their experiences to help other countries to eradicate the species from the Mediterranean before it spreads too far.
Thanks to the Habitats Directive ...
... Natura 2000 provides new opportunities for recreation and tourism

People go in search of nature for a whole variety of reasons. Many are looking to relax in the peace and quiet of a scenic environment, some are keen to explore new areas, while others are more interested in pursuing nature-based activities such as swimming, walking, cycling, fishing or hunting... whatever their motivation, Natura 2000 offers people a unique opportunity to discover and enjoy Europe’s rich natural heritage.

Because it safeguards many of the best areas for nature and biodiversity, Natura 2000 sites often act as a magnet for visitors, which in turn helps to diversify the local economy and stimulate inward investment. It is estimated that there are between 1.2 to 2.2 billion visitor days to Natura 2000 sites each year providing recreational benefits of between €5 and €9 billion per annum.

These recreational activities are compatible with the provisions of the Habitats Directive as long as they do not adversely affect the habitats and species present. The key often lies in sensitive planning, awareness raising and the application of wise use principles to ensure they do not end up destroying the very thing upon which they depend.
Natura 2000 supports rural tourism in Latvia

With its pristine sandy beaches, dense natural forests, extensive raised bogs, and meandering free-flowing rivers, Latvia has much to offer the nature tourist. It is also an ideal place to see hundreds of plants, birds, mammals and other species that are now extremely rare, if not extinct, in other parts of the EU.

The Latvian Rural Tourism Association has sought to tap into this precious natural asset by offering tailor-made, nature-friendly tours and excursions through some of the country’s most attractive Natura 2000 sites. All routes are tested in advance by the association’s own staff, taking advice from local ecologists, to check that they not only offer the best possible experiences for the visiting tourist but are also sustainable from a nature point of view.

The tours also encourage people to stay in rural accommodation near the sites, thereby contributing further to the local economy. Because many of the rural tourism providers are also farmers and foresters with land in Natura 2000, their ability to use Natura 2000 to attract visitors and diversify their income helps to win their support, understanding and acceptance of this important initiative.
Lake Prespa in Greece

Located in a remote region of the Balkans, Lake Prespa is the name given to two freshwater lakes shared by Greece, Albania and FYROM. The crystal clear lakes which are surrounded on all sides by high mountains are exceptionally rich in wildlife, hosting many rare and endemic species, like the Dalmatian pelican which has its largest breeding colony in the world here.

Although still rather difficult to get to, the lakes are fast becoming a magnet for nature lovers thanks to their international reputation as a biodiversity hotspot. But there are no big hotels here; instead tourism is built around small family businesses and rural enterprises which support the local economy. These same businesses have also launched their own trademark – the Prespa-Park-Products – to sell not just to the visitors but also further afield.

Hunters in Natura 2000: a force for good in Limousin, France

Located in the heart of the Limousin region in France, the lakes of Murat and Moustiers are renowned for their rich birdlife. They are also a prime site for hunting of wildfowl. Having supported their inclusion in Natura 2000, the Federation of Hunters of Haute Vienne has been actively involved in ensuring the good management of this valuable site ever since.

The Federation used its in-depth knowledge of the area to draw up a Natura 2000 management plan in collaboration with other local stakeholders. It is now implementing this plan through a Natura 2000 contract with the French Government. Among other measures, this involves carrying out regular maintenance works around the lakes, conducting bird monitoring surveys, and ridding the area of invasive alien species such as the coypu.
Thanks to the Habitats Directive ...
... new developments must safeguard the integrity of Natura 2000 sites

New developments within Natura 2000 are not systematically excluded, but they must be done in a way that respects the integrity of the site as well as the species and habitats within. To ensure this happens, the Habitats Directive has introduced a specific approval mechanism for plans and projects in and around Natura 2000 sites.

This requires that any new developments likely to have a significant negative effect on a Natura site undergo an impact assessment in order to study the potential implications for the EU protected species and habitats present. If the assessment shows that the impacts are likely to be significant then the project must be refused and alternatives explored, unless mitigation measures can be introduced to remove these threats.

In exceptional cases, and where there is an absence of alternatives, the Habitats Directive does however allow damaging activities to be undertaken within Natura 2000 sites if they are for imperative reasons of overriding public interest. But then compensation measures must be taken to ensure that the overall coherence of the Natura 2000 Network is not compromised.
Finding alternative routes for the Via Baltica

The Pan-European Transport Corridor ‘Via Baltica’ will link Helsinki to Warsaw via Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. One of the sections of the expressway, the bypass of Augustow city, was planned to cut right through the primeval forests and pristine wetlands of a Natura 2000 site. In 2006, a coalition of Polish NGOs wrote to the Commission to complain that, in their view, the impact assessment for this project did not comply with the requirements of EU nature laws.

The Commission agreed with the NGOs concerns and opened legal proceedings against Poland. It also asked the European Court of Justice to issue an injunction to stop all construction works of the bypass until a satisfactory solution had been found and the Habitats Directive provisions had been followed correctly.

The Polish Government subsequently ordered a new impact assessment of the project. In addition, it also explored alternative routes that would avoid the Natura 2000 site altogether. The new assessment concluded that the impacts would be significant, and one of the alternative routes was selected instead. In the end, the motorway was designed to avoid destroying any Natura 2000 sites. The Habitats Directive proved effective in ensuring that necessary infrastructure developments can go hand in hand with the need to preserve our natural heritage.
Beinn an Tuirc windfarm, Scotland

The discovery of a pair of golden eagles at the site of a planned windfarm in Scotland did not prevent its construction, but instead inspired a considered approach to minimising the impacts of the development. Thanks to the thorough environmental impact assessment results, a means could be found to accommodate the needs of the eagles without reducing the viability of the windfarm.

The locations of the planned turbines were adjusted to remove them from the eagles’ core territory and an additional habitat was created for them away from the turbines, which involved clearing 5 km² of non-native conifer plantations. What is more the newly created habitats provided them with new foraging grounds. In 2008 two golden eagle chicks hatched in this area.

Strategic spatial planning in the Czech Republic

The Habitats Directive requires impact assessments be made of plans as well as projects that are likely to affect a Natura 2000 site. Carrying out an assessment at this strategic level is one of the most effective ways of avoiding impacts on Natura 2000 early on in the planning process.

In the Czech Republic, a local municipality in the heart of the country was able to adjust its local spatial plan in order to avoid conflicts with Natura 2000 sites thanks to the impact assessment carried out under the Habitats Directive. The assessment identified a project that would have affected a Natura 2000 site. This was subsequently relocated. As a result, none of the projects foreseen in the spatial plan are likely to require assessments now. This in turn saves time and money.
Thanks to the Habitats Directive ...
... funding for nature conservation in the EU has increased in the last 20 years

The objectives of the Habitats Directive cannot be achieved through legal protection measures alone. Important financial resources are also needed to help manage and restore sites within the Natura 2000 Network. As an EU-wide initiative, Natura 2000 is based on the principle of solidarity and shared responsibility between Member States and the European Union. In recognition of this, the EU has ensured that substantial funds are available to Member States to finance Natura 2000 through various EU policy instruments, like the EU Rural Development Programme and Regional Development Funds.

The EU’s LIFE Financial instrument, in particular, has been instrumental in pump priming the implementation of the Network. Adopted at the same time as the Habitats Directive, it has contributed over €1.2 billion to the management and restoration of over two thousand Natura 2000 sites across the EU, as many of the examples in this brochure demonstrate.

While the cost of effectively managing the Natura 2000 Network is substantial, it remains a cost-effective solution when compared to all that we receive in return. Apart from its intrinsic value, Natura 2000 also provides us with many valuable ecosystem services and socio-economic benefits, the estimated monetary value of which far outweighs the initial investments required. By investing in Natura 2000, we are investing in our own future as well.
A sustainable land use model for Goričko, Slovenia

The Natura 2000 sites of Órseg, Goričko and Mura form a continuous ecological landscape of high biodiversity value extending over 420 km² across the border between Hungary and Slovenia. Recognising the need for a common management approach, a project was launched to manage the Natura 2000 sites and develop a sustainable land use model for the whole area based on the natural, economic and social potentials of the region.

The project, which is part funded by the European Regional Development Fund, is carrying out a range of activities to achieve this objective. The EU protected habitats and species are being mapped and machinery is being bought to help restore degraded grasslands (some of which will also be purchased via the project).

Criteria for nature-friendly agriculture will be elaborated in discussion with local farmers and new agricultural and touristic products will be developed, accompanied by a local trademark to help promote local products. A range of awareness-raising material and tourism brochures will also be produced to raise the profile of the region as a high quality nature-friendly destination.
The EU LIFE project for the Yelkouan shearwater in Malta

The EU LIFE Yelkouan shearwater project is one of Malta’s biggest ever conservation projects. Focusing on the bird’s largest colony at Rdum tal-Madonna, the project has successfully improved the nesting conditions and fledging rates of 400–600 breeding pairs.

Measures were also taken out at sea. Using new tracking methods, important sites for the species were identified and proposed for protection. The Armed Forces were also enlisted to help reduce illegal hunting, and fishermen were encouraged to use alternative fishing methods in order to avoid accidentally catching the birds in their nets. Thanks to this LIFE project, the future of the Yelkouan shearwater now looks a lot brighter.

Local authorities working together in Luxembourg

A €3 million LIFE project was recently launched in Luxembourg to help protect and restore 10 Natura 2000 sites. The project includes a range of classic conservation measures, from habitat restoration works, to land purchase, stakeholder dialogue and awareness raising.

But a special feature of the project is that it brings together a wide partnership of local authorities to carry these measures. Instead of being merely consulted, local authorities are instead taking the lead in ensuring the right management for their Natura 2000 sites, in consultation with local communities. This also helps to ensure that the Natura 2000 sites become an integral part of local interests and policies.
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