



Natura 2000 in the Continental region



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Natura 2000 in the Continental region

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Photo © Buchenwaldinstitut.eV

The Continental region – the heartland of Europe

The Continental region covers over a quarter of the European Union and extends in a broad band from west to east, starting in central France and continuing to the eastern edge of Poland. Outside the EU it stretches to the Ural mountains, on the border with Asia. In the south, the region is almost split in two by the high mountain ranges of the Alpine zone and the steppic plains of the Pannonian region. Parts of the Adriatic and Baltic coastlines are also included.

Altogether 11 EU countries have all or part of their territory in the Continental region. It covers major areas of France, Germany, Italy, Poland and the Czech Republic as well as significant parts of Denmark, Belgium, Austria and Slovenia. Only Luxembourg is entirely within the Continental region. Sweden, on the other hand, has just 3% of its country in this region.

The climate is generally characterised by strong contrasts between the cold winters and hot summers. The continental nature of the weather becomes more pronounced on moving from west to east. In the east, the extreme conditions of hot and cold, wet and dry, are more commonplace and have a strong impact on the vegetation. Moving west, the characteristics become less noticeable due to the oceanic influences of the Atlantic region which bring milder conditions. January temperatures in Warsaw, for instance, are usually well below freezing whereas in Alsace they tend to remain above 0°C.

The landscape of the Continental region is generally flat in the north and hillier in the south, with the exception of the extensive floodplains in the Po and Danube basins. The Great North European Plain covers much of northern Germany, Denmark, Poland and Russia. Formed by advancing and retreating glaciers, this vast area was once covered in lowland deciduous beech forests, interspersed with extensive floodplains, marshland and bogs. However, much of this forest has since been cleared for fuel and timber and replaced by large scale agricultural production. The transformation is so great that this area is now often referred to as the 'bread basket' of Europe.

Below the plains, there exists a moraine belt containing thousands of lakes, fens and mires around the Pomeranian region in East Germany and Poland. This is one of the least populated areas of the Continental belt, due not only to the difficult terrain but also to its strategic location after the World Wars as a border region between East and West.

Further south, the vegetation starts to be heavily influenced by the Mediterranean and sub-alpine conditions. The lower elevations of the Alps, Apennines and Carpathians and the mountainous areas of the Vosges, Ardennes, Black Forest, Massif Central, for instance, harbour many species and habitats that are also found in the alpine region.

Some of Europe's most important rivers flow through the Continental region: for instance the Danube, Loire, Rhine, Po, Elbe, Oder, Vistula.... These rivers have played a major economic role over the years connecting the north and the south through internal waterways. As a result most have been canalised and regulated, leading to a dramatic loss of extensive areas of floodplain habitats and species.

Despite these transformations, the Continental region is still relatively rich in biodiversity. Being at the crossroads between so many different biogeographical zones, it shares many species with other regions.

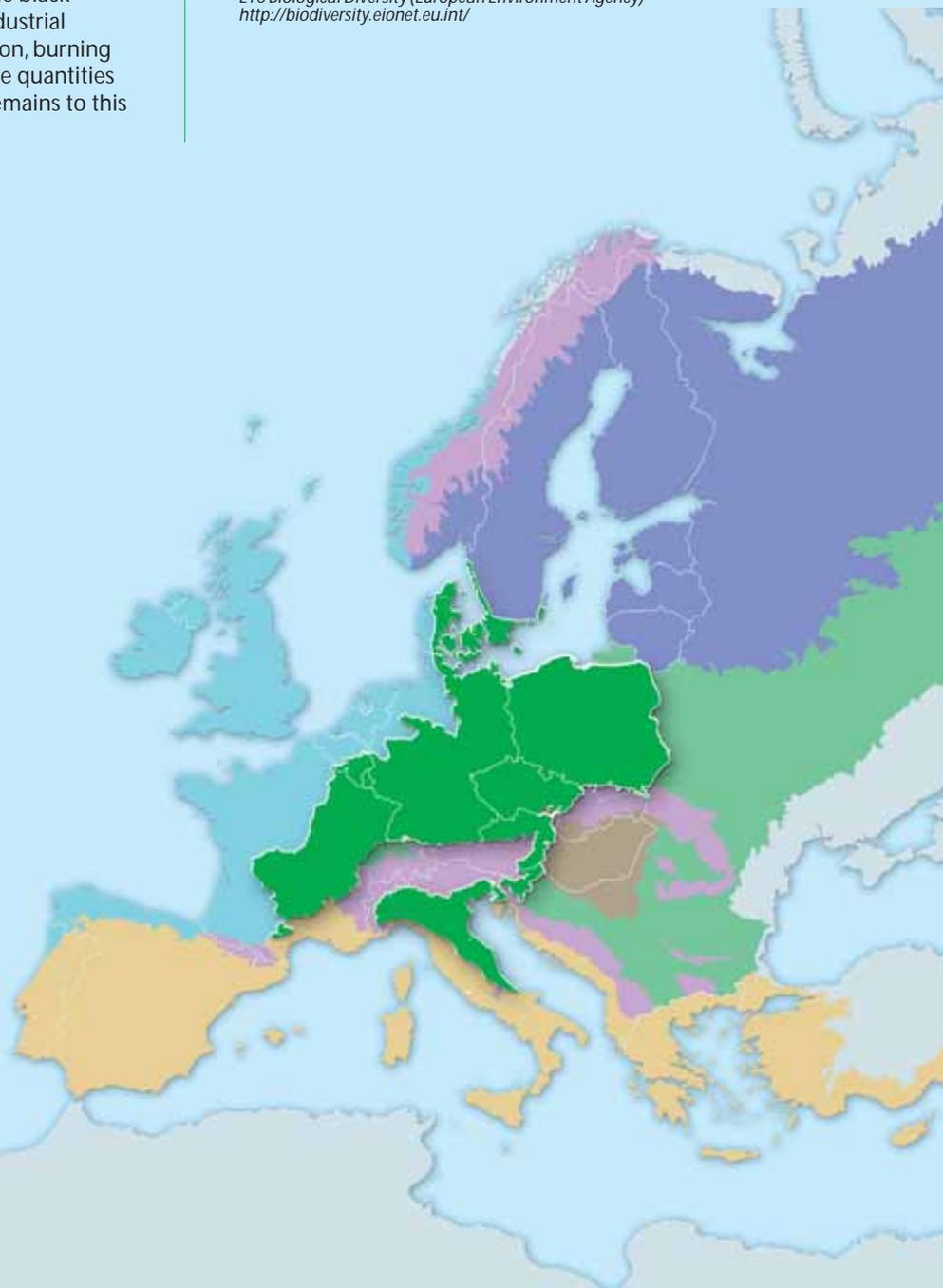
After the last ice age, plants and animals recolonised central Europe via a number of different routes. Some came back down from the higher mountain regions of the Alps and Carpathians, others migrated northwards from the Mediterranean or from the Balkan Peninsula. Yet others moved in from the East. The resulting diversity of plants, animals and habitat types is notably high, even if few are truly endemic to the region.

In terms of human use, population levels are generally high, especially in the northern urban areas of Germany, Denmark and Poland. Central Europe was for many years the industrial heartland of Europe, providing much of its supply of coal, iron ore, copper and steel. Whole areas are dominated by large industrial zones, such as in the Ruhrgebiet in western Germany which is still one the largest industrial zones in the world.

Similar areas exist further east, in eastern Germany, Poland and the Czech Republic. Known as the black triangle, this district suffers from massive industrial pollution. Open cast mining, copper extraction, burning of brown coal (lignite) etc... all produce large quantities of noxious by-products. The black triangle remains to this day the most polluted areas of Europe.

Region	Countries involved	% of EU 25 territory
Atlantic	Ireland, United Kingdom, France, Belgium, Germany, Netherlands, Denmark, Spain, Portugal	20.0
Boreal	Sweden, Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania	20.4
Continental	Denmark, Sweden, Germany, Poland, Belgium, Luxembourg, France, Italy, Czech Republic, Slovenia, Austria	26.3
Alpine	Spain, France, Italy, Germany, Austria, Slovenia, Sweden, Finland, Poland, Slovakia	7.6
Pannonian	Hungary, Slovakia, Czech Republic	2.9
Mediterranean	Greece, Cyprus, Malta, Italy, Spain, Portugal, France	22.5
Macaronesian	Spain, Portugal	0.3

Source:
 ETC Biological Diversity (European Environment Agency)
<http://biodiversity.eionet.eu.int/>



Natura 2000 species in the Continental region

The Continental region harbours 149 animals and 83 rare plants listed in the Habitats Directive as well as over a third of the birds listed in Annex I of the Birds Directive. Many are associated with the characteristic beech, oak and hornbeam forests. Typical bird species include the black woodpecker, red kite, hazel grouse and collared flycatcher, amongst others. In the undergrowth, tens of thousands of insect and plant species have adapted to different woodland microhabitats.

Because of the large number of rivers, marshes, floodplain meadows and other wetland habitats in the Continental region, freshwater species are also well represented. The otter for instance is still relatively widespread although under increasing pressure from pollution and habitat loss.

The number of fish species is particularly notable. Over two thirds of those listed in the Habitats Directive occur here, including some rare endemics such as the Adriatic sturgeon (*Acipenser naccarii*), zingel (*Zingel zingel*) or Danube salmon (*Hucho hucho*).

The continental region also harbours many rare amphibians. Eight species listed in Habitats Directive occur in the Italian Po basin alone. These include the rare sub-species of the European spadefoot toad (*Pelobates fuscus insubricus*), two species of cave salamander (*Hydromantes ambrosii*) and (*H. strinati*) as well as the elusive olm (*Proteus anguinus*). The latter is in fact more characteristic of the dark underwater cave systems of Slovenia where it is known locally as the 'human fish' because of its pallid skin colour. Reaching 25 cm in length, this rare amphibian has baffled scientists for years by its ability to reach sexual maturity without metamorphosing.

As in other regions of Europe, much of the continental landscape has been heavily influenced by agriculture. Although intensive largescale farming is now prevalent,



Photo © Lubomir Hlasek

The fire-bellied toad *Bombina orientalis*

Aptly named for its brilliantly coloured underbelly, which it uses to warn off predators, the fire-bellied toad leads an otherwise unassuming life in and amongst its sheltered sun-exposed ponds. Its favourite habitats are the extensively grazed meadows on calcium-rich soils in central and eastern Europe. The adults hibernate on land, but spend most of the spring and summer months in their breeding tarns. At these times the air is filled with the melodious but mournful sounds of its mating calls.

Unfortunately, these areas are now also intensively used for agriculture. Many ponds have been ploughed up or heavily polluted. Populations of the fire bellied toad have crashed as a result. Efforts are now underway to restore the ponds and their surrounds in Denmark and parts of Germany. Captive bred specimens are also being re-introduced in the hope of re-enforcing the existing populations.

important pockets of semi-natural grasslands and meadows are still being managed extensively, especially in the eastern part of the region. They attract species like the corncrake or white stork which depend on extensive farming systems for their survival. It is estimated that there are some 40,000 storks in Poland alone, with one quarter of the world population breeding in the grasslands between the Oder and Bug rivers.

The grasslands and wet meadows are also particularly rich in plant species and include such rare plants as the Bohemian bellflower (*Campanula bohemica*), or the gentian, *Gentianella germanica*.



Photo © A. E. Zitek

The Danube salmon *Hucho hucho*

This central European salmonid lives exclusively in freshwater. It can reach two metres in length and weigh up to 100 kg. Once widespread in Austria and southern Germany, its range shrank dramatically following the construction of a series of large hydroelectric power plants, which effectively blocked access to many of its natural spawning streams. Nowadays, it is restricted to four separate tributaries of the Austrian Danube. One of the last strongholds is the Pielach-Melk river system in Lower Austria. Here the spawning grounds are still relatively intact, but their access is restricted by no less than 13 obstacles, such as weirs and small hydroelectric mills, located over a distance of 45 km. Since 1999 work has been underway to render each of these obstructions passable for the salmon and, ultimately, to create a river continuum over 78 km, which would reconnect isolated populations.



Photo: MAIN © H Baumgartner; Nationalpark Donauauen, INSET © English Nature

The Continental list of Natura 2000 sites

In December 2004, the European Commission adopted a list of Natura 2000 sites for the Continental region. In total 4,958 sites were approved for the 8 old EU Member States in the region, covering over 49,000 km² of land. This represents approximately 6% of the terrestrial surface of the region, ranging from 4% in France to 15% and 16% respectively in Luxembourg and Belgium.

Although a large number of sites have been proposed, the majority are under 1000 ha, except in Austria, Czech Republic and Poland where Natura 2000 area of over 10,000 ha are not uncommon. In most countries, forests account for the major part of the Annex I habitat designation, although in Denmark and Sweden coastal and halophytic habitats (including marine) are more prominent.

Region	Habitat types	Animals	Plants
Atlantic	117	81	52
Boreal	87	68	58
Continental	144	149	83
Alpine	105	134	97
Pannonian	54	109	38
Mediterranean	146	160	270
Macaronesian	38	22	129

Source: ETC Biological Diversity (European Environment Agency) <http://biodiversity.eionet.eu.int/>
December 2004

- the number of habitats and species per biogeographical region is not definite since the reference lists for the 10 new Member States have still to be finalised, the exception being the Macaronesian region
- the figures are not cumulative since many habitats and species occur in two or more biogeographical regions

Work is now underway to revise the list to include sites for Poland, Czech Republic and Slovenia who joined the EU in May 2004. Additional sites are also expected from those countries who have not yet designated sufficient areas for specific habitat types and species as identified in the Commission's Decision of 7 December 2004.

Region	Natura 2000 sites	Total area covered	Terrestrial area covered	Marine area covered	% of terrestrial area of region
Atlantic	2,419	93,811 km ²	64,954 km ²	28,858 km ²	8
Boreal	5,026	82,377 km ²	73,003 km ²	9,375 km ²	12
Continental	4,958	49,194 km ²	40,838 km ²	8,356 km ²	6
Alpine	956	96,751 km ²	96,751 km ²	–	37
Mediterranean	2,783	180,609 km ²	167,898 km ²	12,712 km ²	19
Macaronesian	208	5,310 km ²	3,516 km ²	1,794 km ²	34
Total EU 15	16,193	458,615 km²	397,488 km²	61,127 km²	12

Source: ETC Biological Diversity (European Environment Agency) <http://biodiversity.eionet.eu.int/>
December 2004

- SPAs not included in the above table as they are not selected according to biogeographical region
- Figures for 10 new Member States are not included as the process of selection is still underway
- Figures for Mediterranean region are provisional since the list was not yet officially adopted at the time of publication of this brochure
- Some sites are on a border between two regions, the database does not allow for the possibility to split sites between regions, therefore some sites may be counted twice
- Percentage of marine areas not available



3 Mols Bjerge



5 Biebrza National Park



2 Hainich beech forests



4 Trockenhasen



6 Bieszczady



Photo © Nationalpark Hainich



Photo © G. Faeymaekers



Photo © E. Vassen

1 Eisenborn grasslands



Photo © D. Depeu



Photo © A. Balhazard

12 Champagne Ardennes



Photo © G. Kłosowscy

11

2

4

5



Photo © Sumava National Park

7 Sumava National Park



Photo © J. Hlasek

11

12

4

6

11 Vallée aux Lièvres



Photo © www.lalapaunifabula.it

10 Po Delta



Photo © BBL, Harberg

8 Lafnitz river valley



Photo © S. Grassano, CPNRC



Photo © I. Modic

9 Rakov Škocjan

Photo © A. Hodalik

- SACs
- SPAs
- SPA and SAC

Map derived from site coordinates supplied by University of Leuven, Division SADL, December 2004

NB: At the time of publication, only partial information was available for proposed sites in the new Member States



Photo: MAIN © M. Lohmann, INSET © J. Hlasek

Natura 2000 habitat types in the Continental region

Before agriculture, much of the Continental region was dominated by deciduous forests. The climatic conditions and soils are particularly well suited to broadleaved forests, such as beech (*Fagus sylvaticus*) which is at the centre of its distribution here. Further East, beech is gradually replaced by oak and hornbeam whereas in the north, on high ground and in poorer soils, natural stands of conifers take over with increasing frequency.

Important tracks of bog woodland, alluvial woods and riparian mixed forests were also once commonplace along most river valleys and in the floodplains. These

exceptionally rich habitats play an important role as natural corridors within the wider landscape. Most have however disappeared and now only exist in isolated pockets.

The transformation from forest to arable fields, meadows and pastures was mostly completed by early settlers. The semi-natural habitats which developed on these soils eventually evolved into valuable reservoirs for native species but these too are under threat from a decline in traditional management and the intensification of agriculture.

Today, grasslands cover ca 14% of the Continental region, ranging from sub alpine meadows and calcareous grasslands on higher elevations to lowland hay meadows and flooded alluvial grasslands.

The alluvial grasslands were once also extensive, covering large areas along river valleys. Here they provided a refuge for many rare wetland species such as *Iris sibirica*, or the corncrake (*Crex crex*) and aquatic warbler (*Acrocephalus paludicola*).

Photo © www.lalupusinfabula.it/Attivita/Acqua/fiumi-igmi-maritim



The Po delta

Situated along the Adriatic coast in the Continental region, the low-lying Po delta is the largest wetland in Italy and one of the most productive in the Mediterranean. It covers some 1,300 km², over a third of which is protected as an SPA under the Birds Directive. Over 280 species of birds can be seen here including the rare squacco heron (*Ardeola ralloides*), pygmy cormorant (*Phalacrocorax pygmaeus*) and ferruginous duck (*Aythya nyroca*). The high species diversity is due to the sheer complexity of the terrestrial, fluvial and coastal habitats present. Rivers, marshlands, sand dunes, coastal lagoons, freshwater wetlands, ancient pinewoods and mixed oak woods all blend together in a rich patchwork of habitats. Species from the Continental region live side by side with those from the Mediterranean region. The long history of human use has contributed further to this complexity. Marshland has been reclaimed for agriculture, saltmarshes transformed into fishing lagoons called 'Valli,' flood defence systems have been erected to protect villages and chemical factories have been installed along the coast. All these activities have taken their toll on the region's natural values but efforts are now underway to develop a unified approach to the long term management of the entire delta across different economic sectors and administrative boundaries.

Whilst much of Europe's precious floodplains have been lost, important areas still exist in parts of the region for instance along the Danube, Po, upper Loire and Elbe rivers. The wetlands on the upper reaches of the Oder river between Poland and Germany, for instance, stretch for 60 kms on either side of the river.

Other typical wetland habitats include a large number of lakes and bogs as well as extensive freshwater marshes and fens. The Biebrza river valley, in north-eastern Poland, is one of the largest and least disturbed marshlands in Central Europe with large tracts of natural bogs extending over some 90,000 ha.

On higher ground, extensive cave systems permeate through the karst landscape. These represent an important stronghold for many rare species of bats as well as other specialised fauna and flora. The Sumava caves of the Czech Republic are amongst the largest cave systems in Central Europe.

Inland dunes are another unusual but characteristic habitat of the Continental region. Sands were deposited in the last ice age across much of central Europe and additional deposits were brought down by the river. As with coastal sand formations, great efforts were made to stabilise these wastelands, through conifer plantations and soil enhancement. The remaining dunes and their specialised fauna and flora are now much reduced and heavily fragmented.

A wide range of coastal habitats are also found along the northern and southern coastlines of the Continental region. Open sea habitats, beaches and shingle features, salt meadows, lagoons, dunes and dune heaths and coastal woodlands are all present and support a wealth of wildlife. Two of the largest mobile dune systems in Europe, at Rabjerg Mile in Jutland and Slowinski National Park in Poland are included. In these areas the natural dune forming processes are allowed free rein.



Photos: © B Gibbons/Natural Image

Bialowieza Forest

Covering some 120,000 ha, the Bialowieza Forest on the border between Poland and Belarus is the largest surviving area of primeval mixed forest in Europe. Once a private hunting forest for Polish kings and Russian tsars, it has been protected as a strict nature reserve since the 1920s. As a result few forestry activities have taken place. This has allowed the formation of an exceptionally rich species diversity. 632 vascular plant species have been recorded so far, representing almost a third of all plants found in Poland, many of which are endemic. Over 230 bird species have also been recorded including many species of eagle, owls and woodpeckers.

Important populations of wolf, lynx and otter are also present but the forest is best known for harbouring the European bison. This species was exterminated in 1919 but successfully reintroduced ten years later in a fenced reserve. The population has since grown to over 700 but because of the small source population it remains highly vulnerable to genetic inbreeding. The forest, and its centuries old trees, is also under threat from encroaching forestry activities on its outer rim.

Photo: © F. Vassen



Calaminarian grasslands

Calaminarian grasslands occur on soils containing elevated levels of heavy metals, such as lead, zinc, chromium or copper. The greatest extent of the habitat occurs on artificial sites associated with past mining activities (the habitat is in fact named after one of the oldest zinc mines in Belgium, the 'calamine'). Near natural examples on natural rock outcrops and river gravels are more localised.

Although heavy metals are usually toxic for plants, some species such as the zinc violet (*Viola calaminarina*), the spring sandwort (*Minuartia verna*) or Young's helleborine (*Epipactus youngiana*), have become especially adapted to the presence of these noxious substances. The low nutrients and heavy metals are believed to keep the vegetation open, retarding succession. As a result many rare specialist plants are able to thrive without competition from the more vigorous colonists.



Photos © Nationalpark Hainich

Management issues in the Continental region

Much of the Continental landscape has been significantly transformed through centuries of changing land uses. Large areas of beech forest were cleared to provide wood for industrial furnaces and to make way for intensive large-scale farming. Wetlands and floodplain meadows were drained to further increase agricultural holdings. Rivers were dammed, canalised and regulated to prevent floods and to provide inland navigation routes.

By the 19th Century, heavy industries were omnipresent in key areas like the Ruhrgebiet or in the Black Triangle between Germany, Poland and Czech Republic. Local human populations increased substantially as people moved into these areas looking for jobs. The impact on the environment was substantial. Large tracts of land were urbanised and transformed into industrial zones. Pollution began to cause major problems.

Only the habitats on poorer soils, such as bogs, marshes and heaths escaped major transformation. These were managed extensively instead, if at all. Such is the case for the region around Pomorania or in the Massif Central in France. Both still harbour large areas of valuable bogs, marshes, forests and grasslands.

Many areas located in the border regions between the old East and West frontiers also remained relatively unchanged for decades after World War II. It is as if time has stood still here. With the recent collapse of the

Photo © J. Hlasek



Managing Annex IV species – the case of the hamster

The European hamster (*Cricetus cricetus*) was once widespread in farmlands across the Continental region. It could be found in almost every type of crop from wheat, rye, oats, barley and corn to sugar beet. Here it would dig deep burrows in the loamy soil (sometimes 2 m deep) and collect seeds and other food at night. For years it was persecuted as a farmland pest and trapped for the fur trade but then the species began to decline dramatically following the move towards intensive mechanised farming. Populations dropped so dramatically that it is now strictly protected under Annex IV the Habitats Directive. As a result any form of deliberate capture or killing is prohibited as is any deliberate disturbance.

In order for the increasingly fragmented populations of hamster to survive over the long term however, more active management measures are also required. Several countries have recently introduced conservation plans for the hamster in which they promote hamster friendly management contracts with local farmers. Farmers can receive supplementary payments in exchange for undertaking certain simple measures such as growing strips of alfalfa along field margins, limiting the use of fertilisers, rodenticides or herbicides, or ploughing only shallow furrows no more than 20 cm deep and harvesting after mid-October. Such measures could also eventually be funded through the new Rural Development Regulation and the agri-environment schemes in particular.



International co-operation for the Danube River basin

The Danube flows for 2,850 kms from its source high up in the Black Forest to its mouth in the vast delta plains along the Black Sea. It crosses no less than 10 countries along the way. For centuries, the river has been of major ecological, cultural and economic value to all of these countries.

Recognising the immense value of the river, efforts have been underway since 1985 to try to stop or even reverse some of the worst excesses of pollution and development. An International Convention on the protection and management of the Danube was signed by all riverine countries in 1991 and a Strategic Action plan adopted by Environment Ministers in 1994.

An international Commission for the Protection of the Danube River was set up at the same time to take this action plan forward. It has also been nominated as the authority to coordinate the elaboration of the Danube River Basin Management Plan under the Water Framework Directive.

communist regimes and the re-opening of national borders however land uses are changing rapidly here too, either through land abandonment or intensification.

The reform of the Common Agricultural Policy and the introduction of area based payments decoupled from production may help to slow this process down, as will the strengthening of the Rural Development schemes. The fact that Natura 2000 is now specifically mentioned in the Rural Development Regulation is an important political step in forging greater integration of farming and conservation needs.

Whilst the landscape is still well forested compared to the Atlantic region (about 27% of the land area) only a small proportion of the woodland is semi-natural broadleaf. It is estimated that over 75% of the original forest has been lost and what is left has been severely altered by commercial management practices.

Scots pine (*Pinus sylvestris*) which under normal conditions is confined to poorer soils is now the dominant species within commercial plantations. In Germany alone it accounts for 72% of all forests.

Air borne pollution from industrial activities has also taken its toll on the region's biodiversity and on the forests in particular. High emissions of sulphur dioxide, nitrogen oxide or ammonia, for instance, cause acid rain.

Not only does this lead to extensive damage to the forest vegetation but it also makes stands more vulnerable to natural destructive forces such as high winds and storms, or to introduced pests and diseases. It is estimated that over 90% of the trees in Poland and Czech Republic are partly defoliated as a result.

The region's rivers, floodplains and other wetlands have also suffered badly from the exceptionally high levels of industrial and agricultural pollution. Many of the watercourses have become sterile as a result.

Most rivers also underwent major physical changes over the last 200 years. They have been canalised, straightened, deepened, embanked and dammed. Some, like the Rhine were transformed into major navigation routes. Others were extensively modified for hydroelectric power. The surrounding floodplains were also drained and transformed to make way for agriculture and to prevent flooding.

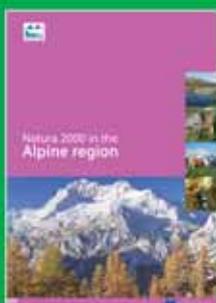
Yet despite these dramatic changes, fragments of the original natural and semi-natural habitats do still exist in pockets along most major rivers, albeit in a severely reduced form.

Recognising the economic as well as the ecological value of these rivers, efforts are underway to adopt softer management solutions and where possible restore part of the rivers' natural dynamics. Thanks to the Water Framework Directive an integrated management approach is being developed over the entire length of many major rivers and their catchment areas.

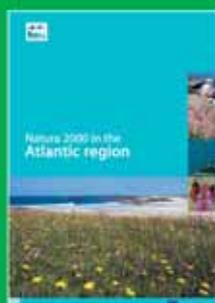


Photo © E.Barbelette, LPO

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The European Union has seven biogeographical regions, each with its own characteristic blend of vegetation, climate and geology. Natura 2000 sites are selected according to each region on the basis of national lists submitted by each Member State within that region. Working at this level makes it easier to conserve species and habitat types under similar natural conditions across a suite of countries, irrespective of political and administrative boundaries. Together with the Special Protection Areas designated under the Birds Directive, the Natura 2000 sites selected for each biogeographical region make up the ecological Natura 2000 network which spans all 25 countries of the EU.



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