

4060 Alpine and Boreal heaths

Management of Natura 2000 habitats. Summary



Alpine shrubby heaths in high Valle Buscagna, Alpe Veglia and Alpe Devero Natural Park, Italy. Photo: Paolo Pirocchi.

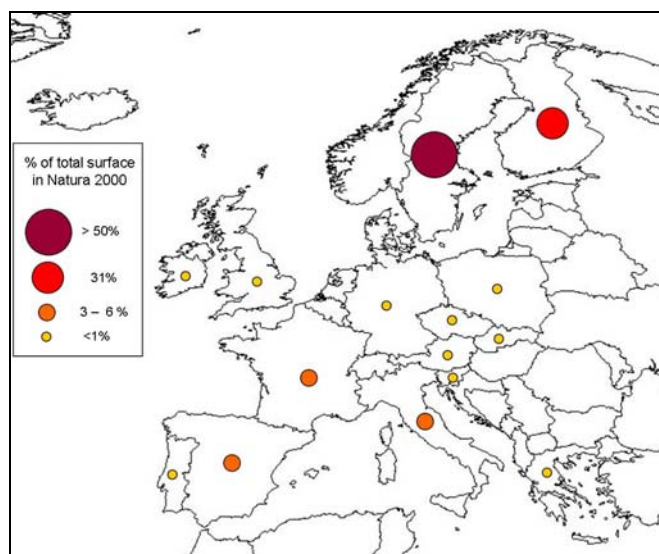
Within the European Union, the Alpine and Boreal heaths habitat is distributed along mountain chains, located between the natural altitudinal tree line and the grassland formations. The heaths are usually associated with shallow mineral soils, which are, in some cases, eroding and unstable. They can also be found on areas of loose rock and coarse sediment on mountaintops and ridges. The presence and abundance of characteristic vascular plants, mosses, lichens and alpine fungi assemblages are important indicators of habitat quality.

The heaths also are a key habitat for the threatened *Tetrao tetrix* (black grouse), which is listed in the Birds Directive and in need of coordinated conservation action across the EU. In northern Finland and Sweden, the Alpine heath is a key habitat for both species of ptarmigan: the willow grouse *Lagopus lagopus* breeds and winters here while the rock ptarmigan *Lagopus mutus* uses it primarily as a winter habitat.

The management of Alpine and Boreal heaths is normally linked to low level grazing after snowmelt once the ground has had time to dry out. This is to avoid soil degradation and the compression of the herbaceous layer. Regular grazing limits scrub invasion. Within the distribution area of the Alpine and Boreal heaths, different types of grazing are carried out: summer grazing in south and central Europe (e.g. France, Italy), and year-round grazing in places like the United Kingdom. In northern Sweden and Finland, reindeer grazing has a very long tradition. The Alpine heaths above the tree line constitute the main summer grazing habitat for semi-domestic reindeer, and it is clear that reindeer grazing has been a key factor affecting the structure of the habitat.

The first step in rationalising grazing activities is to formulate a "pasturage plan", based on accurate field surveys to determine the habitat's characteristics and needs, the sustainable pasturage load, as well as the typology of grazing and its timing, taking into consideration the local conditions. For example, in the United Kingdom heather can tolerate higher levels of grazing in the phase of growth and during the summer. Burning is also used in some EU countries, but inappropriate use of this technique can be dangerous. Burning should be therefore adequately planned and carefully carried out only if really necessary.

The long-term maintenance of the habitat does not always require active management. For instance, in Sweden and Finland, with a land use history primarily linked to reindeer grazing, this habitat is mostly under passive management, while in the Czech Republic no interventions are recommended.



Percentage distribution of the total surface of Alpine and Boreal heaths in Natura 2000

The complete text of the document is available at: http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/natura2000/management/best_practice_en.htm

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