1st Meeting of the Steering Committee for the Natura 2000 Biogeographical Process in the Continental, Pannonian, Steppic & Black Sea regions

DG Environment, Brussels, 5 March 2014

Draft minutes

Present

Ms Iva Antolić, Ministry of Environmental and Nature Protection, Croatia
Mr Marita Arvela, European Topic Centre on Biological Diversity
Mr Stefan Avramov, European Habitats Forum / CEEWEB / Bulgaria Biodiversity Foundation
Mr Werner Ackermann, Planungsbüro für angewandten Naturschutz GmbH, Germany
Ms Marie Alice Budniok, Natura 2000 Users Platform, ELO
Mr Axel Buschmann, Federal Agency for Nature Conservation, Germany
Ms Asya Doneva, National Nature Protection Service, Bulgaria
Mr Axel Drechsler, Federal Agency for Nature Conservation, Germany
Mr Aljoša Duplić, State Institute for Nature Protection, Croatia
Ms Nora Elvinger, Ministry of Sustainable Development and Infrastructure, Luxembourg
Ms Lenka Jandová, Nature Conservation Agency, Czech Republic
Mr Ctibor Kocman, European Commission
Mr François Kremer, European Commission
Ms Alena Kubánkova, Ministry of the Environment, Czech Republic
Mr Andrzej Langowski, General Directorate of Environmental Protection, Poland
Mr Julien Legros, Ministry of Ecology, Sustainable Development and Energy, France
Mr Ludovic Le Maresquier, European Commission
Mr Neil McIntosh, European Centre for Nature Conservation
Mr Christian Ploessnig, Tirol, Austria
Mr András Schmidt, Ministry of Rural Development, Hungary
Ms Katalin Sipos, Duna-Ipoly National Park Directorate, Hungary
Mr John Smaranda, Ministry of Environment and Climate Change, Romania
Mr Mark Snethlage, European Centre for Nature Conservation
Mr Libor Ulrych, State Nature Conservancy, Slovak Republic
Mr Lionel Wibail, DGARNE, Walloon Region, Belgium

Apologies: Denmark, Italy, Slovenia & Sweden

1. Welcome & introduction

François Kremer (FK) welcomed members of the Continental, Pannonian, Steppic and Black Sea Steering Committee to this first meeting. He noted that Denmark, Italy, Slovenia and Sweden would not be represented today.

The Continental, Pannonian, Steppic and Black Sea Natura 2000 biogeographical process is the fifth to start following the Boreal, Atlantic, Alpine and Mediterranean regions. In the three years since the start of the Natura 2000 Biogeographical Process, much has been learned from experience and the Process is now under review. A strategic paper drafted by the European Commission, with inputs from several steering committee representatives and the contractor, will be presented and discussed at the next meeting of the Coordination Group on Biodiversity and Nature (CGBN) on 27 to 28 March 2014 in Brussels.

This first meeting of the Continental, Pannonian, Steppic and Black Sea Steering Committee signals the new direction of the Process: the initial analysis of habitats and species, on the basis of Article 17 reporting prepared by the European Topic Centre for Biological Diversity (ETC BD) has, for the first time, been conducted by an online
consultation regarding priority habitats. The results of this consultation, rather than the consultation process itself, constitute one of the main issues for discussion at this meeting. The outcome should be the selection of habitats for priority consideration during the Continental, Pannonian, Steppic and Black Sea region's process. Also, selected habitats will be discussed in terms of clustered priority habitat groups.

2. Discussion about the Process and its context in the Continental, Pannonian, Steppic and Black Sea regions.

To provide further evidence of the new direction within the Process, FK underlined that the Member States and other stakeholders represented in the Steering Committee are being increasingly and positively encouraged to take ownership of the Process. The Process should be seen as an important opportunity to take forward common priorities and shared interests identified by Process stakeholders. The Process is voluntary, but is available to be utilized as a way to complement strategic and operational priorities for Natura 2000 in each biogeographical region. The European Commission, assisted by the contractor, is there to support and facilitate the Process, but the key actors are the Member States and expert stakeholders.

One of the main changes is that there is no longer a requirement for one Member State to take the lead and act as host for Process events. If there is a candidate country to lead the Continental Process, then this is fine, but in the absence of a candidate, there is a possibility to share organisation and hosting of events between Member States: additionally, potential hosts can be regional authorities, NGOs, management authorities etc. For example, in preparations for the Mediterranean Process, despite numerous requests to find a willing lead, no country volunteered as a candidate. As a result, and by way of an alternative, the Axios Delta Management Authority (Greece) was approached and has volunteered to host the kick off Mediterranean Seminar.

Also, in contrast to earlier cycles, which consisted of a Preparatory Workshop and a Seminar organized in the time frame of one year, the new approach commences now with a kick off seminar, underlining the fact that the Natura 2000 Biogeographical Process is an open ended process, which does not end after 12 months.

Furthermore, it is emphasised that the Seminars in themselves do not necessarily aim to reach definitive conclusions, but rather, signal the start of a continuing process of collaboration, further cooperation and networking: the Process provides complementary opportunities to focus on common priorities and shared interests identified by experts within each region. The Seminars therefore should be viewed essentially as meetings to discuss the agenda and priorities for future action for Natura 2000, which can then be developed by Member States and other stakeholders, with support from the European Commission through the assistance of the contractor. In this new approach, the Kick off Seminar is expected to be followed by a number of thematic workshops, whose content and objectives are agreed at the Kick-off Seminar, but developed subsequently thereafter as part of the implementation of the Process.

An important point for discussion today is the approach the Steering Committee wishes to adopt to implement the Natura 2000 Biogeographical Process in the Continental, Pannonian, Steppic and Black Sea biogeographical regions. A key question therefore for the Steering Committee to consider is: should there be one joint process, or separate processes?

3. Steps in the preparation of the background information to the habitats in the region

Presentation of the pre-scoping document for the Continental, Pannonian, Steppic and Black Sea Natura 2000 Biogeographical Process - Marita Arvela, ETC/BD.

Marita Arvela presented the Continental, Pannonian, Steppic and Black Sea Pre-scoping Document. The document contents are based on the 2001-2006 Article 17 reporting data. Although most of the data for the 2013 round of Article 17 reporting have been submitted, it was logistically not possible to base the data analysis for the Draft Pre-
Scoping Document on these latest reports. Furthermore, it was noted that Slovenia and Greece have not yet sent their data, but that is expected by the end of March.

The assessment of Habitats Directive Article 17 reporting is carried out by the ETC BD, while the assessment of the Birds Directive Article 12 reporting is done by a contractor. Although birds have not been assessed in the Pre-scoping document, they should definitely be part of the Natura 2000 Biogeographical Process in terms of conservation and management priorities related to the habitats they depend on.

The assessment of habitats and Annex 2 species has been conducted by applying 3 simple criteria to the Article 17 dataset. Although this approach has been questioned by some in earlier rounds, it enables greater consistency and transparency of results to be achieved. Moreover, during the development and testing of various methodologies, for example, using a more complex approach with weighting, the results did not differ substantially.

Following the selection of habitats for priority consideration in the Continental, Pannonian, Steppic & Black Sea Process, the ETC BD will produce a second version of the Pre/scoping document giving more information about the selected habitats.

There was some discussion about the next steps and the timeline, especially regarding the planning of the second version or “Revised Pre-Scoping document”. Due to the high work load of the ETC BD currently assessing the Article 17 data, the revised document will not be ready until probably July. It was agreed to plan to have the Revised Pre-Scoping Document ready before the summer break, but in any case well in advance of the Kick-off Seminar, expected to take place in late 2014.

Representatives of Bulgaria (Asya Doneva) and Romania (John Smaranda) explained some of the specific challenges they have in selecting the habitats for priority consideration in their countries that are also part of the Pannonian region (Romania) and the Continental region (Bulgaria and Romania). Moreover, the Steppic region only occurs in Romania, making it difficult to discuss specific issues internationally. This was picked up under the discussion about habitat groups – see points raised under item 5 below.

4. **Scope and organization of the process**

In discussing how to organize the Process in the Continental, Pannonian, Steppic and Black Sea region, potential options and groupings for the four biogeographical regions were considered.

Some SC Members expressed some reservations regarding the usefulness of such a large all-encompassing scope for the process. Also in the previous Seminars it has sometimes been difficult to achieve a satisfactory level of concrete outcomes - considering all four regions together might make this even more difficult.

However, *taking into account the emphasis on continuing cooperation and networking being implemented within the Process, it was agreed that the benefits of addressing conservation issues across the four regions outweighed possible disadvantages*. Furthermore, within the habitat group discussions, there will also be the opportunity to discuss issues specific to a particular sub-region. Also, for example, for Romania and Slovakia, it was reported that there is still a problem with some habitat classification, which would benefit from discussion. In this regard, John Smaranda reported that for some habitats like 6220 it is not sure whether it exists in Romania. Libor Ulrych noted a similar problem for Slovakia. *It was agreed that there would be benefit to give time through the Continental Process to discussion about ways to harmonize habitat classifications – for example in respect of the difference between 6240 and 6140, which is ambiguous.*

François Kremer noted that these interventions already identified a possible topical issue that could be discussed at the Kick off Seminar: habitat classification. In previous regions, similarly, the definition of favourable reference values and favourable conservation status continues to be identified as an issue of common interest. Also, as noted
below, even if habitats or species are not specifically referred to in the background documents to support the Process, this does not mean that they cannot be discussed.

5. Presentation and discussion of the preliminary Habitat Selection Document and decision about the top 20 habitats for each (cluster of) region(s) by ECNC.

Mark Snethlage and Neil McIntosh presented the results of the consultation to identify the habitats for priority consideration within the Continental, Pannonian, Steppic and Black Sea process. The document with the results of the consultation had been circulated in advance of the meeting, and therefore the presentation concentrated on a possible grouping of highest priority habitats (based on the Member State ratings) into habitat groups.

Within the Natura 2000 Biogeographical Process, up to four habitat groups are proposed as a basis for the management discussions. However, some SC members (such as Lionel Wibail and Werner Ackermann) expressed reservations to discuss issues for broadly defined habitat groups - for instance, management and conservation issues differ quite significantly between wet and dry grasslands, and between mountain and lowland forests.

Therefore, following this discussion and taking into account the SC’s decision to organise the four biogeographical regions together in one process, it was agreed that it would be useful to include more than four habitat groups. On this basis, it was decided there would be value to focus on six habitat groups for the Continental, Pannonian, Steppic and Black Sea regions – these were agreed as:

- Forest
- Grassland
- Rivers & Lakes
- Mires and Bogs
- Coastal areas (selected from the others)
- Heaths and scrub

Additionally, based on this outcome, it was agreed that the contractor would prepare a new second draft of the habitats selection document – this would contain a proposal for habitats organised in each of the six habitat groups. This document will be circulated to the Steering Committee for their possible comments before the end of March 2014.

François Kremer reminded the SC that within the habitat groups there is always the opportunity to ‘zoom in’ to habitat specific issues within a habitat group. Also, Neil McIntosh added that the primary function of the Kick off Seminar is to identify the issues (which may be habitat specific) and that, subject to the wishes of Process participants, there is scope to discuss such issues in greater detail as part of plans to continue networking following the Kick-off Seminar.

Stefan Avramov suggested the idea to draft habitat action plans as a way to ensure more detailed analysis of the problems and solutions for each priority habitat. François Kremer recognised that habitat action plans may provide a possible way forward, but should be only one of the many possible outcomes for action identified during a Kick off Seminar. He added that it would be important to discuss issues that are specific to the four regions included in the Continental, Pannonian, Steppic and Black Sea process, so as not to repeat the discussions held in the previous seminars.

Axel Drechsler asked about how species’ related issues would be dealt with within this Process.

François Kremer informed the SC that species and related issues can be identified and discussed at the Kick-off Seminar. Neil McIntosh added that, so far, the focus has been on habitats selected for priority consideration, following the view that by managing habitats and bringing them back into favourable conservation status, the
6. Discussion about the process for compiling relevant information, including possibilities for a thematic approach in addition to selected habitat types and species.

Neil McIntosh explained the data gathering process. Once the list of habitats groups and their associated habitats for priority consideration had been finalized and accepted by the SC, the contractor will circulate an online Habitat Information Form. The purpose of collecting habitat management information through this form is to create a knowledge base of threats, pressures and management responses for these habitats, by harvesting directly, the knowledge, practical experience and expertise of experts and practitioners. Equally, scientific conservation evidence can be gathered as a way to inform and improve practical habitat management approaches. Another important category of information includes examples of best practice, as well as links to and outputs from LIFE projects.

The collected information is combined with the results of the Revised Pre-scoping Document and presented in the online Natura 2000 Platform (currently in development). Feedback from experts is also used to inform the preparation of the ‘Seminar Input Document’, a summary document prepared in advance of the Kick off Seminar.

*It was agreed that the contractor will circulate the Habitat Information Form before the end of April, once the habitat selection is confirmed, so that SC members and their experts will have until the end of June to submit their contributions.* (Again though, it was emphasized that the collection of experts’ feedback is a continuing process, so the end of June can be viewed simply as a milestone within that process.) *In addition, SC members were invited already at this stage to identify the experts and practitioners they will ask to contribute to this information gathering exercise.*

*The first Draft Seminar Input Document will be ready by end of September and circulated to the Steering Committee for their possible comments. The Revised Draft Seminar Input Document will then be ready by the end of October, before the Kick-off Seminar, which, subject to the outcomes of further SC discussions, would be planned for November 2014.*

7. The role of the Natura 2000 Platform and other communication instruments (e.g. CIRCABC).

Neil McIntosh explained that the purpose of the Natura 2000 Platform is to help experts and practitioners to find information related to the Process and, in particular, to provide them with an easy way to discover a range of relevant, practical habitat management and conservation information contained in its knowledge base.

The three pillars of the Natura 2000 Platform are:

- **Knowledge base**: all relevant information about the management and conservation of the habitats selected for priority consideration and their associated species
- **Networking and cooperation**: a forum for discussion, access to contact details of experts and practitioners
- **Action and results**: a repository for the action and results of the Natura 2000 Biogeographical process.

8. Initial discussion on the organization of the Process in the regions and ideas for seminar themes, content & timing:

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Options for the organization of the Process – key factors discussed, agreed or requiring follow-up action.

The target date for the Kick-off Seminar was agreed as November 2014.

There is a need to identify a lead Member State or collaborating hosts to help co-organise this event. This should be done as soon as possible to allow sufficient time to organize the event. Proposals should be sent to the contractor.

Some features of the Kick-off Seminar were highlighted, as follows:

- Target number of participants: 100 – 120
- A venue and location in an easily accessible place
- 1 big plenary room
- 5 or 6 break out rooms (to accommodate the Habitat Groups)
- Field visits: one all-encompassing or separate for each habitat groups
- A 'Knowledge Market’, which requires a suitably large room to display panel poster sessions, materials, on-line displays etc. about projects, case studies
- Costs: host supports part of the costs if that would be possible
- Participants pay own travel accommodation costs
- Limited EC support is available for some NGO representatives nominated for invitation by the SC (e.g. travel and accommodation costs for 3 NGOs per country) and government experts (1 GO representative per country may be eligible to receive support for travel costs only.)

The Kick-off Seminar is mainly focused on participants from countries within the biogeographical region. Upon request, some exceptions can be made and experts from neighbouring regions may be invited as observers.

In addition, François Kremer invited SC members already to start thinking about who to propose as Chairperson for the six habitat groups. The Chairperson leads the activities of the habitat group in close cooperation and with the support of a facilitator designated by the contractor. The role of the Chairperson is to prepare and chair the habitat working groups during the kick off seminar and to ensure the follow up of the working group activities. In this role, he or she is strongly supported by the contractor.

The SC were also asked to start thinking about the experts they would like to involve in the preparation of the Seminar Input Document, especially as they may also be nominated to be invited to attend the Kick-off Seminar.

Marie-Alice Budniok (ELO) informed the SC that the ELO network and the Natura 2000 Users Forum are at the disposal of the Member States to help them identify experts and practitioners from the field of private land owners and managers.
9. **Provisional timetable agreed for the Natura 2000 Biogeographical Process in the Continental, Pannonian, Steppic and Black Sea region, including possible dates for event meeting(s).**

The following confirms the tentative summary of steps and events to be completed as part of the planning and preparation in the build up to the Kick-off Seminar

<table>
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<th>March/April</th>
<th>SC members think about possible <strong>lead country</strong> or <strong>host</strong> for the Kick off Seminar and send their suggestions to the contractor (<a href="mailto:mcintosh@ecnc.org">mcintosh@ecnc.org</a>, with possibly a copy to the European Commission)</th>
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| End April   | Contractor prepares and circulates **revised habitat selection document**  
SC members **identify potential experts** and think about who to propose as **chairperson for the six habitat groups**. |
| End April   | SC members **approve the revised habitat selection document**  
A Lead Country or Host should be identified and **arrangements for the Kick off Seminar** in November should start |
| Begin May   | Contractor circulates the **Habitat Information Form**  
SC members circulate the **Habitat Information Form** to their experts |
| End of June | Experts send their **contributions to the contractor**  
ETC BD finalizes the **Revised Pre-scoping Document** |
| September   | Contractor produces and circulates to the SC the first **Draft Seminar Input Document** |
| September/October | 2nd Steering Committee Meeting – final preparation for kick off Seminar  
SC and experts review, comment and **approve the Seminar Input Document** |
| November | Contractor circulates the **Revised Seminar Input Document to the Seminar Participants** |

10. **Any other business.**

Marie Alice Budniok wished to communicate the point of view of ELO regarding one aspect of the identification of habitat related priorities: these should not be prioritized on the basis of votes if the representation of stakeholders is not balanced.