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State of Nature in the EU



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Editorial

In 2020, the COVID 19 crisis has exposed our vulnerabilities, but also demonstrated how our health and wellbeing are inextricably linked to the health of our planet. I am therefore convinced that the commitments we took under the European Green Deal will enable us to come out of this crisis stronger and more resilient than before.

The EU's Biodiversity Strategy for 2030, the Farm to Fork Strategy and the new Climate Pact will be an integral part of a green recovery process, helping us build a future that is healthier, fairer and more sustainable. The validity of this approach is increasingly recognised. Last October, the EU Council of Ministers endorsed the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 and many world leaders – including Commission President Ursula von der Leyen – redoubled their commitment to tackling global biodiversity loss at the UN Biodiversity Summit in September.

The 'Leaders' Pledge for Nature', adopted prior to the Summit and already endorsed by the EU and leaders from 80 countries around the world, contains a number of commitments at the highest political level to put nature, climate and the environment at the heart of recovery strategies and decision-making. It is also a clear statement of intent in support of an ambitious post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework to be agreed at the 15th Conference of Parties of the UN Convention on Biological Diversity in 2021.

As the latest EU State of Nature report has shown, our shared natural heritage remains under immense pressure. We must therefore redouble our efforts at EU level as well. In 2021, in addition to strengthening the implementation and enforcement of existing nature legislation, the Commission will propose tangible measures to support our biodiversity agenda. These include legally binding nature restoration targets and new EU strategies for forests and soil.

We will work to secure greater investment in biodiversity under the newly adopted Multiannual Financial Framework and Recovery Fund. The recent agreement to work towards the ambition of providing 7.5% of annual spending in 2024 and 10% in 2026 and 2027 under the MFF to biodiversity objectives is another example of the increased priority given to biodiversity in the EU. As clearly demonstrated by so many LIFE projects and Natura 2000 Award winners, targeted conservation actions work, but they must be scaled up if we are to turn the tide in favour of Europe's biodiversity. Therefore, greening our recovery plans in the next couple of years is one of the greatest challenges that we face but one that will provide huge benefits for people, the planet, the climate and our economy.

Virginijus Sinkevičius
European Commissioner for Environment, Oceans and Fisheries



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© David Tripling/naturepl.com



© Tenkies to go/overship for nature projects



© A. Matus

Cover: European river otter
Lutra lutra cub.

© Chris Gomersall/naturepl.com



The Merganser, *Mergus merganser* with chicks, has a good status in the EU.

The State of Nature in the EU Report (2013–2018)

“This State of Nature assessment is the most comprehensive health check of nature ever undertaken in the EU. It shows, yet again, very clearly that we are losing our vital life support system”.

European Commissioner for the Environment, Virginijus Sinkevičius

Every six years, Member States are asked to report back to the European Commission on the conservation status of EU-protected species and habitats present on their territory. The Commission then pools all the data together, with the help of the European Environment Agency and its European Topic Centre on Biological Diversity, in order to see how well they are faring across the EU.

The results for the period 2013–2018 were published in October 2020. Here are some of its key findings.

EU status and trends of bird species

The latest *State of Nature* report concludes that almost half (47%) of the wild bird species naturally occurring in the EU have a good population status and are holding their own, despite the immense pressures they continue to face. On the

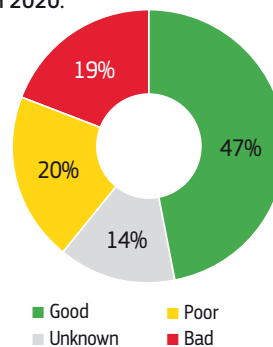
other hand, around 39% still have a poor or bad status.

The figures are very similar to the previous reporting round. Where differences occur, they are usually due to a refinement in data quality and analysis rather than any genuine change in status.

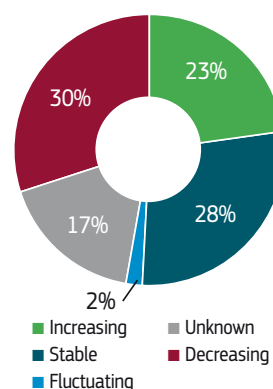
Some genuine changes in status are nevertheless visible at the Member State level. This is the case, for instance, for the bittern, *Botaurus stellaris* in Belgium, the cinereous vulture, *Aegypius monachus* in Spain, the aquatic warbler, *Acrocephalus paludicola* in Poland or the little bustard, *Tetrax tetrax* in France. Many of these species have benefitted from targeted conservation action under the EU LIFE Fund.

Looking at the short-term population trends for birds, around a quarter (23%) of species are showing signs of improvement but, for the

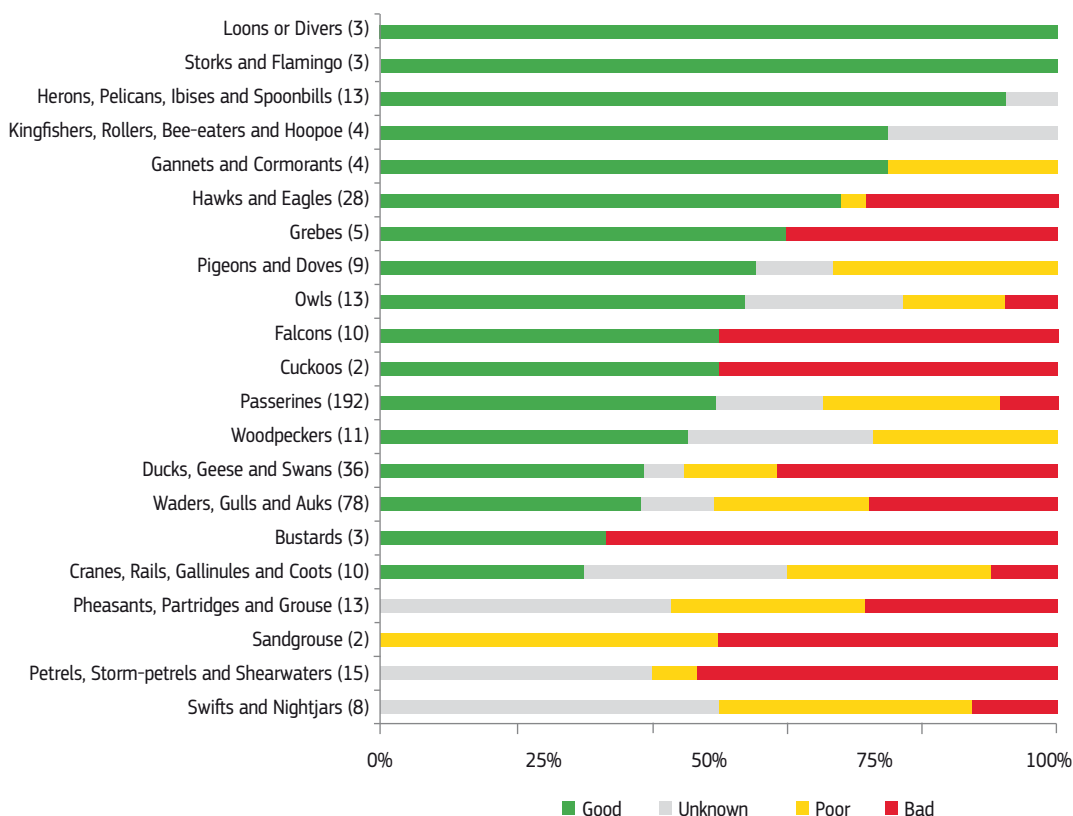
EU Population status for birds in 2020.



Short-term (12 years) breeding bird population trends at EU level.



Population status of EU birds by taxonomic order (number of species per group in brackets).



remainder, the trend is either stable (28%) or pointing towards a further decline (30%).

The *State of Nature* report also examined the status of Europe's birds according to their taxonomic order. From this one can see that some groups are clearly doing better than others. For instance, almost 90% of all herons, pelicans, ibises and spoonbills (13 species) and 65% of hawks and eagles (28 species) have a good population status in the EU.

On the other hand, only 28% of all cranes, rails, gallinules

and coots (10 species) and a quarter of pheasants, partridges and grouse (13 species) have a good status. Many species of ducks, geese and swans (36 species), waders, gulls and auks (78 species), falcons (10 species) and marine birds like the petrels, storm petrels and shearwaters (15 species) are also in a poor or bad conservation status (50% or more).

Looking at the population status and trends of species listed in Annex I (in need of site protection), the results reveal that the proportion of Annex I species

with a secure status decreased by 8% since 2015, while the proportion of those with poor and bad status increased by 6%.

As for huntable species listed in Annex II, the proportion with a good status is 9% lower now than in 2015. 46% of huntable species also show a downward trend over the short-term, which is twice as many as for Annex I species (23%). This is a cause for concern as it indicates that existing provisions in the different Member States are not providing sufficient safeguards for these species.

EU status and trends of other species

As regards the other 1400 species protected under the Habitats Directive, just over a quarter of species (27%) have a good conservation status, up from 23% in 2015, but the majority (63%) still have a poor or bad conservation status.

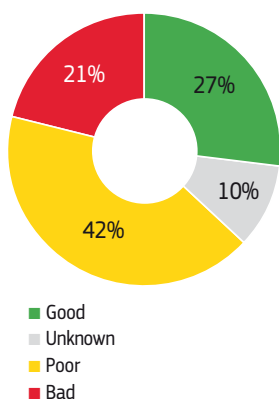
Looking at the trends of species with a poor or bad status, only 6% show an upward trend, while 35% are still deteriorating, which indicates that very few species are showing signs of recovery. The trend is stable for 28% and for 31% the trend is simply not known.

The *State of Nature* report also looked at the conservation status of Habitats Directive species according to their taxonomic groups. From this one can see that reptiles and vascular plants are faring best, with 40% and 36% in a good status respectively, followed by amphibians (27%) and arthropods (25%).

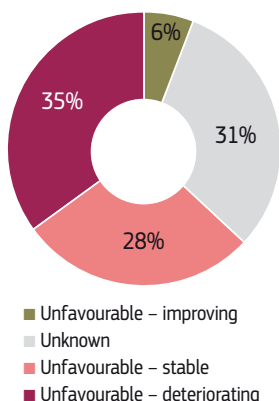
On the other hand, fish or non-vascular plants have an overwhelmingly poor or bad status (82% and 73% respectively). In the case of fish species, this points clearly to continuing pressures on their freshwater habitats in particular.

Regarding mammals, it is encouraging to note that twice as many species have a good (25%) as compared to a bad status (12%). Nevertheless, almost half (45%) continue to be

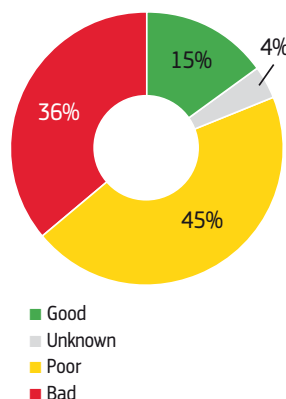
Conservation status of species at EU level.



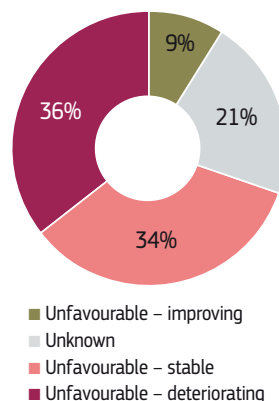
Conservation trends of species with unfavourable (i.e. not good) or unknown status at EU level.



Conservation status of habitats at EU level.



Conservation trends of habitats with unfavourable (i.e. not good) or unknown status at EU level.





The souslik, *Spermophilus citellus* continues to decline across the EU.



Over three quarters of protected freshwater habitats have a poor or bad conservation status.

in poor condition. Mammals also have the highest proportion of species that are improving but, at only 10%, this remains very low. Amongst those that are in a good status or improving, are some well-known species like the otter *Lutra lutra*, the beaver, *Castor fiber*, and the grey seal, *Halochoerus grypus*.

Other less well known species are also showing signs of recovery at least at a national or biogeographical level such as the forest reindeer *Rangifer tarandus fennicus* in the Boreal region, to the sand lizard *Lacerta agilis* in the Mediterranean region and the lizard orchid *Himantoglossum jankae* in the Continental region.

EU status and trends of habitat types

For the 233 habitat types protected under the Habitats Directive, the situation is very

serious. The overwhelming majority is in a poor (45%) or bad (36%) conservation status. Just 15% of habitat types have a good status.

This is no doubt linked to a wide range of factors, be it the high level of pressures they continue to face or, in some cases, the long recovery time needed even when all the pressures have been removed and appropriate management measures introduced. Many habitats are so depleted that they will require active restoration or even recreation in order to kick start their recovery.

As for the trends of those with a poor or bad status, this is equally discouraging since only 9% of the habitat types have an increasing trend. For a third of habitats, the trend is stable (34%) or declining (36%).

Looking at the conservation status according to different

habitat groups, one can see that the worst affected are the grasslands, dunes, bogs, mires and fen habitats. In all cases, over 85% of the habitat types are in a bad or poor status. Rocky habitats and sclerophyllous scrub habitats are faring a bit better, but still only a fifth of these habitats have a good conservation status (25% and 21 % respectively).

Of those with a poor or bad conservation status, forests (13%) and heath and scrub habitats (11%) have the highest share with improving trends. By contrast only 4% of freshwater habitats, bogs, mires and fens are improving. Once again, grasslands, dunes, bogs, mires and fen habitats are showing the sharpest declining trends.

There are however some timid signs of hope here and there. The priority habitat type Coastal dunes with *Juniperus* spp (2250),

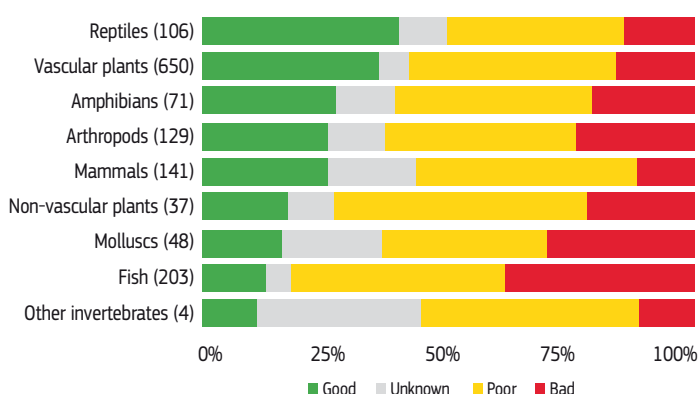
for instance, has gone from unfavourable-bad to favourable in the Atlantic region thanks to concerted conservation efforts. So have the laurel forests of the Macaronesian region.

Key pressures and threats

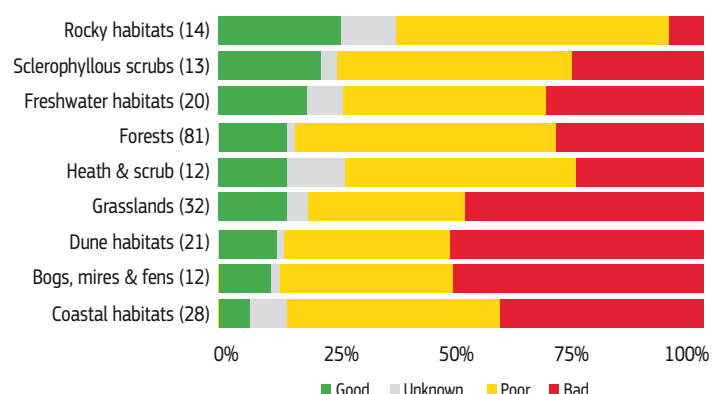
In order to gain a better understanding of the underlying pressures and threats on the species and habitats protected under the two Nature Directives, Member States were also asked to report on the main causes of species loss and habitat deterioration

The results show that, once again, agriculture remains the most frequently reported pressure, affecting over a fifth of all protected species and habitats. This reflects not only the scale of agricultural land use in the EU but also continuing changes in farming practices.

Conservation status per species group at EU level (number of species per group in brackets).



Conservation status per habitat group at EU level (number of habitat types per group in brackets).



Reported frequency of high ranking pressures

Agriculture	21.4%
Urbanization	12.9%
Forestry	10.8%
Natural processes	8.5%
Changes in water regimes	8.3%
Invasive alien species	7.3%
Over exploitation	7.2%
Energy infrastructure	4.8%
Transport	4.7%
Climate change	3.7%

Examples of the key pressures on habitats and species

- **Agriculture:** abandonment of farmland, agricultural intensification or conversion from one type to another, pollution and removal of small landscape features.
- **Urbanisation:** outdoor sports, recreation and tourism, spread of urban areas, new infrastructures or expansion of existing facilities.
- **Forestry:** removal of dead, dying and old trees, clear-cutting and the conversion to other types of forests or land uses.
- **Natural processes:** natural succession, interspecies competition or predation, abiotic pressures.
- **Changes in water regimes:** hydrological dams, the drainage of wetlands, groundwater abstraction and physical alterations to water bodies.
- **Alien (problematic) species:** competition with native species for food and habitats.
- **Exploitation of species:** illegal shooting and killing of wildlife, overhunting, overfishing, overharvesting, accidental bycatch in fishing nets.
- **Climate change:** droughts and decrease in precipitation, temperature changes, increases in changes in precipitation, changes in sea level and wave exposure.



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© David Tipling/naturepi.com

Young girl photographing a fly agaric, *Amanita muscaria*.

The pressure comes in two opposing ways: on the one hand, there is the continuing intensification of agricultural activities and the conversion of one type of agricultural practice to another. On the other, there is abandonment of agricultural areas and their lack of management. Today, only 8% of agricultural habitats show an improving trend, whereas 45% are deteriorating.

Other major pressures that are recorded as being of high importance include urbanisation, forestry and alterations to freshwater habitats, pollution, species exploitation, invasive alien species and climate change

The contribution of the Natura 2000 network

The *State of Nature* report also attempted to gauge the influence of the Natura 2000 network on the conservation status of the species and habitat types for which sites have been designated. Comparing the extent to which the species and habitats are covered by the network with their conservation status, reveals that species and habitats are, on average, more likely to have good conservation status if their habitat area or population is well covered (> 75%) by the network.

This is most obvious for dune, heaths and scrub habitats and

forests, and for amphibians and fish. Habitat types with a high representation (>75%) in Natura 2000 sites have also improved more and deteriorated less since the last reporting round than those that are less well represented. With a reported improvement of over 8%, bogs, mires and fens, in particular, have benefited from their inclusion in Natura 2000.

However, despite these positive signs, it is clear that much still needs to be done to improve the effectiveness of the management and conservation of individual Natura 2000 sites within the network. To date, only around 60% of the sites in the network have Natura 2000 management plans and available evidence would suggest that very few of these plans are being implemented, often for lack of the necessary resources, both human and financial.

Looking to the future

As the *State of Nature* report has shown, the EU has not yet managed to stem the decline of protected habitat types and species of EU conservation concern. And, although there has been some progress in implementing both directives over the last 6 years, resulting, for instance, in a significant extension of the Natura 2000

Restoration needs for EU protected habitats

The *State of Nature* report examined the extent to which habitats protected under the Habitats Directive needed to be restored or actively recreated in order to reach a favourable conservation status within the EU.

The report concludes that 215 000 km² (or 5% of EU-27 territory) of protected habitats needs to be restored. Forests have the greatest need (about 100 000 km²), followed by coastal habitats (about 46 000 km²), grasslands (about 33 000 km²), freshwater habitats (about 13 500 km²) and bogs, mires and fens (about 10 900 km²).

In addition, at least 11 000 km² of Annex I habitats needs to be actively (re)created in order to ensure the long-term viability of all habitat types.

This is a very conservative estimate due to the lack of data, the figures are likely to be much greater in reality. But at least they provide a good starting point for the new European Restoration plan due to be proposed in 2021.

network and an increase in the number of sites with management plans, this has not been sufficient to turn the tide on Europe's biodiversity.

Clearly, the Natura 2000 network, which lies at the core of Europe's conservation efforts, has yet to reach its full potential. There is an urgent need to scale up conservation actions at site level and improve the effectiveness of the measures taken.

There is also a need to raise the bar in terms of ambitions, in order to go beyond simply maintaining the status quo and focus on a concerted restoration programme in order to kick start the recovery process.

Inspiring success stories have shown what can be achieved through targeted action. However, such success is often not being achieved on a sufficient scale. For the EU Nature Directives to reach their full potential, conservation efforts must be increased significantly.

The new EU Biodiversity Strategy to 2030, adopted earlier in the year aims to do precisely that. Amongst others, the Strategy calls for the legal protection of at least 30% of

the EU's land and sea area, 10% of which must be strictly protected.

It also commits to ensuring that, by 2030, there is no further deterioration in any habitats and species listed in the Nature Directives, and that there is a positive strong trend for at least 30% of those in poor or bad state.

In addition, all protected sites must also be effectively managed by 2030 and a new Nature Restoration Plan put in place by 2021, with legally binding targets. This will need to be accompanied by significantly greater financial support and a better integration of biodiversity needs into other EU land and water-use policies in the future.

For more information go to:

Commission website on *State of Nature* report
https://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/knowledge/rep_birds/index_en.htm

https://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/knowledge/rep_habitats/index_en.htm

EEA website on *State of Nature*
<https://www.eea.europa.eu/themes/biodiversity/state-of-nature-in-the-eu/>

The Red Kite *Milvus milvus*

Like many birds of prey, the red kite was once heavily persecuted and hunted. This, combined with the loss of breeding and foraging habitats due to agricultural intensification, meant that the species range shrank considerably across the EU and became highly fragmented. Illegal poisoning is thought to be the main driver of its decline these days. As occasional scavengers, red kites are particularly sensitive to poisons used to control unwanted wildlife, such as foxes and crows.

However, thanks to a series of major anti-poisoning campaigns and species reintroduction programmes, the red kite population has begun to increase again. In total, 18 LIFE-Nature projects have been implemented for the species so far, which has led to a genuine improvement in both its status and trend in recent years. The species is now considered to have a secure conservation status at EU level.



© Hermann Brühl/nature.com

The role of the EU LIFE Programme

Adopted in 1992 at the same time as the Habitats Directive, the EU LIFE Programme has been supporting nature conservation projects across the EU ever since.

To date, LIFE has co-financed some 1800 projects to the tune of almost € 3 billion to conserve protected habitats and species in different corners of the EU. Over 5400 Natura 2000 sites have also benefited from LIFE funding during this period.

The LIFE Fund has not only had a major impact on the conservation status of several EU protected species and habitats, but has also been instrumental in raising awareness of Natura 2000 amongst millions of Europeans and actively engaged thousands of stakeholders in the protection and management of sites, habitats and species.

https://ec.europa.eu/easme/sites/easme-site/files/bringing_nature_back_through_life_brochure.pdf



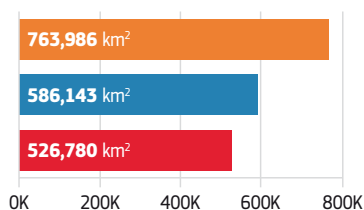
natura 2000

THIS NATURA BAROMETER is produced by DG Environment with the help of the European Environment Agency. It is based on information officially transmitted by Member States up to **December 2019**.

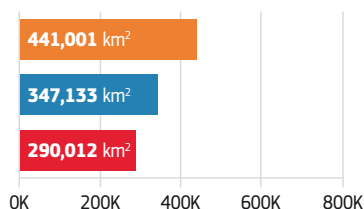
The Natura 2000 network is composed of sites under the Habitats Directive (pSCI, SCIs or SACs – labelled 'SCIs' in the barometer) and sites under the Birds Directive (SPAs). The figures relating to the total area of Natura 2000 sites (i.e. SPAs + SCIs) have been obtained through GIS analysis. This avoids any risk of double counting if areas have been designated under both directives.

Natura 2000 in EU-27

Terrestrial area



Marine area



■ Natura 2000
■ SCI
■ SPA

Member States	Natura 2000 network (terrestrial and marine)		TERRESTRIAL			
	Total N° Natura 2000 Sites	Total area Natura 2000 km²	SCI	SPA	Natura 2000 network	
			SCI area (km²)	SPA area (km²)	Natura area (km²)	% land area covered
AUSTRIA	352	12895	9378	10334	12895	15%
BELGIUM	310	5163	3282	3186	3891	13%
BULGARIA	341	41554	33629	25609	38728	35%
CYPRUS	62	10133	959	1493	1669	30%
CZECH REPUBLIC	1153	11148	7951	7035	11148	14%
GERMANY	5200	80831	33550	40263	55228	15%
DENMARK	350	22647	3178	2605	3594	8%
ESTONIA	567	14861	7806	6203	8106	18%
SPAIN	1872	222515	117584	101619	138111	27%
FINLAND	1866	50636	42197	24550	42495	13%
FRANCE	1776	203564	48755	44016	70875	13%
GREECE	446	58778	21912	27761	35982	27%
CROATIA	783	25954	16036	17050	20716	37%
HUNGARY	525	19949	14442	13747	19949	21%
IRELAND	604	19481	7163	4311	9226	13%
ITALY	2621	69302	42902	40295	57258	19%
LITHUANIA	556	9699	6344	5530	8136	13%
LUXEMBOURG	66	702	416	418	702	27%
LATVIA	333	11834	7421	6607	7447	12%
MALTA	55	4184	41	16	42	13%
NETHERLANDS	197	20605	3139	4771	5522	15%
POLAND	985	68405	34196	48428	61168	20%
PORTUGAL	167	61403	15661	9196	18968	21%
ROMANIA	606	60577	40310	37118	54214	23%
SWEDEN	4087	75854	55106	26448	55611	12%
SLOVENIA	355	7682	6634	5066	7672	38%
SLOVAKIA	683	14633	6151	13105	14633	30%
EU – 27	26918	1204987	586143	526780	763986	18%

The United Kingdom withdrew from the European Union as of 1 February 2020.

barometer

	MARINE			
	SCI	SPA	Natura 2000 network	
	SCI area (km ²)	SPA area (km ²)	Natura area (km ²)	
	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	AT
	1128	318	1271	BE
	2482	550	2827	BG
	8457	110	8464	CY
	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	CZ
	20938	19738	25603	DE
	16492	12184	19053	DK
	3883	6480	6754	EE
	54895	52071	84405	ES
	7676	7402	8141	FI
	106306	119646	132689	FR
	17528	10764	22796	GR
	4919	1112	5238	HR
	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	HU
	9781	1584	10255	IE
	6587	8809	12044	IT
	958	1056	1563	LT
	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	LU
	2664	4280	4387	LV
	2283	3221	4142	MT
	12074	8627	15083	NL
	4339	7224	7237	PL
	37377	8749	42434	PT
	6188	1630	6362	RO
	20174	14448	20243	SE
	4	9	10	SI
	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	SK
	347133	290012	441001	EU

Zoom on Protected Areas in Europe



© David Paty/naturepi.com

Pirin mountains, Bulgaria.

In order to support the protected area targets under the new Biodiversity Strategy to 2030, the European Environment Agency (EEA) has published an online report on the current state of protected areas in Europe (over 130,000 in total). The report provides a statistical analysis of the protected areas as regards their representation in the different European biogeographical regions, countries and overseas territories. It also offers some insights into their general characteristics, such as size, connectivity and management.

As a complement to this report, the EEA has also produced a series of up-to-date country profiles, which are available on the BISE website (the Biodiversity Information System for Europe). Each country summary gives an overview of the number of protected areas present in that country, the land or sea area they cover, their average size, as well as the number of species and habitats that are nationally protected, split according to different taxonomic group.

Each country summary also includes data on the sites, species and habitats protected under the Natura 2000 network and their conservation status at national level. One can find out, for instance, which are the 10 Natura 2000 sites with the highest number of EU protected species and habitats; or the species and habitats for which Natura 2000 sites are most commonly designated.

The country file concludes with a short summary of other relevant information such as on the key types of ecosystems present, (according to the MAES methodology), green infrastructure initiatives and the country's national Biodiversity Strategy.

<https://biodiversity.europa.eu/protected-areas>

<https://biodiversity.europa.eu/countries>

Extract of Bulgaria Country report

1388 PROTECTED AREAS **40.97% OF LAND** **8.01% OF OCEAN**
14.85% of the network is protected only through national laws
63.63% of the network consists solely of Natura 2000 sites
21.52% consist of an overlap between the two

Extract of Finland Country report

15166 PROTECTED AREAS **13.2% OF LAND** **9.83% OF OCEAN**
4.6% of the network is protected only through national laws
21.23% of the network consists solely of Natura 2000 sites
74.17% consist of an overlap between the two



© European Union

The Commissioner and members of the Jury at the hybrid award ceremony in Brussels on 14 October 2020 with the winners on the screen connected digitally.

The 2020 Natura 2000 Award winners

In October, the Environment Commissioner, Virginijus Sinkevičius, and members of the high-level jury announced the six winners of the Natura 2000 Award for the 2020 edition. Due to the unique circumstances this year with the COVID-19 virus, the award ceremony was live-streamed from the Commission's Brussels headquarters with award finalists joining in by video link.

The Natura 2000 Award is designed to reward excellence in the management of Natura 2000 sites and showcase the added value of the network for local economies. In addition, it pays tribute to all those who are working tirelessly on making Natura 2000 an operational success whilst drawing public attention to the substantial achievements of the Natura 2000 network so far.

The 2020 Award once again attracted significant

interest. Seventy-nine eligible applications were received from 26 Member States and the UK in the five categories of the Award: conservation, communication, reconciling interests and perceptions, socio-economic benefits and cross-border cooperation and networking. As in the past, the conservation category proved to be the most popular, making up half of the applications.

All eligible applications were assessed by an evaluation panel of external experts who selected a short list of 27 finalists. A jury, made up of high level representatives from the European Commission, European Parliament, Committee of the Regions and stakeholder organisations, then selected the winners for each of the five award categories.

As for the sixth award – the European Citizen's Award – this

was chosen directly by the public. Over 45,000 people cast their vote for their favourite project this year, which is in itself testimony of the significance of the award, and of the interest people have in learning about the many remarkable initiatives underway to save Europe's nature.

The next Natura 2000 Award application round is expected to be launched on 21 May 2021 to mark Natura 2000 Day. More information will be available on the award website in due course. In the meantime, why not watch the award ceremony or find out more about the incredible achievements of the 27 finalists and 6 winners.

Full details are available on:
https://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/natura2000/awards/application-2020/index_en.htm



Brochure of the finalists:
<https://bit.ly/3IHktDS>

AND THE WINNERS ARE...



Conservation Award winner 2020

Title: Using underwater inventories for the conservation of marine areas in Finland
Applicant: Ministry of the Environment, Finnish Environment Institute (SYKE)
Location: Finland

In 2004, the Ministry of Environment and the Finnish Environment Institute launched a National Inventory Programme for the Underwater Marine Environment, called VELMU. The aim is to develop a detailed picture of the distribution of marine habitats and species in Finnish marine waters, and gain an insight into their conservation status.

So far over 150,000 spatially explicit observations have been collected making this the most all-encompassing national programme for marine areas in Europe. The data were then combined with information on environmental variables and human activities at sea to create a first, fully integrated map of marine biodiversity for Finland.

This revealed that existing protected areas cover only around one fourth of the highest nature values in Finnish marine waters and that this could be doubled by adding just one percent more to the protected area coverage (from 10% to 11%).

The nature value maps have also been used to describe ca. 200 "EMMAs" – Ecologically Significant Marine Areas – for the Finnish sea areas. The EMMAs are based on CBD Ecologically or Biologically Significant Areas (EBSA) criteria. In addition to contributing to the Natura 2000 network, the survey results are



also being used in planning for a more sustainable use of the marine environment, in particular by avoiding excessive pressures in areas with the highest nature values.

Communication Award winner 2020

Title: Eau la la!!! Eco-tips for sea and shore!
Applicant: Lannion-Trégor Communauté, Guingamp-Paimpol Agglomération, PETR du Pays de Guingamp
Location: Brittany, France

Much of the 400 km Amor coastline in Brittany has been protected as Natura 2000 due to its outstanding marine life. But, as past surveys showed, few in the boating community were aware of the rich marine life that lay beneath them or of the potential damage their activities could cause to this valuable resource.

In the summer of 2019, an environmental awareness campaign was launched for boaters, managers of port infrastructure, tourists and recreational anglers to encourage them to minimise their impact on the Natura 2000 sites. Six topics were chosen for the campaign: birdwatching and mammal-spotting, anti-fouling, black and grey water, waste management, mooring and seagrass beds, and recreational fishing.

The project developed information kits on each of the six topics, as well as a booklet, a poster, a series of short videos and an informative website. The material was distributed far and wide along the coast in different stakeholder associations, at 60 distribution points and in some 28 nautical events.

The campaign has proven to be very effective. Post campaign surveys showed that 85% of the boaters involved were keen to improve their practices in relation to at least one of the six themes of the campaign. The project was also innovative in that it was



run as a joint venture between local Natura 2000 management structures and various organisations responsible for marine water quality. Because of the campaign's success, plans are afoot to repeat the campaign and the surveys in 2020.

Reconciling interests and perceptions Award winner 2020

Title: **Ten keys to co-ownership for nature projects**

Applicant: **Agentschap voor Natuur en Bos, De Vlaamse Waterweg, Gemeente Kruibeke, vzw Kruibeeks Natuurbehoud**

Location: **Flanders, Belgium**



The Kruibeke Polders lie just south of Antwerp along the River Scheldt in Belgium. For decades, the polders were used as a patchwork of small private plots dedicated to agriculture and forestry, holiday homes and fishponds. However, because the entire area is prone to extensive flooding, the Flemish government had

decided to incorporate the polders into a major flood protection and nature conservation scheme for the region. This meant flooding parts of the area, including the Kruibeke Polders.

Efforts to expropriate the land were initially met with strong resistance and weekly protests were held until 2010. But, despite the objections, the re-naturalisation of the Kruibeke polders went ahead and an EU LIFE project was launched to restore the natural values of the polders. The project also placed great emphasis on engaging local inhabitants in its activities. It organised regular information evenings, monthly site walks and workshops to demonstrate the values of the area to local inhabitants.

New recreational opportunities were created consisting of hiking trails, fishing spots and birdwatching spots amongst others. After some effort, the local municipality was also persuaded to become a project partner and soon evolved from being the project's strongest opponent to becoming its biggest supporter.

All of this helped to change people's perceptions, creating instead a sense of pride and ownership of the area which is now regarded as a tourist asset, providing additional income and jobs. The local community is now very much in favour of the sustainable long-term management of 'their' polders.

Socio-economic benefits Award winner 2020

Title: **Pro-Biodiversidad: shepherds as biodiversity conservators in Natura 2000**

Applicant: **Fundación para la Conservación del Quebrantahuesos**

Location: **Asturias, Spain**



Much of the Picos de Europa mountain range has been designated as Natura 2000 sites. The area, however, suffers greatly from rural abandonment. Since 1997, the number of sheep, goat and cattle in the area had dropped by 70%, with dire consequences for both the farmers themselves and for biodiversity.

This prompted the Fundación para la Conservación del Quebrantahuesos in 2015 to create a special certification brand, Pro-Biodiversidad (Pro-Biodiversity), to support local wildlife-friendly farmers. In exchange for complying with a series of good practice requirements, farmers could use both the Pro-Biodiversidad brand and the various marketing tools that have been created for the brand in order to promote their products.

The brand has turned out to be a resounding success. In 2017, three commercial agreements were signed with large supermarket chains to sell their produce and, in 2018, an additional agreement was signed with Paradores de Turismo (an important chain of high-quality tourist hotels in Spain) to include their branded products on their restaurant menus. The farmers themselves have seen a 45% increase in their revenues and are now guaranteed to sell all of their annual production at a fair price.

The brand has also been highly beneficial for biodiversity, helping to maintain grassland areas, reduce the risk of fires and land abandonment as well as feed wild scavengers, such as vultures.

A series of agreements have been signed with local slaughterhouses in order to use their byproducts to supplement the diet of vultures and other wildlife.

Cross-border cooperation and networking Award winner 2020

Title: Joint efforts for safe and wildlife-friendly transportation networks in the Carpathians

Applicant: Nature Conservation Agency of the Czech Republic

Location: The Czech Republic, Slovakia and Romania

The Carpathian Mountains are one of the richest natural areas in Europe, much of which is protected by the Natura 2000 network. However, over the past decades, the sustainable development of this region has been challenged by a rapid growth in transport infrastructure. This has had a serious impact on biodiversity, especially for species like bears and wolves that move freely across the landscape, beyond the boundaries of individual Natura 2000 sites.

This problem of landscape fragmentation led to the launch of an EU Interreg-funded networking initiative, called the TRANSGREEN project. Sixteen partners from six countries representing a wide cross-section of sectors, organisations and NGOs at all levels were brought together to share experiences and best practices on how to minimise the effects of landscape fragmentation caused by a dense transport infrastructure. The partnership focused in particular on activities that would lead to an improved planning framework and the development of safe and environmentally-friendly road and rail transport solutions.

Thanks to the project, joint methodologies have been developed for monitoring collisions and road-kills, and three in-depth analyses and 'Catalogues of Measures' have been produced for three pilot areas. The final outcome is a comprehensive guide



© Joint efforts for safe and wildlife-friendly transportation networks in the Carpathians

'Guidelines for Wildlife and Traffic in the Carpathians' –which describes how to achieve integrated transport infrastructure planning, construction, management and monitoring activities in a way that takes full account of the local biodiversity and minimises landscape fragmentation.

Citizens Award winner 2020

Title: Partnership for protection of Bulgarian old-growth forests in Natura 2000

Applicant: Executive Forest Agency (EFA), Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Forestry, Bulgaria, WWF Bulgaria, Association of Parks in Bulgaria, Balkani Wildlife Society

Location: Bulgaria

One third of Bulgaria is covered in forests, and just over half of this has been included in the Natura 2000 network. At the beginning of the designation process, forest owners and managers were very much opposed to the designation of their land for fear of economic losses, and conflicts flared up each time plans for timber use were adopted.

Forestry enterprises were reluctant to limit their activities in Natura sites because of the consequent loss of revenue. Environmental organisations, on the other hand, were concerned that the quality and quantity of the forests within network was not sufficient and was poorly managed.

To address this problem, the Executive Forest Agency, in partnership with the Association of Parks and NGOs, carried out extensive surveys and GIS mapping to draw up an inventory of old-growth forests present in state-owned forests within Natura 2000 across Bulgaria. The idea was to increase the area of state-owned forest to be protected from commercial activities.

After a long process of exchange, discussions and reviews with interested stakeholders, almost 110,000 ha of additional old-growth forests were designated for protection and excluded from harvesting. This meant a 3% extension of the Natura 2000 network



© Partnership for protection of Bulgarian old-growth forests in Natura 2000

in Bulgaria. Thanks to the project, trust has been restored between the different partners, paving the way for further collaboration in the future on the management of this valuable resource.

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Binding EU nature restoration targets

In 2021, the Commission intends to present a proposal for binding EU nature restoration targets to restore degraded ecosystems, as announced in the EU Biodiversity Strategy to 2030. As part of the impact assessment that will underpin the Commission's proposal, an online public consultation has been launched, running until the end of March 2021. Stakeholders, authorities, experts and citizens are all invited to provide their views on the range of options for EU-level restoration targets, and on the conditions that should be established for their implementation.

Two further public consultations are also currently underway on the evaluation of the EU Biodiversity Strategy to 2020 and on the review of the implementation of the EU Regulation on Invasive Alien Species.

Go to: <https://bit.ly/37JyJEn>

New LIFE projects approved

Last November, the Commission approved an investment package of more than €280 million for 120 new LIFE projects on environment and resource efficiency, nature and biodiversity, climate change mitigation, adaptation, and governance and information projects. Together, these projects will trigger a total investment of nearly €590 million, which represents an increase of 37% compared to last year.

Of these 120 new projects, 34 deal with nature and biodiversity. They represent a total investment of €221 million, to which the EU will contribute €133 million. Once again, a wide range of conservation actions is foreseen: from restoring rivers and forests in the Belgian Ardennes; conserving threatened butterflies in Nord Rhine Westphalia, Germany; improving the resilience of brown bear populations in Cantabria, Spain and to restoring fish habitats along the Dordogne River in France.

Also foreseen are projects to restore lesser kestrel populations in the eastern Balkans, save the Italian spadefoot toad and conserve saproxylic beetles in the Carpathians.

Full details on: <https://bit.ly/3mrMMet>

Biogeographical process update

As announced in the previous issue, the third Alpine Natura 2000 seminar was held from 11 to 14 September 2020. Despite being a virtual meeting, over 170 people from 13 countries participated to exchange conservation experiences and further develop a biogeographical roadmap for the Alpine region.

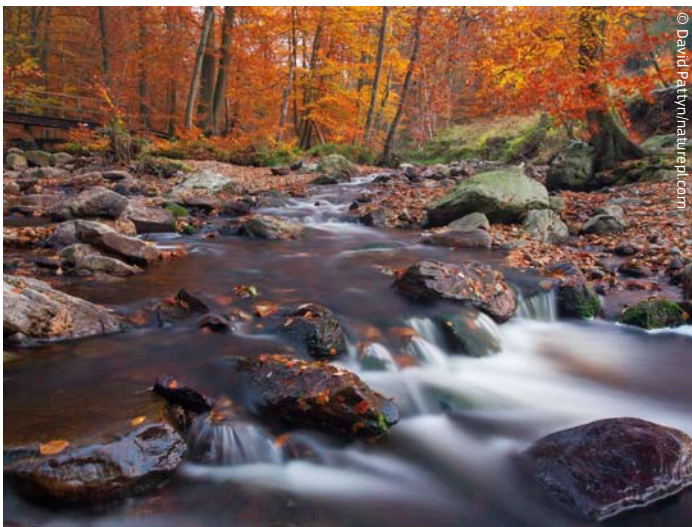
Other networking events have also taken place over the past couple of months. They include a workshop for the marine Black Sea region, three Mediterranean workshops on specific issues relating to EU protected habitat types and a Baltic workshop on using Baltic Natura 2000 sites as migration hotspots.

In addition, two cross-cutting workshops were held. The first focused on the management of Natura 2000 freshwater habitats, and the second on the protection of meadow birds in the EU.

Three events are already foreseen so far in 2021. The third Mediterranean Natura 2000 seminar will now take place in Calabria (Italy) on 5–8 May 2021. Two key workshops focusing on marine mammals will also be held sometime in the spring. They will discuss the cross border conservation of harbour porpoise in the North East Atlantic and the management of marine protected areas for small cetaceans in the Baltic region.

Next year, work will also start on redesigning the networking initiative itself. Its remit will be extended to cover the delivery of some of the new EU Biodiversity Strategy targets, particularly in relation to increasing protected area coverage in the EU and improving the conservation status of at least 30% of EU-protected species and habitats.

Restoring rivers and forests in the Belgian Ardennes.



Soil provides many vital ecosystem services to society.



Member States are expected to submit their national contributions and commitments for achieving these two targets from 2021 onwards, based on guidelines to be issued by the Commission in the coming months. The authorities concerned, NGOs and stakeholders will then meet during 2023 within the framework of the biogeographical seminars to review and discuss the completeness and coherence of these national pledges at a biogeographical level.

<https://bit.ly/2Vs9YgP>

New EU Soil Strategy in 2021

Soil is an essential ecosystem that supports biodiversity and ensures both mitigation and adaptation to climate change. It is also the basis for food production, food security and safety, carbon sequestration, water purification and nutrient regulation. As such, healthy soils are a key enabler to achieve the objectives of the European Green Deal.

The Commission will present a new EU Soil Strategy in the first half of 2021 to protect soil fertility, reduce soil erosion, increase soil organic matter, and restore degraded soils including polluted soils. It is also essential to fight desertification and land degradation. Citizens and stakeholders are invited to provide their views on the draft strategy during the open public consultation which is available on:

<https://bit.ly/33ydBWL>

New EU Forest Strategy in 2021

In line with the Biodiversity Strategy, the Commission is also currently working on defining, mapping, monitoring and strictly protecting all remaining primary and old-growth forests in the EU as well as increasing the quantity of forests and improving their health and resilience.

The Commission will propose a new EU Forest Strategy in spring 2021, building on the

actions and commitments of the Biodiversity Strategy and in line with the wider climate neutrality ambition. The views of all citizens and stakeholders are very welcome during the open public consultation which is available on:

<https://bit.ly/3fXY9sh>

EU action to save the European turtle dove

Once a common sight across Europe, the turtle dove *Streptopelia turtur* has declined massively since the 1980s because of a combination of factors, including the degradation of its habitat in farmland and forests, illegal killing and trapping, and unsustainable hunting.

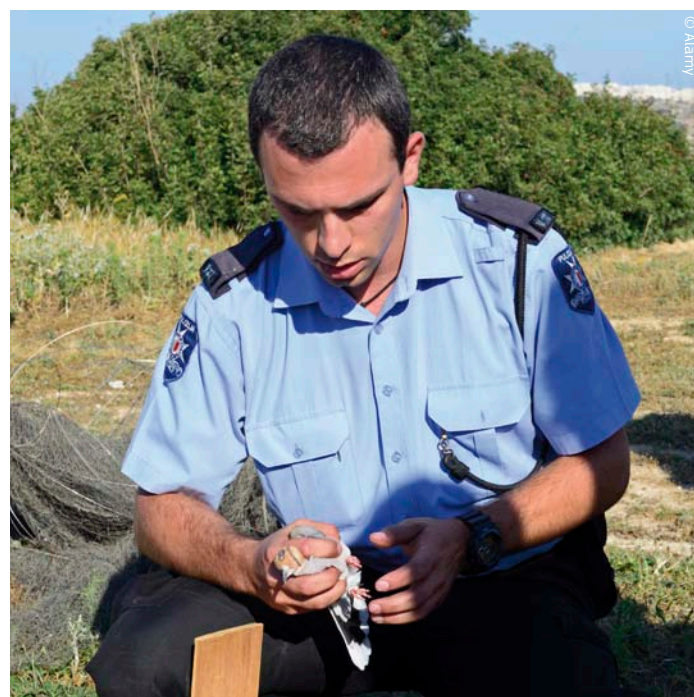
In 2018, the Commission published an EU-wide Action Plan for the species in a bid to stem its further decline and kick start its long-term recovery. It is now also developing an adaptive harvest management mechanism for the turtle dove along its western and central-eastern flyways.

In this context, workshops are being held to bring Member States and stakeholders together to discuss how to build such a harvest management mechanism along each flyway. Topics included the setting of population targets, establishing a population model for estimating the population growth, exploring possible harvest management scenarios and monitoring needs, as well as investigating ways to link hunting and habitat management activities. Further workshops are foreseen in 2021.

<https://bit.ly/2LOkUjP>

Knowledge Centre for Biodiversity

The Commission launched a new Knowledge Centre for Biodiversity during Green Week 2020. The centre will provide a one-stop shop for information about biodiversity and the impact of related policies. It will identify, analyse, filter and organise data from different sources and communicate



Confiscated turtle dove *Streptopelia turtur* from trapping area, Malta.

this in a more accessible, tailored and concise manner to a wider audience. It will also bring together researchers, policy makers, scientists and other members of civil society to share research results and build a common and enhanced knowledge base for mainstreaming biodiversity in policy making and for monitoring progress under the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030.

<https://bit.ly/2VsWOQQ>

Management effectiveness of Natura 2000 sites

The new EU Biodiversity Strategy commits to effectively manage all protected areas, including Natura 2000 sites, by, inter alia, defining clear conservation objectives and implementing the necessary conservation measures by 2030.

To date, only around 60% of sites in the network have Natura 2000 management plans and all available evidence suggests that very few of these are being implemented, often for lack of the necessary resources. Where conservation measures are being taken, they tend to focus on maintaining the status quo or preventing further degradation, rather than actively improving

the conservation condition of the site, and its species and habitats.

To gain a better insight into the current state of play, the EEA has issued a brief on the management effectiveness of the EU's Natura 2000 sites. It summarises the key findings of an in-depth study, which used PAME (Protected Area Management Effectiveness) criteria to assess the state of implementation of management measures in a cross section of Natura 2000 sites in five countries.

The briefing concludes with a series of recommendations for improving the reporting, collation and assessment of the effectiveness of protected area management in the future, with a view to informing the new EU strategic framework.

<https://bit.ly/2Jmhdoo>

New guidance on wind energy and Natura 2000

The European Green Deal sets out a clear vision for achieving climate neutrality by 2050 and further de-carbonising the energy system in order to reach climate objectives in 2030 and 2050. The Deal highlights the essential role of renewable energy sources, in particular of offshore wind energy production,



© Alamy

Wind turbines at sea of Lillgrund, Sweden.

in achieving these objectives but also stresses the need to ensure this is done in a way that does not harm nature.

To assist in this process, the European Commission has just issued an update of its guidance document on 'wind energy developments and EU nature legislation'. The aim is to help national authorities, developers, consultants and the wind energy sector ensure that both onshore and offshore wind energy developments comply with the provisions of the EU Nature Directives in particular.

The guide summarises the latest developments in EU policies on renewable energy and nature protection, as well as in wind energy technology, before going on to review the latest state-of-the-art information on the possible impacts of wind energy activities on biodiversity

and on the various mitigation practices that can be applied to remove, or at least reduce, these impacts on nature.

The publication of the guide coincided with the launch of the EU's new Offshore Renewable Strategy, which aims to substantially increase the development of offshore renewable energy.

Go to : <https://bit.ly/39N2IEP>

EU Ecosystems Assessment Report

Last October, the Commission, JRC and the European Environment Agency launched Europe's first ever EU-wide ecosystem assessment report. This provides a comprehensive analysis of the changes in pressures and condition of the main ecosystem types present in the EU (urban, cropland and grassland, heathland and shrub, woodland and forest,

sparsely vegetated lands, wetlands, freshwater and marine), using the year 2010 as a policy baseline. In addition, crosscutting assessments are provided on climate change, invasive alien species, landscape mosaic, soil and ecosystem services.

The report concludes that most ecosystems are deteriorating, and that the current potential of ecosystems to deliver timber, protection against floods, crop pollination, and nature-based recreation is equal to, or lower than, the baseline value for 2010. It represents a first step in better describing and understanding the condition and trends of Europe's ecosystems and will provide a useful benchmark for future assessments.

<https://bit.ly/37wweeW>

In Memoriam

It is with great sadness that we must announce the passing away of Claus Stuffmann last November. As a leading member of various Commissioners' cabinets from the earliest days of the European Commission's existence and, then, as the first

Head of the Nature Protection Unit in DG Environment from the late 1970s to his retirement in 1994, Claus was instrumental in shaping and negotiating the Birds, Habitats and Environmental Impact Assessment Directives through to their final adoption.

His prodigious political skills, wisdom and legendary determination were critical to overcoming obstacles and ensuring that these key environmental Directives successfully saw the light of day. The Nature Directives remain the cornerstone of EU biodiversity policy and we therefore owe a great deal of gratitude to Claus Stuffmann for this enduring legacy.



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