

Interreg Europe – Policy Learning Platform – Environment and Resource efficiency

Policy brief

Protection of biodiversity and natural heritage: Exchange of experience and policy learning for greener Europe

The biodiversity and ecosystems provide essential goods and services to the society, and constitute the natural base for the economic prosperity and quality of life. Decline of these natural assets is considered a major challenge over the last decades that is addressed by the EU biodiversity policy framework. At regional level there is urgent need to improve the relevant policies and to provide multi-stakeholder solutions for protection and sustainable use of the natural capital.

1. Background and context: policy drivers for biodiversity protection

The global trend of declining species, habitats and ecosystems, is recognized as one of the key challenges that mankind is facing. Biodiversity is crucial for our economy and for our well-being. Increasing pressure on biodiversity means that we face the risk of losing many of the vital services we depend upon. In other words, conserving biodiversity is not only about protecting habitats and species but also about maintaining nature's capacity to deliver the goods and services that we all need, and whose loss comes at a high price.

To enhance restoration of ecosystems, and take action to avert global biodiversity loss, in May 2011, the European Union adopted the EU Biodiversity Strategy to 2020¹. It sets ambitious targets for 2020 (halting the loss of biodiversity) and 2050 (protecting and valuing biodiversity and ecosystem services). A key step towards the achievement of the objectives of the EU Biodiversity strategy is the development of green infrastructure and the EU Green Infrastructure strategy provides the strategic framework for green infrastructure development.²

The EU Biodiversity Strategy is in line with the commitments made by EU leaders in March 2010 as well as with the international commitments adopted by 193 countries (including the EU and all its Member States) in the conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity in Nagoya, Japan, in 2010. The EU Biodiversity Strategy to 2020³ provides the strategic framework for the protection and preservation of biodiversity and ecosystems in the EU and defines to a great extent the focus of further investments in preserving nature and biodiversity in EU. The EU Member States have committed to implement the six targets of the EU Biodiversity Strategy to 2020. The objective is to reduce key pressures on nature in the EU by taking steps to fully implement the existing EU nature legislation and integrate biodiversity objectives into key EU sectoral policies, including regional development.

Natura 2000 network is designed to protect the habitats and species by establishment and management of coherent network of protected areas. The legal basis for Natura 2000 network comes from the Birds Directive (2009/147/EC) and the Habitats Directive (92/43/EEC), which are the main pillars of the EU's biodiversity policy. The Directives focus on two types of

¹ EU Biodiversity Strategy to 2020 (COM(2011) 244 final

² EU Green Infrastructure Strategy (COM(2013) 249 final

activities: the designation and management of protected sites and protection of species listed, as well as their breeding sites. Habitats directive also includes strict rules regarding projects that can have harmful effect on environment.

2. Biodiversity protection: challenges at regional level

Currently in the EU, 30% of land area is moderately to highly fragmented, and even in protected areas, despite the existence of EU legislation on nature conservation, just 16% of Habitats Directive-listed habitats, 23% of listed species and 52% of bird species are in a favourable conservation status.⁴ Some of the major threats to biodiversity in the EU are land fragmentation and land use changes, unsustainable use of resources and their overexploitation, climate change and pollution.

At regional level, the constraints in protection and sustaining biodiversity and natural heritage, originate from the complex geographical specifics, social, political and economic drivers. The value of natural capital to our economies and societies, and the interdependencies of nature with other societal objectives, is often not reflected in private and public decisions, indicators, or accounting systems and economic signals in our economies⁵. Other challenges faced by regions include:

- *Access to robust and reliable data*

Biodiversity protection requires reliable, structured and robust data, necessary for the establishment of the species and habitats conservation status, trends and assessment of human impacts. The absence of this information base and/or incompatible data poses serious challenge for the effective decision-making for biodiversity protection at regional level.

- *Management of Natura 2000 network*

Although the Natura 2000 has been already established and covers 18% of Europe's land area and 6% of marine territory, effective management and restoration of sites in the Natura 2000 network requires significant investments, tools and innovative approaches. In order to ensure favourable conservation status of the protected species and habitats there is also a need for enhanced management, coordination and sustainable use models.

- *Assessment of ecosystem services*

Since the launch of the EU Biodiversity Strategy to 2020, mapping and assessment of ecosystems and their services has become a cornerstone for estimating the impacts of European biodiversity policy. Assessment of ecosystem services and their values is identified as essential precondition for strategic planning for biodiversity and ecosystem protection at regional level. This process has recently started in most EU Member states and is important for cost-effective policy responses and better informed decisions.

- *Knowledge gap*

While evidence has increased that investments in nature deliver multi-benefits, there are still gaps in knowledge and understanding regarding ecosystems and ecosystem services. This

⁴ COM(2015) 219 final : 'The State of Nature in the European Union'

⁵ COM(2015) 478 final: Assessment of progress in implementing the EU Biodiversity Strategy to 2020

hampers cities and regions to look beyond nature's intrinsic values, and recognize biodiversity as an asset in a wider regional economic and social context.

- *Financing*

The 2014-2020 Growth and Jobs programmes support measures that directly address nature protection issues and horizontal measures as protection of biodiversity and ecosystems have synergies with other policy areas (research, innovation, climate change, etc.). However, allocation of sufficient funds for nature conservation at regional level remains a challenge. In addition to ESI funds and Horizon 2020, regions can benefit from LIFE programme, through its sub-programme on environment, thematic area "Biodiversity", finances best practices to halt biodiversity loss and restore ecosystem services, while keeping its primary focus on Natura 2000. The natural capital investments can generate revenues and save costs. Such investments can be supported also under Natural Capital Financing Facility (NCFF), a financial instrument that combines European Investment Bank (EIB) financing and the European Commission funding under the LIFE Programme.⁶

3. Addressing the challenges

There are many good practices at regional level with regards to the protection of biodiversity and natural heritage. In particular, 2007 – 2013 INTERREG IVC Programme provided support for identification and promotion of best practices in sustainable uses in protected areas, integrated management of lands and seas, establishment of green infrastructure etc. Some examples of projects, which demonstrate the value of cooperation at regional level with particular focus on biodiversity are described below:

- **Business to Nature (B2N)** project resulted in the development of strategic documents with good practices and policy recommendations, responding to the challenge of reconciling economic development with environmental protection. It focused on EU entrepreneurship and environmental policy on local and regional level, aimed to prove that business and nature can co-exist in a harmonious way, sharing its values for the successful sustainable EU development. The project also provided tools to local authorities for stimulating economic development in most vulnerable natural areas.

- **Sustainable Use of Regional Funds for Nature (SURF-Nature)** project aimed to optimise regional policies and practices with regards to promotion and preservation of natural heritage, biodiversity, and nature conservation through improving opportunities for and the impacts of financing these measures from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). The project partners have analysed 46 operational programmes in order to identify measures and funding for nature conservation and biodiversity.

⁶⁶ http://ec.europa.eu/environment/life/funding/financial_instruments/documents/ncff_leaflet.pdf

In the period 2014-2020, Interreg Europe Programme continues to support projects that aim to improve regional policies focusing on natural heritage, and five of the projects already approved target various aspects of nature protection in Europe, specifically:

- the link between relevant and robust biodiversity data and conservation decision-making processes is addressed by BID-REX project
- improvement of spatial and management tools for Natura 2000 sites is at the focus of IMPACT project
- management policies for coastal areas in relation to eco-tourism development are dealt with by the Land-Sea project
- light pollution is addressed by the Night Light project
- protection of natural heritage through developing green infrastructure is the key topic for PERFECT project.

4. The way forward

Achieving the 2020 biodiversity objectives requires building strong partnerships, engagement and efforts from key policy actors at all levels, in particular with respect to completing the Natura 2000 network for the marine environment, ensuring effective management of Natura 2000 sites and implementing the Invasive Alien Species Regulation, and considering the most suitable approach for recognizing our natural capital throughout the EU⁷.

Whereas there are many habitats and species that still have an unfavourable conservation status, there are clear indications that the Natura 2000 network is playing a major role in improving the status of these species and habitats, especially where the necessary conservation measures have been implemented on an adequate scale. Regions can play a major role in this process, also with regards to management of buffer zones and connectivity features with wider green infrastructure.

The benefits of nature to be taken into account in the decision-making process at all levels can be substantial. Besides the achievement of the EU commitments to halt biodiversity loss, the protection and restoration of natural ecosystems ensure long-term social and economic benefits. Last but not least, the increasing public support for nature protection, demands responsible decision-making.

[The Interreg Europe Policy Learning Platforms](#) stimulate knowledge exchange in four thematic areas, one of these is the Environment and Resource Efficiency Platform. Projects in the same family will be encouraged to learn from each other. To fine-tune the services and products of the Platforms to user needs, we encourage you to share your ideas with the relevant Platform managers and thematic experts. You will find their contact details [here](#).

Sources of further information:

- Europe 2020. A strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth. COM (2010) 2020 final.
- EU Biodiversity Strategy up to 2020 (COM(2011) 244 final)
- EU Green Infrastructure Strategy (COM(2013) 249 final)
- Assessment of progress in implementing the EU Biodiversity Strategy to 2020 (COM(2015) 478 final).
- The State of Nature in the European Union, (COM(2015) 219 final)

⁷ 2015, EU assessment of progress in implementing the EU Biodiversity Strategy to 2020

- EU, The Guide to Multi-Benefit Cohesion Policy Investments in Nature and Green Infrastructure, 2013
- EU, Economic benefits of Natura 2000, Synthesis report, 2013
- INTERREG IVC Programme, Good practice database

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