



# Natura 2000

Conservation in partnership



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For more information on the European Commission nature policy go to <http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/environment/nature/>

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*The Natura 2000 Network is expected to cover almost a fifth of the EU territory. This means it forms an integral part of our rural landscape in which people are at the heart of the process*

## Natura 2000 – part of a living landscape

The Natura 2000 Network came into existence in 1992 through the adoption of the Habitats Directive which, together with the Birds Directive, forms the cornerstone of Europe's nature conservation policy.

It is part of Europe's response to conserving global biodiversity in line with international obligations under the Biodiversity Convention. It is also a major element in the implementation of the commitment made by Europe's Heads of State and Governments at their Spring Summit in Gothenburg in 2001 to 'halt the loss of biodiversity by 2010'.

The aim of the Natura 2000 Network is to protect and manage vulnerable species and habitats across their natural range within Europe, irrespective of national or political boundaries. Natura 2000 is however not merely a system of strict nature reserves where all human activities are systematically excluded.

It adopts a different approach – it recognises that man is an integral part of nature and the two work best in partnership with one another. Indeed, many sites in Natura 2000 are valuable precisely because of the way they have been managed up to now and it will be important to ensure that these sorts of activities (such as extensive farming) can continue into the future.

Such an approach has many advantages, both for nature conservation and for people living and working in rural areas. By actively associating different land-users in the management of Natura 2000 sites it is possible to ensure that vulnerable semi-natural habitats and species, which are dependent upon positive management, are maintained.

By the same token, the sheer scale of Natura 2000 makes it a powerful ally in helping to maintain the economic viability and social fabric of many rural areas. It can bring new opportunities for economic diversification and inward investment.

This is now recognised at the highest political level. The recent reform of the Common Agricultural Policy has decoupled payments from production and replaced it with a single farm payment that is based on good agricultural and environmental condition.

The scope of measures which can be financed under the Rural Development Regulation (RDR) has also been broadened. One of its objectives is to help improve the environment and the countryside by supporting land management measures that are beneficial for Europe's biodiversity and for the Natura 2000 network in particular.

In this brochure, we look at the management implications of Natura 2000 in various land-use sectors and explore the options available for working in partnership with different interest groups to protect Europe's rich natural heritage whilst promoting sustainable development.

Further information on these issues and on the Commission's guidance documents is available on the European Commission's nature website: <http://europa.eu.int/comm/environment/nature/>.



*Natura 2000 supports the principle of sustainable development. Its aim is not to stop economic activities altogether, but rather to set the parameters by which these can take place whilst safeguarding Europe's biodiversity*

# Managing Natura 2000 sites



## How are sites chosen?

The Natura 2000 network is composed of Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) designated for one or more of the 198 threatened habitat types and 800 species listed in the annexes to the Habitats Directive.

It also includes Special Protection Areas (SPAs) classified under the Birds Directive for around 200 endangered bird species and wetlands of international importance<sup>1</sup>. Some very important areas are both SAC and SPA.

Around 20,000 sites have been included in the Natura 2000 network so far. Together they cover almost a fifth of the European territory.

The objective is to enable these vulnerable habitats and species to be maintained, or where necessary, restored to a favourable conservation state across their natural range in Europe.

Sites are selected in three stages.

- ▶ The **first stage** involves a scientific assessment at the national level. Each Member State identifies important sites for the species and habitats present on their territory on the basis of common scientific criteria. These national lists are then sent formally to the European Commission.
- ▶ The **second stage** involves selecting sites of Community importance from the national lists according to one of the seven biogeographical regions in Europe. This is done by the European Commission, in close

collaboration with the Member States and scientific experts.

Because each biogeographical region covers several countries, or parts of countries, with similar natural conditions, sites can be chosen across the natural range of each species or habitat type, irrespective of political or administrative boundaries.

- ▶ **Stage three:** Once the sites are selected under stage two, they become part of the Natura 2000 Network. Member States then have up to 6 years to designate them as Special Areas of Conservation (SAC) and, if necessary, introduce positive management measures to maintain or restore the species and habitats to a favourable conservation status.

## What are the obligations on Natura 2000 sites?

The Directive requires that within Natura 2000 sites:

- ▶ Damaging activities are avoided that could significantly disturb the species or deteriorate the habitats for which the site is designated.
- ▶ Positive measures are taken, where necessary, to maintain and restore these habitats and species to a 'favourable conservation status' in their natural range.

How this is achieved is up to the Member States to decide, in order to legally ensure site conservation. The provisions used can be:

- statutory (e.g. making a nature reserve),
- contractual (e.g. signing management agreements with the land owner) or
- administrative (providing the necessary funds to manage the site).

<sup>1</sup> Natura 2000 is established through Council Directive 92/43/EEC of May 21 1992 on the conservation of natural habitats and of wild fauna and flora, and Council Directive 79/409/EEC of April 2 1979 on the conservation of wild birds



Whatever method is used, it must take account of the economic, social and cultural requirements and regional and local characteristics of the area concerned. This principle is enshrined in the Habitats Directive.

### Stakeholder involvement

In practice, this means working closely with the landowners and stakeholder groups in or around individual Natura 2000 sites in order to agree on the most appropriate ways to conserve the species and habitats present whilst respecting the local socio-economic context.

The Habitats Directive recommends using management plans to help establish a dialogue between all interested parties and agree on pragmatic management solutions for the area concerned.

Although not obligatory, management plans are useful tools:

- they record the conservation needs of the habitats and species present so that it is clear to all what is being conserved and why;
- they explain the socio-economic and cultural context of the area and the interactions between different land-uses and the species and habitats present;
- they provide an open forum for debate amongst all interest groups
- they help build a consensus view on the long term management of the site;
- they create a sense of shared ownership for the final outcome.
- They help find practical management solutions that are sustainable and fully integrated into other land use practices.

### Commission guidance

To facilitate the understanding of the provisions of the Nature Directives as regards managing Natura 2000 sites, the Commission has published an interpretation manual giving detailed guidelines on some of the key concepts used in Article 6 of the Habitats Directive.



*Biogeographical regions of the European Union.*

- Alpine
- Atlantic
- Boreal
- Continental
- Macaronesian
- Mediterranean
- Pannonian



#### What is not true...

- Including land in a Natura 2000 site affects the ownership of such land
- Properties automatically lose value as a consequence of Natura 2000 designation
- All economic activities will be limited
- Hunting activities are forbidden
- Any new infrastructure is forbidden
- Everyday activities will have to undergo an environmental impact assessment

#### What is true...

- Many existing land use practices will continue as before because they are already compatible with the conservation of the habitats and species present
- Where the land uses negatively affect the species and habitats present, adjustments can often be made without jeopardising productivity
- Management activities that favour nature conservation can receive additional financial support through the Rural Development Regulation
- Hunting, fishing, tourism and other recreational activities will continue provided that they are managed in a sustainable manner and do not adversely affect the rare species and habitats present or prevent their recovery.

Many Natura 2000 sites are valuable for nature precisely because of the way they have been farmed up to now

# Farming and Natura 2000



## Changing trends in farming

Europe has one of the most diverse and varied rural landscapes in the world. This diversity arose out of centuries of different farming practices which generated semi-natural habitats rich in species – such as hay meadows, wet grasslands, wooded pastures and open heaths.

These semi-natural habitats are part of what makes Europe's landscape so special, both culturally and from a biodiversity perspective.

This valuable resource is however rapidly disappearing. Agriculture in Europe has undergone some major changes in the last fifty years. After the war, farmers were encouraged to intensify and modernise wherever possible in order to increase their yields and improve efficiency. Monocultures were introduced, fields enlarged, livestock farms expanded, and pesticides and fertilisers introduced.

Not all farms were able to follow this trend though. Some were handicapped by their local conditions: the fields were too steep, the soil too poor, the area too remote, the work too labour intensive... As a result, many farmers in the more marginal agricultural areas of Europe were forced to leave their land and search for jobs elsewhere.

The result is that large tracts of farmland across Europe have been heavily transformed or simply abandoned.

The combined effects of these opposing trends on Europe's natural heritage is significant. Many of the rich farmland habitats and species are rapidly disappearing.

## Farmland in Natura 2000

Because a high biodiversity usually coincides with low agricultural outputs, most of the farmland in Natura 2000 is located in the marginal farming areas. Typical examples include alpine meadows and pastures, steppic plains, *dehesas* and *montados*, open moorland or wet grasslands.

In these areas, existing farming practices are already likely to be compatible and so should be allowed to continue as before. Indeed, designation under Natura 2000 could further help to re-enforce such activities by drawing attention to their societal value and by focusing EU funds towards their maintenance and, where possible, re-introduction.

## The New Rural Development Regulation

The importance of farming in maintaining our natural environment is now recognised at the highest political level. The latest changes to the Common Agricultural Policy have, for instance, decoupled farm payments from production and linked them instead to keeping farmland in good agricultural and environmental condition.

The latest Rural Development Regulation (2007–2013) also aims to help improve the environment and the countryside. New measures have been introduced and old ones reinforced to support land management practices that are beneficial for the environment, such as agri-environment schemes.

This has wide reaching implications for Europe's biodiversity and for the Natura 2000 network in particular. Farmers are now entitled to extra financial support for being within a Natura 2000 site and for maintaining high nature value areas.



### Options for Natura 2000 under the Rural Development Programme

- The 'single farm' payment is no longer linked to production. Instead it will be conditional upon keeping farmland in 'good agricultural and environmental condition'. This means respecting the provisions of the Habitats and Birds Directives.
- Temporary and digressive support is available to cushion the effects of complying with particularly demanding environmental, hygiene and animal welfare standards imposed by EU legislation. Aid will be payable on a flat rate basis (max €10,000 a year per holding) and will be digressive for a maximum of 5 years. The definition of Areas faced with Environmental Restrictions (AERs) is now restricted exclusively to Natura 2000 areas. This helps farmers to

meet the provisions of the Birds and Habitats Directives and compensate them for any special management they must undertake that goes beyond normal requirements of good farming practice.

- This can be further supplemented by voluntary agri-environment schemes designed to protect the environment and maintain biodiversity. These can be specifically targeted towards particular areas or species – e.g. unimproved grassland, corncrakes, great bustards.... It is up to each Member State to design their own agri-environment schemes to reflect their regional or national priorities.
- Support can also be granted for drawing up management plans relating to Natura 2000 sites and for enhancing, on-farm, the public amenity value of Natura 2000 areas and other areas of high natural value.

### Farming measures beneficial for wildlife

1. Leave a strip of uncropped, unfertilised land at the field margin or along water courses
2. Introduce mowing to encourage rare wildflowers
3. Reduce levels of pesticide and fertiliser use
4. Avoid ploughing or harvesting at times of the year when species are raising their young
5. Adjust grazing regimes to encourage a mosaic habitat structure and prevent the effects of over or undergrazing
6. Recreate small ponds
7. Use spring sown cereals such as oilseed rape, kale...
8. Adopt rotational farming with mixed crops such as alfalfa
9. Adopt a centre out mowing method to flush out wildlife
10. Leave untreated winter stubble on the ground

### Working with farmers to restore grazing on the Island of Öland, Sweden

For centuries the island of Öland in southern Sweden was extensively grazed by a mixture of sheep, cattle and horses, which resulted in a complex mosaic of 'alvar' habitats of remarkable botanical diversity. This was also the mainstay economy for thousands of inhabitants on the island. However, in the last 30–40 years, due to low returns from extensive livestock production, many of the small-scale farmers on Öland went out of business. As fewer areas were grazed, the alvar began to disappear, smothered by invading scrub of significantly less natural value.



Following the inclusion of 26,000 ha of alvar habitats in the Natura 2000 Network, the regional nature conservation authority worked closely with the local farming community to develop an agri-environmental scheme specifically designed for the alvar. As a result 85% of Stora Alvaret is being grazed again and the farmers are receiving over €2 million a year in payments. New marketing opportunities are also opening up for their products, not least from the greater influx of tourists attracted to the island's unique natural and cultural heritage.



*Natura 2000 designation does not mean that all forests have to be systematically taken out of production, but activities may need to be adjusted to ensure they do not threaten the rare species and habitats present*

## Forestry and Natura 2000



### Europe's forest resource

Today, around a third of the European territory is covered in forest, although the extent varies significantly between Member States (up to 72% in Finland and down to 8% in Ireland).

The majority is termed "available for wood supply" and is subject to varying degrees of intensity in human use. Like agriculture, the trend over the last fifty years has been towards intensification and the use of exotic trees. The EU is now the second largest paper and sawn wood producer in the world.

Europe's forests are however also important for many other reasons: they prevent erosion, they store water and carbon, and they have a high recreational and amenity value.

In addition, they have a particularly rich biodiversity. Because of their structural complexity and diversity, they are an ideal habitat for a wide array of plants and animals, and a natural refuge for large carnivores, such as bears, eagles and wolves, which once roamed freely across Europe's wooded landscape.

Typical examples of ancient natural forests include, amongst others, the western taiga forests of Finland and Sweden, the virgin beech and holm oak forests of central Europe, and Portuguese oak or juniperus forests of the Mediterranean.

Unfortunately, few of these virgin forests have survived into the 21st Century. What remains is generally very restricted in range and highly fragmented, which is why they have been included in the Habitats Directive.

### Managing forests in Natura 2000

Natura 2000 includes both natural forests and managed semi-natural forests.

As in agriculture, Natura 2000 designation does not mean that all forests have to be systematically taken out of commercial production. Existing management practices should nevertheless take account of the natural values present, in particular the species and habitats for which the site has been designated.

Adjustments could be relatively simple, like leaving dead wood on the ground or protecting certain trees which contain rare bird's nests, or they could be more complex, like introducing selective felling on a long rotation or removing exotics and planting native deciduous trees in their place.

Much will depend on the local conditions of the forest, and the species and habitats present. Again, it is best that the decisions over the long term management are made on a case by case basis in close consultation with the local stakeholders and landowners concerned.

To assist in this process, EU funding is available under the new Rural Development Regulation (2007–2013) for privately owned forests within Natura 2000. New forest-environment measures have also been introduced. Similar to the agri-environment schemes, these provide additional financial support for voluntary nature-friendly forestry practices.

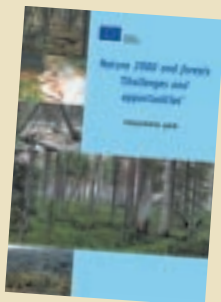




### Commission guidance of forest management in Natura 2000

To help clarify the role of forests and forestry within Natura 2000, the Commission has produced an informal guidance document. The objective is to inform stakeholders and authorities of existing experiences across Europe in the field of Natura 2000 and forestry, from national policies to individual case study examples.

It also provides a framework for non-mandatory guidelines on the management of Natura 2000 forest sites, based mainly on existing initiatives to promote sustainable forest management as defined by the Ministerial Conference for the Protection of Forests in Europe (MCPFE).



### Forest management contracts in France

France harbours half the forest habitat types listed in Annex I of the Habitats Directive. As a result over 40% of the Natura 2000 sites proposed for France have a forest component. The majority is in private ownership – not big forestry companies but small private landowners with an average parcel size of 4 ha.

In light of this, France has chosen a legal mechanism based on voluntary cooperation at the very local level to help implement Natura 2000. Thus, for each Natura 2000 site, management guidelines are drawn up, under the supervision of the local authority, to determine the specific conservation needs of that site and the practical measures (including funds) required.

The resulting recommendations are then discussed at a formal Steering Committee set up to involve local stakeholders, before being adopted by local Decree. The local authority and stakeholders are assisted in this task by a comprehensive forest habitat reference guide produced by the French Ministry of Environment which provides detailed information on the conservation interests of each of the forest types and associated species as well as their production capacities and economic use. This helps to determine appropriate levels of commercial forestry activities.

Once the management guidelines are in place and depending on the kind of extra management required, the local authority can issue public service contracts, called Natura 2000 contracts, to remunerate local stakeholders for 'services rendered to the community'. The contract defines the precise tasks to be done, over a minimum of five years to maintain or restore the targeted species and forest habitats and the method of payment, be it investment subsidies or annual aid per hectare.

These contracts are partially funded by the EU through the new Rural Development Programme. In this way, substantial financial resources can be drawn down to enable local stakeholders to actively manage forested Natura 2000 sites which might otherwise have been abandoned or cut down.

### Managing forests in Germany whilst protecting capercaillie

The Black Forest in southern Germany is the last remaining refuge for the capercaillie in Central Europe. In the 1990s, 80 km<sup>2</sup> of once high yield commercial forest was taken out of production in order to allow it to revert back to a more natural state. This was, however, not good news for the capercaillie. Without management the forest became too old, uniform and dense for many woodland species and no longer provided the complex mosaic of habitat types needed for the capercaillie to survive.

The Regional Forestry Institute decided therefore to re-introduce active management to the area, based on the conservation needs of the species. It concluded that not all of the forest had to be optimal habitat for the species; 30–45% would be enough, with this proportion moving gradually across the area over time. The specific management prescriptions needed to achieve this was discussed with the local foresters who were then contracted to implement them.

This dynamic forest management approach was greatly appreciated by the local foresters. They could once again operate commercially in the area and much of the conservation work could be done on the sidelines of normal forest management practices.

Such was their interest that a few years later they gave their full support to a proposal to expand forested area in Natura 2000 to include the whole capercaillie metapopulation.



*Natura 2000 Network offers people a unique opportunity to discover and enjoy Europe's rich natural heritage*

# Recreational activities within Natura



## Recreation in nature

People go in search of nature for a whole variety of different reasons. Many are looking to relax in the peace and quiet of a scenic environment, some are keen to explore new areas, whilst others are more interested in pursuing nature-based activities such as swimming, walking, cycling, fishing or hunting...

Whatever their motivation, Natura 2000 offers people a unique opportunity to discover and enjoy Europe's rich natural heritage.

Most of these recreational activities can be compatible with the provisions of the Habitats and Birds Directives so long as they do not adversely affect the habitats and species present.

The key often lies in the sensitive planning and wise use of resources to ensure they do not end up destroying the very thing upon which they are based.

Hunting is a typical example. The Birds and Habitats Directives recognise the legitimacy of hunting as a form of sustainable use and do not *a priori* prohibit its practice within Natura 2000 sites.

Instead, the Directives set a framework for controlling hunting activities to ensure there is a balance between hunting and the long term interest of maintaining healthy and viable populations of huntable species.

## Commission guidance on hunting

To facilitate the understanding of the Birds Directive as regards the practice of hunting wild birds in Europe, the Commission has produced a guidance document on the subject.

This looks at both the legal and the scientific/technical dimensions of sustainable hunting. It also provides advice on such issues as fixed hunting seasons or disturbance that might arise in the case of staggered opening and closing dates for hunting.

The document was prepared in close consultation with both hunting and conservation groups who have since signed an Agreement on Sustainable Hunting to continue the dialogue over sustainable hunting practices.



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### Tourism

Tourism is one of the fastest growing economic sectors in Europe. As more and more people are working fewer hours and taking shorter but more regular holidays, there is an increasing appetite for more specialised forms of tourism, such as nature tourism and an increasing interest in the natural environment. These alternative forms of tourism are growing almost three times faster than classic tourism markets.

Many Natura 2000 sites can act as a magnet for such visitors offering them opportunities to experience nature first hand, be it through wildlife watching, hiking, exploring, canoeing etc.... This in turn can help to diversify the local economy and stimulate inward investments in local enterprises and initiatives linked to tourism.

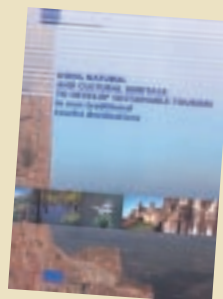
However, it is important to ensure that the type of tourism is developed in such a way that it does not cause damage to the natural values of the area concerned. This is easier to achieve when there is a vested interest maintaining the natural resource. By contrast, many mass tourism developments tend to be in direct competition with nature, especially along the coast and in the mountains.

Because tourism is such a competitive industry, careful planning is central to the success of any initiative. This not only helps to ensure that the valuable natural resources are used sustainably but also encourages a better integration of tourism activities with other rural activities. There is little merit in developing a visitor centre or a nature trail in a Natura 2000 site if there is no easy access to the site or nowhere for people to overnight or eat nearby.

### Commission guide on developing natural heritage tourism

The Commission has published a good practice guide on 'Using natural and cultural heritage to develop sustainable tourism in rural areas'.

The report examines the recent trends in rural heritage-based tourism in Europe, the opportunities and constraints they present and gives practical advice for businesses,



nature managers and local authorities on how to go about developing such forms of tourism in a sustainable manner.

The report can be downloaded from [http://europa.eu.int/comm/enterprise/services/tourism/studies/ecosystems/study\\_sustainability.htm](http://europa.eu.int/comm/enterprise/services/tourism/studies/ecosystems/study_sustainability.htm). Hard copies are available in English, French, German, Italian and Spanish from [entr-tourism@cec.eu.int](mailto:entr-tourism@cec.eu.int).

### The Canaries: a paradise for nature tourists

Over 11 million tourists visit the Canaries every year. Although most come for the sunshine, there has been a steady rise in nature tourism, which is based on a more environmentally friendly, quality based holiday experience. And there is plenty to see! The Canaries are a world biodiversity hotspot for plants, the seas team with dolphins and turtles and the dramatic interior hides many rare and unusual species.

Over 30% of the islands have been designated as Natura 2000 as a result. This international recognition has done a lot to boost the nature tourism businesses further. It has also created some interesting partnerships where tourism revenues are helping to further the work of conserving rare species such as the Hierro giant lizard (Europe's largest reptile). Little wonder this gentle giant is now the island's mascot.



### Natura 2000 tourism in Lapland

Lapland covers vast expanses of forests and mires of outstanding natural beauty. When an area of 300 km<sup>2</sup> was designated as a Natura 2000 site, local communities were initially opposed, fearing that it would put a halt to the budding tourism market.

The park authority assured them that, on the contrary, it would help bring new jobs and business opportunities. It developed a series of carefully planned nature trails that channeled visitors away from the sensitive areas but still provided them with an enjoyable experience.

The trails proved to be so popular that they made headline news. Local businesses have since experienced a steady increase in visitors and many now view Natura 2000 as a potential ally rather than a hindrance.

*New activities or developments within Natura 2000 sites are not automatically excluded. Instead, decisions need to be made on a case by case basis following the step-wise procedure laid down in the Habitats Directive*



# Assessing new development projects

## New developments within Natura 2000

Sometimes new development plans and projects are proposed that might have an impact on sites within the Natura 2000 Network. These could, for instance, involve the construction of a new road, a tourism complex or the opening of a new quarry site.

It could also involve major changes in current land uses within and around a Natura 2000 site – such as major afforestation or conversion to intensive arable production.

None of these activities are prohibited *a priori* under the EU directives. Instead they must undergo an assessment to determine the likely impact on the Natura 2000 sites. If the damage is deemed to be significant then alternatives must be found.

If however no alternatives exist and the project is of overriding public interest then the plan may still be authorised provided certain conditions are respected. These are laid down in Article 6 of the Habitats Directive and follow the principle of sustainable development.

### A step wise procedure

Article 6 of the Habitats Directive defines a step-wise procedure for considering whether any plans or projects may or may not be allowed.

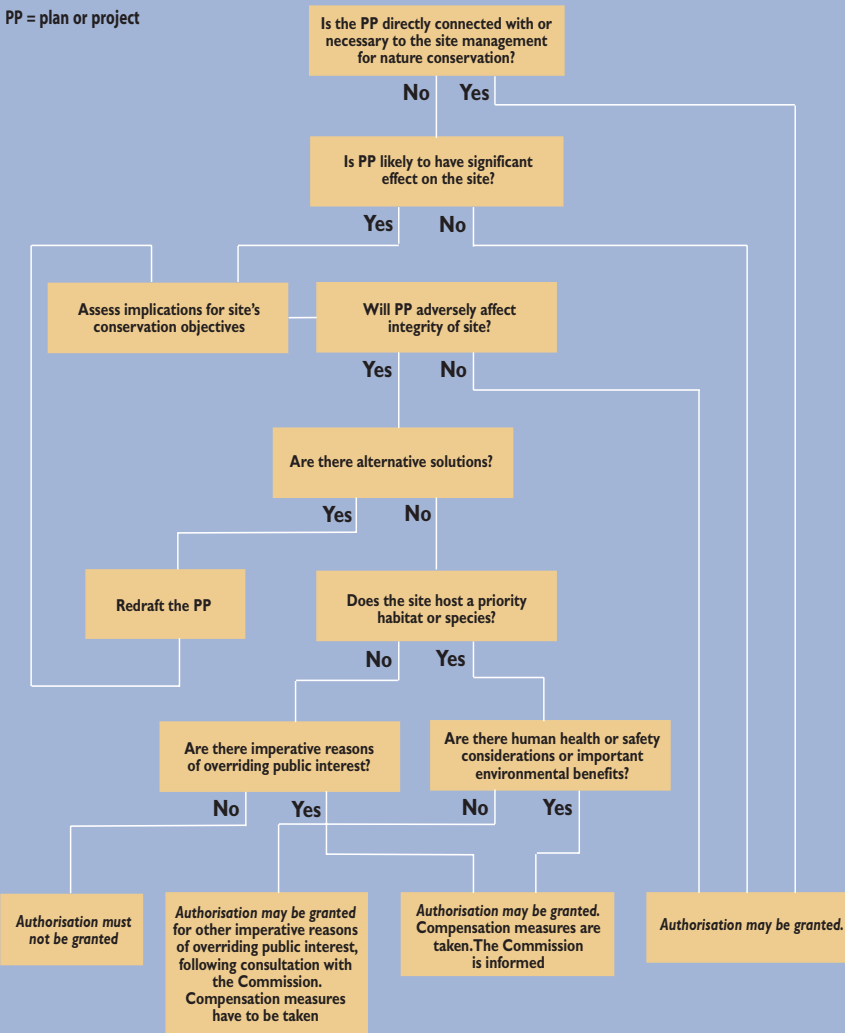
The term 'project' includes both construction works and other interventions in the natural environment. The term 'plan' includes legally binding land use plans and sectoral plans or programmes but leaves out general policy statements.

➤ **Step one:** The first step is to determine whether the plan or project is likely to have a significant effect on the site. If it is concluded that the effect is not likely to be significant then the project can be authorised.

➤ **Step two:** If on the other hand the plan or project is likely to have a significant effect on the site then the proponent is asked to redraft the

## Consideration of plans and projects affecting Natura 2000 sites

PP = plan or project





project to remove the likelihood of these effects or to consider alternative options (for instance changing the route of a proposed road scheme) which would not have a negative impact on the site.

- ▶ **Step three:** If no alternatives exist but the project or plan is considered to be indispensable – i.e. it is of overriding public interest, then it can still go ahead provided adequate compensation measures are taken to ensure that the overall integrity of the Natura 2000 Network is maintained.

There is an additional safeguard for plans or projects that are likely to affect a site hosting priority habitats or species. Here it is necessary to demonstrate that they are necessary for human health or public safety, or they will provide benefits of primary importance for the environment.

Decisions relating to steps 1 to 3 are made by the national authorities in the Member State concerned. The Commission does not interfere in these decisions unless there is an official complaint against the decision taken by the Member State.

It must however be informed of any compensation measures proposed for any plans or projects that are approved under step three so that it can check that the coherence of the Natura 2000 network is not affected.

The Commission can also in very exceptional cases deliver an opinion that overrides step 2 for certain projects affecting priority species and habitats if the Member State presents compelling arguments regarding its overriding public interest, accompanied by adequate compensation scheme (see example in box).

### Commission guidance

To facilitate the understanding of these provisions, the Commission has produced a guidance document which provides non-mandatory methodological help to carry out or review the assessments required under Article 6(3) and (4) of the Habitats Directive.



### The Rotterdam Mainport Development Project

In 2002, the Dutch Government proposed a major project to expand the port and industrial area around Rotterdam harbour. This would have a negative effect on habitats and species (including priority grey dunes) within the surrounding SACs/SPAs. Respecting the provisions laid down in Article 6 of the Habitats Directive, the Dutch Government assessed the proposal in detail and concluded that it was of overriding public interest and that no alternatives were possible.

Based on a detailed assessment of the possible impact on Natura 2000 values, it proposed the following compensation package:

- ▶ re-creation of 100 ha of new priority grey dunes (code 2130\*) which would develop over a 20 year period
- ▶ re-creation of 10 ha of humid dune slacks (code 2190) to provide new habitats for the priority orchid *Liparis loeselii*
- ▶ re-creation of an area of shifting white dunes (code 2120) equal to the area lost as a result of the project, and finally
- ▶ the protection a further 31,250 ha of sea area within the Voordelta SPA. The aim here is not to create new habitats but to introduce measures that will diminish disturbance on the seabed, such as special fishery limitations, so as to improve the conditions for foraging birds.

These compensatory measures were approved by nature NGOs and the Fisheries sector. They were also approved by the European Commission who delivered a positive opinion in accordance with Article 6 (4). In April 2003, the project was given the green light.



*The success of the Natura 2000 Network depends on a sound understanding of the provisions of the Habitats and Birds Directives*

# Natura 2000: dispelling the myths



Public consultation is a vital part of the Natura 2000 process. For these discussions to meet their objective, it is essential that they be conducted in an atmosphere of mutual understanding and trust.

However, a number of misconceptions have arisen of the implementation of the EU Nature Directives over the years. These are not only confusing the issue but also creating unwarranted concerns.

The following answers some of the most common concerns. It is hoped that they will allay certain fears and promote a better understanding of the ultimate objectives of Natura 2000.

- **“The Habitats Directive is a Community initiative that was concocted in secret by Brussels technocrats”**

Natura 2000 is a direct response to public concerns over the rapid loss of nature in Europe. According to a recent Eurobarometer survey, over a third of Europeans are worried about species extinction and the loss of natural areas.

Responding to these concerns, Environment ministers of the Member States unanimously adopted the Habitats Directive in 1992 after five years of debate in the Council and the European Parliament. Many interest groups communicated their position to both the Member States and to the Commission during that period and their observations were taken into account.

- **“All Natura 2000 sites will become nature reserves”**

If a site is in the Natura 2000 Network, it is because it is of European importance for the species

or habitat types listed in the Habitats or Birds Directive. In many cases, these species or habitats will already be in a favourable conservation state thanks to existing human activities. All that is needed is for this to be maintained.

Nominating a site as SCI does not therefore *a priori* imply that the activities underway within the site will have to change or stop. The activities do however have to take account of the rare species and habitat present to ensure their favourable conservation state.

How this is achieved is up to the Member States to decide. They have a choice of mechanisms to use to manage a site: statutory measures (e.g. making a nature); contractual measures (e.g. signing a management agreement with the land owner) or administrative measures (providing the necessary funds to manage the site).

Several Member States are already proceeding along these lines and it is probable that the administrative and contractual measures will be applied to the majority of areas in Natura 2000.

- **“We will have to stop all our activities within a site for the sake of preserving nature”**

There will, of course, be occasions where decisions will have to be made about restricting or stopping certain activities that are a significant threat to the species or habitat types for which the site is being proposed as a Natura 2000. But these need to be addressed on a case by case basis and do not apply across the board.



Maintaining species or habitats in a good conservation state is not necessarily incompatible with human activities. In fact, many of the natural areas are highly dependant upon certain human activities for their survival (e.g. agriculture).

Some of these sites are already being managed in the spirit of Natura 2000. Their inclusion in the Natura 2000 network should help to ensure that they will continue well into the future.

What is more, the sheer scale of the Natura 2000 Network means that it can become a powerful ally in attracting inward investments to help maintain existing land use practices or encourage new ones. Several measures under the Rural Development Regulation are now specifically geared to Natura 2000 sites in recognition of its important role in maintaining a dynamic rural environment.

- **“Brussels will dictate to us what can or cannot be done in each site”**  
The Habitats Directive and the Natura 2000 network are based on the principle of subsidiarity. It is up to the Member States to decide how best to conserve the sites that are identified as being of Community importance.

Although not an obligation, management plans are identified in the Directive as a useful tool in determining what needs to be done to maintain or restore a site in a favourable conservation state.

These plans are site specific and provide a vehicle for consultation with local interest groups, thereby

ensuring that the fate of a Natura 2000 site can be decided together and in a spirit of cooperation and co-management. Management plans often help the different interest groups to find an area of common ground between them.

- **“Once a site is included in Natura 2000 it becomes untouchable as regards future developments”**  
The Directive does not *a priori* prevent any new activities or developments within a Natura 2000 site from taking place. Article 6 does however require that new plans or programmes that are likely to have a significant effect undergo an appropriate impact assessment before being implemented.

If it turns out that a proposed activity is likely to cause significant damage to a site and all possible alternatives have been exhausted, it may still go ahead but only if it is of overriding public interest and if measures are taken to compensate for the loss of the species or habitats affected.

- **“It is the inhabitants of the Natura 2000 sites that will have to support the costs of this protection”**  
It is the Member States’ and Commission’s duty to ensure that the costs of Natura 2000 are shared by all. That is why the Member States are asked, at the time of submitting their national list of sites, to evaluate the cost of managing areas hosting priority species or habitat types and to communicate this to the Commission.

These can then be considered for co-financing under various Community funding programmes.

Agri-environment measures under the Rural Development Programme are of particular importance in financing low intensity environment-friendly farming in many Natura 2000 sites.

- **There is a general lack of transparency on Natura 2000**  
Every effort is made to ensure that the European Commission’s activities as regards the establishment of Natura 2000 are as transparent as possible.

Throughout this publication, reference has been made to a number of guidance documents which explain in greater detail the different requirements of the two nature Directives. These can be found on the Commission’s nature homepage, together with a wealth of other information and good practice examples:

For more information on Natura 2000 go to: <http://europa.eu.int/comm/environment/nature/home.htm>



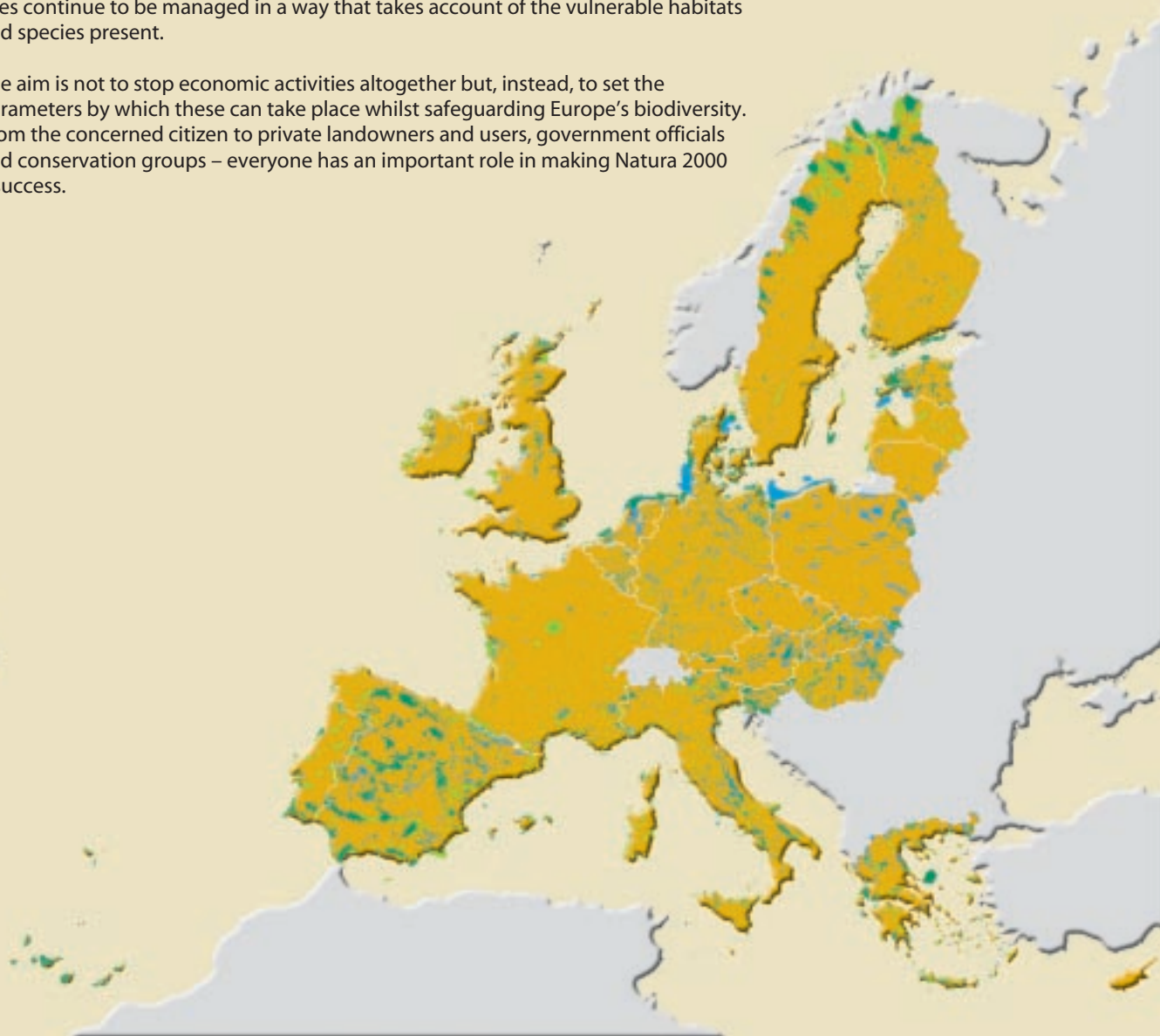
Natura 2000 is the most ambitious initiative ever undertaken to conserve Europe's rich natural heritage. It enables all 25 countries of the EU to work together to protect hundreds of our most vulnerable species and habitats across their natural range in Europe, irrespective of national boundaries.



At its heart lies the creation of an ecological network of sites known as the Natura 2000 Network. Some 20,000 sites have been included in this network so far. Together, they cover almost 20% of the EU – an area the size of Germany and Italy combined.

Because Natura 2000 is an integral part of our countryside, it is important that the sites continue to be managed in a way that takes account of the vulnerable habitats and species present.

The aim is not to stop economic activities altogether but, instead, to set the parameters by which these can take place whilst safeguarding Europe's biodiversity. From the concerned citizen to private landowners and users, government officials and conservation groups – everyone has an important role in making Natura 2000 a success.



European Commission

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