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Key drivers of success for Natura 2000

Environment

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Cover: Green turtle
Chelonia mydas
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Editorial

2019 will be an important year for the EU's biodiversity policy. After almost a decade of hard work, the time has come to start taking stock of our successes and failures as regards our ambitious target to halt the loss of biodiversity in the EU by 2020, and kick start its recovery as much as possible.

The Nature Action Plan, adopted in 2017, has provided a much-needed boost to implementation of the Birds and Habitats Directives. Its ambitious work programme of 15 main actions and over 100 individual measures is well underway and will need to be finalised this year. Several EC guidance documents on implementing the directives have been prepared, others updated and translated into all languages, and widely promoted. Dedicated 'Nature Dialogues' have been held with many Member States to discuss key implementation challenges for the two Directives. Further marine sites have been added to the Natura 2000 network allowing the EU reach the Aichi target of 10% of designated marine area.

We have also reinforced our commitment to broader biodiversity. A new EU pollinators initiative has been adopted and there has been important progress on implementation of the EU Invasive Species Regulation, on assessing ecosystems and their services as well as on actions for their restoration through the deployment of Green and Blue Infrastructure. At the same time, work is underway on integrating natural capital into public and private accounts.

We are also working to strengthen investments in Natura 2000 and biodiversity and improve synergies with other EU funds for the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF 2020–2027). In this regard the Commission is assisting the Member States in preparing their Prioritised Action Frameworks and actively participating in negotiations at EU level for the next MFF. And last but by no means least, the Commission is continuing its targeted enforcement action focused on ensuring the completion of the Natura 2000 network and the setting in place of effective management measures.

The impacts of all these actions will take time to translate into results on the ground. But it is hoped that the next State of Nature report in 2020 will already show some encouraging signs in the conservation trends of protected species and habitats.

On the international front, not least thanks to effective EU participation, the 14th Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity started developing a new ambitious global biodiversity framework – the Sharm El Sheikh to Beijing Action Agenda for Nature and People – to collect voluntary commitments for enhanced implementation of the CBD.

This will feed into the ongoing reflections at EU and global level on the post 2020 biodiversity strategy. To this effect, a major conference in May 2019 will be held in Brussels to discuss this further with key stakeholder groups, NGOs and governments. I look forward to sharing its conclusions with you in the next issue of the newsletter.

Karmenu Vella
European Commissioner for Environment, Maritime Affairs and Fisheries

European tree frog *Hyla arborea* has an unfavourable status in the Atlantic Region but a favourable status in the Netherlands thanks to the development of a connected network of high quality habitats that facilitate meta population structures across the landscape.

Identifying the key drivers of success for Natura 2000

The EU Biodiversity Strategy, adopted in 2011, set a target for 34% of the habitats and 26% of the species protected under the Habitats Directive to reach a favourable conservation status or show a significant improvement by 2020. Similarly for birds, 78% should either be secure or improving by 2020.

Major efforts have been underway ever since, both at EU and Member State level, to reach these ambitious goals. But, as the last State of Nature report in 2015 revealed, a large proportion of the species and habitat types of Community interest are still in an unfavourable conservation states and/ or had worsened in status since the previous reporting round in 2006.

As a result, the Action Plan for Nature, People and the Economy was adopted in 2017 to rapidly improve the practical implementation of the Directives and accelerate progress towards the EU 2020 goal.

A new study on drivers of success

Although the chances of reaching the 2020 target are now rather slim there are nevertheless a few glimmers of hope. The State of Nature report identified a limited number of species and habitat types with an improving conservation status, or at least a measurable positive trend in one or several of the assessment parameters.

For bird species, although negative trends still prevail, there have also been some remarkable recoveries. In a few Member States and regions, species and habitats with positive trends even outnumbered those affected by further deteriorations.

This then begs the question: what is driving these individual success stories? And how could they be replicated on a grander scale to accelerate the implementation of the Directives.

The Article 12 and 17 reports themselves give very few clues as to why certain habitats and species are improving and others are not. The Commission therefore decided to investigate this issue further in order to help identify a number of key drivers of success that could be used to roll out more successful conservation measures in the future.

The study, conducted by IEEP and others, has just been published and offers some useful insights into the issue, which are presented below.

Identifying genuine improvements

The study started by identifying genuine improvements in conservation status. These are cases where real progress has been made on the ground as opposed to those resulting simply from better data or improved knowledge.

The genuine improvements were then investigated further to highlight those that have been triggered by intentional environmental measures, be it targeted conservation actions aimed at the habitat or species in question, or other habitats and species, or more general environmental measures (e.g. to reduce pollution).

Overall, 80 such improvements were identified for habitats and 132 for species protected under the Habitats Directive. For birds protected under the Birds Directive the figures were substantially higher: altogether 455 improvements were identified.

Their incidence was nevertheless very unevenly spread, possibly due at least in part to data gaps in the Articles 12 and 17 reports.

Most of the improvements were found to be in the Continental and Atlantic Biogeographical Regions, and to a lesser extent in the Boreal Region for habitats, and the Alpine region for species. Far fewer improvements were identified for the more southerly biogeographic regions.

Selecting case studies

To supplement the analysis of the reporting data, case studies were investigated to ascertain who, when and by whom these improvements had been achieved, giving particular attention to how the improvements are being maintained in the long-term. This led to the identification of some 50 case studies, mostly in the Atlantic Biogeographical region (14). By contrast, there are no or very few case studies found for Macronesian, Steppic, Marine Baltic and Marine Mediterranean biogeographical regions.

There is also a relatively high proportion of improvements in coastal habitats (4), mammals (9) or birds (17).

Although every effort has been made during the study to provide a coherent and representative sample of case studies, the results are inevitably skewed in favour of those with available data.

As such, the case studies do not necessarily represent the best examples of conservation measures for the habitats and species covered, or of the approaches and methods that they illustrate, and they may not have resulted in the most significant improvements.

Nevertheless, they provide a valuable body of information offering a useful insight into many of the drivers of success.

Identification of drivers of success and key lessons

Based on the above, a series of key drivers were identified and assessed. These are briefly summarised below.

The role of political support, governance, institutions and their staff

There is wide evidence that strong and coherent governance, with effective supporting institutions, (especially nature conservation authorities, but also others involved in land and sea management) is a pre-requisite for effective implementation of the Nature Directives and broader conservation actions.

The coherence and enforcement of environmental policies and legislation is essential and, in this regard, the political support is crucial. Little can be gained from implementing effective measures that support habitats and species if other actions are taking place that undermine them.

Another common driver of success is the strong motivation and commitment of particular individuals. The kind of organisation they work for is less important.

Nevertheless, no matter how dedicated the individual or team, they still need the necessary political support and funding to create the critical mass of expertise to drive and achieve large-scale impacts.

The role of land owners and other stakeholders

Many sites of high nature conservation importance incorporate large areas of private land. As the case studies amply illustrate, adequate and effective stakeholder consultation and engagement is essential and is a major driver of success. Good stakeholder involvement can also go beyond the avoidance of conflicts. It can provide a basis for developing joint positive nature conservation goals and carrying out substantial collaborative actions.

Number of habitats and species of the Habitats Directive that have improved due to conservation and other environmental measures.

Region	Number of Annex I habitats	Number of Annex II, IV & V species
Alpine	4	15
Atlantic	31	37
Boreal	12	6
Continental	17	56
Mediterranean	6	3
Pannonian	1	12
Marine Atlantic	7	1
Marine Baltic	1	0
Marine Mediterranean	1	2

Habitat type coverage.

Habitat types	Number of improvements identified	Number of case studies
Coastal	20	4
Dunes	8	2
Freshwater	13	3
Heath and scrub	4	1
Sclerophyllous scrubs	1	
Grasslands	11	2
Raised bogs, mires & fens	10	2
Rocky habitats	1	
Forests	12	2

Species coverage.

Taxa groups	Number of improvements identified	Number of case studies
Lower plants	4	1
Higher plants	26	3
Arthropods	25	5
Molluscs	2	
Fish	17	4
Amphibians	9	2
Reptiles	7	3
Birds	455	14
Mammals	42	9

The role of the Natura 2000 network and other protected areas

The case studies and data analysis also shows the importance of the Natura 2000 network in two ways. Firstly, it is clear that the network contains a large proportion of the habitat area, and populations of species for which improvements were observed. Secondly, a large proportion of the most important actions that contributed to these Improvements occurred within the Natura 2000 network, especially for habitats.

Thus, protected area designation has not only provided basic protection (e.g. from habitat destruction), but also stimulated the required conservation measures for the habitats and species that are present, for instance through access to funding, the development of management plans, enforcement actions, and stakeholder engagement etc.

This is especially the case for habitats and species that tend to be concentrated within the Natura 2000 network, but more widespread species have also benefitted as the sites often comprise high quality habitats that are key core areas for the species survival.

The role of broad conservation measures

From the evidence collated, it was particularly difficult to draw reliable conclusions on the role of wide-scale conservation actions in driving improvements from the evidence collated.

On the face of it relatively few observed improvements appear to have involved important wide-scale actions, possibly because of their complexity. There are, however, some clear examples in the case studies of where broad-scale actions (e.g. water quality improvements), have undoubtedly been major drivers of the improvements.

The approaches to tackling pressures in agricultural and wetland ecosystems

Despite the challenges, a number of improvements have been achieved in agricultural systems and wetlands. However, most of them involved habitats and species that are relatively scarce and have a high proportion of their range or population within Natura 2000 sites.

This has enabled target interventions to be carried out, through intensive engagement with farmers and the establishment of carefully tailored management and restoration actions supported by LIFE projects and sometimes CAP agri-environment climate measures.

However, it appears to be difficult to achieve such improvements for other more dispersed agricultural species without increased implementation of the Nature Directives (e.g. to protect grasslands from agricultural conversion), strengthened environmental components of the CAP and a considerable increase in targeted funding through the Natura 2000 measure and agri-environment climate schemes.

The situation for rivers, lakes and wetlands is more positive but further implementation of the Water Framework Directive is necessary as the poor condition of some water bodies is clearly a major barrier to improving the conservation status of some habitats and species.

Funding and resources requirements

There is ample evidence to demonstrate that access to funding is likely to be a major driver. However, this study was not able to objectively examine the extent to which funding constraints have limited opportunities for improving the status of habitats and

The role of LIFE

Over the last 25 years, the EU LIFE programme has played a pivotal role in designating, protecting and actively restoring species and habitats under the Birds and Habitats Directives. It has undoubtedly contributed to many of the genuine improvements witnessed in their conservation over recent years.

Since it was launched in 1992, LIFE has supported over 1,700 nature and biodiversity projects. The overall investment amounted to €3.8 billion, to which the EU contributed €2.2 billion. More than a third (760 species) covered by the nature Directives have been targeted for conservation, some several times over. The single most targeted species has been the Bittern *Botaurus stellaris* with 80 projects, followed by the brown bear *Ursus arctos* with 40 projects.

Over 5400 Natura 2000 sites had also benefitted from LIFE funding by the end of 2018, representing almost 20% of the EU network. Forests, grasslands and wetlands have been the most targeted with alluvial forests (habitat type 91E0) and natural eutrophic lakes (habitat type 3150) vying for first place with over 200 projects each.

Source: https://ec.europa.eu/easme/en/section/life/life-programme-publications

species, as information was not gathered on the reasons for failure (i.e. where there have been intentions to take actions but these have not materialised or been adequate due to a lack of funding).

Nevertheless, it is likely that the relatively low number of identified improvements, especially for some habitats and species that would be reliant on large-scale and relatively expensive measures (e.g. on intensive farmland and in productive forests), is at least in part the result of overall funding constraints, and barriers to access to funding.

It is also abundantly clear from the case studies that, despite its relatively small size, the LIFE programme remains the most important funding related driver. As the case studies show, some LIFE projects were supported or followed up with larger-scale and/or longer-term funding, principally through EU agri-environment schemes.

As agri-environment schemes are primarily aimed to maintaining or enhancing biodiversity that is already in good condition, the current study, which is aimed at identifying the drivers for improvements, cannot properly reflect the key importance of RDP funding for maintaining biodiversity.

Other important funding sources included EU regional development funds, which have been used to develop management plans or carry out one-off actions. National funds were also important in a number of cases.

On the other hand, there is very little evidence within the case studies of funding from private sources or innovative funding instruments, except in a couple of cases.

The role of research and monitoring

This study found numerous examples supporting the widely held view that the design of appropriate, effective and efficient conservation and restoration measures are dependent on reliable, up-to-date and context relevant knowledge of the ecological requirements of the targeted habitats and species, and the pressures affecting them.

Several cases also showed the value of investing in improving scientific knowledge, and the benefits of carrying out trials to test the measures, before rolling them out more widely.

Once measures are being implemented, then adequate, appropriately designed and targeted monitoring can facilitate adaptive management (such as refinements to the practical measures), as well as provide important assessments of trends and conservation status that can feed into Article 12 and 17 reports.

However, the results of this study have shown that there are currently numerous gaps in knowledge of the status of many habitats and species. There is also a lack of such evidence to determine whether or not observed improvements are genuine and, if so, whether they are the result of intentional conservation measures.

Factors that lead to the long-term sustainability of conservation outcomes

A particularly important requirement in sustaining improvements is to ensure long-term commitments to conservation actions. The security of these depends on at least three main factors being satisfied:

- ensuring the effective on-going delivery of conservation management activities through appropriate regulatory and management systems;
- securing the long-term use of land for conservation purposes; and
- ensuring the financial sustainability of conservation management over time.

The specific mechanisms that may satisfy these conditions are likely to include:

- a long-term management plan;
- a binding contractual agreement;
- securing rights to manage the land for conservation purposes;
- securing access to finance to fund conservation action; and
- safeguarding against risk of failure.

In conclusion

From the evidence gathered for this study it is clear that there are indeed a large number of factors that drive the success of conservation measures for habitats and species. These factors often operate together in complex ways, depending on the local circumstances.

Thus, based on its findings, the study has also drawn up a comprehensive list of recommendations, focussing on those issues that are most likely to result in sustainable conservation successes, and that are likely to be of sufficient magnitude and extent to improve the status of a species or habitat at the national or at least regional scale.

As the day of reckoning rapidly approaches in 2020, the recommendations provide a valuable reminder of the many aspects that need to be put in place so that the Nature Directives deliver genuine improvements in the conservation of the species and habitats they protect.

Study and case studies available on: http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/knowledge/index_en.htm

THE EURASIAN OTTER – NETHERLANDS

Conservation status: *Atlantic: Favourable, Netherlands: Unfavourable – but improving*

© David Kjaer

The Eurasian otter became extinct in the Netherlands due to habitat loss, poor water quality and traffic kills. In 1988 an Otter Recovery Plan came into action, through cooperation between national and local governments, water boards and nature management organisations. The plan included the following measures: habitat restoration, water quality improvement, a breeding programme combined with reintroduction/repopulation of the species, connecting habitats and creating safe routes for movement and dispersal, as well as scientific research and educational activities.

Improved water quality resulted mainly from wider EU and national policies, but, in otter habitats, water pollution was more strictly prohibited. As the otter is considered to be a good indicator species for overall environmental quality, and also an iconic species for the river delta, a large budget was provided for these measures. The combination of measures has resulted in a population of about 200 individuals which is still spreading and increasing. However, ongoing road kills and the limited genetic diversity of the population need still to be fully addressed.

LOGGERHEAD TURTLE (AND GREEN TURTLE) – CYPRUS

Conservation status:
Mediterranean: Unfavourable – bad,
Cyprus: Favourable


© Jord Chias/naturepl.com

Massive over-exploitation of turtles from the end of the First World War to 1970 led to a virtual collapse of the turtle populations of the region. More recently both turtle species have been under pressure again, mainly from habitat loss and disturbance as well as from fishing bycatch. After 40 years of implementing conservation measures in Cyprus, steady improvements have been seen in turtle populations. Time was the key to seeing results, keeping in mind that turtles need at least 20–30 years to mature.

Knowledge gained through these efforts has resulted in the designation of protected areas, the identification of harmful activities, and the targeted implementation of effective conservation measures. Joint action between dedicated NGOs, the Government, local authorities, supported by volunteers, ensures the continuation of conservation efforts and the spread of public awareness. Key measures to improve turtle breeding and reduce hatchling mortality have included legal protection, prohibiting cars, sunbeds and parasols on beaches, and caging nests to reduce natural predation by red foxes.

NORDIC ALVAR HABITAT – ESTONIA

Conservation status:
Boreal: Unfavourable – bad;
Estonia: Unfavourable – inadequate


© Dietmar Nil/naturepl.com

The Nordic alvar habitat, found around the Baltic Sea, suffered dramatic losses over the last 50 years due to the abandonment of traditional low intensity grazing. Most of the remaining habitat is now protected by Natura 2000. There has been a substantial improvement in its management since 2015 thanks to large-scale restoration actions funded through LIFE and national land management agreements.

Key factors of success include the use of efficient and large-scale mechanical restoration techniques, good communication between the local people and the state organisation, availability of targeted agri-environment support, and the project team's efforts to help farmers restore their livestock numbers. The Estonian Government has set the target of 7,500 ha of Nordic alvar grasslands to be under annual grazing by 2020, and funding has been secured until then under the Cohesion Fund, the Rural Development Programme, and national funds. Prospects are therefore good for this habitat even if it will inevitably take time for the habitat to fully recover to favourable status.

GREAT BUSTARD – PORTUGAL

Conservation status:
EU27: Secure


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This species declined across Europe through agricultural intensification, habitat deterioration and hunting. In Portugal, agri-environmental programmes and LIFE projects have promoted an expansion of the area of land cultivated by using dry cereal-fallow cycles (the great bustard's primary habitat) in Castro Verde and Vale do Guadiana SPAs, and, through the adoption of measures to reduce human-related mortality across the Natura 2000 network.

Key drivers of the success have been the LIFE projects involving both conservation organisations and farming associations in the design and promotion of the agri-environmental measures. Legal protection of SPAs through the denial of permits for agricultural development that would be detrimental to steppic birds is also important, especially outside the two core areas. This has however led to hostility towards nature conservation and limits the future prospects of the species in Portugal outside the two core areas. Nevertheless, Castro Verde and Vale do Guadiana hold over 80% of the national population, and here, numbers are increasing slowly but steadily.

BITTERN – UNITED KINGDOM

Conservation status:
EU27: Secure


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The Eurasian bittern is a widespread waterbird in Europe, but due to its specialist habitat requirements for large wet reedbeds, it is relatively scarce and only occurs in scattered locations. In the UK, its population dropped to a low of 11 booming males in 1997. National extinction of the bittern was only averted through a concerted conservation effort involving statutory and NGO nature conservation organisations and local authorities. This started with an intensive research programme that established the causes of the species' decline, its specific habitat requirements and related habitat management measures.

A major programme of reedbed management, enhancement, restoration and creation was then undertaken, with the help of LIFE funding. The bittern population responded well, increasing to 40 booming males by 2006 and 164 in 2017. Although the species population has recovered, and is much more resilient, on-going management of its reedbed habitat is essential and further wetland restoration and expansion may be needed to sustain the population in the long-term.

Marine Natura 2000 sites –

Marine protected areas cover approximately 11% of EU seas. Their total coverage has more than doubled in the last six years, primarily due to the expansion of the Natura 2000 Network – the largest coordinated network of conservation areas in the world.

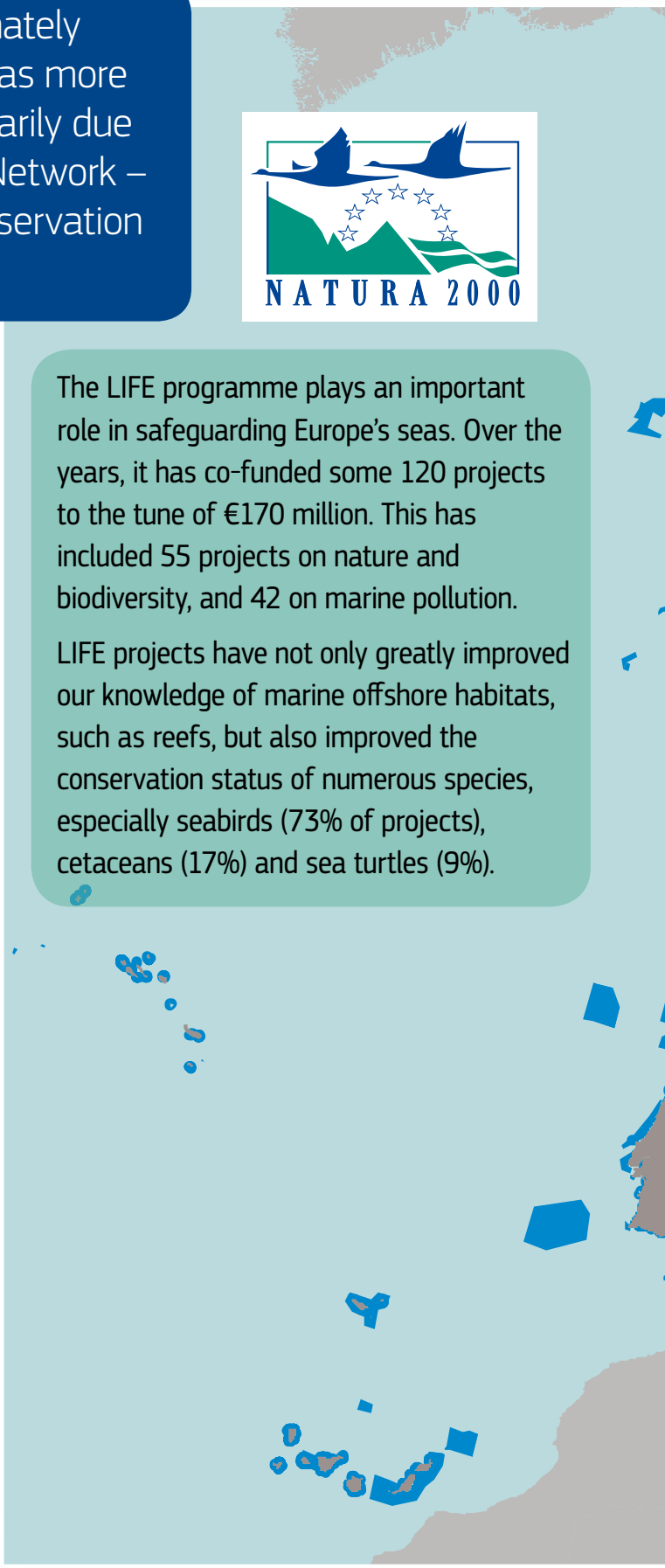
There are currently over 3150 marine Natura 2000 sites in the Network covering 551 898 km^2 (end 2018 figures), which represents 9.5% of EU seas. This major progress is the result of intensified joint efforts to protect valuable and vulnerable marine ecosystems. However, significant discrepancies still exist between the different marine regions or sub-regions, as well as between near-shore waters, where Natura 2000 coverage is relatively high, and offshore zones which are largely under-represented in the network.

Until now, most attention has focused on identifying and designating suitable marine sites for Natura 2000. While efforts to fill in designation gaps are still ongoing, the priority is now increasingly shifting to establishing suitable conservation objectives and appropriate management regimes for Natura 2000 sites. Protection often involves restrictions on pressures and threats, such as limits on fishing effort, on use of certain gear types, or on certain damaging activities such as extraction, often via a system of zonation within a Natura 2000 site.

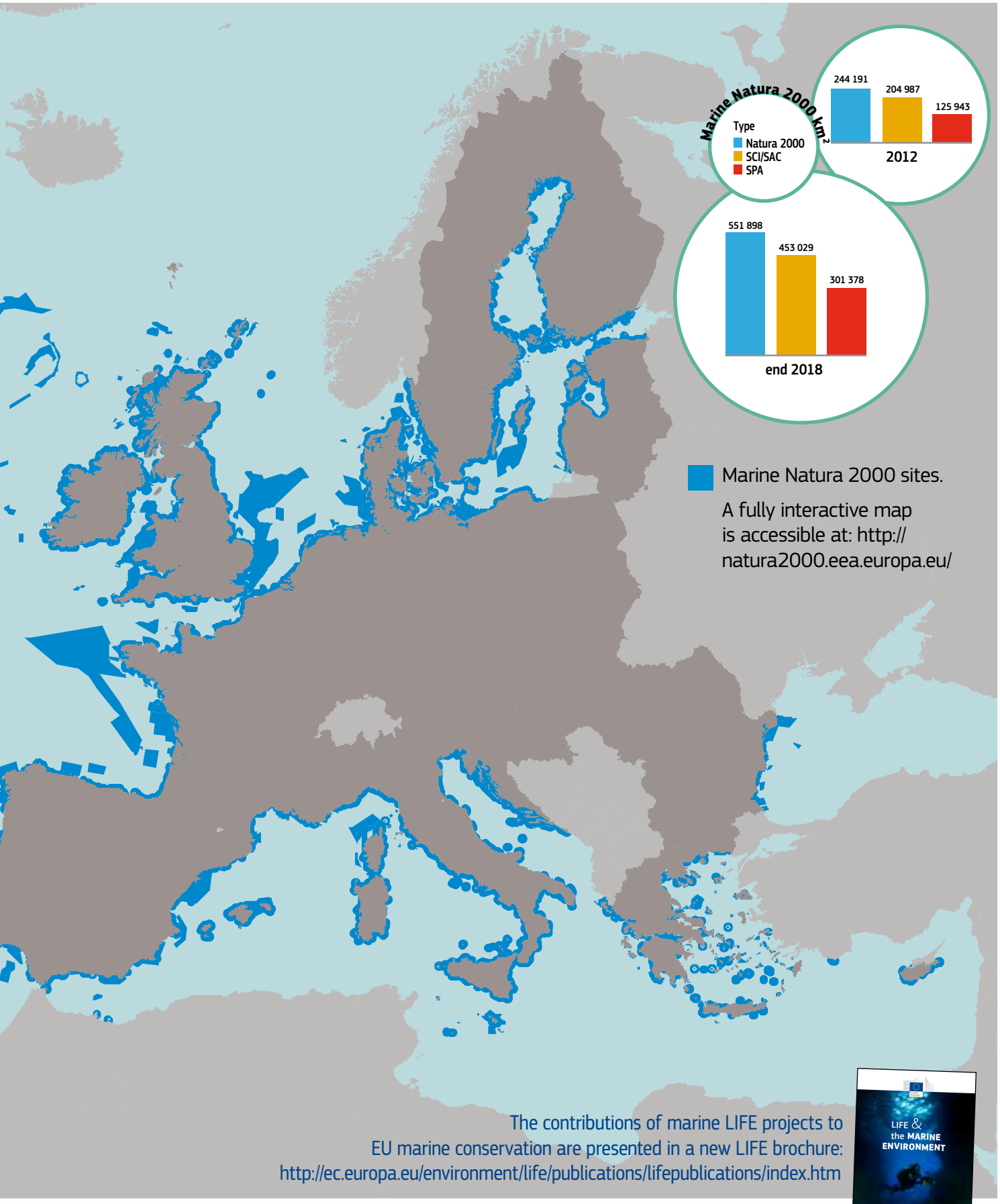
However, no marine Natura 2000 site can operate in isolation. Integrating the requirements of the Birds and Habitats Directives into wider European policy areas is therefore fundamental to the success of Natura 2000. Important synergies are being created with the Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD), the Water Framework Directive, the Common Fisheries Policy and the Maritime Spatial Planning Directive, amongst others, to safeguard the health of Europe's seas.

The LIFE programme plays an important role in safeguarding Europe's seas. Over the years, it has co-funded some 120 projects to the tune of €170 million. This has included 55 projects on nature and biodiversity, and 42 on marine pollution.

LIFE projects have not only greatly improved our knowledge of marine offshore habitats, such as reefs, but also improved the conservation status of numerous species, especially seabirds (73% of projects), cetaceans (17%) and sea turtles (9%).



– protecting European seas



Marine Natura 2000 sites.

A fully interactive map is accessible at: http://natura2000.eea.europa.eu/

The contributions of marine LIFE projects to EU marine conservation are presented in a new LIFE brochure: http://ec.europa.eu/environment/life/publications/lifepublications/index.htm

The EuroBirdPortal uses records from over 100,000 volunteer birdwatchers across Europe to create animated maps depicting the week by week distributional patterns of 105 bird species in near-real time.

LIFE EuroBirdPortal

For years, birdwatchers across Europe have spent many happy hours collecting valuable information on the occurrence and movements of bird species across the continent. At one time, this information was carefully recorded in personal note pads, and preciously kept in a drawer or, at best, shared locally.

But, with the advent of online data collection platforms, such observations are increasingly being inputted into a range of web portals. This, in turn, is generating a vast amount of data that would previously have been impossible to amass, but which are invaluable for orientating conservation policies and practices.

The sheer amplitude of their combined geographical and taxonomic coverage offers great potential for research on the temporal and spatial distribution of birds across large geographical areas. Such knowledge is also urgently needed to help us better understand bird distributions and movements and to address EU policy needs under the EU Birds Directive.

It can, for instance, provide early-warning systems, help predict wildfowl movements due to cold spells, improve the delimitation of species-specific hunting seasons, monitor range changes for pests and invasive species or monitor avian-borne diseases, etc.

However, in order to make best use of the data gathered by the various online portals across Europe, a common database was urgently needed to link up the different data sources and render them more readily accessible.

The EuroBirdPortal (EBP) project was therefore launched. It aimed to create a common data repository containing data from each of the existing systems and with the objective of unraveling the large-scale spatiotemporal patterns of bird distributions (seasonal distributional changes, migratory patterns, phenology) and their changes over time.

Its first product, the EBP demo viewer, was launched in June 2015 at Green Week. This viewer depicted, for the first time, week-by-week distributional patterns of 50 bird species using a series of attractive and innovative animated maps.

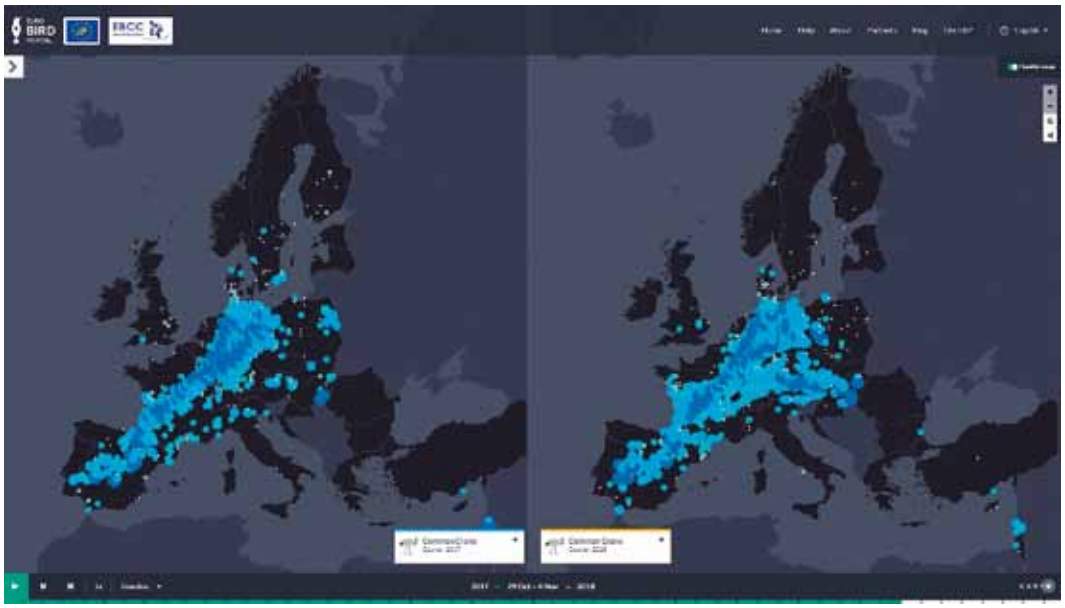
EU LIFE EBP project

During the last three years, the EBP project has been further developed with the help of

Right: Common crane *Grus grus*. Far right: Common swallow *Hirundo rustica*, and below right: Field fare *Turdus pilaris*.

Comparing the migratory patterns of different species, or the migratory patterns of the same species in different years, is just one click away with the EBP viewer.

In the example below, the migratory flyways used by the crane during early November in two different years (2017 and 2018) can easily be compared.



EU LIFE funds. The objective was to turn the EBP demo viewer into a fully-fledged web portal displaying detailed and up-to-date European-wide spatiotemporal patterns of bird distribution in near-real-time and in a reliable manner.

A complementary, but equally important, objective was to promote the value of citizen science data collection on an EU-wide scale and provide best practice advice and guidance on how to compile and display citizen science-based information on such a large scale.

In terms of geographical coverage, the EBP now covers 96% of the EU territory thanks to the fact that Hungary, Slovenia, Greece, Cyprus, Romania, Bulgaria, Estonia and Croatia joined the initiative during the course of the LIFE project.

Currently, the whole EBP partnership involves over 81 institutions from 29 countries (27 of which are in EU Member States). Together, their online data gathering portals collect some 50 million bird records every year thanks to the collaboration of more than 100,000 volunteer observers.

This is the largest and most dynamic citizen science biodiversity data flow currently existing in Europe. It is also becoming increasingly popular.

During the last few years, the initiative has been increasing at an annual rate of around 20% both in terms of participation and number of observations submitted.

Thanks to the LIFE grant, this huge quantity of information has been further harnessed through development of the new central EBP database repository and the implementation of an automatic data-flow system that connects 13 different online bird recording systems (94% of the whole EBP data) with the central database.

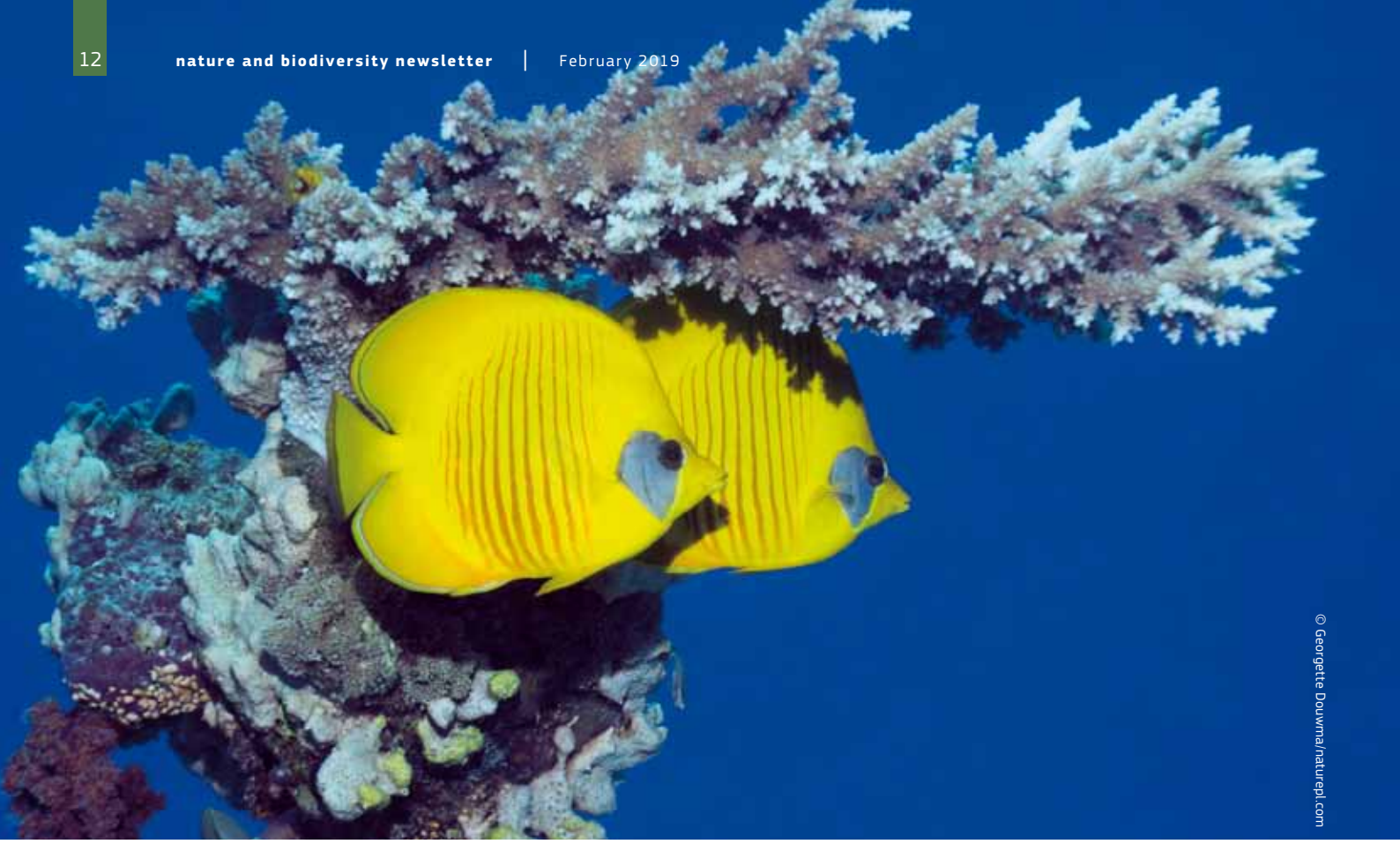
Latest state of play

The final product – a live up-to-date version of the EBP viewer – will be launched on 9 April in the framework of the European Bird Census Council conference: Bird Numbers 2019. Thanks to the new viewer, which will be updated almost daily from now on, anyone can explore the spatiotemporal distribution of 105 bird species on weekly animated maps from January 2010 up to the current week, hence the term 'live'.

Since the viewer allows two different animated maps to be shown simultaneously, users will be able to easily compare the migratory patterns of different bird species, or the patterns of the same species in different years.

Given the number of species, types of maps and years available, this means that more than 50 million different map combinations are available to choose from. It goes without saying the that the new ECP represents a joint leap forward for bird conservation and research.

More information on:
www.eurobirdportal.org and life.eurobirdportal.org
EBCC conference:
http://www.ebcc2019.uevora.pt/



Masked butterflyfish with acropora coral, Red Sea, Egypt.

The UN Biodiversity Conference 2018

UN BIODIVERSITY CONFERENCE
Investing in biodiversity for people and planet
COP 14 - CP/MOP9 - NP/MOP3
Sharm El Sheikh, Egypt, 2018

Towards a post 2020 policy framework

The UN Biodiversity Conference 2018 was held in Sharm El Sheikh, Egypt from 17 to 29 November 2018. It brought together over 4000 participants from 180 countries to review progress under three major international conventions: the Convention for Biological Diversity, the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety, and the Nagoya Protocol on Access & Benefit Sharing.

At the 14th Conference of the Parties (COP14) of the Convention on Biological Diversity, participants took stock of progress towards achieving the 20 'Aichi Biodiversity Targets' adopted in Nagoya, Japan in 2010. From this it became clear that, although many actions have been triggered since 2010, they are not enough to stem the continuing loss of biodiversity around the world. Numerous decisions were subsequently adopted to encourage Parties and stakeholders to step up their efforts in the remaining two years.

COP14 also saw the launch of the process for developing a post 2020 global biodiversity framework, to be adopted by COP15 in 2020 in Beijing, China. This framework will have to live up to the urgent challenges and trigger a long overdue transformational change of policy. Many Parties, including the EU, emphasised the need to go well beyond 'business as usual' and develop a truly ambitious post 2020 Agenda.

In order to help push biodiversity and ecosystem services further up the world's list of priorities, COP14 called for a high level summit on biodiversity to be held in 2020. Egypt and China, furthermore, launched the Sharm El Sheikh to Beijing Action Agenda for Nature and People calling for contributions from stakeholders and voluntary commitments from Parties. This should help to lay the foundations for an ambitious post 2020 global biodiversity framework.

Other sensitive issues addressed

Three other sensitive topics were also discussed at the COP.

The first concerns synthetic biology ('synbio'). This encompasses various new developments in modern biotechnology which combine science, technology and engineering. Of these, 'gene drives' are perhaps the most controversial, with some Parties calling for a total ban, while others arguing that their benefits may outweigh the risks.

After lengthy negotiations, COP14 agreed to recall the need to implement the precautionary approach and to launch a broad and regular horizon scanning process to update current knowledge and understanding of this rapidly evolving area.

The second topic concerns the so-called digital sequence information. This is an important issue for developing countries who consider that these new developments in the world of genetics put the concept of benefit sharing at risk because they make it easier to create a product without having to have physical access to the genetic resource itself.

The Nagoya Protocol, concluded in 2010, specifically addresses this objective by seeking to ensure that access to genetic resources is controlled through a national system of permits, and that benefits are shared fairly through negotiation of contracts between users and providers of genetic resources.

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CBD 14th Conference of the Parties Secretariat, Sharm El Sheikh, November 2018.

However, the sharing of benefits could be undermined by the exchange of digitised information generated from a genetic resource, such as DNA-sequences – broadly called Digital Sequencing Information (DSI). The participants finally agreed to set out a process for gathering further information and understanding on the issue.

Finally, COP14 adopted a decision on resource mobilisation which calls for strengthening financial reporting, capacity building and introducing safeguards for biodiversity financing mechanisms. It also provided guidance concerning the contributions of indigenous peoples and local communities and established a solid preparatory process for addressing the mobilisation of resources when developing the post-2020 global biodiversity framework, to ensure its adequate implementation.

Coral reefs are under increasing pressure from climate change and pollution.


© Alex Mustard/naturepl.com

Other highlights

The Conference also led to the adoption of:

- guidance on ecosystem-based approaches to climate change and disaster risk reduction;
- guidance for avoiding unintentional introduction of invasive alien species (IAS) associated with trade. An ad hoc group will, inter alia, address risks associated with cross-border e-commerce;
- an updated International Pollinators Initiative; and
- a definition of 'other effective area-based conservation measures' to complement the work on Protected Areas.

Marine issues also figured prominently on the agenda. New descriptions were adopted for Ecologically and Biologically Significant Marine Areas (EBSAs) in the Baltic, Black and Caspian Seas. Decisions were made to encourage further efforts to protect biodiversity in cold water areas, noting in particular the finalisation of the Agreement to Prevent Unregulated High Seas Fisheries in the Central Arctic Ocean and to minimise the impact of marine debris and deep-seabed mining.

Lastly, various other decisions were taken to further strengthen the overall processes and implementation of the Convention on Biological Diversity, e.g. concerning communication, cooperation with other organisations and initiatives, knowledge and science and review mechanisms. The voluntary peer review of Montenegro's and Sri Lanka's biodiversity policies were highlighted.

COP14 furthermore equipped itself with a robust process for avoiding and managing potential conflicts of interest in expert groups and ensuring transparency.

Further information: https://www.cop14-egypt.com/ and https://www.cbd.int/conferences/2018

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Financing Natura 2000 through the Rural Development Programme post 2020.

Financing Natura 2000 post 2020

In May 2018, the Commission published its proposals for the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) for the period 2021–2027 (see previous issue). This was followed by a series of draft legislative acts for each of the main EU funding programmes (European Regional Development Fund, the Common Agricultural Policy, Horizon Europe, LIFE and others). As in previous cycles, most of these funds will continue to offer opportunities to finance the Natura 2000 Network.

To assist Member States in this process, the Commission has developed a Prioritised Action Framework (PAF) format in accordance with Article 8 of the Habitats Directive which is to be filled in by each Member State. PAFs are strategic multiannual planning tools, aimed at providing a comprehensive overview of the measures needed to implement the Natura 2000 Network within a particular country or region, and linking them to the corresponding EU funding programmes. These must be submitted by early 2019 in order to have an influence on the new funding programmes post 2020.

The Commission is also currently organising a series of financing workshops in each of the Member States. The aim is to bring together different national authorities, NGOs and stakeholders to discuss the various measures available for financing Natura 2000 under the new MFF and to explore how best these could be integrated into future operational programmes, using the updated PAFs.

Meanwhile, the Commission is also working on updating its guidance document on financing Natura 2000 to reflect the provisions of the new MFF. The intention is to publish this guide as soon as there is a final decision on the next MFF in mid 2019.

http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/natura2000/financing/index_en.htm

Large carnivores

The EU Platform on the Co-existence between People and Large Carnivores organised two further regional workshops in 2018.

The first, hosted by WWF and the European Landowners Organisation, was held in September as a side-event to the Pathways Europe conference 'on human dimensions to wildlife' in Goslar, Germany. Various presentations were made of different experiences across the EU in using EU funds under the Common Agricultural Policy to prevent livestock depredation.

Discussions at the second regional workshop held in November in Budva, Montenegro revolved around the potential for joint information collection and sharing, and stakeholder participation amongst both EU and non-EU countries in the Dinara-Pindos-Balkan region.

Also, in November, the Commission amended its EU Guidelines for State Aid in the agricultural and forestry sectors and in rural areas in order to allow better coverage of the costs for damage caused by wolves and other protected animals. These can now receive 100% coverage. Preventive measures can also be covered.

For more information, including answers to Frequently Asked Questions on large carnivores, go to: http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/conservation/species/carnivores/coexistence_platform.htm

Natura 2000 Biogeographical Process

Three further Natura 2000 biogeographical seminars have taken place during the course of 2018. The first seminar for the Macaronesian region was organised by the Spanish and Portuguese authorities and hosted by the Regional Government of Madeira in Funchal in September.

Participants discussed the different challenges facing the region such as monitoring conservation status, evaluating the coherence of the network, or harmonising the establishment of conservation objectives and measures within the region.

In October, the second seminar for the Continental,

European lynx *Lynx lynx* released during translocation from Switzerland to Kalkalpen National Park, Austria.

A new LIFE project has been launched for the Bonelli's eagle *Aquila fasciata* in Greece and Cyprus.

Pannonian, Steppic and Black Sea regions took place in Strasbourg, hosted by the French Region Grand Est. Representatives from 18 Member States proposed that joint action be taken on:

- linking site-level, regional or national objectives and favourable reference values;
- identifying and solving issues in relation to habitat type definitions;
- increasing involvement of local land managers through integrated site management;
- selecting biogeographical level conservation priorities and measures.

Finally, the third Natura 2000 seminar for the five marine biogeographical regions took place in Mallorca in November, hosted by Biodiversity Foundation of the Spanish Ministry for the Ecological Transition and the Government of the Balearic Islands. Twenty-three Member States were represented. Their discussions focused on identifying ways to encourage cooperative action in setting conservation objectives, favourable reference values and developing conservation measures.

Full details are provided on the Natura 2000 Communication Platform: http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/natura2000/platform/events/index_en.htm

New LIFE projects approved

In October 2018, the Commission approved a new investment package of €243 million for projects under the LIFE programme. A total of 142 projects were approved of which 40 are LIFE nature & biodiversity projects aiming to support the implementation of the Birds and Habitats Directives and the EU Biodiversity Strategy to 2020. Their total budget amounts to €153 million, to which the EU is contributing €97.5 million.

The projects range from protecting bats for the benefit of organic farmers in Bulgaria and finding uses for organic waste matter produced when restoring and maintaining protected grassland and wetland habitats in Belgium, to tackling the problems faced by the Bonelli's eagle *Aquila fasciata* in Greece and Cyprus, and resolving conflicts between foresters and the Siberian flying squirrel *Pteromys volans* in Finland.

A full summary of all approved projects can be found on: http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-18-6163_en.htm

Conference: Renewable energy developments and the EU nature legislation

In September 2018, the European Committee of the Regions, in partnership with the European Commission, held a conference to promote the better and more effective implementation of the EU nature directives in relation to the developments of the renewable energy sector.

The conference presented various tools and smart approaches to help local regional authorities meet their renewable energy objectives in a sustainable way, without damaging high value nature areas and especially Natura 2000 sites. Discussions focused on the recently published Commission guidance documents on hydropower, and on energy transmission infrastructure and EU nature legislation, as well as on the forthcoming update of the guidance on wind energy developments and Natura 2000.

Conference details: http://ec.europa.eu/environment/legal/platform_en.htm

The EC guidance documents are available in all languages on: http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/natura2000/management/guidance_en.htm

EU Bats Action Plan

In November, the Commission published an EU Multi-Species action Plan for all 45 bat species listed in Annex IV of the Habitats Directive. Its aim is to support the development of national or local action plans in different regions across the EU. The Action Plan has been prepared in cooperation with UNEP/EUROBATS and nominated experts from all EU countries, following an extensive literature review.

The document provides a summary of the ecology, distribution, status and threats of the bat species in the EU and offers a series of recommended targets and actions for their conservation to guide Member States in the choice of conservation efforts at national, regional or local level.

Available on: http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/conservation/species/action_plans/pdf/EU%20Bats%20Action%20Plan.pdf

"EnRoute" final conference on urban ecosystems

The Commission in partnership with the European Committee of the Regions organised the final conference of "EnRoute" on 29 January 2019 in Brussels. The EnRoute project, run by the Joint Research Centre and DG Environment, stands for 'Enhancing Resilience of urban ecosystems through green infrastructure'. It aims to illustrate how EU biodiversity and green infrastructure policies and actions are being implemented in

Natterer's bat *Myotis nattereri* in flight over the surface of pond.

practice at a local scale. The project involves 18 'city labs' dotted across Europe. Their role is to test how science and policy interact on urban green infrastructure development at local level.

The final conference presented the main scientific and policy outcomes of EnRoute and provided a forum for policy makers, scientists and stakeholders to exchange ideas on how urban green infrastructure can conciliate urban growth with biodiversity objectives, quality of life and public health, climate change, sustainable urban planning, natural disaster risk reduction, etc.

For more information: https://oppla.eu/groups/enroute

The EU Zoos Directive is considered 'fit for purpose'

Adopted almost 20 years ago, Directive 1999/22/EC relating to the keeping of wild animals in zoos (Zoos Directive) requires that zoos undertake a number of conservation activities before they can obtain a licence to operate.

In 2016–2018, the Commission conducted an evaluation of the Zoos Directive to determine if it is still fit for purpose. The assessment compared initial expectations with results achieved, and looked into what has, or hasn't, worked and the lessons learnt. The final analysis, published in November 2018, concluded that the Directive still serves its purpose, and continues to play a small but useful and necessary role within a wider legislative framework.

However, although good progress has been made towards meeting the Directive's main goals, this remains incomplete. Realisation of the Directive's full potential will depend upon improved implementation to ensure that zoos across the EU contribute to the conservation of biodiversity in a more effective and efficient manner.

http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/legislation/refitzoosdirective/index_en.htm

A new European Framework for Action on Cultural Heritage

As the European Year of Cultural Heritage drew to a close in December 2018, the European Commission published its first ever European Framework for Action on Cultural Heritage. This sets out 60 different actions which aim to capture the momentum created by the success of the European Year and further promote and protect Europe's rich cultural heritage over the longer term.

The actions cover five thematic areas, helping to meet the main challenges facing cultural heritage in Europe. The areas are also those where EU action can bring the highest added value, and where joint European action is needed to make a difference.

One of the actions aims to boost synergies between natural and cultural heritage. To this end, the Commission intends to publish a report in 2019 on linking natural and cultural heritage in Natura 2000 in order to highlight their common challenges and opportunities and suggest ways of working together as illustrated by good practice examples from across the EU.

https://ec.europa.eu/culture/content/european-framework-action-cultural-heritage_en

Champion of Waterbird Conservation

At the occasion of the Seventh Meeting of the Parties to the African Eurasian Waterbird Agreement (AEWA) in December, the European Commission was rewarded with a 'Champion Plus' status for its generous support and commitment towards the AEWA African Initiative in 2017.

The AEWA African Initiative aims to promote the implementation of AEWA in Africa and thus help conserve migratory waterbird populations under threat. The generous EU grant for the period 2017–2020 focuses on conserving iconic species, such as the white-winged flufftail and the grey-crowned crane, and on promoting an effective conservation flyway across the French speaking countries.

https://www.unep-aewa.org/en/news/european-commission-and-norway-champions-waterbird-conservation

Micheal O'Briain receiving the AEWA Champion award on behalf of the European Commission.

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