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## How serious are the EU Member States about protecting nature?

The backbone of the EU Member States work on nature is the protection of sites of European importance – the so called “Natura 2000”. This network of areas protects threatened species and habitats in Europe.

WWF and its partner network across Europe have evaluated the implementation of Natura 2000 in the 25 EU Member States.

**The result:** Overall, the 25 EU Member States made good progress in transferring the Birds and Habitats Directives (which builds the legal base of Natura 2000) into the national laws, as well as in the selection and designation of the sites, together with the setting up of the funding and management systems needed. Implementation seems to work best in Germany and the Netherlands, while Greece and Cyprus trail behind. Such countries who are below the implementation average of the EU should improve their engagement – the positive examples show that this is possible and primarily a question of political will.

### What is Natura 2000?

Natura 2000 is the network of protected sites in the European Union that derives from the Birds and Habitats Directives and currently covers about 18 % of the EU’s landmass. The main aim of Natura 2000 is to ensure sustainable management of natural resources in these “hot-spots” of biodiversity. This can put a stop to further degradation of habitats and the loss of species while continuing to allow economic activity, such as farming and infrastructure development; provided the conservation aims are not violated! Therefore, Natura 2000 represents the world’s most modern and ambitious approach to halt the loss of biodiversity.

Overall, the European Member States and Accession countries have been taking important steps to transpose and to start implementing European nature conservation legislation, which is the most important

legal tool currently in existence for achieving the 2010 goal to halt biodiversity loss. Europe can be proud of having probably the best conservation scheme on earth. One major achievement being that one sixth of the EU territory has been designated as the European network of protected sites (Natura 2000) - which is as large as Germany - where every site is a cornerstone to ensure a sustainable Europe. On the other hand, major challenges arose in terms of insufficient resources for the implementation. It is obvious that the financial support for Natura 2000 is insufficient as are the capacities and funds for an adequate management scheme and harmonization of development plans such as infrastructural plans and projects with conservation needs.



Endangered beauties: More than 40% of European mammals, like the Iberian lynx, and 45% of European reptiles, like the Loggerhead turtle, are threatened by extinction.

All in all Europe is on the right path towards establishing a sustainable future for the continents natural treasures, but a great deal still needs to be done in order to achieve that goal.

## It's not only about ethics and beauty: The loss of nature endangers us all!

Consumption and degradation of nature have increased greatly over the last decades. Loss of species and habitats and disruption of natural processes, once viewed as an ethical or aesthetical problem only, have become a main driver for poverty in poor countries and a potential trigger of large-scale economic instability worldwide.

The UN "Millennium Ecosystem Assessment" has shown that two thirds of the services provided by nature and that life depends on are declining due to overuse, increasing instability of ecosystems and the disappearance of habitats and species. Examples of the decline of these services are the global depletion of fish stocks, the loss of top-soil, the degradation of freshwater resources and global warming.

### The global dimension and Europe's commitments and role to play

By recognizing the crucial role of nature and natural resources in the economic well-being and long-term stability of Europe, the EU Heads of State pledged in 2000 to take the measures needed to halt the loss of biodiversity by 2010. A similar pledge was taken on a global level at the UN Summit in Johannesburg in 2002 as part of the implementation of the CBD (Convention on Biological Diversity). The CBD is the main legal approach to globally halt the loss of biodiversity. The Birds and Habitats Directives are the cornerstones of the EU 2010 commitments and represent the major contribution of Europe towards achieving the global goals of the CBD.

### Europe's endangered nature

Europe is home to an extraordinary range of habitats and species; from snow covered alpine peaks, romantic Mediterranean seabeds and beaches, to the mystical forests of the Carpathians in Eastern Europe. Shaped and managed for millennia, the vast majority of European landscapes resulted in a unique mosaic of natural and semi-natural habitats. However, today, our European natural heritage is in a serious crisis! Results from many studies show a significant and alarming decline of our natural resources. Increased human activities over the past centuries have caused a massive wave of species' extinctions with a current rate of loss estimated at 100 to 1,000 times greater than normal natural loss.

## Natura 2000 in Europe: How seriously the countries take the protection of the nature?

The aim of the NGOs assessment was to detect the status of implementation of Natura 2000 in Europe and to encourage the national Authorities to increase their efforts to protect European fauna and flora. The assessment was carried out by experts from WWF national offices and a network of partners around Europe. The full report "Natura 2000 in Europe: An NGO Assessment" can be



"Our analysis shows that European countries have started their homework, but still need to make an important effort. More action, more money and increased communication is needed to save Europe's biodiversity". Andreas Baumüller, WWF EPO.

downloaded at [www.panda.org/epo](http://www.panda.org/epo). The evaluation is based on a standardized questionnaire with 32 questions concerning the implementation status of Natura 2000. The questions cover an important part of the Natura 2000 "homework" for all countries, such as transposition of legislation, site designation, management, communication and monitoring. All questions were answered by national NGOs, experts and institutions. The answers were restricted to the four standardised options (yes/sufficient, incomplete/inadequate, no, no information), which allows later comparisons..

Basically all EU countries made huge progress in establishing a European-wide nature conservation scheme; like setting a common legal basis or establishing the Natura 2000 network, but these projects are incomplete. Still, huge challenges remain, especially related to the lack of human and financial resources.

The national legal frameworks are generally positive, but there are still some challenges like the integration of Natura 2000 within other policies and sectors like agriculture, water management or spatial planning, all of which can be contradictory. Setting the legal basis is instrumental for the implementation therefore the adequate transposition and the integration of the directives should be finalized as soon as possible.

Designating sites of the European network is one core task of implementing Natura 2000. The directive sets a clear timetable, but the whole process is delayed mainly due to political reasons. However, at least it is almost completed for the EU-15, while the new member states are still at an earlier stage. Positive examples are Finland and the Netherlands, where all terrestrial sites have already been selected. Major steps have also been made by countries such as Austria, Germany, Denmark, Latvia, Slovenia, Sweden or the United Kingdom, but severe delays occur in e.g. Cyprus, Italy and Poland. The 10 new Member States, which joined in 2004, should dedicate sufficient capacity to this issue. As one negative example, Poland needs to significantly improve their designation efforts..

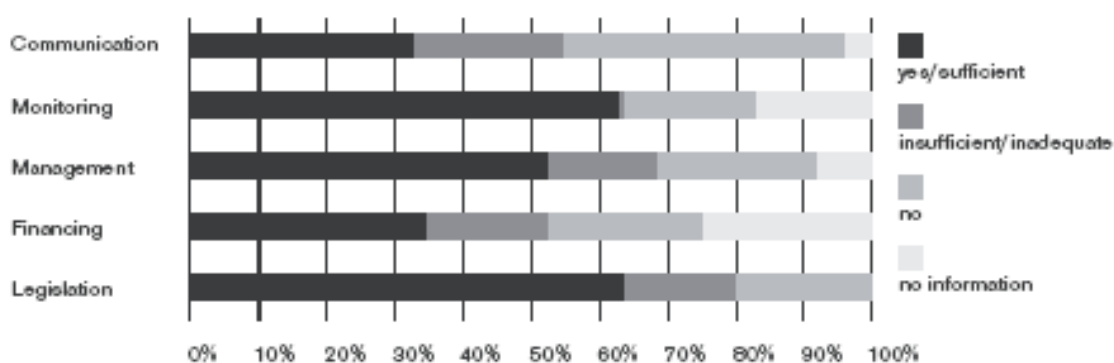
making processes for the use of EU funding is rather poor in most of the EU countries, although it is possible to find good examples in Germany, Estonia, Malta and the Netherlands.

But once we have the sites designated, the work has only just begun, as these sites need concrete management. Management plans can be the key to maintain the fauna and flora, but not all sites have such plans. Other challenges are the harmonization of development projects and conservation needs in Natura 2000 areas. For example some important European development plans and projects could heavily affect or destroy major parts of the Natura 2000 network, if no assessment such as the Via Baltica in Poland or navigation projects along the Danube: for them an appropriate assessment and related measures are needed.

As the implementation of Natura 2000 is complex and involves various interests, an intensive and continuing dialogue with all the concerned parties is necessary. However, most of the countries present deficiencies related to public participation and awareness-raising, including a lack of an adequate communication strategy. On the other

Chart 1: For halting the loss of biodiversity, EU Member States must enforce their actions to communicate Natura 2000, enforce the management of sites and species and ensure an adequate funding. Based on the NGO questionnaire and report, the following graphic shows the number of answers per section as percentage.

**Comparative implementation status of Natura 2000 in the European Union (EU-25) by sections (results from the NGO's questionnaire)**



Another result from our assessment is that the financing chapter should be improved. The upcoming years are crucial for this issue, and the main responsibility lies in the hands of the national authorities, who are free to use the EU funds and their own budget to cover the financial burden of Natura 2000. Specific funds for Natura 2000 are very small, as practically the only budget specifically dedicated for Natura 2000 until 2005 was the EU LIFE-Nature fund. Moreover, the participation of environmental authorities and NGOs in the decision

hand, some positive examples like Austria show that Natura 2000 can be taken as a positive motor for regional marketing.

## Who cares about Nature?

If Europe wants to achieve the 2010 goal to halt the loss of biodiversity, all countries need to make a significant effort to implement the EU nature directives. Although the implementation of the Habitats and Birds directives is obligatory within the European Union and containing following a clear timetable, not all Member states show the same ambition to implement it. Countries such as Belgium, Cyprus and Greece face bigger challenges than others, who show a better performance, including Germany, Estonia, Lithuania, and the Netherlands. This is quite remarkable in the cases of Estonia and Lithuania, countries that only joined the European Union very recently, in May 2004.

On the other hand, “older” EU Member States such as Greece, Spain, Ireland or Belgium, that had at least 10 years more for implementation, need certainly need to speed up, fill the implementation gaps and become positive examples for all future EU Members.

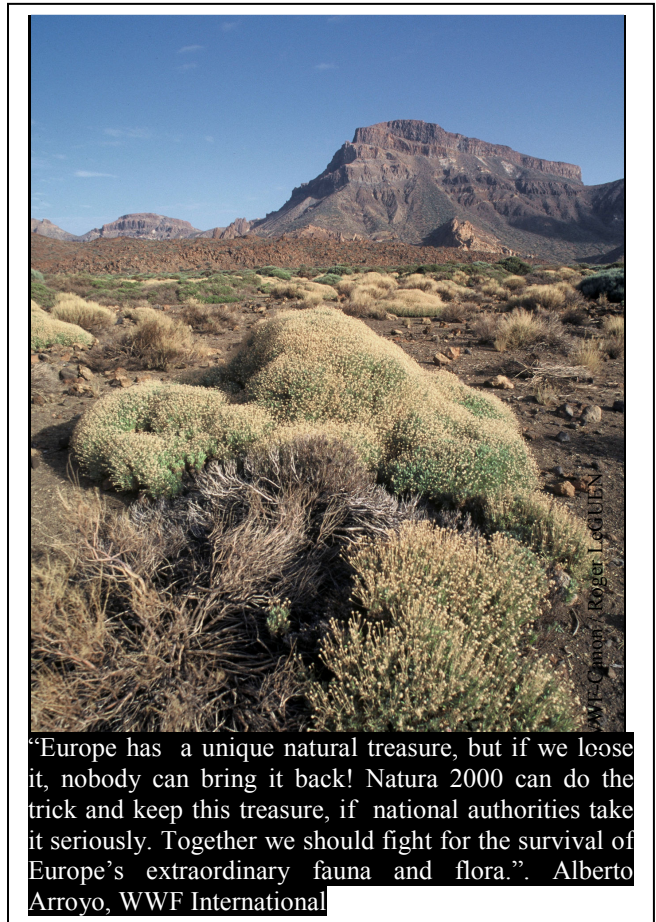
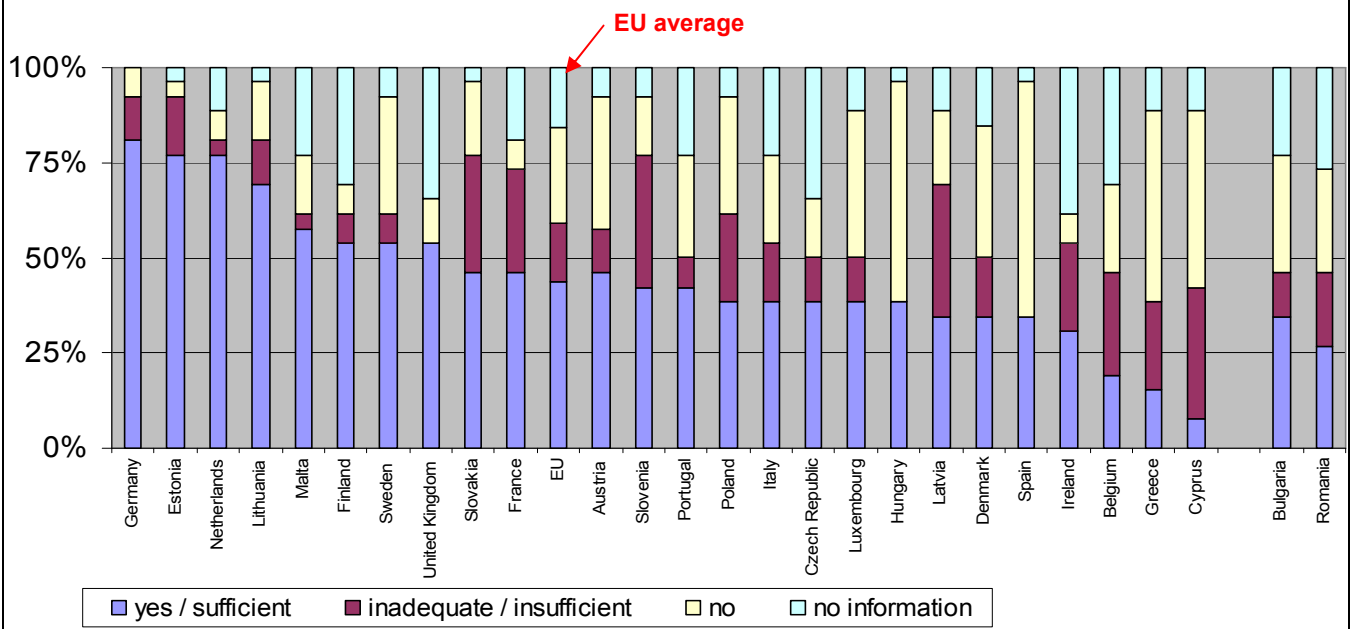


Chart 2: Evaluating the implementation of the Habitats Directive of EU Member states, big differences occur between the countries. The graphic shows the number of answers to the NGO questionnaire per country as percentage.



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