

Protecting the Tree of Life

Europe is a continent of breathtaking natural beauty and dramatic contrasts. The EU's 27 Member States stretch from the frozen Arctic Circle in the north to the warm Mediterranean waters in the south. From the wave-lashed Atlantic coast in Ireland to the snow-capped Carpathian mountains in Romania, the EU includes a vast range of natural habitats and a great diversity of flora and fauna.

Our natural heritage includes several thousand types of habitat, 520 species of bird, 10 000 plant species and at least 100 000 species of invertebrate. Yet, in comparison with other regions in the world, these numbers are relatively modest. Europe is the most urbanized and densely populated continent in the world. It is also one of the most polluted. These factors have taken their toll on the natural environment.

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Despite a raft of conservation policies, the EU's precious biological diversity - essential for supporting life on this planet - continues to be under serious threat. Poor planning, wasteful land use, industrial pollution, mass tourism and intensive farming methods have resulted in the destruction of many natural habitats, which many wild species depend upon for their survival. In only a few decades, half of Europe's wetlands have been drained and 60-90% of steppes, peat bogs and heathlands have disappeared. Two-thirds of trees in the EU are under stress, while forest fires in the south continue to pose a problem.

The destruction of natural habitats is having a devastating impact on European wildlife. Four in 10 of our native mammals, butterflies and reptiles and over half our freshwater fish are threatened. Birds such as the slender-billed curlew are now so rare that they risk extinction, while even numbers of common species, such as the skylark and garden warbler, have fallen dramatically.

As nature does not recognize national boundaries, the best way of protecting our natural environment is by coordinating efforts and pooling resources. The Danube flows through ten countries. If one country damages part of the river, all may be affected. Migratory birds travel the length and breadth of Europe in search of resting, feeding and breeding grounds. If their habitats are only protected in one part of Europe and not in another, the species' chances of survival are inevitably slimmer.

The EU has been involved in efforts to protect the continent's natural heritage for the past 30 years and has taken an active role to curb the loss of biodiversity at the international level. It has signed up to the 1979 Bern Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats, the 1979 Bonn Convention on Migratory Species, the 1991 Convention on the Protection of the Alps and, most importantly, the 1992 Rio Convention, which launched the principle of sustainable development.

In 2001, EU governments set the ambitious target of halting biodiversity loss in the EU by 2010. A year later, at the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, world leaders committed themselves to significantly reducing global biodiversity loss by the same

date. The EU's Sixth Environmental Action Plan, which sets out the EU's environmental policy agenda until 2012, also highlighted nature and biodiversity as a top priority.

The enlargement of the EU in 2004 and in 2007 to include the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, Cyprus and Malta holds both opportunities and challenges for the Union. The new member states have a rich biodiversity and will bring new species and habitats under the EU umbrella. But making sure these wildlife riches are conserved and managed will be a major challenge for policy-makers in the years ahead.

The cornerstone of the EU's nature conservation efforts are two directives focusing on the protection of sites as well as species.

The 1979 Birds Directive identified 193 endangered species for which member states have to designate special protection areas. Over 4 000 such regions have been assigned to date, covering 8% of EU territory. The directive puts an end to certain practices, such as the keeping and sale of native wild birds and indiscriminate methods of killing. As a result of this action, some severely threatened species, such as the bittern, are now beginning to recover. But there is still a lot of work to do to ensure the conservation of Europe's most vulnerable birds.

The 1992 Habitats Directive aims to protect other wildlife species and habitats. Each member state is required to identify sites of European importance and put in place a special management plan to protect them that combines long-term conservation with economic growth and job creation. Under the directive, some 450 animal and 500 rare or endangered plant species are protected by law.

At the heart of both nature directives lies the creation of a Europe-wide safe haven of protected sites called the Natura 2000 network. This patchwork quilt of protected areas comprises more than 18 000 sites, covering a fifth of EU territory. In its 15 years of existence it has notched up some notable conservation victories, such as pulling back the Iberian Lynx from the brink of extinction and reintroducing the chamois in the Italian Apennines.