

NATURE MANAGEMENT CHALLENGES IN EUROPE: THE EU BIODIVERSITY POLICY FRAMEWORK

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Let me take the opportunity of the international year of biodiversity 2010 to remember that our forests are a key component of European nature and biodiversity policy.

What do we mean by biodiversity?

Biological diversity or biodiversity encompasses the richness of life and the diverse patterns it forms. Biodiversity does not only have an intrinsic, ethical, cultural, emotional and recreational value, but it provides a series of so-called ecosystem services which form the basis for human livelihoods. Biodiversity rich ecosystems clean and regulate our water, purify our air and maintain our soils. They regulate the climate (through inter alia carbon sequestration as well as storage and release of water), recycle nutrients and provide us with food, raw materials and resources for medicines and other purposes. However, biodiversity loss has accelerated to an unprecedented level, both in Europe and worldwide.

Improved communication on biodiversity is needed

Most people equate the term biodiversity protection to the conservation of species and habitats. There is relatively little awareness of the economic, social and cultural benefits we derive from nature. As a consequence, there is still a perception that biodiversity protection in some way competes with economic well-being and employment. The use of specialist jargon may also reinforce the feeling of disconnection between human society and the natural environment that surrounds us. However, the reality is that biodiversity protection affects every person in the EU. It is concerned with our cities, towns, houses, gardens, parks and green spaces as much as it is with rural areas, coastal zones and protected sites.

A snapshot on EU Biodiversity activities.

In 2006 the Commission adopted a Communication on “Halting Biodiversity Decline by 2010 and beyond” outlining what needs to be done by the European Community and the Member States for biodiversity conservation. Further to strengthening the implementation of the EU’s Nature laws (NATURA 2000), the EU biodiversity strategy includes the mainstreaming of biodiversity in other EU policy areas, such as the CAP, Regional and Maritime Policies, Trade, Development Cooperation and External Relations, Climate Change and Research.

The cornerstones of EU policy to protect biodiversity in Europe: the Birds Directive and the Habitats Directive embedded in the NATURA 2000 network.

EU nature conservation is based on 2 main pieces of legislation, the Birds and the Habitats Directives. Both directives provide the basis for the NATURA 2000 network.

NATURA 2000 is the centrepiece of EU nature & biodiversity policy and is the most extensive and comprehensive ecological network in the world. The aim of the network is to assure the long-term survival of Europe’s most valuable and threatened species and habitats. It is not simply a network of parks and nature reserves. NATURA sites very often include towns, villages, farms and businesses with the idea that man and nature work together. That means that economic activities and developments continue to take place as long as these activities do not undermine the ecological value of the site. The terrestrial part of NATURA 2000 is now largely complete and comprises around 25.000 sites in 27 Member States, covering over 840.000 km² or 17% of the EU territory.

How to diminish our knowledge gap

Insufficient resources are invested in surveying and monitoring biodiversity. Some Member States do not know the conservation status of over 50% of the threatened species within their territory. Would a similar state of ignorance be imaginable in relation to GDP or unemployment figures? At the level of the EU, we do a lot of efforts to enhance and coordinate tools to establish a comprehensive and authoritative picture of the status and trends in our biodiversity.

The EU RTD programmes and projects promote research activities to make available reliable indicators of ecosystem resilience and vital and to develop fundamental scientific knowledge to link ecosystem properties to changes in the goods and services provided by nature. In addition, the link between biodiversity, ecosystem services and climate needs to be better understood, in particular with regards to positive and negative feedbacks in the climate system.

Biodiversity Protection as a Driver for Economic and Social Change

The interaction between Europeans and their environment has shaped our landscape, history, culture and identity. The diversity of Europe's natural environment has played a significant role in shaping our cultural and social diversity and in defining the sense of what it means to be European. In some parts of Europe we have managed to conserve the connection between man and the environment but in other places, particularly in large cities, this connection has been broken. In poorer, inner-city areas the absence of any connection with nature is a contributory factor to alienation and marginalisation.

In some parts of Europe, re-connection with nature has been a lever for economic, social and cultural change. In the Emscher valley in Germany for example, the re-vitalization of a practically dead and lifeless river covered-over for decades with concrete and steel has become the centre-point for economic and social renewal through a major, multi-billion Euro project.

Biodiversity represents the natural wealth of the earth but is usually not considered as a market good and doesn't have any evident price: the economic benefits as well as costs of biodiversity loss and ecosystem degradation receive now more attention.

The Commission devotes a lot of efforts in the further development of ecosystem assessments by having launched a study on *The Economics of Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (TEEB)* led by a top Economist of the Deutsche Bank, Pavan Sukhdev. The basic thrust of TEEB is to demonstrate that ecosystems are worth more to human society in their present state than they would be if they were converted for other uses. The results from phase I of this study have been presented in 2009 at the CBD COP9 meeting and the report can be provided by DG Environment.

European companies are realising that adopting measures that promote biodiversity can bring additional financial benefits to their business.

Biodiversity is of strategic importance for business by providing the raw materials and natural assets for many enterprises. Corporate actions on biodiversity can help companies to distinguish themselves from competitors, while also involving retailers, investors, employees, local communities and others. The question of public image is increasingly crucial for businesses if they are to compete successfully for customers.

DG Environment is in the process to launch a new European Business & Biodiversity initiative with the aim to introduce biodiversity considerations into corporate governance through voluntary initiatives. DG ENV is establishing in this respect a technical support facility for interested businesses on developing partnerships for biodiversity protection at the European level.

Climate change has major implications for biodiversity and resilience of forest ecosystems: on March 1st, 2010 the Commission adopted a green paper on preparing forests to climate change.

Many forests throughout Europe will increasingly be challenged by climate change. Preparing to meet these challenges now is the best way to ensure that forests can continue to deliver all their functions. The purpose of this Green Paper is to encourage an EU-wide public debate on options for the EU approach to forest protection and information. The European Institutions and all those interested organisations or private individuals are invited to submit their comments on the questions set out by the Green Paper as well as on any other issues they wish to raise. A web-based public consultation will be open until July 31st, 2010.

The International Dimension

At a global level, the EU has taken a leading role in the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and other conventions and protocols concerned with biodiversity protection. The EU has taken active steps to implement the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) and is advocating an operational international mechanism on Reduced Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD) designed to protect forests across the globe. Biodiversity protection is also part of the EU's external policy and development policy. Nevertheless, as a result largely of its steadily increasing consumption patterns, the EU's biodiversity footprint in third countries is very large.

Most European citizen are interested in conserving their natural resources. The best way to manage our natural resources for biodiversity conservation is to involve the people who use them and know the best. Close cooperation, an atmosphere of trust, and involvement of different stakeholders are key principles in Europe to preserve biodiversity and protect the economic vitality of our natural environment.