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The Natura 2000 protected areas network

Natura 2000 is a network of protected areas covering Europe's most valuable and threatened species and habitats. It is the largest coordinated network of protected areas in the world, extending across all 27 EU Member States, both on land and at sea. The sites within Natura 2000 are designated under the Birds and the Habitats Directives.

General overview

The sites in the Natura 2000 network are designated under the 'Nature Directives', i.e. the Birds and the Habitats Directives.

In 1979, the Birds Directive (amended in 2009) established an EU-wide protection regime for all bird species naturally occurring in the EU. It included classification by Member States of Special Protection Areas (SPA) for 194 particularly threatened bird species and for all migratory birds.

This approach was extended through the 1992 Habitats Directive, which also provided for the establishment of a representative system of legally protected areas throughout the EU. These areas are named Sites of Community Importance (SCI) and aim for the conservation of the 233 habitat types listed in Annex I of the Directive and the 900 plus species listed in Annex II.

SCIs must also be designated as Special Areas of Conservation (SAC) as soon as possible and within six years at most. SPAs and SCIs/SACs together make up the Natura 2000 network.

The target of both directives (specifically set out within the Habitats Directive and echoed in the Birds Directive) is to ensure the long-term sustainability of the habitats and species they have been set up to protect.

The European Union (EU) is one of the Contracting Parties to the Bern Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats. The Habitats Directive and subsequently the Natura 2000 network were set up in order to fulfil the EU's obligations to the Convention. Natura 2000 sites are therefore considered as the contribution from EU Member States to the Pan-European Emerald Network of the Bern Convention. The two networks are fully compatible and use the same methodology and information tools. Whereas Natura 2000 applies to the EU Member States, Emerald applies to the rest of Europe.

EU policies

The Nature Directives and Natura 2000 together provide a significant contribution towards achieving the EU Biodiversity Strategy to 2030. Target 1 of the Strategy calls for significant improvements in the conservation status of species and habitats protected under the EU Birds and Habitats Directives. In order to address this, completion of the Natura 2000 network and good management are essential. Natura 2000 sites are protected through a series of policy instruments that are put in place by the directives and are translated into national legislation. Certain articles of the Habitats Directive require Member States to report on the conservation status of habitats and species and on compensation measures taken for projects having a negative impact on Natura 2000 sites.

Article 6 is one of the most important articles in the Habitats Directive. Paragraphs 6(1) and 6(2) require Member States to take measures within Natura 2000 to maintain and restore the habitats and species in a favourable conservation status, avoiding activities that could significantly disturb these species, result in deterioration of their habitats or damage habitat types.

Paragraphs 6(3) and 6(4) lay down the procedure to follow when planning new developments that might affect a Natura 2000 site. Thus, an 'appropriate assessment' of any plan or project that is likely to have a significant effect on the conservation objectives of a Natura 2000 site must be carried out.

Article 10 states that Member States shall try to improve the ecological coherence of the Natura 2000 network and encourage the management of features of the landscape that are of major importance for wild fauna and flora, through their land-use planning and development policies. As a requirement of both directives (Article 12 of the Birds Directive and Article 17 of the Habitats Directive), Member States report every 6 years on the progress of implementation and information provision regarding the current conservation status of habitats and species.

While the designation of SCIs is nearly complete for land sites and recent improvements have been made in the marine environment, further efforts are needed where marine habitat and species are not yet adequately protected. Every year the European Commission publishes the approved list of SCIs by biogeographical region through the so-called Union Lists. These SCIs then become part of the Natura 2000 network. In fact, for proposed new sites (pSCIs), Member States are required to take appropriate protective measures, even before approval.

Since 2012 the European Commission runs the 'Natura 2000 biogeographical process'. This is a multi-stakeholder co-operation process at the biogeographical level, which includes seminars, workshops and cooperation activities to enhance effective implementation, management, monitoring, financing and reporting of the Natura 2000 network.

EEA activities

The EEA maintains a publicly accessible EU database on Natura 2000 that is updated annually. It also hosts the Natura 2000 network online map viewer, where visitors can obtain a variety of layered, up-to-date map-based information about the network and individual Natura 2000 sites. A third product offered by the EEA is a visualisation of the Natura 2000 Barometer with information on area coverage and site numbers by member state. Natura 2000 coverage in Europe's seas is calculated by marine regions and subregions. The land cover inside the Natura 2000 network is available from the land cover data viewer. A dedicated section in the EEA briefing 'Marine protected areas' provides additional insights to the coverage of marine Natura 2000. Through its European Topic Centre on Biodiversity and Ecosystems (ETC BE), the EEA assists the European Commission in producing the annual Union Lists of adopted SCIs.

In parallel, the ETC BE assists in the evaluation of the sufficiency of sites proposed by Member States. This ensures that all Annex I habitat types and Annex II species occurring in a Member State are adequately represented and protected by the network. See also the events with relation to the sufficiency of the network.

The ETC BE also provides support to the implementation of the directives, e.g. by editing the Interpretation manual of European Union habitats and maintaining the Natura 2000 reference portal.

A partnership between the EEA, the ETC BE and DG Environment has developed a European set of biodiversity indicators: the Pan-European 'Streamlined European Biodiversity Indicators' (SEBI). Among the set of 26 SEBI indicators, SEBI 008 Sites designated under the EU Habitats and Birds Directives deals with Natura 2000.

Related links

The EEA and its ETC BE provide the following Natura 2000 products to the European Commission and the public

- [Natura 2000 map viewer](#)
- [Natura 2000 map suite \(pdf\)](#)

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- Natura 2000 Barometer
 - Natura 2000 coverage in Europe's seas
 - Natura 2000 and land cover data viewer
 - SEBI 008: Sites designated under the EU Habitats and Birds Directives
 - Natura 2000 database
 - Natura 2000 reference portal
 - Building the Natura 2000 network
 - The sufficiency process events table
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- **European Commission official Natura 2000 website**
 - EU Birds and Habitats Directives

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Dashboard (Tableau)

Natura 2000 and land cover data viewer

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Dashboard (Tableau)

Natura 2000 Barometer

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