

The implementation of the EU 2020 Biodiversity Strategy and recommendations for the post 2020 Biodiversity Strategy



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In light of the evaluation process of the EU 2020 Biodiversity Strategy and the discussions on the post 2020 EU Biodiversity Strategy, the above members of the European Habitats Forum (EHF) have agreed the following assessment and recommendations for post 2020 EU Biodiversity Policy and action.

The EU is set to fail its 2020 target to halt biodiversity loss

The EU is set to fail its 2020 target to halt biodiversity loss. Both the 2015 Mid-term evaluation of the EU Biodiversity Strategyⁱ, the 2018 IPBES Regional assessment for Europe and Central Asiaⁱⁱ and the recently published 2019 IPBES Global Assessmentⁱⁱⁱ confirmed the continuing decline of biodiversity and the degradation of ecosystem services in the EU and globally. This presents a significant threat to human wellbeing.

Biodiversity loss is one of the most critical environmental threats alongside climate change and the two are inextricably linked. Without addressing the rapid loss of biodiversity, the world will struggle and likely fail to live up to the Paris Agreement or to achieve the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). And conversely without addressing climate change, actions to tackle the loss of biodiversity are likely to fail.

Land use change and direct exploitation of organisms remain the main cause of biodiversity loss in natural and semi-natural habitats. Particular pressure is exerted by intensive agricultural practices, land abandonment, urban sprawl, grey infrastructure development and human activities at sea (such as fishing, shipping or tourism).

The main reasons why the EU is failing to halt biodiversity loss have been known for a long time and they remain the same:

- The insufficient implementation of existing nature, water and marine legislation
- The lack of ownership and the lack of mainstreaming with other sectors and policies: agriculture, fisheries, forestry and energy, which means that the main drivers of biodiversity loss are not sufficiently addressed
- The lack of resources (finance gap) and continuation of perverse subsidies

The underlying problem is the lack of political will to take nature loss seriously and to act accordingly and the opposition of those with vested interests in the status quo. The EU's commitment to "lead by example" made in 2010^{iv}, is significantly undermined because it is not followed up with action on the ground in all EU Member States and this puts the EU's credibility at stake, both internationally and at home.

In order to change this and to secure positive political will, more transparency in decision making is essential and the influence of vested interests needs to be challenged. Furthermore, an intense effort needs to be made to communicate to citizens and politicians the often hidden values of nature and ecosystem services. The people's movement to avert the collapse of our life support system and an impoverished future for our children and grandchildren needs to be supported.

Evaluation of the implementation of the EU 2020 Biodiversity Strategy¹

Target 1: BHD implementation

- + Transposition of the nature directives into national law
- + Terrestrial Natura 2000 network mainly established, although the connectivity of the network remains insufficient
- Marine Natura 2000 network still has major gaps, in particular for offshore areas and with regards to connectivity between sites
- By far not enough effective management (conservation measures, species protection, preventing deterioration, restoration, monitoring and financing) and therefore many terrestrial and most marine Natura 2000 sites remain paper parks
- Slight increase in number of species and habitats in Favourable Conservation Status but many remain unfavourable and their conservation status continues to decline

Target 2: Restoration and Green Infrastructure

- + Knowledge base has increased
- Ecosystem degradation continues
- No clear definition of baseline and no commitment to specific restoration targets
- No strategic planning and insufficient investment in restoration and green infrastructure

Target 3: Agriculture and forestry

- + Targeted agro-environmental schemes can have positive impacts
- Farmland biodiversity (farmland birds, butterflies and other pollinators) continues to decline
- Conservation status of forest habitats and species covered by EU nature legislation shows no significant signs of improvement
- Greening of the CAP has failed and the CAP still incentivizes large-scale industrial farming

Target 4: Sustainable seas and fisheries

- + Progress has been made to put in place the legislative framework to improve data collection of fishing activities including impact on marine environment
- Management of fishing activities to restore and maintain fish populations have not been sufficient to decrease overfishing in most sea basins, in particular in the Mediterranean where at least 87% of fish stocks remain overfished
- Protected species such as seabirds, dolphins, whales and turtles continue to be bycaught due to a lack of management rules on fishing activities and lack of compliance with existing rules
- Fishing activities are still being given special treatment in Marine Protected Areas and management authorities have adopted a *laissez faire* attitude despite the threats to the conservation of the areas

Target 5: IAS

- + New regulation on IAS adopted
- Effectiveness of the IAS regulation is very dependent on species listing process and can therefore be undermined by strong pressure from Member States and industry
- Few marine species have been included in the regulation so far

¹ Overview of main positive and negative points for each target of the current EU Biodiversity Strategy, based on EHF's members assessment

Target 6: Global biodiversity loss

- + Increased resources for global biodiversity
- + Initial steps to reduce indirect drivers of global biodiversity loss, including wildlife trade
- Global biodiversity continues to decline
- Much too little being done to reduce the negative impacts of EU consumption and trade policy on biodiversity
- By far not enough action taken on assessing and removing perverse incentives

Recommendations for the Post 2020 EU Biodiversity Strategy

General remarks

There can be no healthy future on a degraded, overexploited planet. Our planet has boundaries which need to be respected, otherwise we will lose nature, have temperate rises of over 4°C and ultimately lose the basis for our lives and civilisation. As the IPBES 2019 global assessment concluded, nature is declining globally at rates unprecedented in human history and unless this negative trend is stopped, we will not be able to fulfil commitments to address climate change and to achieve sustainability.

Importantly, the IPBES global assessment has clearly expressed the need for transformational change of our economic system as critical to stop the negative trends. The EU and its member states need to reduce the impact of the drivers of biodiversity loss to sustainable levels and national strategies to remove perverse incentives are an important element for achieving this.

The linkages with the SDGs and the synergies between the climate change and biodiversity agendas need to be made explicit in the Post 2020 EU Biodiversity Strategy. According to the latest IPCC report^v, the adoption of effective measures to conserve land carbon stocks, to limit agricultural expansion and to recover healthy ocean ecosystems emerge as a critical feature of virtually all mitigation pathways that seek to limit global warming to 1.5°C. Nature-based solutions and large scale restoration will contribute to mitigation, adaptation and resilience.

The social dimension, health benefits and the acknowledgement of everyone's Right to Nature is an important element that needs to be taken into account throughout the Strategy, as according to a growing body of evidence, health inequalities are linked to access to nature and a number of studies show how access to nature is vital for good mental and physical health at all ages.

Suggestions on specific targets

The strategy needs to contain ambitious and SMART targets that will strengthen the implementation and enforcement of nature legislation (BHD, WFD, MSFD) and promote the synergies between them.

For the Nature Directives, the focus should be on ensuring effective management of all N2000 sites and reducing the pressures of human activities that prevent maintaining or restoring the protected habitats and species to Favourable Conservation Status (FCS). Effective, systematic and long term biodiversity monitoring, enhanced connectivity, adequate financing and preventing damage are also required. The engagement of EU Member states environmental, agricultural and fisheries authorities in its implementation needs to be guided by a gap analysis, and the gaps need to be closed by 2030 so that FCS is achieved.

For the Water Framework Directive, the focus should be on developing more ambitious and effective management plans by reducing the use of exemptions, strictly applying the non-deterioration obligation, as well as properly implementing the economic provisions to ensure that the value of freshwater ecosystems for their role in safeguarding water resources is truly appreciated.

For the Marine Strategy Framework Directive, the focus should be wider than fisheries impacts and it should ensure that more ambitious programmes of measures are developed and implemented, including by making the necessary funds available. It should cover a wide range of direct management measures addressing both individual threats from specific activities and cumulative impacts on marine ecosystems, in view of reaching Good Environmental Status of EU seas as soon as possible after 2020.

Frequent systematic monitoring of terrestrial and marine biodiversity and production of indicators is essential to track outcomes and evaluate progress. It's not only essential to monitor population sizes, but for understanding population declines we need to know also more about demographic data. Researchers revealed^{vi} that only 1.3% of the mammal, bird, reptile and amphibian species have comprehensive information on birth and death rates. They developed a Demographic Species Knowledge Index which should be supported.

In the context of the UN Decade for ecosystem restoration, and given the fact that progress on target 2 of the current strategy has been largely insufficient, it is clear that a new approach for ecosystem restoration, with stronger commitments, is needed. Special attention should be given to providing space for natural processes to restore and sustain ecosystem functionality and resilience (following rewilding principles like free flowing rivers and natural grazing for instance), to restoring species populations and to the stimulation of partnerships with other economic sectors in developing nature-based economies. Restoration of connectivity and landscape defragmentation should also be a priority. The mitigation and adaptation potential of restoring forests, wetlands, peatlands and grasslands and coastal, offshore and high seas ecosystems, should be strongly highlighted.

The collapse in freshwater biodiversity should be better addressed in the post 2020 Biodiversity Strategy. Healthy freshwater ecosystems (wetlands, rivers, floodplains, peatlands) are essential for nature, for society and for economies. These ecosystems, especially peatlands, store vast amounts of carbon, making their protection and restoration critical to stopping climate change. In Europe these ecosystems have been modified for centuries and are zones of the most intense human activity. They are home to Europe's highest levels of biodiversity, where the biggest decline of species has been detected. Freshwater species are declining at a faster rate than species in any other ecosystems: on average the abundance of populations monitored in the freshwater system declined by 83% in the last decades. Not even half the waters in the EU are considered to be healthy.

Mainstreaming nature protection and enhancement as an objective in other policies is the major challenge. To achieve this, other sectors need greater ownership of nature conservation issues and to take responsibility in the process of developing the biodiversity strategy and achieving benefits for biodiversity, e.g. by having clear tasks assigned to all ministries and parts of administration. Increased collaboration across sectors is needed to better integrate nature conservation and restoration within these sectors. Unless real commitment and political will is shown, we will not see a change in the negative trends. Without assessing and addressing the incentives and drivers, and transforming the economy it will not be possible to halt biodiversity loss. Without a major shift in agriculture policy, where public money actually rewards public goods, we will not be able to halt the dramatic decline of farmland birds and pollinators and support recovery. The same is true for fisheries policies, renewable energy, transport policy etc. Policy measures in all sectors should be developed to direct positive outcomes, including enhancement and achieving biodiversity gains, and biodiversity targets should be applicable across sectors.

The pollinators initiative to tackle the rapid decline of pollinators in Europe needs to be fully implemented and integrated in the post 2020 Biodiversity Strategy. Invertebrates are at the very heart of our ecosystems and their precipitous decline presents a crisis for agriculture and the health of the environment across the EU. Resolute action is needed to halt and reverse the decline of pollinators and the pollination service they provide. The post 2020 Biodiversity Strategy must include clear targets to address the drivers and pressures behind pollinator decline, including intensive agriculture, pesticide use and land use change.

Europe's seas include some of the most intensively used marine waters in the world and remain threatened by a range of human activities that lead to the loss of marine biodiversity and degraded habitats, the overexploitation of fish stocks, and pollution. Main challenges should be addressed by (1) ensuring proper enforcement and implementation of existing management rules, especially to recover fish populations and end overfishing; (2) designing new management rules for issues that are not currently implemented, such as ecosystem wide impact of commercial and recreational fisheries, underwater noise, and microplastics; (3) implementing robust monitoring systems, collecting sufficient data and making them publically available to allow the design and implementation of better and more effective conservation measures; and (4) adopting financial commitment to ensure management/enforcement/data collection is taking place. Decisions for supporting the marine

environment need to be taken while thinking about the long term use and protection of the marine environment. This includes properly applying an ecosystem based approach to maritime spatial planning, where nature is the fundamental basis of all social and economic development at sea and maritime activities are planned in view to achieving Good Environmental Status of EU seas.

To tackle the finance gap for nature protection and restoration, there is an urgent need to increase available funding at all levels. As stated above, this needs to be in addition to phasing out harmful subsidies and making sure that EU funding does not lead to biodiversity loss (implementation of biodiversity proofing). The funding available for nature conservation and implementation of the biodiversity strategy needs to be increased significantly, by setting a spending target of 50% of the overall budget for nature, climate and environment. As the current budget discussions go into the direction of more responsibility for Member States (subsidiarity), it becomes even more important to make sure that funding opportunities for nature are fully included in the CAP strategic plans and the operational programmes, including EMFF operational programmes.

Given the fact that the EU represents only 7% of the world's population, but uses up almost 20% of the global biocapacity^{vii}, increased action to tackle global biodiversity loss and to reduce the EU's global footprint is direly needed. This needs to go beyond the greening of development policies and must pave the road for a fundamental system change regarding trade and consumption policies, including a change of economic incentives and supporting a UN treaty on transnational corporations and human rights to ensure global environmental and human rights standards are respected by corporations in third countries, as they are in Europe. EU trade agreements must ensure the highest environmental standards are maintained. The EU has been supporting biodiversity conservation globally through its development cooperation instruments, and this needs to be continued and stepped up in the next Budget period to support biodiversity and climate action as well as the implementation of the SDGs in Europe and in third countries.

Building capacity for local communities and civil society to ensure proper decision making and implementation of environmental law is essential. The IPBES global assessment summary clearly identifies the need for strengthening environmental laws and policies and improving their implementation as a key lever for protecting biodiversity. Equally sustainable outcomes are more likely where local communities are involved and participating in decision making.

As the IPBES global assessment has clearly shown, we are facing an ecological emergency and the risks of nature loss for humanity are alarming. However, the report also makes it clear that it is possible to halt and reverse this trend, if we implement transformative changes to address the indirect drivers that are the root causes of nature deterioration. The key challenge is to raise political will and ambition to implement effectively the necessary actions. The EU needs to make halting and reversing biodiversity loss by 2030 a top priority on the political agenda of Heads of States and not leave this crucial issue to environment ministers alone.

ⁱ European Commission (2015) The Mid Term Review of the EU Biodiversity Strategy to 2020. COM (2015) 478 final, http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/biodiversity/strategy/index_en.htm#mid

ⁱⁱ Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), 2018, Regional assessment report on biodiversity and ecosystem services for Europe and Central Asia, <https://www.ipbes.net/assessment-reports/eca>

ⁱⁱⁱ IPBES, 2019, Global assessment summary for policy makers, <https://www.ipbes.net/news/ipbes-global-assessment-summary-policy-makers-pdf>

^{iv} Council Conclusions 15 March 2010, 7536/10, <https://register.consilium.europa.eu/doc/srv?l=EN&f=ST%207536%202010%20INIT>

^v IPCC, 2018: Summary for Policymakers. Global Warming of 1,5°C. An IPCC Special report, <https://www.ipcc.ch/sr15/>

^{vi} PNAS, May, 2019: p 9658-9664, <https://www.pnas.org/content/pnas/116/19/9658.full.pdf>

^{vii} EU Overshoot Day, Living beyond Nature's Limits, WWF & Global Footprint Network, April 2019, http://www.wwf.eu/media_centre/?uNewsID=346835