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## **European Natura 2000 Award 2015**

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# **BENCHMARKING REPORT**

In cooperation with





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# 1 Executive Summary

The European Natura 2000 Award was launched by the European Commission in 2013. In spite of the extraordinary richness of Europe's nature, and the success of Natura 2000 since its inception in 1992, knowledge and understanding of the network among the European public remains limited. The Award aims to change this. Its objectives are to:

- Raise awareness about the Natura 2000 network among the public;
- Recognise excellence in the promotion of the Natura 2000 network and its objectives;
- Recognise excellence in the management of Natura 2000 sites;
- Encourage networking between stakeholders working with nature protection in Natura 2000 sites; and
- Provide role models to inspire and promote best practice for nature conservation.

In the first two years, the process has been quite similar. Winners were selected for five categories: Conservation, Socio-Economic Benefits, Communication, Reconciling Interests/Perceptions and Cross-Border Cooperation and Networking. Eligible applications were evaluated according to the criteria of effectiveness, originality, durability, cost-benefit ratio and replicability by a team of independent experts, resulting in a shortlist. The winners were then chosen by a jury consisting of representatives of EU Institutions and different organisations active in the field of nature conservation. In 2015, a public vote was held to choose the winner of a sixth prize: the European Citizens' Award.

In its second year, 2015, the Natura 2000 Award received 93 applications from 24 Member States. This was fewer than in the first year when 163 applications were received. As in 2014, by far the greatest number of applications was received under the Conservation category, followed in decreasing order by the categories Communication, Cross-Border Cooperation and Networking, Socio-Economic Benefits and Reconciling Interests/Perceptions. As in 2014, applications were received from a wide range of actors including NGOs, businesses, farmers and national, regional and local authorities. The largest number of applications was submitted by NGOs who often worked together with other actors to engage them in consortia. Again, many applications described activities which had been funded through LIFE+, demonstrating the importance of this funding programme for Natura 2000 management.

The aim of the annual Benchmarking Reports is to contribute to the identification, recognition and promotion of good practice in Natura 2000. It is also intended as an instrument for the exchange of innovative ideas between the applicants who submitted applications to the Award, or as inspiration for those who plan to submit applications in the future. The report is targeted mainly at the Natura 2000 community, including past and potential future applicants to the scheme. These include site managers, staff and volunteers of nature conservation NGOs, representatives of land users active on Natura 2000 sites and other local stakeholders. A certain level of knowledge about Natura 2000 is assumed but overly technical language has been avoided as far as possible.

This current Benchmarking Report is based on an analysis of successful applications in the second year of the Award, particularly but not exclusively the Award winners and finalist applications. The report presents a catalogue structured according to 11 elements of good practice identified using examples taken from the submitted applications. After each element of good practice, the report outlines recommendations aimed particularly at future applicants.

The Report highlights the huge amount of expertise, experience and ingenuity being invested in the network by a diverse community of Natura 2000 actors, in order to jointly preserve and

make the most of Europe's impressive natural heritage. The report shows that Natura 2000 is a network in progress, and one of the great achievements of the European Union.

## 2 Introduction

Europe boasts an extraordinarily rich biodiversity. The steep climatic and ecological gradients along the latitudinal, longitudinal and altitudinal axes mean that the continent is home to an exceptionally wide range of ecosystems and - as a consequence - an impressive richness of species and habitats.

However, biodiversity in Europe is threatened. Alarming rates of decline in the condition, number or distribution of many habitats and species are being observed. The 2010 target to halt biodiversity loss was not met and progress towards the 2020 target to halt biodiversity loss and restore it as far as possible is slow (EEA 2015). Research indicates that globally, we may be entering an anthropogenically-caused mass extinction (Ceballos 2015).

Biodiversity is important to Europe's citizens for environmental, social and economic reasons. Attempts have been made to put a monetary value on biodiversity through the Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity (TEEB) which estimated the costs of not reaching the 2010 targets. The cost of lost forest ecosystem services alone was calculated as being in the range of US\$2–4.5 trillion per year every year. The economic benefits of the Natura 2000 network itself are equally significant. The economic benefits, such as ecosystem services, water and climate regulation, ecotourism and fuel, fibre and food, have been calculated on a site and habitat basis in a range of Member States. A European Union study has scaled these up to the EU-scale and estimates overall benefits in the range of €200-300 billion annually (European Union 2013).

The European public agrees that biodiversity is important to them. The latest Eurobarometer Flash Survey shows that 88% of respondents think that the decline and possible extinction of animal species, flora and fauna, natural habitats and ecosystems in Europe is a problem (Eurobarometer 2013). However the same survey showed how poor public knowledge about Natura 2000 is with only 27% of respondents aware of the term and still fewer understanding its meaning. The Natura 2000 Award aims to change this.

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### 2.1 Natura 2000 – a centrepiece of biodiversity policy

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The European Union has a number of legislative and coordination measures in place to manage biodiversity. Natura 2000 forms the centrepiece of these efforts.

The Natura 2000 network of over 27,000 terrestrial and marine protected sites, consists of Special Protection Areas (SPAs) designated under the 1979 Birds Directive and Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) designated under the 1992 Habitats Directive. Site designation and management is required to protect the most threatened species and habitats. The directives also provide strict protection for certain species across the wider EU terrestrial and marine territory (including outside protected sites).

The crucial importance of Natura 2000 for EU biodiversity policy is reflected by the EU Biodiversity Strategy to 2020 (European Commission 2011b), which sets out the long-term vision and medium-term headline target of EU biodiversity policy:

- **2050 vision:** *"By 2050, European Union biodiversity and the ecosystem services it provides — its natural capital — are protected, valued and appropriately restored for biodiversity's intrinsic value and for their essential contribution to human wellbeing and economic prosperity, and so that catastrophic changes caused by the loss of biodiversity are avoided."*

- **2020 headline target:** *"Halting the loss of biodiversity and the degradation of ecosystem services in the EU by 2020 and restoring them in so far as feasible, while stepping up the EU contribution to averting global biodiversity loss."*

Among the six targets of the strategy, the first focuses exclusively on the full and timely implementation of the Habitats and Birds Directives, while the other five complement it. More specifically, target 1 aims to *"halt the deterioration in the status of all species and habitats covered by EU nature legislation and achieve a significant and measurable improvement in their status so that, by 2020, compared to current assessments:*

- 100% more habitat assessments and 50% more species assessments under the Habitats Directive show an improved conservation status; and
- 50% more species assessments under the Birds Directive show a secure or improved status. "

The establishment of the Natura 2000 network has allowed Member States to work together to conserve biodiversity under one legal framework. It has also enabled the targeting of resources to the sites most at risk. Importantly, a common reporting framework has been set up. Member States must report every six years on progress with implementation of the Habitats Directive. Reporting on the Birds Directive has recently also been brought in line with Habitats Directive reporting.

The State of Nature report (EEA 2015) summarises the most recent round of Member States reporting from the Birds and Habitats Directives, providing a snapshot of the current situation with regard to conservation status and trends for over 2,000 species and habitat types protected by the directives. The reporting shows a mixed picture: the headline figures of 20% of habitat assessments favourable or improving; 28% of species assessments favourable or improving; and 52% of bird species secure, hides a great deal of complexity and regional variation. While some successes have been seen, demonstrating the effectiveness of certain targeted measures to protect biodiversity, progress towards meeting the targets of the Biodiversity Strategy described above is in reality limited.

Further information will be provided by the Mid Term Evaluation of the Biodiversity Strategy which is due to report on progress towards meeting the targets halfway to 2020. An independent assessment, published by BirdLife in May 2015, concluded that progress had been made towards reaching Target 1 (and that the Birds and Habitats Directives have been in this respect effective). However, current progress will not be sufficient to meet the target by 2020. In particular, better implementation of site protection and the establishment of management plans as well as greater levels of funding to finance Natura 2000 are needed (BirdLife 2015).

The performance of the Birds and Habitats Directives themselves will be additionally assessed in 2015 through the Fitness Check of EU Nature Legislation (European Commission 2015). Included in the wider Regulatory Fitness and Performance Programme (REFIT), which examines the burden of EU legislation with the aim to contribute to a clear, stable and predictable regulatory framework, the Fitness Check will examine, among other things:

- Implementation and integration successes and problems;
- The costs of implementation and of non-implementation of the legislation;
- Opportunities for improving implementation and reducing administrative burden without compromising the integrity of the purpose of the directives;
- The situation of implementation in different EU countries; and
- The views of key stakeholder groups.

Significant further information on the implementation of Natura 2000 and the Nature Directives will therefore be gathered over the course of 2015.

## 2.2 Typical Challenges to Natura 2000

In the first Natura 2000 Award Benchmarking Report, some of the key site-level challenges to Natura 2000 identified through a literature review. These are summarised and expanded with further references in the table below.

Challenge	Description	Example References
Insufficient stakeholder participation in site designation and management	Since Natura 2000 does not afford strict protection, effective management relies on successful communication with stakeholders. In some areas this has been limited. Stakeholder participation can also in itself be very resource-intensive.	Beunen & De Vries (2011), Iloja <i>et al.</i> (2010)
Conflicting interests of other sectors	Key economic sectors such as agriculture, forestry, fisheries, tourism and the extractive sector often have interests that are in conflict with nature conservation objectives of the sites affected. Enforcing legal requirements on certain actors can still be problematic in some Member States.	Snethlage <i>et al.</i> (2012)
Poor conservation status of habitats that depend on traditional agricultural practices	The latest reporting shows that species and habitats which depend upon on agricultural ecosystems continue to do worse than the assessments of other ecosystems due to agricultural intensification or abandonment.	EEA (2015) Halada <i>et al.</i> (2011) BirdLife (2015)
Lack of habitat connectivity especially in the context of climate change	Habitat fragmentation, caused amongst other things by infrastructure development, means that species cannot easily move between protected areas. This is particularly problematic in the context of climate change, where adaptation to changes in biogeographic boundaries is needed.	Opdam and Wascher (2004)
Lack of strategic, adaptive management planning aimed at favourable conservation status	Management planning for Natura 2000 still lags behind designation. In cases where plans exist, their strategic direction towards improving the conservation status of target habitats and species is sometimes not sufficiently elaborated.	Hochkirch <i>et al.</i> (2013), Iloja <i>et al.</i> (2010)
Inconsistent on-the-ground monitoring of conservation status	Despite the reporting requirements of the Birds and Habitats Directives, monitoring is not always sufficiently standardised between Member States.	Hochkirch <i>et al.</i> (2013)

Weak social consensus to support conservation of Natura 2000 sites	Weak consensus about the importance of Natura 2000 management has slowed down implementation and made it more difficult to integrate biodiversity management into the activities of other sectors.	Hochkirch <i>et al.</i> (2013), Grodzinska-Jurczak & Cent, (2010), Iojă <i>et al.</i> (2010)
Lack of resources for effective management of Natura 2000 sites	To meet the management requirements of Natura 2000 sites would cost an estimated €5.8 billion annually. These funding requirements are not being met. The estimated costs however are outweighed by the benefits estimate at around €200-300 billion per year.	Iojă <i>et al.</i> (2010); European Commission (2011a); European Union (2013)

The Award categories described below have been designed to encourage applications which address some of these commonly recognised challenges.

## 3 Natura 2000 Award

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### 3.1 Objectives of the Award

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The Natura 2000 Award has five interdependent objectives:

- **Raise awareness about the Natura 2000 network among the public:** In spite of its extraordinary coverage, the immense wealth of natural values involved and its remarkable success in contributing to biodiversity conservation and sustainable development throughout the European Union, the Natura 2000 network remains poorly known and understood among the general public, and even among those living in the immediate vicinity of sites: According to a survey carried out in 2013, only 27% of respondents had heard of Natura 2000, and only 11% really know what it is (Eurobarometer 2013). It is therefore time to celebrate the achievements of the Natura 2000 network and to bring them to public attention throughout the Union. The Natura 2000 Award is an effective way of achieving this because it focuses on what matters most: the huge diversity of Natura 2000 sites and the ingenuity of all those who work towards their effective management and promotion. Focusing primarily on the site level makes the richness of the network even more tangible to the general public, because it highlights achievements that can be directly demonstrated to and experienced by site visitors and stakeholders.
- **Recognise excellence in the management of Natura 2000 sites:** Establishing, managing and improving the Natura 2000 network has posed a wide range of practical challenges to site managers (see Section 2.2 above), which have been addressed through an equally wide range of innovative solutions. Taken together, this wealth of solutions is one of the great social achievements of the Natura 2000 network. More than 20 years after implementing the Habitats Directive, it is time to take stock of and celebrate this creative achievement. The body of good practice that is emerging as a result of the multiple problem-solving successes of site managers and their partners has not been used to its full potential in the past. It needs to be recognised and promoted in such a way that it can be replicated progressively throughout the entire network. This is another way in which the Natura 2000 Award will contribute to achieving the aims of the Habitat and Birds Directives.
- **Recognise excellence in the promotion of the Natura 2000 Network and its objectives:** While the management of individual Natura 2000 sites has given rise to a multitude of innovative solutions, the same is true for efforts to promote sites or even the network as a whole and its objectives. The Natura 2000 Award also aims to recognise efforts to promote Natura 2000 as the centrepiece of the EU biodiversity policy which can be proven to have an impact on the individual site level.
- **Encourage networking between stakeholders working with nature protection in Natura 2000 sites:** People who work in and around individual Natura 2000 sites may be or feel isolated from the vast experience that already exists among their peers. To overcome this, the Natura 2000 Award contributes to forming a European Natura 2000 community where individual site managers support and learn from each other. This applies to the social level - with applicant representatives gathering at the annual Award ceremonies and getting to know their colleagues from other successful applications - as well as on a more technical level: The good practices revealed in the applications is being analysed and compiled in the award's documentation for further dissemination, including this Benchmarking Report. This strengthens the character of the Natura 2000 community as a mutual learning network.
- **Provide role models to inspire and promote best practice for nature conservation:** As a social effort, Natura 2000 is run by a diverse community of inspiring people. The Natura 2000 Award aims not only to promote outstanding solutions to conservation challenges, but

also to provide a stage for the people who develop these solutions. This will inspire others and bring new people into site administrations, NGOs and other partners, and provide role models for future generations of conservation managers.

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## **3.2 Description and justification of the categories**

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Under the 2015 Award, applications were invited under five different categories, which reflected broad thematic areas where innovation and good practice are likely to yield the highest benefits for the overall effectiveness and conservation status of the Natura 2000 network. This is partly because they address recognised challenges such as those identified in Section 2.2. These categories are Conservation, Socio-Economic Benefits, Communication, Reconciling Interests/Perceptions and Cross-Border Cooperation and Networking. Although submissions could be made under one category only, the categories clearly are interdependent and some applications demonstrated cross-cutting methodological innovation and good practice.

### **3.2.1 Conservation**

This category focused on achievements that have improved the conservation status of a particular habitat and / or species / group of species. Target habitats or species had to be in the Habitats Directive Annex I or II or Birds Directive Annex I, or be a regularly occurring migratory bird, and be the habitat or species for which the main application site was designated.

### **3.2.2 Socio-Economic Benefits**

This category recognised socio-economic benefits that have come about as a result of a Natura 2000 site or activities on one. It aimed at activities that maximised the generation and utilisation of such benefits, for instance by allowing sustainable producers to establish niche markets or obtain better prices for their products by labelling or other suitable approaches.

### **3.2.3 Communication**

This category was centred upon successful communication activities aimed at increasing awareness or promoting Natura 2000, particularly those that brought lasting changes in attitudes or behaviour towards the network among specific stakeholder groups or the general public.

### **3.2.4 Reconciling Interests/Perceptions**

Based on the observation that effective reconciliation often involves compromises between stakeholders with differing interests and views, this category rewarded successful efforts that brought together opposing socio-economic or political forces, land- or resource-users in a way that benefitted Natura 2000.

### **3.2.5 Cross-Border Cooperation and Networking**

This category covered two potentially distinct but interrelated aspects, namely:

- (1) Cross-border (or cross-region in federal states) collaboration in order to achieve better conservation of a species / habitat. It can also include cooperation within a bio-geographical region, or between marine and land sites.
- (2) How networking activities with similar themes have resulted in lasting positive impacts for Natura 2000.

### 3.2.6 European Citizens' Award

While not a category in itself, a sixth prize was awarded in 2015 to the finalist application receiving the largest number of votes through an online public vote. The aim of this Award was to engage the public more directly in the process of choosing the winners and to encourage the applicants to promote their own applications and the Award more widely.

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### 3.3 Description of the selection criteria

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Following an eligibility check, the submissions under each category were assessed by a team of evaluators using five selection criteria: effectiveness, originality, durability, cost-benefit and replicability. These selection criteria - the weight of which varied slightly between the Award categories - can be summarised as follows:

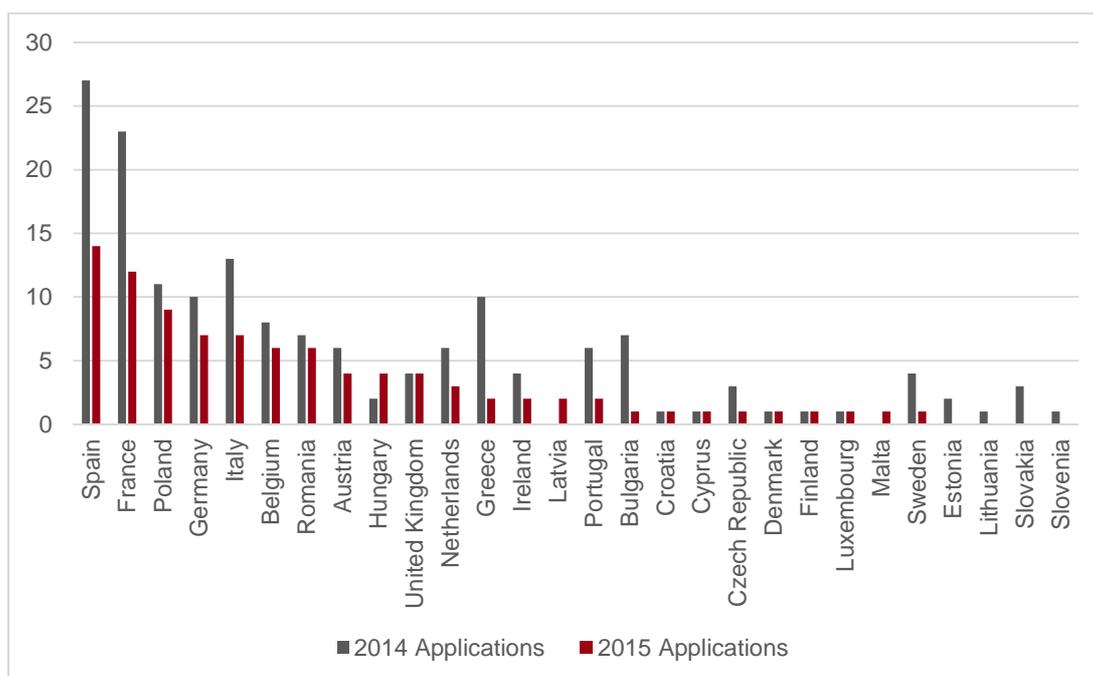
- **Effectiveness:** In order to judge how effective a given application was, the evaluation assessed how clearly the activities' / achievements' impact had been demonstrated in relation to its goals and to the conservation values in question (e.g., species / habitats from the Habitat and Birds Directives' annexes). Was the impact of the activity measured, and / or was there a clear difference between the situation before and after the activities? Depending on the category, effectiveness was expressed as: the conservation status of species or habitats in question; socio-economic benefits; changes in attitude of the target audience; changes in views between interest groups and how far apart they were initially; and / or number of countries / regions involved in networking. Of key importance for all of these was demonstrating the benefits to Natura 2000.
- **Originality:** Originality was assessed at the EU and individual Member State levels. Applicants were asked to self-assess the originality of their activities / achievements. This self-assessment was critically re-evaluated by the evaluators, taking into account the overall approach and specific methodologies and tools employed, as well as the types of organisation and partners involved. Originality was included among the selection criteria as it underpins methodological innovation.
- **Durability:** The criterion of durability focused on the likelihood of the impacts of the activities / achievements being long-lasting, on how self-sustained these impacts would be after the conclusion of the activities themselves, and on the extent to which follow-up activities ensuring durability had already been initiated or at least prepared. This included the physical and financial sustainability of mechanisms or structures established through the applicants activities, observed trends in key impacts allowing a prognosis of their future development, documented or formally agreed partner commitments and other relevant indicators.
- **Cost-benefit:** The cost-benefit ratio of applications was evaluated in relation to their documented impact, as well as the European importance of the intervention target (e.g., % of community population or area for conservation applications). The question of how sustainable this impact would be, and what additional funds would be required to maintain it was also considered in this context. For applications in the Socio-Economic Benefits category, costs could also be compared with economic (monetary) benefits.
- **Replicability:** This selection criterion focused on how replicable an applicant's approach or methodology would be in other Natura 2000 sites. This is a particularly important question in relation to the Award's purposes of promoting good practice and mutual learning within the Natura 2000 community. In order to evaluate replicability, the evaluators assessed if an application's activities / achievements had already been replicated or at least promoted in other contexts, to what extent the preconditions of replication had been considered by the applicants, what steps for dissemination of results and lessons learned had been taken, and what was the overall potential to achieve replication in the future.

After the evaluation according to the above criteria, the evaluation panel agreed a short-list of 24 applications and passed on their results to the Award jury who selected the winning applicant for each category. In parallel, a public vote was held to select the winner of the European Citizens' Award on the basis of the summaries provided by the applicants (edited by the European Commission to ensure a similar length and standard of English) published on the Natura 2000 Award website. The general public was encouraged to vote on their favourite finalist application.

### 3.4 Applicant statistics

The Natura 2000 Award 2015 received 93 applications from 24 Member States (compared to 163 applications from 26 Member States in 2014). Figure 1 shows the applications from 2014 and 2015.

**Figure 1: Number of applications per Member State**



In general, the relative number of applications reflected the total area of SCIs/SACs and SPAs in each country - those countries with the largest areas of Natura 2000 sites also submitted most applications. Exceptions to this rule were the Benelux countries, which submitted more applications than would be expected from their network areas, and the Nordic EU countries (Denmark, Finland and Sweden), from which very few applications per square kilometre of SCI/SAC/SPA area were received.

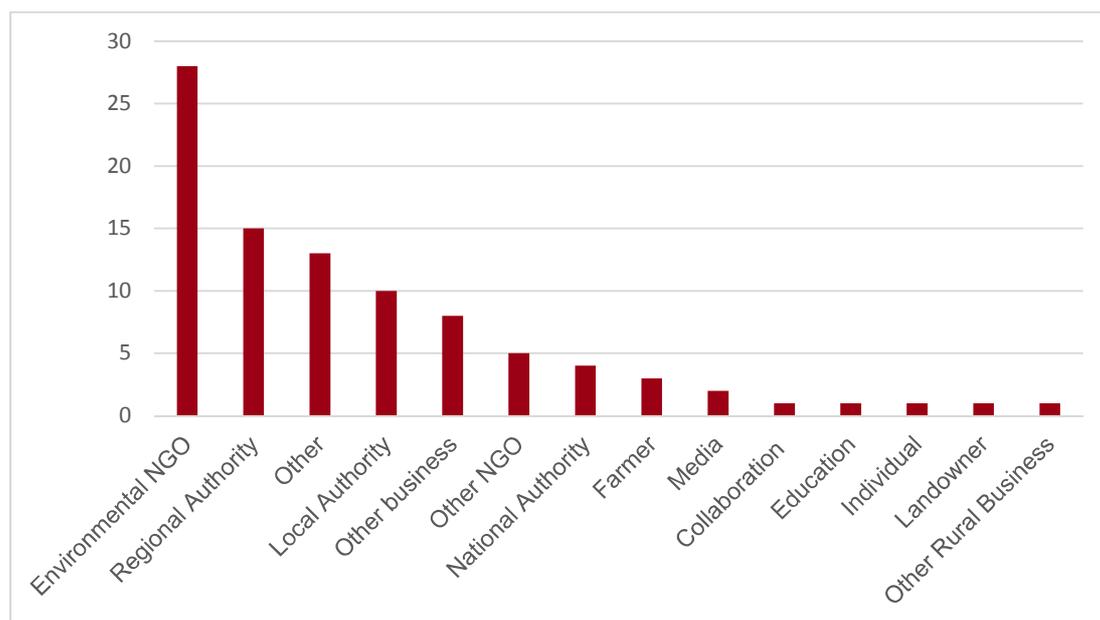
With regard to the Award categories, as in 2014, by far the greatest number of applications was received under the Conservation category, followed by Communication. Reconciling Interests/Perceptions, Cross-Border Cooperation and Networking and Socio-Economic Benefits (Table 1) received fewer applications. Particularly disappointing was the low number of applications to the Reconciling Interests/Perceptions category which received many more in the first year. This also meant that the chances of being shortlisted or winning the Award differed significantly between categories.

**Table 1: Number of applications per category**

Category	2014	2015
Conservation	58	40
Communication	49	27
Socio-Economic Benefits	8	9
Reconciling Interests/Perceptions	38	6
Cross-Border Cooperation and Networking	10	11

In 2015, unlike 2014, applicants were asked to categorise their organisation when registering on the Award website. The figures for 2015 are therefore not entirely comparable with 2014. While the largest number of applications was again received from environmental NGOs (28 with a further 5 applications from other NGOs) (in 2014, 43 applications were received from NGOs generally), as in 2014, there was a wide diversity of actors involved in applications.

**Figure 2. Type of applicant 2015. Applicants selected from the categories listed. NB. Other NGO = NGO where environment is not the main focus; Other rural business = not farmer or landowner; Other business = not rural business; Other = range of different applicants not always further defined.**



The overview of actors involved in the applications is similar to and reinforces the general trends identified in 2014:

- Diversity:** The diversity of applicants ranged from site administrations through various businesses, to museums and academic institutions. This reflects the wide range of actors and stakeholders who support - in one way or another - the management and promotion of Natura 2000 sites, and highlights once more the considerable social capital that is already invested in this network.
- Important role of NGOs:** The 2015 Award has once more highlighted that, within the wider spectrum of actors, civil society plays an indispensable role for nature conservation and sustainable development of Natura 2000 sites. NGOs often catalyse innovative solutions that are then also taken up by state institutions, and bring together other stakeholders such as site administrations, land owners, resource users and academic institutions for collaborative conservation initiatives.
- Importance of consortia:** Consortia of different types of institutions (such as site managers and academia, or NGOs and resource users) contributed some of the most innovative applications in both 2014 and 2015. This may have to do with the fact that entering consortia helped individual actors to overcome narrow perceptions and open their mind to unconventional and more challenging intervention strategies.
- Emerging actors:** Both rounds of the Award highlighted the growing importance of emerging categories of actors, such as land owners, natural resource users (e.g., hunters and fishermen) and business companies. More unusual actors included faith-based organisations, the military and sports clubs.

- **Dedicated funding:** The applications submitted were of also diverse in terms of their funding sources. As in 2014, a significant number were EU-funded LIFE+/LIFE projects, demonstrating the high importance of this funding programme for management of Natura 2000 sites. However, other donor- and state-funded activities, use of corporate social responsibility (CSR) funding by businesses, and the engagement of volunteers to carry out key activities were also noted.

### 3.5 Short introduction of winners by category

The winners of the Natura 2000 Award 2015 are presented briefly below:



*The Danish Nature Agency and partners Aarhus University and DTU Aquarestation, carried out this marine project to restore cavernous boulder reefs which had been seriously damaged by boulder extraction in the past.*



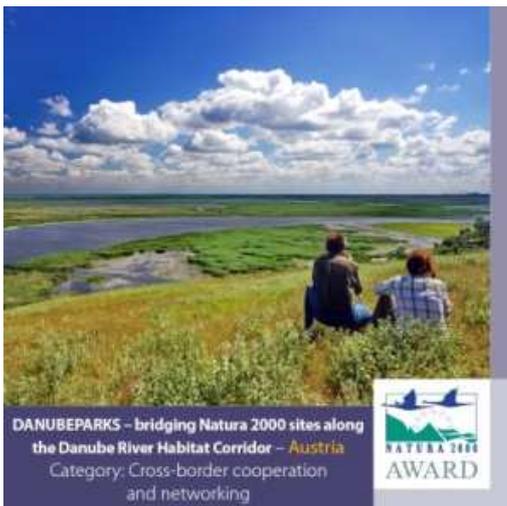
*Through agreements with farmers, the Hunting Federation of Lozère established measures to maintain open habitat and provide carrion food sources for raptors. The vultures have become a symbol of the area attracting significant numbers of tourists.*



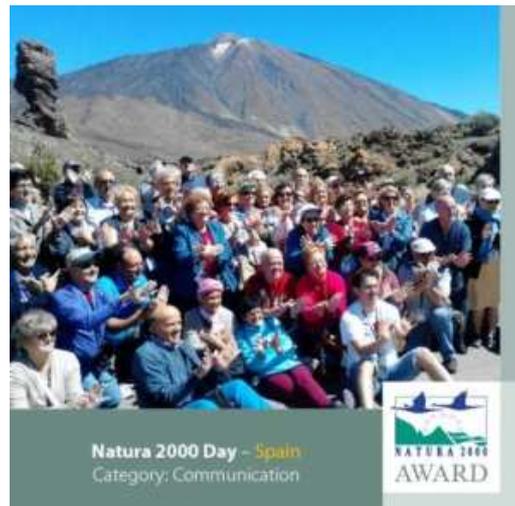
*Naturfreunde created a network of trails designed for walkers in Baden-Württemberg to learn about Natura 2000 and an exhibition: 'Es lebe das Leben' to showcase the Natura 2000 network in town halls and other public facilities.*



*The Fundación Oso Pardo (FOP) worked long-term with local stakeholders to reduce human-bear conflicts in the Cantabrian Mountains, signing agreements with 4,500 hunters and set up bear monitoring and measures to reduce damage.*



*DANUBEPARKS established jointly-designed actions on habitat management, conservation of flagship species, river restoration, nature tourism and public awareness in all relevant Danube Protected Areas.*



*SEO/BirdLife and BirdLife Europe with Agencia EFE created the 'European Natura 2000 Day' which asks the general public to make the shape of a butterfly with their hands and share on social media to raise awareness about the Natura 2000 network.*

## 4 Rationale and structure of the Benchmarking Report

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### 4.1 Aim of the report

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The Benchmarking Report aims to contribute to all five objectives of the Natura 2000 Award (see Section 3.1), but it particularly aims to identify, recognise and promote good practice in Natura 2000 management and promotion. It also is intended as an instrument for the exchange of innovative ideas between applicants, or inspiration for those who plan to submit an application in the future.

The report is targeted mainly at the Natura 2000 community, including past and potential future applicants to the Award. These include site managers, staff and volunteers of nature conservation NGOs, representatives of land users active on Natura 2000 sites and other local stakeholders. A certain level of knowledge about Natura 2000 is assumed but overly technical language has been avoided wherever possible.

**It should be borne in mind that this report is based on the first and second years' applications only and will be updated to include information on future rounds.**

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### 4.2 Structure and methodology

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The core part of the Benchmarking Report of the 2015 Natura 2000 Award is a catalogue of 11 elements of good practice. These were derived from a stepwise analysis of the factors that made the successful submissions to the Award scheme stand out during the evaluation process. The following methodology was used:

1. The application documentation submitted and the evaluations – particularly those of the finalists for each category - were read.
2. Evaluators' comments on finalist applications were collected, clustered and categorised, giving rise to a first tentative list of elements of good practice.
3. Non-shortlisted applications (particularly those highlighted by the evaluators as having certain qualities in spite of not being short-listed) were screened based on the tentative list of elements of good practice, and additional examples of original application attributes that had been noted as strengths of those applications – even if these strengths had not been sufficient to qualify them as a finalist – were identified. At the same time, the list of elements of good practice was refined and adjusted.
4. A representative sample of 3-5 applications illustrating key aspects of each element of good practice was collected – primarily from shortlisted applications but also including other relevant applications.
5. Each of the applications identified in step 4 was briefly described in relation to the element of good practice for which it had been selected (N.B. this implied that some applications were listed under more than one element of good practice, which reflects the fact that some applications were strong in more ways than others).

6. Additional comments from the evaluators relevant to each element of good practice were collected and briefly discussed, in order to provide further guidance to future applicants.

This stepwise process was conducted fully in 2014 and revised in 2015, leading to the addition of one more element of good practice (perseverance).

As already pointed out in the 2014 Benchmarking Report, not all of these elements of good practice are equally relevant to all Award categories and selection criteria - the relevance of each element is noted at the beginning of each chapter. However, most of them can be regarded as general attributes of good practice in the Natura 2000 context. As in 2014, some of the elements of good practice specifically refer to the management and promotion of the Natura 2000 network (i.e., Nos. 1, 2, 4, 5 and 6), while others reflect general rules of sound project planning and implementation (i.e., Nos. 3, 7, 8, 9 and 10).

Each chapter of the catalogue starts with a short summary of how the respective element of good practice was relevant to the submissions to the 2015 Award, and what differences were noted in comparison to 2014.

**The 2015 elements of good practice discussed in Section 5 below are the following:**

1. Attracting new actors;
2. Involving all stakeholders;
3. Starting from a sound situation analysis;
4. Promoting conceptual and technical innovation;
5. Looking beyond individual sites;
6. Realising socio-economic benefits;
7. Planning sustainability from the start;
8. Mobilising a wide range of resources;
9. Measuring and communicating success;
10. Learning, knowledge sharing and communication as core application components;  
and
11. Perseverance (new).

Following the description of each element of good practice, suggestions or recommendations for future applicants are highlighted in a box. This allows applicants to go directly to the recommendations and read the longer text providing examples for the areas which are particularly relevant to their activities.

The report concludes with an Outlook section (Section 6) which addresses the use of the report's findings, and a number of thematic and geographic areas where there may be room for further development in future rounds of the Award.

It should be borne in mind that the reporting is based on the first and second years' applications only. It will be updated to include information on further Award rounds.

## 5 Catalogue of good practice

### 5.1 Attracting new actors

The 2014 Benchmarking Report stressed that widening the range of Natura 2000 actors is a key approach towards improving stakeholder involvement and building public support for the Natura 2000 network. This is because Natura 2000 sites are not strict protected areas, but typically multi-functional areas with a correspondingly wide range of owners, users and other stakeholders. Broadening the base of actors in Natura 2000 also brings in new expertise and approaches, which often increases their management effectiveness and enhances benefits.

Many new and emerging actors already contributed to the success of applications to the 2014 Award. Examples were agricultural land owners, hunters, companies from the extractive sector, faith groups, school children and people with disabilities. In addition to these groups, submissions to the 2015 round show that the range of social actors who contribute to the Natura 2000 network is even wider:

- The Spanish private micro-enterprise Qnatur submitted the application **“Qnatur: Catalyzing eco-business in Natura 2000”**. This project promotes ecologically friendly products and services that are connected to Natura 2000 sites and other natural areas via the internet. It aims at the Spanish market. Qnatur has built up a network of 512 entrepreneurs in 39 Natura 2000 sites, who use its website qnatur.com to offer a wide array of goods and services ranging from horseback riding to agricultural produce. By becoming a Natura 2000 actor, the enterprise has also brought innovative technology related to e-marketing and a market-based self-financing approach into the conservation field. These help to incentivise farmers and other local businesses to support their Natura 2000 sites and at the same time make some of the benefits of these sites accessible to customers throughout Spain. Qnatur is an example of the considerable potential of small innovative business sector to get involved in the marketing of goods and services from the network.


- Another actor of great strategic potential in relation to some habitat types listed in the Habitats Directive is the military. The real estate administration of the Latvian Defence Ministry conducts the application **“Nature and Military - nature conservation in the military training area Adazi, Latvia”**, in the framework of an ongoing LIFE+ Nature project. This application aims at a good conservation status of dry sand heath and degraded raised bog landscapes with their associated flora and fauna of community importance. The actions taken – e.g., removal of trees and bushes, closing of drainage ditches - are established good practices rather than innovative actions, but were accompanied by thorough monitoring including extensive baseline studies. That these activities are conducted at a military training area, by the military, opens up a large and – at least for Eastern Europe – new arena for the restoration of open landscapes and related conservation actions: The activities benefitted 24% of the area of “Dry sand heaths with *Calluna* and *Empetrum nigrum* in the Boreal Region. Therefore, the example of the Adazi training area has considerable potential for replication not only in Latvia and the Baltic States, but throughout eastern Europe.



- The conservation and monitoring of freshwater – as well as coastal marine – habitats is technically challenging and often beyond the capacity of conventional conservation organisations. One way to overcome this challenge is to engage and train recreational divers to conduct monitoring at Natura 2000 sites in these habitats. The joint application **“Divers and conservationists – a win-win situation”** of the German BirdLife partner NABU and two divers’ association has chosen this approach. Recreational divers were trained to monitor macrophytes in lakes of the Federal State of Brandenburg. Based on this training, they conducted more than 200 monitoring dives. The results of these dives were published in various formats and used for the monitoring of and reporting on the conservation status of these Natura 2000 areas. Considering that the monitoring was conducted on a voluntary basis, and without the need to purchase diving equipment, this approach is also a very cost-effective way to fulfil monitoring obligations and ensure management success. In addition, the divers were engaged to support conservation in the Natura 2000 sites in the project area and the initial antagonism between them and conservationists was overcome. A replication of these activities in southern Germany in cooperation with additional partners is under preparation.
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- There have also been examples where actors from within existing management bodies who have however not previously not involved in biodiversity management, have been trained to support monitoring and conservation. The Forestry and Nature Education Centre is a unit of the Forest Experimental Station, which is a non-residential teaching unit of Warsaw Life Sciences University, Poland. It submitted the application **“Buboforests - Education from the methods of location, monitoring and protection of the owl”**, in which it trained employees of the Polish State Forests to inventory, monitor and protect the emblematic Eagle Owl and six other owl species in seven forested Natura 2000 areas. A total of 65 training sessions on a range of themes related to owl conservation were conducted, with 840 foresters and 374 ornithologists-trainers attending. By inviting the foresters, who are among those who spend most time in the forest on a regular basis, to widen their skills to also include owl monitoring and conservation, they were enabled to strengthen their role as Natura 2000 actors. At the same time, this is another example where typical monitoring challenges were overcome by an effective and also resource efficient solution. A nationwide “Night Owls” campaign to upscale the results of the activities and raise public awareness was also devised.
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### Suggestions / Recommendations for future applicants

There were some cases in the 2015 Natura 2000 Award in which potential actors who would have been crucial for the implementation of applicants’ activities were actually not among the implementing team or among the submitting consortium. Applicants to future rounds should check thoroughly if they have all the key actors on board in the early stages of initiating their activities and should ensure the range of partners and actors are included in their Award application.

## 5.2 Involving all stakeholders

In terms of innovative ways to involve stakeholders, in the 2015 Natura 2000 Award, the focus of applications shifted from the question of **whom** to involve and towards the question **how** to enable and support various stakeholders to participate effectively. This question was addressed in several ways by 2015 applications:

- The application **“NATURA mission: building stakeholders' skills for influencing management plans for Natura 2000”** of the Polish Foundation for the Support of Ecological Initiatives (FWIE) aimed to inform a wide range of Natura 2000 stakeholders about the values of and threats to their sites. However, more importantly, it offered communication training to them, in order to enable them to have their say and negotiate their interests and understand and acknowledge those of others in the context of Natura 2000 management planning processes. In addition to training stakeholders at 10 Natura 2000 sites, the applicants proposed tailored models for the public consultation for each of them, and supported the written consultation process of draft management plans through its Natura 2000 Information Centre. A detailed monitoring programme which also included monitoring the perceptions of stakeholders showed that this integrated approach indeed contributed to reconciling the perceptions and interests of conservationists and other land users in the sites. For instance, in the Pisa Valley, the applicants helped land owners better understand the consequences of Natura 2000 management for their activities, and to therefore better accept them. A similar approach with additional innovative methodologies was taken by the application **“Komm-Natura – Innovative communication for a better implementation of Natura 2000”** of the Austrian Umweltdachverband, an umbrella organisation of 39 environmental NGOs (see Section 5.4 below for more details).



- Similarly, the application **“Towards a balance between agriculture management and N2000 in Wallonia”** of the Belgian NGO Natagriwal offered mediation between farmers and Natura 2000 managers. Acknowledging the large overlap between the Natura 2000 network and agricultural areas – particularly species-rich semi-natural grasslands, the applicants set out to support farmers and Natura 2000 managers to strike a fair balance between agriculture and conservation in these areas. Natagriwal advisors visited farmers whose holdings overlapped with a Natura 2000 site and discussed potential solutions to existing conflicts. 230 farmers participated in a two stage mediation process in 2014, seeking conflict resolution through better understanding, compromise and sometimes compensation. This process, which was also supported by technical assistance and a website rich in resources, was reportedly successful in 87% of the conflicts which underwent mediation. Building on this, Natagriwal developed a mediation handbook and solutions toolbox for wider dissemination. An added benefit of these activities was that those involved also improved their general understanding and acceptance of Natura 2000.

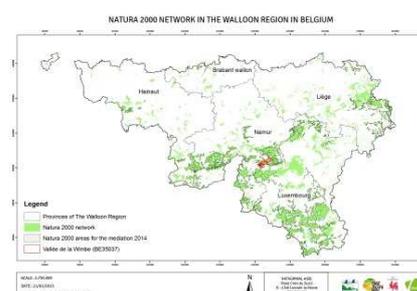


Photo: Natagriwal asbl

- An improved general understanding and acceptance of the Natura 2000 network among stakeholders was also the goal of the application **“Natura2000 – Long live the life! Biodiversity meets communities”** of the German NGO Naturfreunde Baden-Württemberg. The **2015 winner of the Communication category**, focused on the establishment of 40 soft-impact nature trails to introduce hikers to the network, together with a travelling exhibition that was shown in town halls and other public spaces. At least 3,600 members of the general public participated in events organised by the applicants, plus an unknown but probably much larger number who used the trails or visited the exhibition. The most original aspect of this application was its bottom-up nature, as most of the trails which then received the “Natura Trail” label were developed by local chapters within the 25,000 strong membership of the NGO in the Federal State of Baden-Württemberg. Thus, these trails also became a platform for the continued engagement of thousands of local conservationists with the Natura 2000 network. This – and the tourism related socio-economic benefits of increased tourism – strongly contributes to sustainability.



#### Suggestions / Recommendations for future applicants

In spite of these impressive examples of engaging important stakeholders in the management and governance of Natura 2000 sites, ensuring stakeholder participation remains a great challenge in many sectors, particularly agriculture, extractive industries and fisheries. Applications that demonstrate new ways to ensure effective negotiation with and participation of these stakeholders in good conservation management of Natura 2000 sites at all levels will therefore remain of great interest for future rounds of the Natura 2000 Award.

### 5.3 Starting from a sound situation analysis

The applications to the Natura 2000 Award 2014, further reinforced by the 2015 submissions, showed how a sound analysis of the ecological and socio-economic situation, as well as a thorough assessment of the feasibility of the envisaged interventions, contributes to the success of conservation applications:

- The trans-boundary application **“Revitalization of peat grounds in the Central Ore Mountains”** was submitted by the Forest District of Marienberg in the Federal State of Saxony (Germany), together with the regional State Forest Agency in Teplice (Czech Republic) and the Ore Mountains / Vogtland Nature Park Association. It aimed at the restoration of almost 2,500 ha of the woodland bogs that are typical of this area, in 12 Natura 2000 sites. Since this is a laborious and technically challenging task, the actual restoration programme was preceded by an in-depth hydrological survey, vegetation inventory and peat ground mapping which allowed for a sound feasibility assessment and restoration planning.



This meticulous preparation not only ensured success, but also enabled the implementing consortium to design a highly cost-effective and innovative restoration approach. This is an example of how a sound situation analysis at the technical level can help to justify and steer even challenging management strategies such as peatland restoration,

within the complex institutional and cultural framework typically associated with trans-boundary conservation activities.

- Another example of the crucial contribution of an initial technical situation analysis to eventual success was the application **“Paradise regained: enhancing the Isles of Scilly SPA off southwest England”** of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and the Isles of Scilly Wildlife Trust (UK). This project aimed to eradicate brown rats to improve the conservation status of Atlantic puffins and European storm petrels – both of Community concern – at the islands of St Agnes and Gugh, which belong to the Scilly archipelago. These islands differed from others where similar programmes have been conducted in the past, by being inhabited. Conducting a rat eradication programme under these circumstances was only possible based on a detailed initial situation and feasibility analysis, which also provided a baseline for the innovative impact monitoring programme of the project. This shows how sound initial situation analyses can help to lay the foundation for innovative conservation measures, thereby contributing to the overall effectiveness of the Natura 2000 network.



Photo: Nick Folkard
- However, a sound situation analysis is important not only with respect to technical parameters, but also in terms of stakeholder awareness and attitudes. The Malta Environment and Planning Authority (MEPA) submitted the application **“Public participation in the management planning process of terrestrial Natura 2000 sites”**. This project included a stakeholder communication action plan, which set out steps to inform and educate people around terrestrial Natura 2000 sites in Malta about the network and its benefits. In order to measure the success of this plan, repeated surveys on the general public’s perception of Natura 2000 (level of awareness of Natura 2000) were conducted before and after the plan’s implementation. Based on this combination of baseline assessment and subsequent monitoring, it could be shown that the general public’s awareness of Natura 2000 increased significantly during the project, and that support to the protection of the network increased dramatically. It remains to be seen how the very conservation-friendly results of the survey can be reconciled with well-known reservations among strong stakeholder groups (namely hunters) to the Maltese Natura 2000 network. This project illustrates how an initial assessment of awareness and attitudes can contribute to the design and ultimately success of communication projects related to Natura 2000.



The Malta Environment and Planning Authority (MEPA)

### Suggestions / Recommendations for future applicants

With regard to the initial situation analysis, evaluators of the 2015 Natura 2000 Award observed that in some Communication applications, the target groups could have been defined more clearly from the start, and that, in general, more concise baseline data against which to measure eventual success were often missing. The same was to some extent true for applications under the Socio-Economic Benefits category. More precision and clarity in this area will be highly welcome in future Award rounds.

## 5.4 Promoting conceptual and technical innovation

As in the 2014 round, the applications to the 2015 Natura 2000 Award provided ample examples of both technical and social innovation at various scales, ranging from the local and highly specialised to general and widely applicable innovations. A few of the most outstanding examples are given here:

- The application **“Blue Reef – restoration of stone reefs in Kattegat”** of the Danish Nature Agency, **winner of the Conservation category in 2015**, aimed to restore and stabilise the structure and function of boulder reefs in the Kattegatt, while also increasing awareness among environmental managers, policymakers and the broader public on marine nature restoration and management issues. Following extensive baseline studies and feasibility assessments, about 5.5 ha of these reefs were restored using about 100,000 tonnes of natural rocks. This led to a marked increase in the biomass and species richness of the high-conservation flora and fauna associated with this habitat. The activities were technically innovative in several ways: **(1)** It is one of only a few examples where a completely degraded marine habitat was successfully reconstructed; **(2)** Project design employed state-of-the-art physical and numerical modelling technology; and **(3)** Natural rocks were used instead of concrete, in order to increase durability and mimic the surface properties that benthic organisms typically encounter in their natural habitat. As a result, a valuable contribution to the restoration of a habitat in unfavourable-inadequate conservation status was made; a refuge area for fish which also benefits fishing in the vicinity was created, and a precedent for similar restoration activities throughout the Baltic region was set.



Photo: Danish Nature Agency
- While the above is an example of a large scale (and costly) innovative application, impressive conservation impacts can also be achieved with innovations on a much smaller scale. A consortium led by the League for the Protection of Nature (Portugal) developed **“Fence and powerline best practices for Great Bustard conservation”**. In order to better conserve Great Bustards in their Portuguese stronghold “Castro Verde”, this consortium combined modifications of 40 km of power lines with the establishment of 184 bird-friendly passageways along 28 km of fencing, thereby contributing to the increase and more recently stabilisation of the site’s Great Bustard population. Particularly the second intervention is considered highly innovative and potentially also highly effective, since fences act as barriers to these birds. Four types of passageways were tested, and their use was observed during the project. While the exact contribution of the passageway and scaring devices on power lines has not been quantified to date, the project consortium has already taken steps to upscale their results, by successfully promoting inclusion of these measures as obligatory mitigation measures, and their continued use and maintenance through the after-LIFE plan of the project.



League for the Protection of Nature  
Photo: LPN - Liga para a Protecção da Natureza

- An example of innovation in the field of communication was the application **“Komm-Natura - Innovative communication for a better implementation of Natura 2000”** of the Austrian Umweltdachverband, an umbrella organisation of 39 environmental NGOs. This project promoted acceptance of 18 Natura 2000 sites – as well as the network in general - among the general public, improved mutual understanding of broad stakeholder groups (e.g., farmers, foresters, land owners, etc.) in relation to Natura 2000 and an improving workflow in site management. It did so by producing a wide array of high-quality, humorous communication materials. Apart from more conventional media such as short videos, a website and a stakeholder conference, more innovative tools included five two-day communication seminars, a manual on “First aid in participatory processes”, and a book on “The views of others”. These materials often used humour to address conflicts and facilitate the search for their solution, which is also innovative in practice. Although it is too early to assess lasting attitude changes among the stakeholders addressed, the feedback on all formats was reportedly extremely positive and there was high demand for the outputs of the activities.
- While all the above applications contributed to innovation by inventing novel solutions, another important aspect of promoting innovation is the dissemination and up-scaling of activities. Several submissions to the 2015 Natura 2000 Award comprised strong initiatives aimed at a wide dissemination of innovative ideas, such as the **“Partnership for the Conservation of Peatlands”** of the IUCN UK Peatland Programme and the application **“AdriaWet 2000 - Adriatic Wetlands for Natura 2000”** of the Veneto Agricoltura (Italy) and its Slovenian partners.



Photo: Azienda Regionale Veneto Agricoltura

#### Suggestions / Recommendations for future applicants

The above examples show that while some applications do include exciting technical innovation, this is not possible for all. In cases where “classic”, state-of-the-art methods are applied, there is also the potential to think outside the box in terms of engagement of stakeholders. Considerable benefits may arise from activities that ensure the wide application of good (and innovative) practice throughout the Natura 2000 network.

## 5.5 Looking beyond individual sites

Starting from the observation that strengthening Natura 2000 also means strengthening its network character, the 2014 Natura 2000 Award highlighted a rich sample of good practice approaches to taking a network perspective – rather than just an individual site perspective – on Natura 2000. This was true for both the physical and the social connectivity of the network. There were additional examples of the importance of the network approach for Natura 2000 success in 2015. In particular, 2015 included some strong applications crossing national borders:

- **“DANUBEPARKS – bridging the Natura 2000 and Protected Areas along the Danube River Habitat”** was submitted by a network of 20 protected areas and Natura 2000 sites from 10 countries called “Danubeparks”. The winner of the **Cross-Border Cooperation and Networking category in 2015** addressed connectivity not only among Natura 2000 sites, but also with protected areas of other designations in EU non-Member States along the Danube. Areas of activity included the development of management capacity, communication, education and public awareness work, and nature based tourism. These involved managers from a wide range of cultural backgrounds and working environments and specifically promoted connectivity related concepts, such as cross-border management, habitat corridors, or harmonised biodiversity and site monitoring. Since 2009, 150 actions have been implemented. Impacts, as shown by external project evaluations, prove that the integrated approach along the large scale Danube River corridor afforded conservation gains that would have been impossible with merely site-based activities. An interesting aspect of the project is that, in order to enhance the benefits of the Natura 2000 network, it can be useful to invest efforts and resources into non-Natura 2000 sites that are physically connected to their core areas.



- The application **“Revitalization of peat grounds in the Central Ore Mountains”** of the Forest District of Marienberg in the Federal State of Saxony (Germany), the regional State Forest Agency in Teplice (Czech Republic) and the Ore Mountains/Vogtland Nature Park Association was not only noteworthy for its strong initial situation analysis (see Section 5. 3 above). It also demonstrates the benefits of looking not only across the borders of individual Natura 2000 sites, but also across the border of individual Member States. The applicants successfully restored 12 Natura 2000 sites with bog woodland habitats, two of which were located in the Czech Republic. The trans-boundary approach chosen by the consortium not only broadened the expertise base and impact (i.e., number of sites restored) of the project and allowed it to operate in its natural range and unconstrained by the “artificial” border, but also contributed to its cost effectiveness. This was because the relatively laborious and resource-intensive peat bog restoration could be conducted more efficiently at a larger scale. Based on these mutual benefits, the project also catalysed improved cross-border cooperation on other aspects of Natura 2000 management, such as public awareness-raising.



- A similar example – but focused on wetlands – is the application **“AdriaWet 2000 - Adriatic Wetlands for Natura 2000”** of the Veneto Agricoltura (Italy) and its Slovenian partners. This project brought together the managers of seven Natura 2000 sites from both sides of the Italian-Slovenian border. Its thematic focus was the development and implementation of an integrated monitoring and management system for the participating sites, and also its application to socio-economic development and stakeholder outreach. Based on an initial problem analysis, the project took a systematic approach and developed monitoring protocols and a database, an education platform, a consistent analysis of ecosystem services, training sessions and stakeholder outreach events. Inter-agency and topic-oriented task forces were established



to achieve this. On a more general level, the project has enhanced the social connectivity among wetland site managers in the northern Adriatic region, and has led to an official agreement on future coordination and cooperation, the Staranzano Charter.

- While all the above described activities addressed ecological connectivity by looking at multiple sites, there were also cases where this element of good practice was applied “in reverse”, i.e., by aiming to enhance habitat networks of particular importance within individual sites. One such example was the application **“Old and senescent trees network for long-term improvement of conservation status”** of the French Forest Office (Jura branch) and the management authority of the Natura 2000 site “Forêt de Chaux”. This site comprises the largest continuous deciduous forest in France and important populations of Grey-headed and Middle spotted woodpeckers, which both are in unfavourable conservation status. Since these species depend on old and senescent trees, the applicants’ aim was to create and manage a network of forest patches as woodpecker habitat, inside the larger Natura 2000 area, in collaboration with the Forestry Office. The result is a network of 28 forest patches with a total surface of 124 ha and with 2,000 dead, senescent or big trees, as well as trees with cavities, suitable for the primary target species (woodpeckers) as well as bats, inside a Natura 2000 site. While it is too early to judge the impact of this project on the conservation status of these species, it clearly shows that effective connectivity conservation sometimes requires looking at within-site structure and heterogeneity, rather than at linkages between sites.



Photo: OFFICE NATIONAL DES FORETS - Agence du Jura

- The **“Partnership for the Conservation of Peatlands”** of the IUCN UK Peatland Programme was an outstanding example of horizontal, EU-level, multi-site work. The Programme is a large networking initiative in the UK and internationally, formed in response to concern that damaged peatlands posed a significant threat to climate change and biodiversity. As a partnership of public / private bodies and land managers of Natura 2000 and other peatlands, it presented firm evidence on peatland ecosystem service benefits, established shared goals, informed national policy and identified potential private funding opportunities. Because it includes managers, staff and stakeholders from the main EU LIFE funded projects on peatland Natura 2000 sites in the UK, the Programme had a multiplier effect on exchanging knowledge and practices and assisted in engaging stakeholders at a local level with additional positive impact beyond designated sites. It therefore is a prime example of enhancing the social connectivity of the Natura 2000 network.



Photo: Azienda Regionale Veneto Agricoltura

**Suggestions / Recommendations for future applicants**

In spite of the above examples of good practice in ensuring physical and social connectivity in the Natura 2000 network, connectivity, especially in the context of climate change, remains a major challenge to its overall effectiveness, and new ideas how to continue moving away from a patchwork and towards a true network character will be highly welcome in future rounds of the Natura 2000 Award.

## 5.6 Realising socio-economic benefits

Although there was a marked decline in the number of applications under the Socio-Economic Benefits category, with only nine applications for the Natura 2000 Award 2015, some of these, and likewise some of the applications that were submitted under other categories, showed remarkable innovation and good practice in the field of realising socio-economic benefits:

- The Hunting Federation of Lozère (France), in itself an unusual lead applicant to the Natura 2000 Award, submitted an application on **“Vultures – providing gains for nature and communities”**, winning the **2015 Socio-Economic Benefits category**. This application was based on the Natura 2000 site “Gorges du Tarn et de la Jonte”, which is particularly rich in raptors, including Griffon, Black and Egyptian vultures. The applicants contracted farmers to secure grazing (in order to maintain the open character of the area) and in some cases remove bushes and trees, install places to deposit dead livestock as food for vultures, install water points for sheep and wildlife, and secure natural feeding places for raptors. Sixty-one five-year contracts covering grazing management were agreed. Apart from the considerable conservation gains made, the activities also resulted in two socio-economic benefits: the effective vulture conservation and particularly the establishment of feeding sites for them boosted visits to the area (about 500 guided walks to vulture feeding areas per year) and even enabled the introduction of a vulture brand and dedicated “vulture tourism”, as one form of nature-based tourism. This continues to benefit local tourism businesses. Farmers also benefit because additional grazing areas were made accessible and feeding livestock carcasses to vultures proved to be a cost-effective way of disposing of them. In terms of total return on investment, it was reported that each Euro invested in Natura 2000 activities in the area yielded a return of €30-40.



- The application **“Qnatur: Catalyzing eco-business in Natura 2000”** of the Spanish micro-enterprise of the same name not only made itself a new and unusual Natura 2000 actor (see Section 5.1 above) and used the internet in an innovative way. The project also helped to realise the multiple rich benefits offered by Spanish Natura 2000 sites and other natural areas. This has also motivated farmers and other local businesses to support their Natura 2000 sites.



- Socio-economic benefits can also be realised by minimising damage: MAVIR, the Hungarian Independent Electric System Operator Company, implemented the application **“In harmony with birdlife – Bird protection along the transmission grid”**. Similar to the application **“Saving the Imperial Eagle: Insulating Electricity Grid To Secure Hunting and Breeding Grounds”** – the winner of a 2014 Natura 2000 Award – this application aimed to protect bird species of Community importance by installing various protection measures on power lines.



MAVIR Hungarian Independent Transmission Operator Company Ltd

It particularly focused on Great Bustard, Saker Falcon and two other falcon species. These measures provided highly attractive artificial nesting boxes for the falcon species, although the impact on their or the Great Bustards' population dynamics in the Natura 2000 areas affected is not yet clear. However, the diverters on high-voltage power lines (in itself an innovative approach as these are usually only used on low- and medium-voltage lines) reportedly reduced the number of bird collisions by 75%. While the costs for recovery of lost voltage caused by collisions are not considered as significant by the applicant, the time needed for repairs is a serious problem for the public and affects the company's business. By considerably reducing this problem, the activities helped to prevent accidental power outages and to minimise repair costs along the power grid.

- Payments for Ecosystem Services (PES) are a promising way of realising socio-economic benefits of natural areas, such as Natura 2000 sites. The idea of PES schemes is that a buyer, who is benefitting from a certain ecosystem service, pays a seller, who in turn ensures the provision of this service at an agreed level or quality. However, while attractive in theory, there are not many examples where such schemes have been instituted in practice to date. Against this background, it is all the more notable that some of the applications submitted for the 2015 Natura 2000 Award took steps towards the potential realisation of PES schemes. One such example was the **“Partnership for the Conservation of Peatlands”** of the IUCN UK Peatland Programme, which also took an exemplary multi-site approach (see Section 5.5 above). Among its many other innovative project activities, a best practice guideline on peatland PES was produced based on the work in partnership with the German Moor Futures programme and launched by the UK Environment Minister in September 2013. While a guideline alone does not ensure its wide application, this activity is definitely a step in the right direction which should be replicated in other habitats and biogeographical regions of the Natura 2000 network.



Global Peatland Restoration  
demonstrating **success**



Photo: Azienda Regionale Veneto Agricoltura

#### Suggestions / Recommendations for future applicants

The above examples demonstrate how applications submitted under all categories produced socio-economic benefits, without necessarily making them explicit. While the question of how the Natura 2000 network contributes to socio-economic development and human wellbeing needs to be addressed at a larger scale than that of individual sites, such examples remain highly relevant for the network and the Award scheme. Given the low number of applications to the Socio-Economic Benefits category, further applications focusing on this aspect of their work would be welcomed in future.

## 5.7 Planning sustainability from the start

The durability of outputs and impacts has remained high on implementers' agenda during the 2015 round of the Natura 2000 Award. As in the previous round, it became clear that the most durable outcomes were reached by those applications which addressed sustainability as an integral part of design of activities from the outset, and invested resources and creativity in ensuring it:

- Besides being very innovative (see Section 5.4 above), and **winning the 2015 Natura 2000 Award in the Conservation category**, the application **“Blue Reef – restoration of stone reefs in Kattegat”** of the Danish Nature Agency also took an exemplary approach to durability. A physical model to simulate how durable the reconstructed boulder reef would be under extreme waves and tidal regimes, how sediment burial could be avoided, and how to ensure that the design of the boulder reef could withstand even extreme events was run during the pre-project study phase. This model helped to ensure the most durable positioning and design of the reconstructed reef, and thereby a lasting conservation impact on the biota of the newly created habitat. Additional factors contributing to this durability are the long expected lifespan of the natural rocks used, which considerably exceeds that of concrete (30-50 years), and the successful efforts of the Danish Nature Agency to ensure a favourable political environment for boulder reef restoration in the Kattegat.



Photo: Danish Nature Agency

- Climate change is an emerging threat to many Natura 2000 sites, and climate-proofing the outcomes of activities that are conducted there will become increasingly important throughout the network. New ground in this direction was broken by the National Trust (UK) and its partners, who conducted the application **“The Alde Ore Estuary- Securing a sustainable future for wildlife”**. The conservation status of the coastal habitats of community importance at the estuary, with their associated biota (e.g., avifauna) had been impaired by a series of dry springs / early summers before the onset of the activities. Therefore, reversal of the negative impacts caused by climate change and adaptation of the area to projected impacts was an objective of the project, which also dealt with unauthorised access, other direct threats to the integrity of the fragile coastal habitats of the site and local stakeholder engagement. The desired improvement of the conservation status of the site was pursued principally through hydrological management, i.e., restructuring of the terrain as well as the establishment of new inlet sluices, evacuation pumps and internal water controls. These measures resulted in the creation of 3 ha of coastal lagoons, 6 ha of shallow pools and restructuring of silty breeding islands, a stabilisation of salinity in existing wetlands, and tangible increases in the populations of target species such as Avocet. The overall sustainability of the project’s success is also being ensured through the long-standing commitment of the consortium’s member organisations on-site, and through a wide range of public awareness and knowledge sharing activities.



Photo: The National Trust

- The challenge to make Natura 2000-related outcomes durable presents itself at various levels and timescales. A common immediate concern is to maintain infrastructure and continue activities set up through a project. Three complementary ways of addressing



Photo: Agency of Nature and Forest, ANB

ing this issue were demonstrated by the application **“Cross-regional cooperation to enhance natural structure and public awareness of the Sonian forest”** which was submitted by the Agency of Nature and Forest (ANB) of Flanders, Belgium, together with its consortium partners. The goal of this application was to secure integrated management of the

Sonian Forest across the intersection of the Flemish, the Brussels-Capital and the Walloon Regions. The consortium sought sustainability by applying for a follow-up project, which was approved in 2013 by the EC. This project also involves a number of additional partners, with a total investment around €9 million. Activities and impacts are also being sustained through the approved common vision for the Sonian Forest, as well as the shared understanding and practice of the participating regions. Finally, the idea to nominate the Sonian Forest as a World Heritage site further strengthens this joint vision and provides additional incentives to pursue it.

#### **Suggestions / Recommendations for future applicants**

Durability of the described activities was one of the areas that attracted most comments and questions from evaluators during the 2015 Natura 2000 Award. Two areas to which future applicants should pay particular attention include the following:

- **Identification of needs for long term effects:** In order to plan durability from the start, it is important to first identify what needs to be done so that impacts are durable, and then also to estimate what resources are needed to achieve this. This provides a basis for the evaluation of the steps taken to ensure durability.
- **Differentiation between possibilities, plans and concrete achievements in relation to sustainability:** There were cases where it was not clear from the submitted application what the likelihood of durability measures being carried out were, i.e., if it was a distant future possibility, a firm plan or already secured with resources in place. A clearer differentiation between these, and a focus on ensuring rather than just considering sustainability measures from the start, will result in additional examples of this element of good practice in future Award rounds.

In relation to the last point, the evaluators also observed that in some cases applications were submitted too early in the course of the described activities before results could be demonstrated clearly. It is recommended that applications for an Award are not submitted during the very early stages of planned activities and that potential applicants instead wait until they can demonstrate measurable results.

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## **5.8 Mobilising a wide range of resources**

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As in the 2014 round, pioneering ways of resource mobilisation in support of Natura 2000 activities were found by applicants to the 2015 Natura 2000 Award, particularly through engaging new financing partners and non-monetary resources. In addition to these examples, the 2015 round revealed promising new approaches to sourcing funds for sustained impact beyond the lifespan of the actual projects. It also highlighted the importance of strategic financial planning and sound resource allocation policies, not only at the site level but also at higher levels. Typical examples of all of these approaches include the following:

- An example of the use of corporate social responsibility funds to support Natura 2000 was the application **“Valuable habitat networks in the River Main valley”** by the German company Heidelberg Cement and its partner NGO Landesbund Vogelschutz. The objective of this project was to promote biodiversity at the company’s mining sites – both in the production and restoration phase. This contributed to the conservation of calcareous grassland habitat types on the grounds of the mining company, which act as a stepping stone between two adjacent Natura 2000 sites. The consortium developed a management plan for the area covered by the mining company, monitored the habitats and bird species in the area, and conducted environmental education and public relations activities. In practical terms, habitat management activities included mowing, hay making, cutting of overgrowth (trees and bushes), fencing, repair of roads and paths, securing public facilities and information panels, etc. By conducting these activities with its own funding, and on its own grounds, the company contributed significant financial resources to the conservation of this habitat type in the area of the wider network, as well as to general environmental awareness.



Photo: HeidelbergCement
- Volunteers can be an important non-financial resource for Natura 2000 management, particularly monitoring, which would otherwise be very costly. This was demonstrated by **“Boundless Nature in the National Park Region Meinweg in MSN”** of the Nature Park Maas-Swalm-Nette (MSN), a Dutch-German cross-border association targeting the preservation of nature and landscape. This project was designed to improve management of about seven Natura 2000 sites on both sides of the German / Dutch border, and to connect people in the region to nature at these sites. It comprised connecting nature through integrated management planning (including zoning), as well as connecting people to nature (including the creation of opportunities for nature experience, volunteer networks, training on cultural heritage, etc.). The project succeeded in building up a network of 100 volunteer citizen-scientists to support biodiversity monitoring. These volunteers provide valuable and cost-efficient support for the conservation authorities and help them fulfil their statutory duties. The volunteers involved with monitoring also have their annual event EcoTop, which has been successfully continued after the end of the project. This testifies to the sustainability of this resource of expertise and commitment.



Photo: Nature Park Maas-Swalm-Nette (MSN)
- The financial self-sustainability of activities was one of the strengths of the project **“Think Green, act for Future – protect Dinarides”** of the Public Institution for the Management of Geomorphological Monuments of Nature “Cave Park Grabovaca”, Croatia. This park overlaps with a Natura 2000 site. The overall objectives of the project were to secure nature protection, sustainable socio-economic development and environmental awareness, and to create new tourism-based jobs, thereby decreasing emigration from the region. These were pursued by enhancing tourism development, local branding of produce and services, and environmental education. Thereby, significant opportunities for local micro-enterprises were created, and in turn provide a self-sustained incentive for the



Photo: Gđa

conservation of the Natura 2000 site around which these are clustered, as well as for the continued provision of socio-economic benefits.

- Submissions to the 2015 Natura 2000 Award also accentuated the need to not only mobilise resources, but to also use them in a strategic and efficient manner. For instance, the project **“Cross-regional cooperation to enhance natural structure and public awareness of the Sonian forest”** which was submitted by the Agency of Nature and Forest (ANB) of Flanders, Belgium, demonstrated how funds can be allocated in a more rational way if financial planning is integrated over a larger area, how overlapping investments can be avoided and how additional external funding can be leveraged based on a shared vision and consolidated planning. The **“Partnership for Action on Peatlands”** of the UK National Committee of IUCN aims at a coordinated multi-institution approach to peatland conservation and restoration throughout Britain, and has also succeeded in coordinating and upscaling funding and fundraising. By making a clear case for peatland conservation and restoration, and by speaking with one voice, the partnership also raised the profile of this issue at the national policy level and improved the likelihood of winning additional financial support.



#### Suggestions / Recommendations for future applicants

An additional area of interest in relation to resource mobilisation for Natura 2000 management is payments for ecosystem services (PES). While one application that was moving into this direction is discussed in the socio-economic benefits section (Section 5.6 above), the question of how PES can be institutionalised and used more widely to support the Natura 2000 network will certainly remain of great interest to future rounds of the Natura 2000 Award.

## 5.9 Measuring and communicating success

While many applications submitted for both the 2014 and the 2015 Natura 2000 Award struggled to clearly monitor and communicate their success, there were also numerous examples of strong and at least nationally innovative monitoring and communication elements among the submissions. These concerned the measurement of physical and biological impacts, as well as – in some cases – of socio-economic outcomes and attitude changes. Another field where some applications excelled was the dissemination of results – sometimes primarily within the conservation community (with a view on replication) and sometimes directed at a wider audience:

- **“The European Bison Reintroduction in Vanatori Neamt Nature Park”** submitted by the park administration, aimed at re-establishing a population of this emblematic species in a Natura 2000 site in Romania. In order to achieve this, a “soft approach” with the presence of free, semi-free and captive populations in the same location was chosen, resulting in the successful establishment of a herd of 16 juvenile / mature bison and two calves roaming an area of 10,000 ha in the target site. The progress and success of this process is being meticulously monitored in terms of its movements, preferred



habitats, impact on the forest and grassland habitats, impact as an ‘umbrella species’ and health status. The reintroduction programme was also evaluated independently by members of the IUCN/SSC/Bison Specialist Group. The most important criteria indicating the success of the reintroduction programme were the births in the wild after 1-3 years after reintroduction (two in 2012 and two in 2014), the population’s viability, the comparability of its demographic characteristics with other wild herds, and other indicators. This may have enabled the project team to also identify success factors, which have been communicated to a replication project in the Tarcu Mountains of the Southern Carpathians, which started in 2014.

- The National Trust (UK) and its partners, who conducted the project **“The Alde Ore Estuary- Securing a sustainable future for wildlife”**, which also put climate change into the centre of its sustainability considerations (see Section 5.7 above), put a similar focus on conveying project results and the best practice developed to conservation managers who are faced with similar challenges. This was based on a sound monitoring programme which, among other things, employed remote cameras to document not only bird populations on-site, but also disturbances by unauthorised visitors. An extensive communication portfolio and resource bank was established. The project website ([www.lifealdeore.org](http://www.lifealdeore.org)) provides numerous downloadable documents, reports, scientific articles and other resources produced during project implementation, in order to facilitate replication by others. A three-day site managers’ workshop specifically targeted managers from comparable sites in the Netherlands, Belgium and around the UK. A LIFE anniversary celebration was organised through the project, and an Alde Ore Estuary Managers Forum has been formed. The latter has as an objective to improve communication and resource sharing between local site managers from different organisations. The project partner RSPB has also used its results to create and enhance additional coastal nature reserves adjacent to the Alde Ore Estuary.
- Another extensive monitoring programme with a dissemination strategy aimed more at the general public was included in the project **“Błędowska Desert”** (Poland), which was submitted by a LIFE+ project of the same name. The Błędowska Desert is the largest area of continental inland sand dunes in Poland. Due to afforestation in the past and rapid secondary succession, the area of sand dune habitats has shrunk considerably, from 300-400 ha to 50 ha. The project set out to reverse this trend, and to re-establish natural wind-erosion dynamics, which could result in a self-sustaining dynamic desert landscape. This was accompanied by communication and awareness raising activities. In order to monitor the progress and success of the programme, a monitoring system was established on 400 ha of the site. A total number of 450 monitoring points, with detailed descriptions of vegetation (including vascular plants, mosses and additionally lichens) were surveyed twice over the course of the project. The first monitoring survey showed that 180 ha of two habitat types were restored, while the remaining 155 ha can be treated at the moment as a potential sand habitat and a buffer zone. For the dissemination of the project results, a Desert Information Centre was opened. In addition, a best practice manual was printed, a final project conference with around 140 people was organised, 10 training workshops and lectures were held, and various TV programmes focused on the project. CNN included the site in a series of documentaries about interesting places in Poland. As a result of this combination of sound impact monitoring and



Photo: The National Trust



Photo: Gmina Klucze

extensive dissemination activities, the conservation impact of the project has been considerably enhanced.

#### **Suggestions / Recommendations for future applicants**

In spite of these and other examples of good practice in the field of measuring and communicating success, the 2015 Natura 2000 Award also revealed considerable room for improvement in this regard. By far the largest number of questions and comments from the evaluators were related to measuring and communicating success. Particular aspects that should be considered in future rounds of the Award include the following:

- **Quantifying outputs:** Outputs should be quantified as precisely as possible, e.g., in terms of area of habitat restored, number of devices deployed, number of people trained, number of communication materials produced, amount of subsidies leveraged, etc. This is true for all types of outputs in all categories.
- **Establishing the baseline:** In order to measure success, it will often be necessary to first establish the baseline before initiation of activities, e.g., the conservation state of a target species / habitat, the intensity or extent of a threat, or initial awareness / attitudes.
- **Clarifying links to Natura 2000 sites:** The specific link of interventions to target Natura 2000 sites and / or habitats / species from the Annexes of the Habitats and Birds Directives should be described clearly and plausibly, and should always be consistent with site objectives.
- **Measuring conservation outcomes:** Based on their own intervention logic, the ultimate goal of most activities would be an improved conservation status of their target habitats / species. The extent to which this improvement was actually achieved should be measured, or – where this is impossible because of time lags or other reasons – it should be explained why and alternative indicators (e.g., on threat reduction) should be presented.
- **Demonstrating impact by quantifying the area affected:** An important element of impact is the overall area of the Natura 2000 network affected by a given intervention. Therefore, the overall area of the network affected and / or similar statistics on relative areas of priority habitats affected would be useful indicators to help clarify impact. In some cases, this could be replaced by percentage of populations of target species.
- **Measuring change in attitude and behaviour:** The need to measure outcomes also applies to communication activities, where not only changes in awareness but also changes in attitude and behaviour should be measured as far as possible. For example, if an activity aims to reduce harmful practices through communication activities, than it should be shown to what extent this has actually happened.
- **Quantifying socio-economic benefits:** Socio-economic benefits generated from Natura 2000 sites as the result of applicant activities should in most cases be expressed in a quantitative manner. This can be in monetary terms or using other adequate indicators (e.g., number of people enjoying a certain benefit).
- **Documenting monitoring methods and referencing data:** Monitoring methods and data sources should be documented to a sufficient degree so that their results are plausible and comprehensible to readers.
- **Showing the bigger picture:** In many cases, the actions, outputs, outcomes and impacts with their underlying intervention logic and respective indicators could be presented concisely and clearly using existing conservation project design and management approaches, such as the Conservation Measures Partnership's [Open Standards for the Practice of Conservation](#) or the [Conservation Management System](#).

## 5.10 Learning, knowledge sharing and communication as core application components

As in 2014, learning, knowledge sharing and communication were relevant to all Award categories, but particularly to the "Communication" category in 2015. Communication with both specific stakeholder groups and with the general public was highlighted by the applications, with some of them aiming at both simultaneously:

- The application **“Natura 2000 Day”** of SEO/BirdLife (Spain) and BirdLife Europe was a pure communication project, and therefore it is not surprising that it won the **2015 European Citizens’ Award**. Its aim was to address the continuing low awareness of the Natura 2000 network by initiating the "European Natura 2000 Day", as part of the LIFE+ project “Natura 2000: Connecting people with biodiversity”. The first European Natura 2000 Day was celebrated on 21 May 2013. A campaign where people, organisations or institutions are invited to make a butterfly hand gesture in support of the Natura 2000 network was created around this occasion. The gesture is photographed and sent to the specially created [www.natura2000day.eu](http://www.natura2000day.eu) website, or shared through social networks. For each gesture, the applicants committed to concrete conservation actions in the Spanish Natura 2000 site of Doñana. Per gesture, 25m<sup>2</sup> of “La Rocina”, the stream providing the main water inflow of the marshes was restored and 16 grams of lead shotgun pellets were cleared from the surrounding sandy soils. Promotional spots, email advertisements and educational materials for schools were also created. In order to turn the Natura 2000 Day into a truly European event, BirdLife partners in other countries (e.g., Croatia, Latvia, Malta) joined the campaign, and support from the EC was sought. While this campaign appears to still be in the process of really taking-off throughout the EU, it is a prime example how an appealing communication campaign using web-based technology and high quality information materials can boost awareness of the Natura 2000 network among the general public and hence increase its overall effectiveness.
- The application **“Communication on the link between agriculture and biodiversity on a Natura 2000 area”** was submitted by the General Council for the Territory of Belfort, France, and the Interdepartmental Chamber of Agriculture Doubs-Belfort. This partnership in itself provided a good basis for mutual learning, as the first partner is a public authority responsible for Natura 2000 among other issues, while the second one is a professional association of the entire agricultural spectrum. They aimed to tackle the opposition of farmers to Natura 2000 in the Belfort area and to inform them about the important links between traditional farming practices (e.g., in meadow areas) and nature conservation. By running a competition between farmers to identify management approaches which ensure a good equilibrium among production and the ecological status on their farms, the project consortium created both a catalyst for innovation and learning, and a platform to share newly created knowledge among farms and to explore the replication of identified good practice. Although limited to a relatively small number of farmers (200), and modest area (20,000 ha, partly overlapping with Natura 2000 sites), this and related actions yielded good results, as shown by the number of agri-environmental contracts agreed by farmers, which is the highest in France at the regional level and one of the highest at the national level.

Photo: SEO/BirdLife



Natura2000DAY.eu

Photo: Conseil général du Territoire de Belfort



- In contrast to the Natura 2000 Day campaign, “**Biodiversity protection in forest areas, including N2000 areas - promotion of best practices**” of the Environmental Projects Coordination Centre (Poland) was first and foremost a learning project – but with a general communication twist. The main element of the campaign was the promotion of best practices in Natura 2000 sites, focusing on 11 topics including bison, grouse, bats, snakes, mud turtle, insects, rare owls, swamps, dry grasslands, large predators (wolf, lynx and bear) and raptors through 11 video films, 11 manuals, 39 workshops with 1,310 participants, the preparation of road maps for species and habitat protection, as well as supportive PR and web materials. Beyond the conservation professionals who attended the workshops, familiarised themselves with good practice in the various technical areas, and also were able to learn from each other, the films reached a much wider audience - millions of people - and thus also contributed to raised awareness of Natura 2000 among the general public. This is an example of an ambitious learning initiative on Natura 2000 related good practice approaches, which owed its success to a combination of a very broad dissemination of good practice guidance among conservation managers and an associated communication campaign directed at a wider audience.



Photo: Centrum Koordynacji Projektów Środowiskowych

#### Suggestions / Recommendations for future applicants

Additional areas for potential future improvement that were identified during the 2015 round of the Award included a clearer definition of target groups for communication activities, more concise output, outcome and impact monitoring, specifically with regard to individual Natura 2000 sites and their conservation state.

## 5.11 Perseverance

The Natura 2000 Award focuses on relatively short-term activities (the past five years, to ensure that the applications cover current / recent activities and achievements) compared to the timescales needed to deliver ecological results or indeed compared to the often life-long commitment of dedicated conservationists. As the perseverance and long-term commitment of individuals or organisations can also be considered elements of good practice – and since many applications that were submitted are embedded in longer-term programmes carried out by their implementers – it was decided to add “perseverance” to the elements of good practice highlighted in the 2015 Natura 2000 Award. Examples of applications which fall into this category include the following:

- The “**Meta-project of peat bog restoration on very large areas in Wallonia**”, which was submitted by the administrative authority for Natura 2000 implementation of the Wallonian Region, Belgium, was intended to restore the favourable conservation status of peaty and wet biotopes, as well as boreo-alpine species in the Belgian Ardenne mountains, covering a total of 13 Natura 2000 areas. This meta-project consists of a sequence of six LIFE projects that have been implemented since 2002, which have succeeded in eliminating spruce plantations (1,250 ha) and the invasive tussock grass *Molinia* sp. (130 ha) and have balanced moisture level and restored natural hydrological structures (400 ha). Sites have

Photo: Marc Dufrière



been managed in cooperation with external partners and land purchased to enhance connectivity between them. Numerous field infrastructures like wooden duckboard paths, observation towers or platforms or information boards were also installed. These significant and wide-ranging results were only possible because of the long lifespan of this meta-project.

- Besides long-term meta-projects, perseverance is often also shown by organisations that pursue their conservation goals over a long period with multiple sources of funding. The Cyprus Wildlife Society with its project **“Cyprus Turtle Conservation Project”** is an example of a small NGO which has been active for decades. The objective and success of the submitted project – to protect the two sites hosting the main nesting beaches of two priority species of Loggerhead and Green sea turtles in Cyprus – builds on the long-term commitment of the society, which has been active since 1984. The long history of the Cyprus Wildlife Society also contributes to the positive sustainability outlook of its actual project, as it has shown that it can work on a continuous basis with minimal funding, thanks to its strong volunteer base.



Photo: Cyprus Wildlife Society
- The Spanish NGO “Fundación Oso Pardo” submitted the application **“Bear conservation through favourable social environment in Spanish Natura 2000 sites”**. Winner of the 2015 Reconciling Interests/Perceptions category, the main aim of the NGO, which has existed since 1992, is demonstrating the feasibility of coexistence of human activities and a wild population of bears in the Cantabrian Mountains of Spain. To support acceptance of bear population and increase awareness, the foundation works with key stakeholders, mainly hunters. The submitted project focused on this type of work, and more specifically on agreements with 11 hunting associations (active on 280,000 ha of bear territory inside and near the Natura 2000 network) on banning snares, protection of livestock and beehives, as well as extensive communications activities. The broad coverage and strong impact of this project was possible only because of the strong social standing, good public relations and long-term presence of the foundation in the project area.



Fundación Oso Pardo
- A similarly long-standing commitment to conservation was shown by another Spanish NGO, Defensa y Estudio del Medio Ambiente (DEMA), which submitted applications on **“Almendralejo’s Purification Church: A divine Special Protection Area for the Lesser Kestrel”** to the 2014 and 2015 Natura 2000 Awards. Through its continuous work over decades, DEMA has managed to win over the majority of the population of this town in Extremadura for the conservation of the Lesser Kestrel, which is listed on Annex I of the Birds Directive but used to be considered vermin in rural Spain.



Photo: Defensa y Estudio del Medio Ambiente/ DEMA

#### Suggestions / Recommendations for future applicants

While perseverance is typically an attribute of individuals or organisations, rather than the activities described in an application *per se*, the above examples show how it often forms the basis for the success of individual applications.

## 6 Outlook

The catalogue of good practice in Section 5 above shows the huge amount of expertise, experience and ingenuity that has been invested in the network not only by the Award winners and the finalists, but by all Natura 2000 actors who participated in the scheme in 2014 and 2015. Having been assembled from the solutions developed by individual applications, the catalogue is more like a mosaic –which will be added to in future rounds – rather than a complete, final set of what the Award Secretariat or the European Commission would consider good practice. The list of good practice reflects what the Award scheme as a whole has demonstrated to date - that the Natura 2000 network is work in progress, a massive, Union-wide collective effort to preserve European nature and biodiversity, within the enabling framework and constraints that are defined by the natural, socio-economic and political setting of the Member States.

Although the Natura 2000 Award 2015 has shown a rich diversity of methodological approaches and creative ideas, submissions have not been homogenous in terms of categories, Member States or submitting organisations. This indicates a potential for increased numbers of applications in hitherto under-represented areas in the future, which may include - but not necessarily be limited to - the following:

- **Room for higher number of submissions under the category Socio-Economic Benefits:** Out of the 93 applications received, only nine were submitted under the Award category of Socio-economic benefits. This is similar to the situation in 2014 where only eight applications out of 163 were received. In particular, few examples of the economic benefits of ecosystem services and payment for these services were described. While not all habitat types and species listed on the Directives' annexes offer opportunities for win-win solutions for combining conservation and socio-economic benefits, it is none-the-less clear that many applications submitted under other categories also had strong socio-economic benefits. It is hoped that higher numbers of innovative projects in this area will be received in further rounds of the Award.
- **Room for higher number of submissions under the category Reconciling Interests/Perceptions:** A disappointing result compared to the 2014 applications was the low number of applications in the Reconciling Interests/Perceptions category (six in 2015 compared to 38 in 2014). In 2014, a large number of high quality projects were submitted suggesting that there are a good number of actors active in this area. Additionally, as with the Socio-Economic Benefits category, many applications contain an element of reconciling interests between different stakeholder groups. Unfortunately, few applicants chose to focus on this, despite its key importance to successful site management.
- **Potential for more submissions under the Cross-Border Cooperation and Networking category:** In 2014, 10 applications were submitted to this category and 11 in 2015. In 2015, an interesting range of activities were submitted including cross-border activities, cross-regional activities and networking activities focusing on a particular theme. It has been highlighted by applicants that the demand to focus on a particular primary Natura 2000 site in a particular Member State could be a barrier to true cross-border applications and this should be addressed in future additions of the Award. While this has not prevented the submission of good applications, more would be welcome in this area in future years.
- **More balanced participation from various Member States and institutional types:** Applicant statistics show that relatively few applications were received from the Nordic countries of Denmark, Finland and Sweden, and the Baltic countries of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia in comparison to the extent of their national Natura 2000 area. An increased participation from these countries would certainly enrich the wealth of good practice that has been gathered during the first and second rounds of the Award. Similarly, while the 2014 and

2015 rounds of the Award did engage a wide range of interesting and novel actors, the highest number of applications is still received from NGOs and government institutions. A higher diversity of applicants will integrate new perspectives and approaches into best practice of Natura 2000 management, increase effectiveness and widen ownership throughout society.

- **Repeat applications:** Disappointingly, only seven applicants from 2014 submitted repeat, improved applications in 2015. The European Commission would like to strongly encourage applicants (who have not won an Award) to re-submit where they have improvements / more information to add to their submission. In particular, where results were not yet complete or activities have been continued and new results can be presented.

The catalogue provided in this report aims to provide inspiration for those working on Natura 2000 sites in general terms as well as for those interested in applying for a Natura 2000 Award. Since Natura 2000 is a network in development across widely varying physical and political conditions across Europe, it is rarely the case that particular experiences highlighted in one application can be applied without alteration elsewhere. These examples should inspire Natura 2000 actors to find solutions that work in their particular context addressing the site-specific issues they are dealing with.

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