



E U R O P E A N
NATURA 2000
AWARD
2018

BENCHMARKING REPORT

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Environment

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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 the Natura 2000 since it was established by the Habitats Directive over twenty years ago, knowledge and understanding of the network among the European public was found to be 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 in Natura 2000 sites; and
- Provide role models to inspire and promote best practice for nature conservation.

Winners are selected for five categories: Conservation, Socio-Economic Benefits, Communication, Reconciling Interests/Perceptions and Cross-Border Cooperation and Networking. Eligible applications are evaluated according to the criteria of effectiveness, originality, durability, cost-benefit and replicability by a team of independent experts, resulting in a shortlist which was then approved by the European Commission. The winners are then chosen by a jury consisting of representatives of EU Institutions and different organisations active in the field of nature conservation. Starting in 2015 and continuing in 2016 and 2018, a public vote was also introduced to choose the winner of a sixth prize: the European Citizens' Award.

In its fourth edition, 2018, the Natura 2000 Award received 80 applications from 27 Member States. This is similar to the second and third years (93 and 83 applications respectively). In the first year, 163 applications were received, demonstrating the great interest in the Award. In 2018, by far the largest number of applications was received under the Conservation category, followed in decreasing order by the categories Communication, Socio-Economic Benefits, Reconciling Interests/Perceptions, and Cross-Border Cooperation and Networking. Applications were received from a wide range of actors including NGOs, businesses, land users 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.

The aim of the 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 fourth year of the Award, particularly but not exclusively the Award winners and finalist applications. The report presents a catalogue structured according to eight 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 significant 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. It 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 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 and the slow progress towards halting biodiversity loss and restoring ecosystem shows this target will not be met 2020 ([EEA 2015](#)).

Biodiversity is important to Europe's citizens for environmental, social and economic reasons. The economic benefits of the Natura 2000 network, such as ecosystem services, water and climate regulation, ecotourism and fuel, fibre and food, have been calculated as providing 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 80% of respondents think that the decline and possible extinction of animal species, flora and fauna, natural habitats and ecosystems in Europe is a problem and over 80% recognise the importance of protected sites for nature, people and the economy ([Eurobarometer 2015](#)).

2.1 Introducing Natura 2000 – a policy for people, nature and the economy

The Natura 2000 network forms the centrepiece of the European Union's efforts to manage biodiversity. The network of over 27,000 terrestrial and marine protected sites, consists of protected areas designated under the 1979 Birds Directive and the 1992 Habitats Directive to protect the most threatened species and habitats. The establishment of the Natura 2000 network has allowed Member States to work together to conserve biodiversity under one legal, reporting and monitoring framework.

However, the loss of species and habitats continues ([EEA 2015](#), [European Commission 2015](#)). A thorough review of the legal framework provided by the Birds and Habitats Directives ([Milieu et al. 2015](#)) found that they were "fit for purpose" but that there are barriers to their effective implementation. These include lack of management plans, poor enforcement in certain Member States and insufficient targeted financing.

Key site-level challenges to Natura 2000 faced by actors and managers of the Natura 2000 network ([Garstecki et al. 2014](#)) include:

- Insufficient stakeholder participation in site designation and management;
- Conflicting interests of other sectors;
- Poor conservation status of habitats that depend on traditional agricultural practices;
- Lack of habitat connectivity especially in the context of climate change;
- Lack of strategic, adaptive management planning aimed at favourable conservation status;
- Inconsistent on-the-ground monitoring of conservation status;
- Weak social consensus to support conservation of Natura 2000 sites;
- Lack of resources for effective management of Natura 2000 sites;
- Marine Natura 2000 network not fully in place.

The European Commission's "Action Plan: for nature, people and the economy" ([European Commission 2017](#)) aims to address these issues. The action plan sets four priority axes to address the obstacles faced in fully implementing the Natura 2000 network. Priority A focuses on "improving guidance and knowledge and ensuring better coherence with broader socio-economic objectives". Priority B addresses "Building political ownership and strengthening compliance" and foresees facilitation by the European Commission to support bilateral dialogue and cooperation for the management of the Natura 2000 network. Priority C requires "Strengthening investment in Natura 2000 and improving synergies with EU funding instruments". Under Priority D, "Better communication and outreach, engaging citizens, stakeholders and communities", the action plan seeks to strengthen the involvement of the public, stakeholders, local authorities and communities.

Improving communication and outreach is therefore a specific aim of priority D but also important for all other priorities. The Natura 2000 Award should help address this.

2.2 The Natura 2000 Award – promoting excellence in nature conservation

The Natura 2000 Award is an initiative which was conceived and is funded by the European Commission to recognise excellence in the management of Natura 2000 sites and conservation achievements. Anyone directly involved in the management of Natura 2000 can apply. Awards were presented in five categories (Conservation, Communication, Socio-Economic Benefits, Reconciling Interests and Perception and Cross Border Collaboration and Networking) in 2014, 2015, 2016 and 2018. Finalists were selected through an impartial evaluation of all applications (see the [Award Guidance](#) for more information on the evaluation criteria) and the winners are chosen by a high-level jury. Since 2015, a sixth prize has been awarded to the finalist receiving the highest number of votes from the public.

The Natura 2000 Award aims to **raise awareness about Natura 2000** amongst the general public. The Eurobarometer repeat surveys show that while there has been a decrease in the number of people who have never heard the term Natura 2000, public understanding across the EU as a whole still remains relatively low. This is however extremely variable between countries. Additionally, even if not familiar with the term Natura 2000, the public recognise the value of protected sites, with over 80% of respondents believing in its importance for nature, the economy and society ([Eurobarometer 2015](#)). The public vote in particular, aims to build on the generally positive views of protected sites which the public have and increase the recognition of the term Natura 2000.

The Award also aims to **recognise excellence in the management and promotion of Natura 2000 and provide role models**. The activities highlighted by the Award, particularly the finalists and winners should demonstrate good practice and allow those working on Natura 2000 sites to learn from one another. The publicising of these activities through the Award should help to highlight good practice; this report also summarises both innovative as well as common aspects between applications.

Linked to the above point, the Award also aims to **encourage networking** between those working on Natura 2000 sites. The Award ceremony itself as well as, for the first time in 2018, a networking event for the finalists prior to the ceremony, ensure that applicants can meet face to face and discuss their activities with one another.

The above objectives also highlight some of the **benefits to those applying for an Award**. In addition to opportunities to network and learn from one another, all finalist projects are significantly promoted on the European Commission website and receive support in promoting their own activities. Winners additionally receive a small financial contribution to contribute to their work, as well as help in organising an event on a Natura 2000 site to which European

Commission officials participate and discuss the winners' activities with local decision-makers and stakeholders.

2.3 Identifying good practices: the Benchmarking report

The Benchmarking Report aims to identify good practice from all the applications received to the Natura 2000 Award with the aim to act as an inspiration for future applicants and anyone working on Natura 2000. It summarises and analyses the experiences described by the applicants and extracts the most useful elements of good practice.

The 2018 Benchmarking Report is based on experiences from the last four years' of the Natura 2000 Award though the catalogue of good practice itself is based on the 2018-edition applications. Reports from the previous Award rounds are available (click to access the [2014](#), [2015](#), and [2016](#) reports).

The core part of the Benchmarking Report 2018 is a catalogue of eight key 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 (a detailed methodology was developed and is described in [Garstecki et al. \(2015\)](#)). Not all of these elements of good practice are equally relevant to all Award categories and selection criteria. However, most of them can be regarded as general attributes of good practice in the Natura 2000 context.

The 2018 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. Planning sustainability from the start;
6. Mobilising a wide range of resources;
7. Measuring success and sharing knowledge;
8. Perseverance.

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 2018 Award, and what differences were noted in comparison to the previous years. Examples from the submissions are given, but they are not exhaustive; indeed, the finalist applications generally demonstrate multiple good practices and some could be said to be good examples for all eight elements.

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 5) 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.

3 The Natura 2000 Award 2018

3.1 Applicant statistics

The 2018 Natura 2000 Award received 80 applications (compared to 83, 93, and 163 applications respectively in 2016, 2015 and 2014) from 27 Member States (respectively 20, 24 and 26 Member States in 2016, 2015 and 2014). Figure 1 shows the applications from 2014-2018.

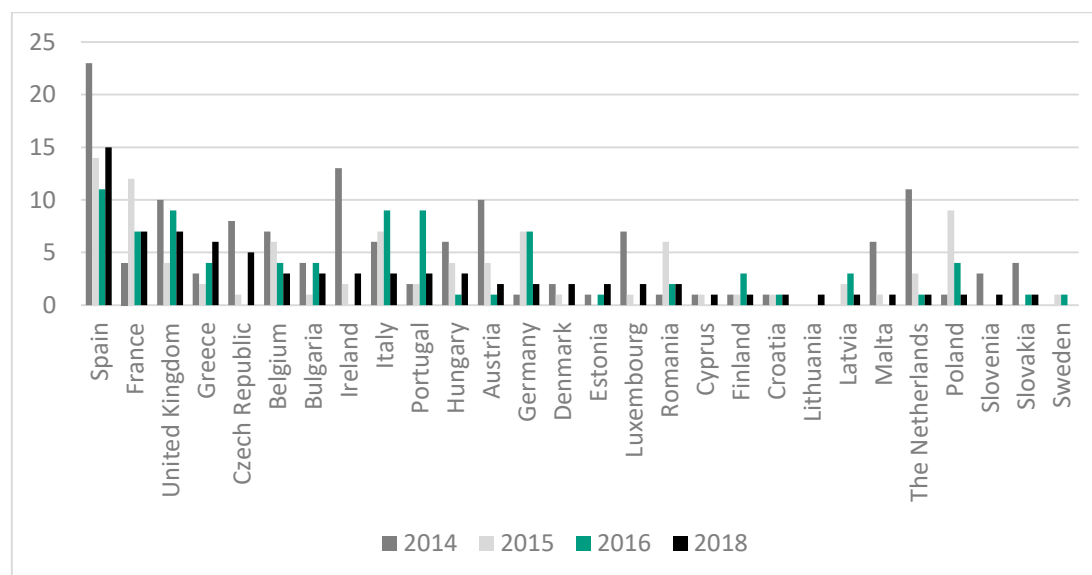


Figure 1. Number of applications per Member State

To some extent, 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 but much also depends on the awareness raising about the Award in the countries. Luxembourg, Belgium, Cyprus and Malta submitted more applications than would be expected from their network areas, and the Nordic EU countries (especially Finland and Sweden), from which very few applications per square kilometre of Natura 2000 sites were received. Germany and Poland were also underrepresented in the 2018 round.

With regard to the Award categories, as in 2014, 2015 and 2016, 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. While the numbers of applications received remained low in these categories, there was a sufficient number of high-quality applications submitted.

Category	2014	2015	2016	2018
Conservation	58	40	32	35
Communication	49	27	21	21
Socio-Economic Benefits	8	9	11	11
Reconciling Interests/Perceptions	38	6	12	8
Cross-Border Cooperation and Networking	10	11	7	5

Table 1. Number of applications per category

In 2018, as in 2015 and 2016, applicants were asked to categorise their organisation when registering on the Award website. In 2014, this was not included in the form so results are not directly comparable, however, applicants were allocated categories by the secretariat. In every year, environmental NGOs were also by far the biggest group (Fig. 2). National, regional and local authorities are also well represented. This suggests that the Award may be best known amongst these categories of applicants. Fewer applicants identified themselves as resource users such as farmers or hunters. However, it should be noted that the graph only identifies the main applicants. Other actors may be included as partners and may thus be involved in and well aware of the Award. Overall, 35 out of the 80 application listed partners. The total amounted to 105 partners, of which 37 were stated to be joint-lead partners. Partner numbers ranged from one to 10 partners, with the majority adding up to three partners (12 applications with one partner, seven applications added two partners, five named three, and 11 named more than three).

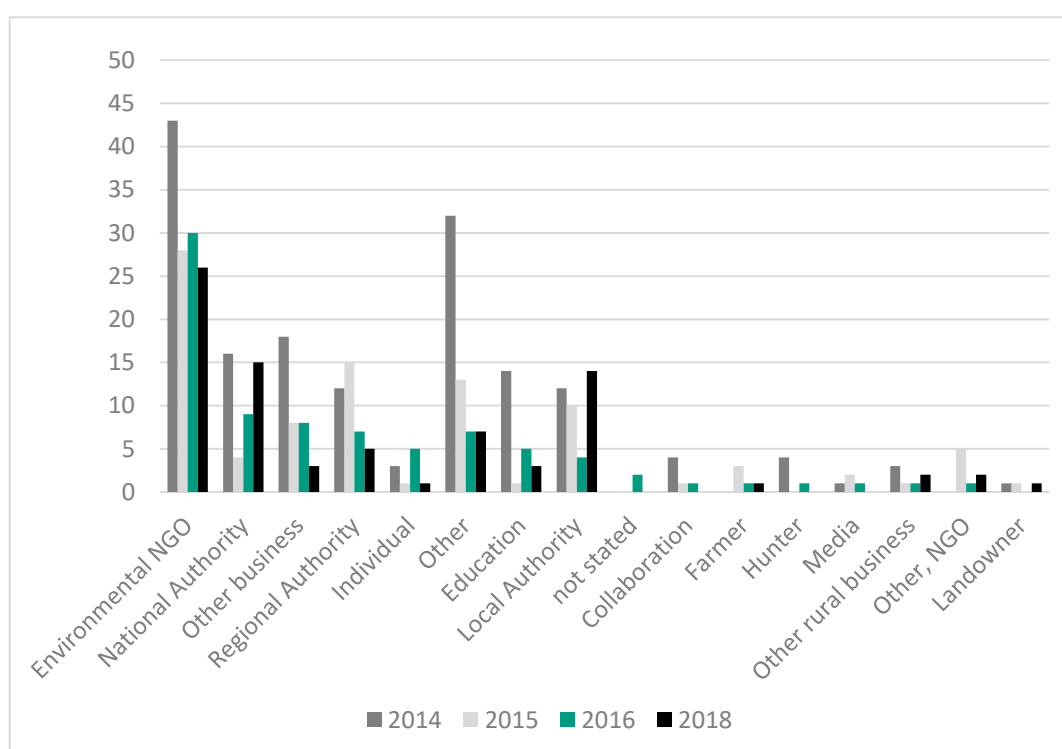


Figure 2. Type of applicant 2014-18. Applicants selected from the categories listed. NB. Other NGO = NGO where environment is not the main focus; Other rural business = not farmer or landowner; Other business = not rural business; Other = range of different applicants not always further defined.

The overview of actors involved in the applications is similar to and reinforces the general trends identified in 2014, 2015 and 2016:

- Diversity:** The diversity of applicants ranged from site administrations through various businesses to art groups. 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 2018 Award 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:** While each application is submitted by one lead-applicant, many involve a wide range of partners. 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 all four years of the Award. 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:** all four rounds of the Award highlighted the growing importance of emerging categories of actors. Land owners, natural resource users (e.g., hunters and fishermen) and business companies as well as schools, cannot any longer really be considered as emerging actors, even if their representation each year is variable. On the other hand, faith-based organisations, banking institutions, the military, sports clubs and especially artists engaging in Natura 2000 efforts are becoming increasingly important as more unusual applicants.
- **Dedicated funding:** The applications submitted were also diverse in terms of their funding sources. As in 2014 to 2016, 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.

3.2 Short introduction of winners by category

The winners of the Natura 2000 Award 2018 are presented briefly below:



Category: Conservation

*BirdLife Hungary and eight partner organisations work on the reduction of illegal poisoning affecting the eastern imperial eagle *Aquila heliaca* in and around 20 Hungarian Natura 2000 areas.*



Category: Communication

SEO/BirdLife and the Spanish news agency, Agencia EFE, carried out a wide range of activities to raise awareness about Natura 2000 including a hypermarket campaign and a series of half-hour documentaries to showcase Natura 2000 sites across Spain.



Category: Reconciling interests/perceptions

The NGO CALLISTO has been working to prevent collisions between bears and vehicles on a new motorway and to engage rural stakeholders in protecting their property from bears. Local tolerance towards bears has increased significantly!



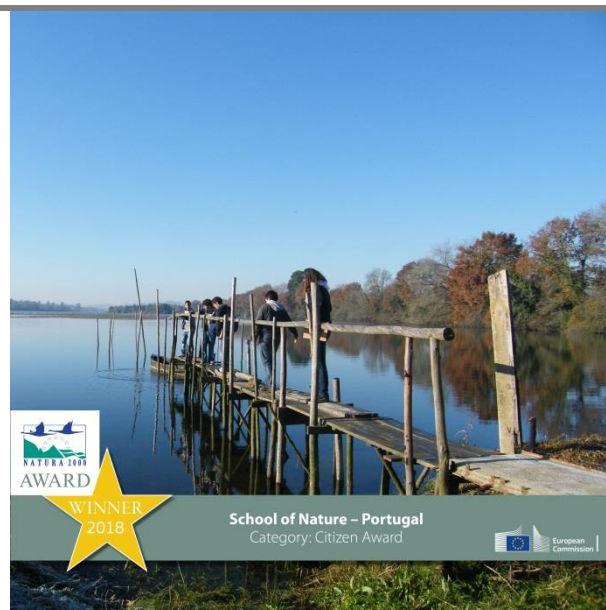
Category: Socio-economic benefits

This LIFE funded project is restoring 2,500 ha of alvar grassland in 16 Natura 2000 sites by supporting local farmers managing the site with EU agri-environment funding. Farmers also profit by marketing their meat and wool as nature-friendly.



Category: Cross-border cooperation and networking

Birdlife Greece and WWF Greece, BSPB Bulgaria and RSPB UK - joined forces to halt the decline of the Egyptian vulture in the Balkans by training customs officers, helping farmers to manage pastures for the benefit of the species and insulating over 400 electricity pylons, a work conducted all along the species' flyway



Category: Citizen Award

The Centre of Environmental Monitoring and Interpretation of Viana do Castelo Town Hall in Northern Portugal, draws from 11 years of experience in applying science and preparing scientific knowledge for and with school children within their 'School of Nature' project.

The winning applications were of high quality and many of them represent several, if not all elements of good practice. In the next section, applications are selected to demonstrate the aspects of good practice, though this list is not exhaustive.

4 Catalogue of good practice

The catalogue of 8 key elements of good practice were derived from a stepwise analysis of the factors that made the successful submissions to the Award scheme stand out during the evaluation process (see Garstecki et al. (2015) for the methodology used). The good practice focuses particularly on the Award winners and finalists, however, other applicants which stood out for particular reasons are also included.

4.1 Attracting new actors / unexpected participants

The military, business companies from the e-commerce and extractive sectors, faith groups, musicians, people with disabilities, as well as sporting clubs are examples of slightly unusual participants in previous Award rounds. New actors widen the social base of the Natura 2000 network, add innovative perspectives and bring their own resources, in terms of time or financing, with them. This can contribute not only to improving the conservation status of the species and habitats targeted, but also to the range of social groups benefiting from the network.



1 Supermarkets as participating actors in the Natura 2000 campaign carried out by SEO/BirdLife and Agencia EFE.

- The winner of the Communication category, **Natura 2000: Connecting people with biodiversity** (Spain), jointly carried out between SEO/BirdLife and Agencia EFE was the first Award winner to engage major supermarket chains to promote the Natura 2000 message to reach the widest possible general public. The LIFE co-financed project carried out an extensive information campaign on Natura 2000 in 50 hypermarkets in 14 regions in Spain. The location in supermarkets was used to make the link between consumers' own behaviour and the impact on nature. By the end of the project, 67.9% of consumers asked by the team through a targeted questionnaire, said they would choose products from a Natura 2000 site if it were not more expensive and 43.8% said they would do so despite additional costs. These activities were particularly successful because they built upon extensive outreach activities (see below).
- A number of applications in the 2018 Award addressed the links between natural and cultural heritage, thus building upon the involvement of musicians in the 2016 Award. The examples here also demonstrate that a focus on both the natural and cultural values in an area, is additionally attractive to business investors in a project. The finalist, **Lake Stymphalia path: Following the steps of Hercules on a natural-cultural heritage journey** (Greece) was submitted by an unusual participant, the Piraeus Bank Group Cultural Foundation, established by a bank. The LIFE co-financed project used the site's mythological past to showcase its natural values. An interpretation trail "Man and Nature on the Paths of the Time" was developed linking the Environment Museum of Stymphalia with the wetland and the archaeological site. Information signs,

placed along the trail, highlight archaeological, natural and mythological aspects of the site.

- Another finalist application, focusing on a site of historical and natural interest, which brought in artists to communicate their message was **The Salt of Life: a tale of the lake, salt, birds and people** (Bulgaria). Again, the involvement of business was important: the project was jointly run by two environmental NGOs, the Bulgarian Biodiversity Foundation and BSPB, in partnership with the salt extraction company, Black Sea Salinas LTD. The project communicates the importance and vulnerability of the Atanasovsko Lake Salt-works to the public at large. The focus was on the cultural and economic activities that led to the development of a site of great biodiversity value. Particularly important, was the engagement of artists in communicating the message and in the development of the annual 'Salt of Life' Festival which has become a regional event of importance, attracting tourists.
- Sporting interests are also important for Natura 2000, as the practice of sports activities on a Natura 2000 site, can potentially cause damage if care is not taken. In previous editions of the Award, recreational divers were involved in a finalist Natura 2000 Award application. In 2018, the finalist application **Natura 2000: Reconciling interests in Menorca** (Spain) targeted a range of mountain sport interests, mountain sports being very popular on the island. EUROPARC Spain developed a "Guide to Good Practices for holding Mountain Races in Protected Natural Areas" in close collaboration with the Spanish Federation of Mountain Sports, Natura 2000 administrations and scientists. The guidelines were put into practice for a major cycling competition, the 12th Mountain Bike Tour in Menorca (August 2017) which crosses 9 Natura 2000 sites on the island. The trial use of the guidelines was regarded as a success, minimising damage, without detracting from the enjoyment of the sporting activities. The guidelines are being used for other races in the region, promoted by the sporting federation.
- As in previous Award rounds, the involvement of volunteers is extremely important for many Natura 2000 activities. Finding new sources for voluntary work may be a challenge for many Natura 2000 actors. In the application **Biodiversity conservation through environmental awareness and forest fire prevention in l'Albufera** (Spain), local Red Cross volunteers and the council collaborated on building environmental management activities into fire prevention. The use of an existing volunteer network, with a new range of interests and expertise, could be of interest for other activities related to Natura 2000.

Attracting new actors / unexpected participants - Recommendations for future applicants

There are many groups of highly engaged and enthusiastic actors and volunteers whose primary interests are perhaps not the environment, but who none-the-less have a generally positive viewpoint of nature conservation. Future applicants should be on the lookout for opportunities to attract such interesting networks and encourage them to invest time and energy in Natura 2000. This includes in particular networks interested in cultural heritage and the arts and sporting interests, especially outdoors enthusiasts. Engaging such actors has a number of benefits:

- Increasing general knowledge about Natura 2000 and opening up new communication pathways;

- Identifying win-win situations e.g. activities to benefit both the natural and cultural values of a site and combining resources to carry out the activities;
- Opening new funding streams and attracting the interests of new business investors.

For future applicants who have identified groups with a potential interest in their activities, it is important to have a good understanding of their interests and why they might volunteer on a Natura 2000 site. Reaching out through a club or representative body might help to build trust and help to communicate with a wider audience. In particular, the benefits should be evident for the new actors as well – i.e. how Natura 2000 can benefit their activities.

4.2 Involving all stakeholders

The 2016 Natura 2000 Award round saw important innovations regarding general approaches to stakeholder involvement, i.e. how to identify stakeholders and particularly how to facilitate their constructive cooperation in a Natura 2000 context. In 2018, applicants built on this with many interesting examples of ways to facilitate the constructive collaboration of the key stakeholders. All the winners performed well here as involving key stakeholders is essential to the success of activities in all the Award categories.



2 The involvement of farmers as part of a wide stakeholder network was part of the success of the winner in the cross-border collaboration category as well as other projects.

- The winner of the reconciling interests and perceptions category, **Co-existing with bears in the 21st century: Difficulties and achievements** (Greece), was managed by Callisto, a conservation NGO, in collaboration with the local authority, farming co-operatives and the local development agency. It was part of a LIFE project which aimed at addressing two main issues: 1) accidents with oncoming traffic in a major international highway, and 2) conflicts with livestock owners, beekeepers and inhabitants of villages in bear areas. The process of identifying the correct stakeholders started at the proposal stage, with the identification of the project partners. As soon as the project started, a survey on attitudes was conducted in order to understand better the concerns of those most affected by bears in the area; the survey was then repeated at the end of the project. A wide-range of stakeholders was involved: for traffic management, the private operator of the highway infrastructure as well as drivers themselves; for issues regarding damage to farming property, farmers, beekeepers and dog breeders were encouraged to put in place measures to prevent depredation of livestock and hives; local authorities were supported in improving waste management with “bear-proof” bins and the emergency services contributed to the establishment of a dedicated Bear Emergency Response Team. The engagement of these various actors has clearly contributed to the increased acceptance of bears in the area.

- The winner of the cross-border networking and collaboration category, **Joint conservation efforts along three continents to save the sacred bird** (Greece) set out with the significant challenge of halting the decline of the Egyptian vulture in the Balkans and along its flyway, since the species is a long-distance migrant. The BirdLife network in the UK, Greece and Bulgaria was responsible for establishing the project activities. The organisations started by using their own networks and built out from this using the snowball effect, to engage a significant range of stakeholders across a massive geographic range. Involving public and private electricity transmission companies allowed the insulation of over 400 dangerous electricity pylons in both Greece and Bulgaria and the replacement of a power line in Sudan. Custom Officers were trained in Greece and Bulgaria, while international cooperation at the level of INTERPOL and international customs authorities was promoted resulting in the conviction of a poacher in Bulgaria. 1400 farmers in Bulgaria were also engaged through support entering agri-environment schemes to manage pasture to benefit vultures. Actors were also engaged along the whole flyway of the species, carrying out monitoring and training activities according to the agreed Flyway Action Plan. This was only possible because of the project partners' good use of their own networks and those of their contacts.
- The winner of the conservation category **Partnership to stop the poisoning of imperial eagles** (Hungary) was the first in Hungary to bring together conservationists, hunters, police and veterinarians for the same purpose. These diverse stakeholders were engaged to: establish a specialised dog-unit where trained dogs found poisoned carcasses (leading to 53 police investigations); tracking of breeding eagles to monitor mortality rates; nest guarding (3158 volunteer days in total) and workshops for key stakeholders (79 events, 6090 participants). The involvement of these networks made a significant difference to the manpower available to the project team. Continuous presence in the field increased awareness of the projects aims, made detection of illegal activities more likely and had significant force as a deterrent. This facilitated the achievement of significant results: a decrease in poisoned eagles from 16 in 2012 to one in 2016 and an increase of 26% of the breeding population.
- Land managers are clearly key stakeholders for many projects. Farmers' activities, often funded through agri-environment schemes, are essential for many projects (see good practice chapter: *Mobilising a wide range of resources* below). Other large-scale landowners include forest managers and the military has been seen to be an important stakeholder this year, as with previous years of the Natura 2000 Award. An example of collaboration between forestry services and the military was the application **Modification of the forestry uses to preserve bat population in the military camp of Chambaran** (France). The military was partner to the project, along with the National Office of Forestry (Office National des Forêts) and ecologists represented through NGOs (Conservatory of natural space Rhône-Alpes (CEN) and Bird Protection League Drôme (LPO)). After identifying the ecological importance of the site, the NGOs recognised that the involvement of other actors was essential to its conservation. The range of activities from forest extraction to military exercises, made the agreement on an aim for the site challenging. Following five years of dialogue, several expert field training courses, many meetings and the production of scientific reports, all partners were able to agree on a new forest management plan with a duration of 30 years. This long-term agreement could be reached because the sustainable management of the site was of interest to all, and all were willing to compromise and keep engaged in the dialogue. This demonstrates that a collaborative process of engaging stakeholders is very important to the outcome.
- As in previous Award years, engaging young people remained a strong theme in the 2018 edition. Capturing the attention of children and teenagers, however, requires a language that is accessible to them without being patronising, i.e. adapted to their age group. With 11 years of experience, collaboration, and group-discussions, the winner

of the Citizen's award **School of Nature** (Portugal), have acquired an good understanding of how to successfully communicate with and through young people. The application described sixty field activities for children linked with Natura 2000 sites. The local municipality, in charge of the project also trained teachers and helped to integrate information and scientific knowledge relevant to Natura 2000 into educational resources addressing a variety of subjects in the curriculum for a range of age-groups. The application was impressive in the number of people reached by the programme (20,000 children and adults), facilitated by involving the whole community. Clearly, they were very successful in raising awareness about their work too as they managed to gather enough votes to win the highly prized Citizens' Award.

- Many other applications such as **Involve young people in Natura 2000 : an innovative educational program on bats** (France) by the French regional Nature Park Causses du Quercy engaged children and organised a range of learning activities for school classes, well integrated into their existing curriculum. It included site visits as part of their biology classes and story-writing during French classes. Approaching the topic by means of a number of different subject-areas supports a gradual build-up of knowledge and interest. This approach may be particularly useful for species which children may initially fear or be disgusted by.
- Engaging young people may also help reach a range of other actors involved in educational activities. Finalist **Natura 2000 and the "Etang de l'Or": the exhibition designed by and for children!** (France) brought together technicians, public clerks, teachers, pupils, university students, land users, elected officials and researchers. The children were encouraged to carry out research themselves with the support of teachers and students and then present it as part of a travelling exhibition to elected officials and landowners amongst others. This shows that the engagement of children may help to reach decision-makers who might not be open to such a theme when presented in a more traditional way by conservationists.

Involving all stakeholders - Recommendations for future applicants

For a successful management of Natura 2000 it may be essential to involve stakeholders who have opposing interests to those of Natura 2000 i.e. whose activities are those damaging the site. These are of course the most difficult groups to engage but the approaches above show that this cannot be put off until late in a project's timeframe.

Not only "difficult stakeholders" need to be involved. A very important stakeholder group is school children, which is reflected in the significant number of applications to the Award aiming at engaging this target group. However, the purposes for communication activities targeted at children should be clear (purely educative, changing viewpoints, using the children as a conduit to other actors) and measurement of the situation before and afterwards should be included. Many applications do not fully consider or describe these aspects in their applications.

An adaptable approach to stakeholder engagement is needed. The most successful projects described here do not focus on a single stakeholder group, but aim to engage a range of stakeholders whose viewpoints on and interest in Natura 2000 may be extremely variable. Being able to adapt and tailor the approach to stakeholder needs is therefore important.

The timing of stakeholder engagement is an essential consideration at the start of a project. If stakeholder involvement are added as an afterthought it is unlikely that outreach attempts will be successful. Ideally the project team itself should include members of the groups most interested or affected by the management of the Natura 2000 site. If this is not possible, at least establishing a working relationship early on is important.

For very large-scale multi-national projects, it may not be possible to bring all stakeholder groups into the team but in this case, the involvement of network of partners, each well connected in their own country is important. The snowball effect can be used to work out from this network and engage suitable organisations in each location.

Lastly, the facilitation of a sustainable stakeholder cooperation is crucial. Different facilitation techniques may be used in combination, and adapted to the context or the existing conflicts. These include meetings, forums, joint-trainings, information sharing, and not least direct collaboration within the co-design of projects and co-development and implementation of measures.

4.3 Starting from a sound situation analysis

The applications to the Natura 2000 Award have shown how a sound analysis of the ecological and socio-economic situation contributes to their success. There are many examples of good practice in conservation projects. Applicants are however increasingly analysing the socio-economic conditions and people's viewpoints prior to starting an action. This element of good practice is also clearly linked to *measuring success and sharing knowledge*, as it is important to understand the baseline situation in order to implement good monitoring. The applicants described below could be considered best practice in both areas.

- Finalist **International flight of the small falcon: lesser kestrel, returning to Natura 2000 in Bulgaria** (Bulgaria) presented a partnership, supported by the LIFE programme, to bring the lesser kestrel (*Falco naumanni*), back to Bulgaria where it was considered extinct. The project was well researched and tested prior to implementation. The methods used, the so-called 'hacking' method, involved breeding juveniles in captivity at specialised breeding facilities, raising them in an aviary with foster parents and later releasing them. This method is based on the long-term experience of DEMA, which has successfully implemented a series of similar initiatives in Spain and France. Since this is the first time the method has been used where the species was extinct, the initial work involved a thorough feasibility study and monitoring of the habitat to check for suitability, building on DEMA's previous experiences.
- The Finalist **Cooperating over wildlife conservation in the Czech-Polish Krkonose/ Karkonosze Natura 2000 Site** (Poland/Czech Republic) was established by the national park authorities with the stated aim of coordinating a cross border monitoring system. It was essential to understand the baseline situation in both countries and what should be adapted or improved. The project built on years' worth of separate monitoring activities in the two national parks on each side of the Czech and Polish



3 By comparing and standardizing monitoring approaches two adjacent national parks in Poland and the Czech Republic were able to build a common database and maps of several species.

border. An overview of the data gathered, however, showed that the different protocols used meant that data was often not comparable. Following analysis of the problem, the competent administrations of both sides of the border agreed on a joint approach for tackling it. Joint teams for monitoring mammals, birds, and butterflies, each involving specialists from many Polish and Czech scientific institutes were set up. Standardized monitoring methodologies were agreed upon (including field mapping, inventory, census, bat detection, telemetry, data modelling) and were deployed. This initial work was used to develop a common database on birds, map butterflies and bats and share data on the spatial distribution of red deer. The common understanding of the situation has allowed the parks to jointly react to the monitoring and establish common conservation objectives for the Natura 2000 sites.

- While measuring the initial situation regarding the conservation value of the site was fairly common, there are fewer examples of Natura 2000 Award applicants carrying out good socio-economic or opinion analysis before starting their activities. The winner, **Natura 2000: Connecting people with biodiversity** (Spain), is an excellent exception, an example of a communication project which measured the initial knowledge and interest in Natura 2000. At the start of their work, only 10% of the general public in Spain know about the Natura 2000 network. This was compared with results at the end (see *measuring and communicating success*). The winner **Co-existing with bears in the 21st century: Difficulties and achievements** (Greece) also carried out a detailed baseline data collected on attitudes, and compared to post-project data. While, initially, 77% of the local population thought that prevention measures such as fencing and guarding dogs were ineffective, the project completion survey demonstrated that the situation had been turned around and 76% of the respondents considered the use of prevention measures effective. Further good examples of assessment of attitudes include the applicant **BE-NATUR – Science Days for Nature Conservation and Biodiversity** (Austria), who based their initial project design on the findings of a series of workshops that identified negative perceptions of N2000 among locals.

Starting from a sound situation analysis - Recommendations for future applicants

The experience of the applicants in the 2018 round demonstrates that working together with other partners with more experience in an area or partners who have different ways of approaching a problem can be an effective means of examining and understanding the situation. Building on this experience and combining the most successful elements of different approaches can save time.

As in previous Award rounds, it is clear that many applicants understand the importance of a sound situation analysis in terms of the biological situation but that fewer fully analyse the socio-economic situation. This is likely to be important for the majority of sizable projects in Natura 2000 sites. Applications in the Communication category in particular, would benefit from considering in more detail how to undertake baseline surveys of attitudes towards or knowledge about Natura 2000 before commencing their activities.

4.4 Promoting conceptual and technical innovation

In the 2018 round of the Natura 2000 Award, a number of innovative approaches and techniques were presented to a wider public. This year a number of interesting restoration projects in fresh water habitats were presented in which new methods were used both for the restoration itself or for engaging people in the project activities. This fits well with the European Commission's priorities for green and blue infrastructure and the restoration of important aquatic habitats.



- The finalist applicant, **Lille Vildmose: a bog restoration project for public and peatland** (Denmark) was submitted by the Danish Nature Agency in collaboration with the private landowner. The project, co-financed through the LIFE programme, is innovative in its scale and in some of the methods used which have been tested here for the first time in Europe. Lille Vildmose, one of the largest lowland raised bogs in North-western Europe, has been comprehensively exploited for peat extraction and agriculture, leaving less than half of the original bog intact. The project used both tried and tested techniques to raise water levels and innovative measures to re-establish appropriate habitat conditions. These included grazing of red deer and elk (the latter extinct in Denmark) on 2100ha of the bog and monitoring of food preferences and movements by GPS; testing different methods of clearing tree overgrowth and establishing a new method of manual clearing. A method to re-establish sphagnum growth, only used in Canada to date, was trialled and adapted to Danish conditions. The project is now used nationally and internationally as a benchmark for large-scale restoration.
- Other bog-restoration projects tested new techniques. In the application **Restoration of the hydrology of the wetlands of De Hoge Veluwe National Park** (Netherlands) a landscape ecological system analysis was elaborated prior to project implementation, an innovation in such restoration projects. **Putting the moss back onto Bolton Fell Moss SAC** (United Kingdom) implemented a newly invented method for bog restoration that enables the establishment of a vegetation in a comparatively short time by placing moss patches as nurturing vegetation and monitored and shared the results. **Witherslack Mosses SAC Restoration** (United Kingdom) used some new restoration techniques as well as bringing in a range of important stakeholders to carry out innovative conservation actions targeting fishermen. The use of a range of methods is important both for achieving conservation goals and keeping stakeholders engaged in the long-term.
- River restoration was also a strong focus in this year's applications. Finalist **Connection of the Danube's fish habitats** (Austria), aimed to link the Danube river fish habitats in Austria through the recreation of semi-natural river areas. The applicant VERBUND Hydro Power GmbH, Austria's largest electricity provider, aimed to reduce the

4 The combination of technical measures tackling water pollution, collaboration with farmers to reduce nutrient inputs and water quality monitoring, contributed to a positive tourist image of the Loch Leven site in the United Kingdom.

impact of hydropower, in particular, the hydropower station "Ottensheim-Wilhering", which had represented an unsurmountable obstacle for migrating fish in the Danube since it was built in 1975 and was preventing the linkage of the many Natura 2000 sites along the river. The project reconstructed 14.2 kilometres of river, creating Europe's largest "fish migration aid". The fish pass construction follows best practice but the project also innovatively provides fish habitat along stretches of already existing artificial riverbeds. Two months after finalisation, in May 2016, an independent monitoring scheme found that over 5000 fish from the Danube had migrated through the new river including the flagship species, "schrätzer" perch *Gymnocephalus schraetzer*. In 2016, 100 individuals from this rare species had migrated to the river bypass and, by the autumn, more than a 1000 young schrätzers had swum back down the river to the Danube. The innovative techniques implemented mean that the site is not only being used as a migration route but also as reproduction area for this rare species.

- Other river restoration projects which show that innovative activities can be carried out on a range of scales was **Restoration and protection of valuable habitats in the capital city** (Slovakia). The activities were significant on national level and unusual because of the urban setting. **Segura Riverlink, connecting people and habitats** (Spain) brought in private landowners through a participative decision-making process innovative at Mediterranean level.
- The Finalist **A collaborative approach to sustainable development at Loch Leven** (United Kingdom) used a variety of innovative measures to deal with diffuse pollution from agriculture. A set of technical measures (silt traps, filter fencing, interceptor drains and buffer strips) was prepared. The measures were presented at workshops for farmers. A farm-specific approach was used and focused on the pollution hotspots reducing nutrient leaching through the use of the best fitting technical measures for the particular farm. This project was also innovative in combining technical pollution reduction measures with measures to increase tourism and bring more visitors to the area.
- While showcasing technical progress for conservation is clearly an important aim of the Award, innovation is also important in the context of communicating about Natura 2000. Engaging the right actors, targeting communications and employing new and interesting methods can help to engage a wider audience. Finalist application **Natura 2000 in the Nature Park Harz** (Germany) demonstrated activities implemented by a regional association of numerous counties and municipalities spanning over three states. Each phase of the project (conceptualisation, visual design, development of printed material, information panels and exhibition) was accompanied by the creation of a "conservation cluster" involving local stakeholders from the private as well as the public sector. The project was one of the first ones in Germany to explicitly make the connection between nature parks and Natura 2000. By focusing on the history, the typical habitats and the flagship species of each site and by putting the site into a bigger geographic context (the park), the project found a clever way to make Natura 2000 more tangible for a broader audience. The idea of creating separate hiking trails for each Natura 2000 site is also original. It allows park visitors to directly experience each site and compare them with each other.

Promoting conceptual and technical innovation - Recommendations for future applicants

Innovation in the management of Natura 2000 is important for the additional benefits it can bring to nature, not for its own sake. The most successful applications do not try to start from scratch but employ measures which have been used in a different context and test

adaptations to apply them to a new setting. Collaborating with those who have used the measures before is important in this context.

The geographical setting and scale of an intervention is all-important. While several examples described above, are on a very significant scale, this does not need to be the case for a successful application. Innovation can be seen on a national, regional or local level, transferring and adapting activities.

Future applicants should continue exploring the added value offered by knowledge and technological transfer, but should also seek more conceptual innovation, e.g. in terms of engagement of stakeholders. Innovative communication techniques are also highly sought after in the Award, especially if these help to bring in new groups or engage stakeholders more effectively.

4.5 Planning sustainability from the start

A significant number of applications to the Natura 2000 Award, showcase activities financed by the LIFE programme. LIFE projects have a set lifetime but planning for continuation of activities after the end of the project financing, is essential, as few conservation problems can be solved in such a short time. This can include the development of action plans or guidelines which will continue to be used by key stakeholders after the end of the project; establishing significantly better working relations between stakeholders, allowing them to continue working together long-term e.g. through agreeing a memorandum of understanding (MOU); or capacity-building with authorities or NGOs so they can continue project activities alone. Ensuring a long-term income from sustainable activities on the site is another way of making sure that beneficial activities continue.



5 The insulation of electricity pylons by the winner of the networking category ensures long-term prevention of damages to the Egyptian culture.

- The Winner **Joint conservation efforts along three continents to save the sacred bird** (Greece) made significant efforts to ensure that the project effects would be long-lasting. The development of the Flyway Action Plan for the Conservation of the Balkan and Central Asian Populations of Egyptian Vulture (EVFAP) is a key element of the Convention of Migratory Species' Vulture's Multi-Species Action Plan. This document is the culmination of over two years of work and collaboration of 26 countries along the flyway of the species and many experts and is expected to be vital for the future of the species. The project also carried out significant one-off activities that have long-term conservation impacts, for example, insulating 400 electricity pylons in Greece and Bulgaria and the decommissioning and replacement of a power line in Sudan, known to have electrocuted hundreds and perhaps thousands of individuals since its construction in the 1950s. Other activities, focused on engaging stakeholders not just for the duration of the project, but in the long-term. One way in which this was done was by working with a wide range of local institutions such as the Sahara Conservation Fund (SCF) and A.P. Leventis Ornithological Research Institute (APLORI), to support them in valuable work aimed at reducing the use of vulture body parts in traditional medicine, a task that they will continue after the end of the project.

- The finalist **Ten keys to co-ownership for nature projects Project** (Belgium) started from the difficult position of a community with a very critical view of Natura 2000 following compulsory land purchase to ensure the site's conservation. The authorities realised that without the buy-in of the residents, the Polders of Kruibeke which are in a populated area, a stone's throw from Antwerp, did not have a long-term future. Their aim was to establish co-ownership of the site by involving the local population in a significant way in the development of the management plans for the site. In order to encourage the Kruibeke municipality to get involved, the project team widened their focus so that they looked not just at the nature benefits of the site but also at the recreation potential. Recreational facilities were created, such as two trails, six fishing pitches, two hides, one viewpoint, five-time capsules and three artworks. Guided tours have also helped to draw visitors in and around 20-140 visitors come to monthly walks. This has benefited the local community, with the establishment of four new bed-and-breakfasts in the last two years. The local view is now much more positive about Natura 2000. The arrangements were also formalised through developing the "keys for co-ownership" with clear responsibilities attached. Without the strong planning for reconciliation and conflict resolution, this would not have been possible.
- One area of activity which has significantly increased since the launch of the Award in 2014, is engaging the general public in the monitoring needed for Natura 2000. New technologies have provided excellent opportunities to engage people in "citizen science". This has the double-potential of gathering more data over a longer period and increasing the interest of those involved in nature. An example submitted to the 2018 round was **BioLog - species records in your phone** (Czech Republic). The BioLog mobile application, promoted by the Czech Nature Conservation Agency, allows people to record their observations on their smart phone and submit them online. The website and data-management are relatively simple and can be run with little expense by the national authority. Important data can therefore be collected in the long-term at very little expense.
- The winner of the Citizen's Award **School of Nature** (Portugal) showcases another example of citizen science, this time targeted at young people. The local municipality in charge of the project developed educational tools include including downloadable species identification sheets and observation cards from an online platform, where observation records can then be uploaded. After scientific validation, the information becomes available to all and can be shared with school communities from other municipalities. Over the course of the project, teachers were also trained in order to broaden the reach of their activities to a wider group. The citizen science tool is easily usable by a wider public including young people, thus strengthening both long-term data monitoring possibilities, and long-term engagement of children and teenagers.

Planning sustainability from the start - Recommendations for future applicants

Applicants should consider the sustainability of their actions from the social, economic and environmental viewpoint from the stage the project proposal's development. It is however clear that these plans will need to be adapted over time, depending on how the situation on the site develops and the types of new activities developed.

Future applicants should consider how capacity-building and conflict resolution techniques can help in this regard. Clearly building trust between actors with different interests on a site, is an extremely effective way of ensuring that people are willing to work together longer

term. Formal establishments of agreements for example through the keys to co-ownership developed by in the Belgium example above or through a memorandum of understanding (MOU), as seen in previous Award rounds, may also help to maintain relations over time.

While applicants are encouraged to describe their activities over a five-year time period, making their future plans clear to the evaluators, will also help them to score highly.

4.6 Mobilising a wide range of resources

A number of ways to mobilize resources for undertaking activities in Natura 2000 sites have been demonstrated by the 2018 applicants and those in previous years. This can include engaging financing partners from the business sector, the use of non-monetary resources such as volunteering and making use of other EU funding streams such as the EU rural development policy, to roll-out project activities more widely.

- Following several examples in previous editions, the 2018 applicants included a still broader array of high-quality projects which started in a limited geographical area, often with the assistance of LIFE financing, and then succeeded in having the tested measures included in rural development programmes, thus making them more widely available. The winner of the socio-economic benefits category **LIFE to alvars: restoration and grazing reintroduction for 2500 hectares of Estonian alvar grasslands** (Estonia) involved 600 landowners in 25 project areas carrying out restoration actions and ensuring subsequent management through grazing. 1,400 ha of alvar grassland have been restored so far by using heavy forestry machinery. Cleared areas were prepared for grazing by installing fences, water troughs, animal shelters and access roads. In order to ensure that the actions would continue to be carried out after the end of the LIFE project, the restored sites became eligible for CAP agri-environmental payments. The project, however, does not just rely on funding but has looked for ways to help farmers create additional revenue from the grassland management. An Added Value Products Working Group for the farmers was set up with the dual mandate: to find suitable uses for the timber harvested during the restoration actions, and to better capture the value chain of the products derived from the extensive grazing (meat and wool from the livestock). A cooperative was formed to market the meat, which is in the process of establishing a local slaughterhouse to reduce transportation costs. The cooperative is also introducing a new high-end brand for its products, called “Muhu meat”. For the marketing of the wool, the working group is trying to develop sufficient economies of scale by combining production in order to offer output volumes attractive for wool processors. The project area has also become more attractive for visitors, thus bringing in additional tourism revenues.
- Other projects, which succeeded in including measures in their rural development programmes, included the finalist **Of geese and men: Reconciling the interests of farming and conservation** (Bulgaria) which is a partnership between a conservation



6 Resources may be mobilized through making a clear link between sustainable tourism in a region and the ecological values connected to a Natura 2000 site

NGO and a farming company. The LIFE-funded project looked at ways to allow the globally threatened red breasted goose (*Branta ruficollis*) to continue grazing fields near two Bulgarian lakes which together shelter up to 90% of the global population. This was achieved thanks to a specially designed agri-environment scheme: farmers experimented with traditional cultivation methods providing foraging habitats for the geese during winter. Farmers co-designed the measure and it proved very popular. The measure also includes provision of advisory services to farmers in order to ensure that it is implemented well. The winner of the reconciling interests and perceptions category, **Co-existing with bears in the 21st century: Difficulties and achievements** (Greece) also succeeded in having the measures trialled through the project (establishing fences to protect livestock and beehives against large carnivores) included in the Greek Rural Development Programme. Additionally, the network of guard dog owners established by the project, facilitates breeding within the project area rather than purchasing puppies outside the region, which generates further income for those participating.

- The finalist project, **Promotion of sustainable farming products through Natura 2000** (Spain), which has also featured in previous Award rounds, is another LIFE project which built up a sustainable income stream through a labelling scheme. The project initially focussed on providing guidance on sustainable production techniques in Castile-La Mancha and Castile-Leon where around 40% of the Natura 2000 area is actively farmed. The NGO submitting the application Fundación Global Nature (FGM) bought up farmers' harvests, packaged and marketed these crops at national and international trade fairs and with major supermarket chains. FGM installed a packaging plant in Toledo and created an almond production cooperative to commercialise the products further. It also designed a special packaging label to brand the produce, which uses Natura 2000 logo and an image of the great bustard as a symbol for ecological production. For the legume production, within 5 years there were 243 producers involved farming an area of 278 ha. They produced 115,000 kilos of legumes and total revenue was €225,100. So far over 400 farmers have joined the project and are much more enthusiastic about the concept of Natura 2000 after seeing how it can bring financial revenues.
- Tourism is another important area for nature conservation and raising awareness about a site's financial value due to its natural value demonstrates a clear win-win situation. Finalist **Magic Autumn at Ambroz Valley** (Spain) is an initiative started in 1998 by a Local Action Group (LAG) which has continued uninterrupted ever since. The project aimed to address the depopulation in this rural area by helping local residents diversify the local economy through tourism while at the same time raising awareness of the fragility and importance of the area, and the reasons why it is protected under Natura 2000. Today Magic autumn includes a multitude of activities such as music, hiking, sports, photos, mountain biking, mushroom picking around the theme of nature and attracts thousands of visitors every November and significant gains for the local economy. The Magic Autumn at Ambroz Valley is now a recognised brand that brings resources for the regional economy and whose image is strongly connected to that of the Natura 2000 network.
- Other projects which succeeded in bringing in tourism revenues included the finalist **Bat tunnel** (Luxembourg), where a situation which was initially viewed critically by tourism operators, was turned into a win-win situation. Initially, bats inhabiting a tunnel through which a new cycle-way should pass, seemed to be an obstacle to development. Following a joint-process of negotiation, the pathway was built around the tunnel. An adventure trail and information boards were installed to inform the visitors about the presence of bats in the tunnel and their status as endangered species. The

bats became an attraction in themselves, bringing in a new type of tourism and improving the general attitude to tourism operators and locals to Natura 2000. The Finalist A **collaborative approach to sustainable development at Loch Leven** (United Kingdom) also helped to bring in new tourism resources to the area by building a 21km long circular Heritage Trail which attracts annually over 200,000 visitors to the SPA, providing significant economic benefits for local businesses as well as benefits to physical and mental health shown to be experienced by the trail users.

Mobilising a wide range of resources - Recommendations for future applicants

LIFE projects often do well in the Natura 2000 Award but future applicants should also consider how they can continue to carry out activities in Natura 2000 areas supported through other EU funding streams. It is clear that the financial needs for the management of Natura 2000 areas are more than the LIFE fund alone can support. LIFE is a good source of funding for launching innovative actions for testing, which if successful can continue to be funded through other funds such as the co-financed Rural Development programmes.

Encouraging sustainable tourism activities can also supply rural areas with much-needed additional income. The links between cultural and natural heritage can be well promoted in Natura 2000 areas. This can increase awareness about the value of Natura 2000 with new or wider audiences.

4.7 Measuring success and sharing knowledge

This element of good practice is strongly linked with element 3 - *Starting from a sound situation analysis*. Once a baseline is in place, continued monitoring of activities is essential for measuring whether or not the desired aims are finally attained. Communicating successes (as well as sharing experience with failures) with peers is important to allow others to learn from your findings.

- Winner of the conservation category, **Partnership to stop the poisoning of imperial eagles** (Hungary) developed detailed protocols for monitoring of actions throughout the life of the project. This included a veterinarian protocol on treatment of injured birds and the results of pathological investigations, a field survey protocol on persecution cases, and a police protocol on investigation methods. The use of common guidelines and procedures means that activities can be compared and followed during and after the project. Considerable efforts were also made to raise stakeholder and public awareness via publications, intensive media and online appearances, and with the creation of an information "Eagle Centre" in Jászberény. Addition-



7 The gathering of knowledge of the marine environment of Natura 2000 in Spain through oceanographic surveys enabled the elaboration of management guidelines as well as a dialogue between various stakeholders.

ally, experts in the area were targeted in particular through presentations at 16 international conferences. An important achievement of the project was networking with the organisations and the projects dealing with the same topic. This involved 17 organisations and 22 LIFE projects from 16 countries. The final project conference attracted 130 experts from 16 countries. The project results are well-documented and available to the public through a high-quality website.

- Finalist **Shiant Isles recovery project** (United Kingdom) aimed to eradicate rats which prevented the breeding of seabirds on the uninhabited Shiant Isles, Scotland. Such a significant intervention requires meticulous planning and thorough monitoring, before, during and after the project activities. Pre- and post- intervention monitoring was carried out both for bird species and targeted rodent population. The rat population appears to have been reduced to zero after two years of intervention. This has allowed the recovery of breeding populations of over 150,000 pairs of seabirds, including some 63,000 pairs of puffins. In order to allow others to apply the methods used in the project, the applicants created and promoted a "Biosecurity" protocol to be used in other island seabird colonies. The finalist application, **Conservation of the Mediterranean monk seal** (Greece), also included high-quality work to transfer knowledge on management measures relevant to monk seal conservation, to neighbouring countries such as Turkey, Cyprus and the countries bordering the Adriatic sea.
- Finalist **Marine Natura 2000 network in Spain: preserving the unknown** (Spain) is a nation-wide project, aiming to improve knowledge of the marine environment in Spain and identify marine N2000 sites. The collaboration between NGOs, scientists and authorities helped to establish important baseline data on the marine network, monitoring protocols and information-sharing techniques. Over 150 oceanographic surveys were undertaken to compile the necessary information on marine habitats, seabirds, cetaceans, turtles and other protected species as well as on their threats and pressures across Spanish waters. Around 40 work sessions involving more than 650 representatives of key civil society groups were also held all along the coast and in Madrid in order to gain their support and participation. The oceanographic research campaigns have been vital in increasing the scientific knowledge on marine biodiversity in Spain. The project has also enabled coherent management guidelines to be established and an extensive dialogue to be held with stakeholders, including fishermen, on protecting and using resources in marine Natura 2000 sites in a way that protects the species and habitats for which the sites are designated. The knowledge gathered enabled the declaration of 39 SPAs for seabirds and 10 SCIs for marine habitats and species. Data and results have been widely circulated and shared with the Spanish network and beyond.
- Far fewer applicants in the Communication category measure the impact of their communication activities on public attitudes. The winner, **Natura 2000: Connecting people with biodiversity** (Spain), stands out as the exception in this respect. Over the course of the project, the number of people who knew about the Natura 2000 network in Spain increased from 10% to 22%. The before and after analysis, also addressed the degree of interest in Natura 2000. An increase was measured between 2003, when 75.7% of the people who knew the network had visited at least one of the sites, to over 90% by 2017.

Measuring success and sharing knowledge sharing - Recommendations for future applicants

Monitoring activities should start with the baseline situation but should continue throughout the project lifetime. As with element of good practice 3 - *Starting from a sound situation analysis*, many applicants are aware of the importance of ecological monitoring but give less weight to socio-economical monitoring. This is a systematic failing in many communication applications in particular and one which results in a poor scoring in the evaluation of a Natura 2000 Award application. Future applicants in this category should consider how they can demonstrate that they have fully considered how to measure the change in knowledge or attitude resulting from their intervention.

Exchanging information on project outcomes and particularly sharing results with peers who may be able to put them into practice in other situations, is highly valuable. Applicants should demonstrate how they have not only made useful data or processes available to others but also promoted their results to the extent that transfer has started to other areas.

4.8 Perseverance

Long-term commitments and efforts made by Natura 2000 partners have led to significant benefits for the Natura 2000 network, but are not always easily captured by the focus of the Award on activities over the last five years. The examples in this report as well as most in previous reports, have focused on small dedicated NGOs which focus on the recovery of protected species. Examples of applications from the 2018 round, which fall into this category include the following:

- The Greek Society for the Study and Protection of the Monk Seal (MOM) was founded 30 years ago and since then has engaged in

considerable efforts to halt the decline of this highly threatened species. MOM, represented through finalist application, **Conservation of the Mediterranean monk seal** (Greece), first established an Emergency Rescue Team in 1990 which since then has intervened in 86 cases of Mediterranean monk seals (*Monachus monachus*) in distress; in 55 of these cases the animals were successfully released back to their natural environment. Given that the Greek monk seal population stands at only 300 seals, such a rate of success is important for the species survival. MOM also carries out field research, discovering new pupping sites. Working with people has also been important over the long term to raise awareness about the plight of the seal. Information centres have been created on the islands of Alonissos, Skopelos, Skiathos, Syros, Milos, Kimolos, Fourni and Karpathos and further information has been distributed through media and social media. Fishermen are



8 Perseverant engagement of BirdWatch Ireland led over decades to the stabilization of tern population on Rockabill Island.

clearly a key stakeholder as fishing activities may accidentally or deliberately kill or hurt seals. MOM succeeded in working together with fishermen to carry out conservation actions for the seal such as improving feeding sites. The long-term commitment of the organisation has been key to engaging and keeping these important stakeholders positively involved. As a result of MOM's actions, the conservation status of the monk seal has improved and it was down-listed from "Critically Endangered" to "Endangered" on the IUCN Red Data List of endangered species.

- The finalist application **Protection and conservation action for Roseate Terns on Rockabill Island** (Ireland) represents another long-term commitment by an NGO towards a specific species' recovery – the roseate tern (*Sterna dougalli*). The Rockabill Roseate Tern Conservation Project, initiated in 1989, following designation of the Rockabill island as an SPA, is led by BirdWatch Ireland, in partnership with the National Parks and Wildlife Service. Efforts were first dedicated to ensuring that the site is a safe, disturbance-free, refuge for the seabirds and then to improving the habitat for the terns to ensure the best possible conditions for successful nesting. In addition to monitoring activities, the initiative also involves researching the breeding ecology and population demographics, and strengthening the knowledge to improve future conservation actions for this species. These conservation actions have resulted in a remarkable increase in both Roseate and common tern populations on Rockabill. At the start of the initiative in 1989, the island was supporting just 152 pairs of roseate terns and 108 pairs of common terns. By 2017, this has increased exponentially to 1597 pairs of Roseate Terns and 2085 pairs of common terns. The island now hosts 47% of the European population of roseate tern and is strategically important for the survival of this globally threatened species. The recovery on Rockabill is also providing a source population of breeding birds for other colonies in Ireland and elsewhere in Europe. These impressive results would not have been possible without the long-term commitment of BirdWatch Ireland on the island over the past 29 years.
- The Greek NGO Callisto, this years' winner of the reconciling interests and perceptions category for **Co-existing with Bears in the 21st Century: Difficulties and Achievements** (Greece) has also been engaged for more than a decade in improving road safety and coexistence between brown bears (*Ursus arctos*) and humans in the Kastoria region. Their constant efforts, also involving more than 1000 volunteers, led to the integration of a LIFE project's Bear Emergency Response Team to be covered by national funding as well as to the adoption of a bear management protocol. Paragraph too short.

Perseverance - Recommendations for future applicants

The 2014-2018 rounds of the Natura 2000 Award show how perseverance is a crucial prerequisite for successful species recovery and re-introduction initiatives. It would be interesting to see additional examples of long-term commitment to the conservation and sustainable use of Natura 2000 sites from other thematic areas in future rounds.

Nonetheless, it is important in the application form to make the distinction between the activities covered by the application (over the last five years) and how these have built upon the longer-term involvement of the applicant.

5 Outlook

The Natura 2000 Award is now an established event and can be said to sample a significant range of different activities taking place in Natura 2000 sites across all Member States. 419 applications (including a few repetitions each year) have been submitted in total since its establishment. These range from individuals building sustainable businesses in Natura 2000 areas to multi-million Euro projects which aim to restore vast areas of degraded habitat through technical interventions. On one level, such diverse activities cannot be compared. The evaluation process of the Award, however, serves to highlight where innovative ideas have been developed, effective and efficient project management processes followed and information well-shared. This provides extremely useful learning material for all those working on Natura 2000 sites.

A few points drawn out from the Benchmarking reports to date are highlighted below.

- Applications have been received from all Member States but still cannot be said to be **balanced between Member States, categories and stakeholders**. This is inevitable and not a problem in itself. Future applicants are however invited to carefully consider how they present activities which potentially fall under several Award categories. In the 2018 round, there were again many applications which could have been submitted under several categories. Highlighting how your activities have brought about socio-economic benefits or have helped to solve conflicts could improve the chances of your application being successful. Applicants should consider how links can be made with efforts to protect cultural heritage and to improve health and well-being of people living in or near Natura 2000 sites. Few applications so far have made these connections in a meaningful way.
- A number of applications which have been highlighted over the four years of the Award demonstrate how **Member States and actors learn from one another**. Peer-to-peer exchange has particular potential for Natura 2000 management. Member States and different actors clearly have different levels of expertise and face different problems. Further initiatives that contribute in sharing knowledge and in successful transfer of experience and skills are particularly welcome.
- The Natura 2000 Award aims to raise awareness about the Natura 2000 network. It is therefore of high importance, that **applicants make the link of the actions and results to Natura 2000 sites clear** in their application. Applicants' work often focus on Natura 2000 sites which are also nationally protected and the fact that the site is designated according to European criterion may be unclear in the descriptions of their activities to the public. The European importance of the site should be promoted. Applicants must also clearly describe the direct benefit of their actions for the Natura 2000 network.
- Several of this years' Award applications focused on the combination of **social and cultural values of a Natura 2000 site** to local communities as well as linked economic benefits. There is greater potential for more applications in this regard. A significant number of applications are providing ecosystem services, especially by engaging farmers and landowners. Applications which demonstrate innovative ways to pay for ecosystem services would be of interest to a wide range of Natura 2000 actors.
- The impact of the **LIFE financial instrument** is once again confirmed by this years' applications. The number of finalists and winners receiving LIFE funding is encouraging in demonstrating how effective these projects are. None-the-less, applications

which are funded in other ways including much smaller, local projects would be welcome in order to demonstrate how everyone can contribute to the protection and management of the Natura 2000 network.

- There were several applications which were **resubmitted several years** in a row and some which were submitted in three out of four Award years. This is encouraged by the Award as long as there is a clear improvement / development in the application compared to previous submissions, and if a certain evolution in achievements over the years is evident in the application. Feedback on a specific application can be obtained from the Award secretariat and applicants should also make reference to this report in order to learn from the good practice of others.

The catalogue provided in this report aims to provide inspiration for those working on Natura 2000 sites in general as well as for those interested in applying for a Natura 2000 Award. In most cases, good practice cannot be directly transferred from one site to another but will need adaptation according to the physical and socio-economic conditions of the site. 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.

The Natura 2000 Award continues to be an excellent means to promote your activities related to Natura 2000. Sharing good practice through an Award application benefits both your own activities (through the increased attention they receive) and other Natura 2000 actors (by inspiring them with new ideas from other applicants). This applies not just to the winners and finalists but also for every applicant whose project is described on the Award website.

It is only by working together, sharing our successes and challenges and acknowledging our strengths that we can reach our common goal of protecting the planet's largest network of protected areas. All Natura 2000 actors engaged in promoting and managing Natura 2000 are encouraged to engage and join the "Award-network" by submitting an application.

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