



Natura 2000 Award Scheme

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ENVIRONMENTAL BENCHMARKING REPORT

In cooperation with

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1 Executive Summary

The 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.

Winners were selected for five categories: "Conservation", "Socio-economic benefits", "Communication", "Reconciling interests/perceptions" and "Networking & cross-border cooperation". 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 of 22 applications. 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 its inaugural year, 2014, the Natura 2000 Award received 163 applications from 26 Member States. By far the greatest number of applications were received under the "Conservation" category, followed in decreasing order by the categories "Communication", "Reconciling interests/perceptions", "Networking and trans-boundary cooperation" and "Socio-economic benefits". The range of applications received testified to the great diversity of Natura 2000 actors, the significant support that state institutions involved in the management and promotion of Natura 2000 receive from NGOs and other actors, the importance of forming consortia to devise and implement successful projects, and the emergence of a considerable range of new actors on the Natura 2000 scene, including land owners and resource users, as well as businesses.

The reporting on the Natura 2000 Award includes this Environmental Benchmarking Report the aim of which 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 project teams that submitted proposals to the award, or inspiration for those who plan to do so 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.

The Environmental Benchmarking Report is based on an analysis of successful applications, particularly but not exclusively the award winners and the shortlisted applications. The report shows the huge amount of expertise, experience and ingenuity that is being invested in the network by a diverse and vibrant Union-wide community of Natura 2000 actors, in order to jointly preserve and make the most of the impressive natural heritage of Europe. It shows that Natura 2000 is a network in progress, and one of the great achievements of the European Union.

The report reveals ten recurrent traits of good practice ("elements of success"). These have been used to structure the catalogue of good practice that forms the core of the report. On the one hand, these elements of success include traits that are specifically relevant to Natura 2000, including attracting new actors, involving all stakeholders, conceptual and technical innovation, looking beyond individual sites and realising socio-economic benefits.

On the other hand, applications that received good ratings often did so in part because they observed general good practice in project planning and implementation, such as starting from a sound situation analysis, planning sustainability from the start, mobilizing diverse resources, measuring and communicating success, and learning, knowledge sharing and communication as core project components.

Each of the identified elements of success in the Natura 2000 Award 2014, including the multiple ways in which successful projects managed to implement them, is discussed in detail in Section 5. 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 years' applications only and will be updated to include information on further Award rounds in future.

2 Introduction

2.1 Biodiversity in Europe

Europe boasts an extraordinarily rich diversity of habitats and species. From the wind-swept coasts of the British Isles to the deep forests of the Carpathians, from the tundras of Lapland to the Greek islands, the continent is home to an exceptionally wide range of ecosystems and – as a consequence – an impressive species richness. Even before the EU accession of Croatia in 2013, habitat and species richness within the EU was estimated as thousands of habitat types, 10,000 species of plants, 100,000 of invertebrates, 150 of fish, 180 of amphibians and reptiles, 448 of birds and at least 220 of mammals (Temple & Terry, 2007).

This is reflected by the density of areas of global importance for biodiversity conservation that overlap with the EU, including the Mediterranean Basin Global Biodiversity Hotspot (Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund, 2014), eight Global Centres of Plant Diversity (Davis et al., 1994), seven priority WWF Ecoregions (Olson & Dinerstein, 2002), five Endemic Bird Areas (BirdLife International, 2014), 30 natural and mixed World Heritage sites (World Heritage Convention, 2014) and many others. The high concentration of biodiversity in Europe is all the more impressive if its relatively high latitude and history of multiple glaciations in the recent geological past are taken into account. This biodiversity underpins human wellbeing and economic development, through a host of ecosystem services.

Biodiversity in Europe differs from that of other continents: It is characterised by steep climatic and ecological gradients along the latitudinal, longitudinal and altitudinal axes, which have led to its rich diversity of habitats. The history of human inhabitation adds another layer to this diversity, as it has brought about a wide range of land ownership and land use types, as well as different traditions in the field of nature conservation. Any community-wide approach to biodiversity conservation has to be flexible and inclusive enough to accommodate this diversity. This has also conditioned the design of the Natura 2000 network.

Europe is also the most urbanised and – jointly with Asia – the most densely populated continent. Many of its landscapes have evolved as a result of a close interaction between nature and humans. As a consequence, many of the habitats of high biodiversity value depend on various forms of land management, rather than being pristine wilderness areas, and need to be conserved accordingly. A recent study identified 63 habitat types from Annex I of the Habitats Directive that depend on agricultural management for their maintenance – primarily on grazing and mowing (Halada et al., 2011).

European biodiversity remains under pressure. According to the 2010 EU Biodiversity Baseline (EEA, 2010), the percentage of threatened species within taxa ranged from 7% (butterflies) to 25% (marine mammals). Only 17% of the species and habitats listed in the Habitats Directive were considered of favourable conservation status. Areas of extensive agriculture, grasslands and wetlands in particular continue to decline. The most important causes for the observed decline in biodiversity have been identified as: conversion to other land uses, land abandonment with the loss of traditional management, unsustainable resource use (e.g. fisheries) and agricultural practices (e.g. eutrophication through fertiliser), and invasive alien species. The impacts of climate change are also starting to make themselves felt.

Recognizing both the immense value of European nature – both intrinsic and as the basis for human wellbeing and economic health – the European Union has devised a biodiversity policy framework with the Natura 2000 network as its centrepiece.

2.2 Natura 2000 as the centrepiece of EU nature and biodiversity policy

Building on a rich tradition of nature conservation and national protected areas systems throughout Europe and on the 1979 Birds Directive (EU, 2009), Council Directive 92/43/EEC on the conservation of natural habitats and of wild fauna and flora (the Habitats Directive - EU, 1992) was a turning point in the history of nature conservation in Europe. The Natura 2000 network has turned into one of the largest and most successful protected site networks on the planet, with over 26,000 sites covering 17% of the land surface of the 27 Member States before the accession of Croatia in 2013 (Jones-Walters & Dör 2013).

Natura 2000 is the centrepiece of EU nature & biodiversity policy (EC DG Environment, 2014b). It is an EU-wide network of protected areas. The aim of the network is to assure the long-term survival of Europe's most valuable and threatened species and habitats. The network is comprised of Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) designated by Member States under the Habitats Directive, and also incorporates Special Protection Areas (SPAs) designated under the 1979 Birds Directive. Natura 2000 is not a system of strict nature reserves where all human activities are excluded. While the network does certainly include strict nature reserves, a significant percentage of the land covered by the network continues to be privately owned and the emphasis is on ensuring that they are managed in a sustainable manner, both ecologically and economically.

The main achievement of Natura 2000 in relation to EU biodiversity policy has been to enable EU Member States to work together to conserve biodiversity within one legal framework, covering species and habitats across their entire range within the Union. Agreeing to protect sites for about 2000 species and habitat types within nine bio-geographical regions has put the individual conservation efforts of the Member States on a common scientifically informed and strategically sound foundation.

At the same time, it has enabled Member States to allocate resources for conservation in an efficient way that maximises conservation benefits from not only a national but also a pan-European perspective. Natura 2000 also has incorporated important paradigm shifts related to protected areas, such as the move from a focus on strict, exclusive protected areas towards increased stakeholder participation and a coexistence of conservation objectives and sustainable use in individual sites, or the growing emphasis on connecting individual sites to form a true network, as emphasised in Article 10 of the Habitats Directive.

The crucial importance of Natura 2000 for EU biodiversity policy is also reflected by the EU Biodiversity Strategy to 2020 (EC, 2011), 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.*

In order to reach this ambitious target, four priority actions have been identified, including a completion of the establishment of the Natura 2000 network with adequate management regimes, ensuring adequate funding, improving stakeholder awareness and involvement as well as enforcement, and improving/streamlining monitoring and reporting. Several of the categories of the Natura 2000 Award refer directly to these priority actions. The Commission has also committed to running an awareness raising campaign on Natura 2000 and the Award aims to fulfil this requirement.

Natura 2000 also contributes to meeting the commitments of the EU under the Convention on Biological Diversity, including the Strategic Plan for Biodiversity 2011 – 2020 and the Aichi Targets (SCBD, 2014). It is particularly relevant to meeting Aichi Target 11, which states that *"By 2020, at least 17 per cent of terrestrial and inland water, and 10 per cent of coastal and marine areas, especially areas of particular importance for biodiversity and ecosystem services, are conserved through effectively and equitably managed, ecologically representative and well connected systems of protected areas and other effective area-based conservation measures, and integrated into the wider landscapes and seascape."*

Because of the crucial importance of Natura 2000 in reaching both the 2020 headline target of the EU Biodiversity Strategy to 2020 and the objectives of the CBD Strategic Plan with the Aichi Targets, any improvements of its effectiveness and extent is directly relevant to reaching both European and global policy objectives on nature and biodiversity. The Natura 2000 Award is a contribution to identifying, acknowledging and celebrating innovative solutions that bring about these improvements.

2.3 Typical challenges to Natura 2000 at the site level

In spite of its remarkable overall success, the creation and effective implementation of the Natura 2000 network is facing significant challenges. Some of them relate to the network as a whole. For instance, there has been a lively discussion on the extent to which the Annexes to the Habitats Directive reflect the actual threat status of species and habitats as defined by recent Red List assessments (e.g. Cardoso, 2012, Hochkirch et al., 2013a, b, Maes et al., 2013).

However, some of the challenges can be addressed at the level of individual sites and projects. The Natura 2000 Award focuses on innovative solutions and successes at the level of individual Natura 2000 sites or small sets of sites. To fully appreciate the achievements of the activities recognised by the Award, it is therefore useful to first consider typical site level management challenges that the applicants have helped to overcome:

- **Insufficient stakeholder participation in site designation and management** (e.g. Beunen & De Vries, 2011, Iojă et al., 2010): Since Natura 2000 is not a system of strict protected areas, its success depends on the effectiveness of the communication and cooperation processes between site level stakeholders. The success of this process has been limited in many areas, including but not exclusively in some new Member States with a tradition of top-down, state-centred governance in nature conservation. An additional factor is that comprehensive stakeholder participation is

often resource-intensive. Poor participation has often led to poor stakeholder ownership of Natura 2000 sites and compromised the enforcement of conservation regimes. The Natura 2000 Award has highlighted both the importance of and creative approaches to strengthening stakeholder participation in Natura 2000 areas.

- **Conflicting interests of other sectors** (e.g. Snethlage et al., 2012): 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. For instance, in the agricultural sector there may be a drive towards intensification or conversion to less biodiversity friendly land uses, or a prevalence of ecologically inappropriate practices. In forested Natura 2000 sites, such conflicts often involve harvesting/thinning or forest road construction. This calls for new ways to reconcile interests and resolve conflicts - a call that has been answered by submissions under the category "Reconciling interests and perceptions" of the Natura 2000 Award.
- **Poor conservation status of habitats that depend on traditional agricultural practices** (e.g. EU, 2010, Halada et al., 2011): Habitat types that depend on traditional agricultural practices have among the worst average conservation status of all habitat types throughout the EU. Only 7% of them showed favourable conservation status in 2010, compared to 21% for other habitat types. This is predominantly because of land abandonment or conversion to intensive agriculture including increased use of fertilisers and pesticides. An underlying cause is that the potential socio-economic benefits from traditional land management have not been realised to a sufficient degree. This is also one of the reasons that "Socio-economic benefits" have been included as one of the categories of the Natura 2000 Award.
- **Lack of strategic, adaptive management planning aimed at favourable conservation status** (e.g. Hochkirch et al., 2013a, Iojă et al., 2010): The establishment of effective management regimes has somewhat lagged behind the designation of new Natura 2000 sites, particularly in new Member States which are still in the process of developing management plans. Even where management plans exist, their strategic direction towards improving the conservation status of target habitats and species is sometimes not sufficiently elaborated. There is room for improvement, for instance through the introduction of existing adaptive management methodologies for conservation (e.g. Teofili & Battisti, 2011). Several submissions under the categories "Conservation" and "Networking and trans-boundary cooperation" broke new ground in addressing this challenge.
- **Inconsistent on-the-ground monitoring of conservation status** (e.g. Hochkirch et al., 2013a): Effective conservation measures require adaptive management, and adaptive management requires constant monitoring of its impact. Although Member States have to report on the status of their habitats and species that are listed on the Annexes of the Birds and Habitats Directives, existing monitoring schemes are often poorly standardised across countries and under-resourced. This is why the evaluation of effectiveness of applications to the Natura 2000 Award paid particular attention to how project impacts were measured and demonstrated.

- **Weak social consensus to support conservation of Natura 2000 sites** (e.g. Hochkirch et al., 2013a, Grodzinska-Jurczak & Cent, 2010, Iojă et al., 2010): A weak social consensus to protect European nature and particularly the Natura 2000 network has complicated and slowed down the implementation of the Birds and Habitats Directives in some countries, including in some new Member States. It also affects the readiness to provide the necessary funding to manage Natura 2000 sites, the preparedness of other sectors to agree on sustainable management regimes in conflict areas, and many other aspects of Natura 2000 management. Both the Natura 2000 Award as a whole and many of the individual applications aim to improve awareness of European nature and support to the Natura 2000 network, thereby answering this challenge.
- **Lack of resources for effective management of Natura 2000 sites** (e.g. Iojă et al., 2010): Strategic management planning, adaptive management and monitoring, stakeholder involvement, communication, inter-sectoral negotiation etc. require financial and staff resources which are sometimes lacking. This challenge can be overcome by opening new funding sources and devising cost-effective solutions to other management challenges, as proposed by several applicants to the award.

3 Natura 2000 Award

3.1 Objectives of the Award

The Natura 2000 Award, which was awarded for the first time in 2014, 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 enclosed 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 also among those living in the immediate vicinity of sites: According to a recent survey, only 27% of respondents have heard of Natura 2000, and only 11% really know what it is (EC, 2014a). 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, on a daily basis. 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 2.3 above), which have been overcome 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 twenty years after agreeing 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 allies 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 a number of sites or even the network as a whole and its objectives. The Natura 2000 Award also aims to recognise these more general efforts to promote Natura 2000 as the centre-piece of the EU biodiversity policy where activities 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 feel that they are somewhat on their own at times. They may be tempted to develop answers to the questions that arise from managing and promoting their sites in isolation 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 projects - as well as on a more technical level: The good practice revealed by the various submissions is being analysed and compiled in the award's documentation for further dissemination, including this Environmental 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 give the stage to the people who come up with these solutions. This will inspire others and attract new experts and practitioners to site administrations, NGOs and other partners, and provide role models for future generations of conservation managers.

3.2 Description and justification of the categories

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 2.3. These categories were "conservation", "socio-economic benefits", "communication", "reconciling interests/perceptions" and "networking and trans-boundary cooperation". Although submissions were made under one category only, the categories clearly are interdependent and some projects demonstrated methodological innovation and good practice in more than one of them.

3.2.1 Conservation

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

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 project. It aimed at activities that maximised the generation and utilization 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 Networking and cross-border cooperation

This category covered two potentially distinct but interrelated aspects, namely (1) how networking activities have resulted in lasting positive impacts for Natura 2000; and/or (2) how long-term conservation can benefit from transnational collaboration. The category was open to also cover cooperation between administrative regions within a country, cooperation between different bio-geographical regions, or between marine and land sites.

3.3 Description of the selection criteria

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

- **Effectiveness:** In order to judge how effective a given project was, the evaluation looked at how clearly the project's 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 project? Depending on category, effectiveness was expressed directly 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; 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 level on the one hand and on the level of the individual Member States on the other hand. Submitting organizations were asked to self-assess the originality of their projects. This self-assessment was critically re-evaluated by the selection panel, taking into account the overall approach and specific methodologies and tools employed, as well as the types of organizations 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 project being long-lasting, on how self-sustained these impacts would be after the conclusion of the project itself, and on the extent to which follow-up activities ensuring durability had already been initiated or at least prepared during the project's lifespan. This included the physical and financial sustainability of mechanisms or structures established through the projects, observed trends in key impacts allowing a prognosis of their future development, documented or formally agreed partner commitment and other adequate indicators.
- **Cost-benefit:** The cost-benefit ratio of project submissions 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 projects). 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 projects on socio-economic benefits, costs could also be compared with economic (monetary) benefits.
- **Replicability:** This selection criterion focused on how replicable a project'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 a project 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 passed on their results to the award jury who selected the winning projects for each category.

3.4 Applicant statistics

The Natura 2000 Award 2014 received 163 applications from 26 Member States (Figure 1). The largest number of applications was sent from Spain (27), followed by France (23) and Italy (13). Malta and Latvia were the only Member States from which no applications were received.

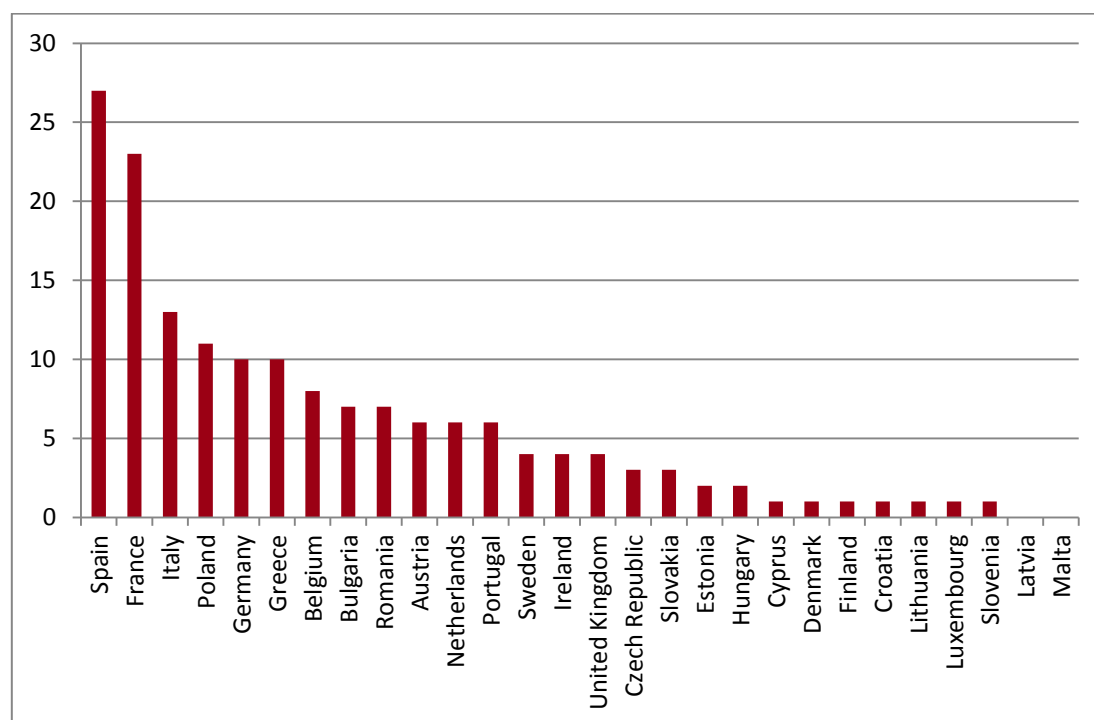


Figure 1. Number of applications per Member State

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. Submissions from the Nordic countries should therefore be particularly encouraged in future rounds of the award.

With regard to the award categories, by far the greatest number of applications were received under the "Conservation category", followed by the categories "Communication", "Reconciling interests/perceptions", "Networking and trans-boundary cooperation" and "Socio-economic benefits" (Table 1). This also meant that the chances of being shortlisted or winning the award differed significantly among categories.

Category	Number
Communication	49
Socio-economic benefits	8
Conservation	58
Reconciling interests and perceptions	38
Networking and cross-border cooperation	10

Table 1. Number of applications per category

Although by far the most applications were received from NGOs (43) and almost as many from state institutions of various levels, an astonishing diversity of actors took part in the first round of the award. The spectrum of applicants also highlighted important general trends regarding Natura 2000 actors:

- **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 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 the 2014 round of the Natura 2000 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:** The first round of the scheme also highlighted the growing importance of emerging categories of actors, such as land owners, natural resource users (e.g. hunters and fishermen) business companies and faith-based organizations.

The applications submitted were of also very diverse in terms of their funding sources. A significant part of them were EU-funded LIFE+/LIFE projects, but there were also other donor and state funded projects as well as various co-funding agreements involving businesses, and even some grassroots funding. Some projects that had small overall budgets were among the most cost-effective ones, in terms of their conservation impacts.

3.5 Short introduction of winners by category

The winners of the Natura 2000 Award 2014 were the following:

- Conservation: *Saving the imperial eagle: insulating electricity grid to secure hunting and breeding grounds - Bulgaria (Bulgarian Society for the Protection of Birds).*** The Conservation Award went to a project for saving the imperial eagle in Sakar in Bulgaria. Thanks to the work of the project team and the cooperation between conservationists and private companies, the local population of this globally threatened species has been brought back from close to extinction. By working with energy companies to insulate power lines and bury cables, the project successfully eliminated the risk of electrocution, a serious problem facing this bird (Figure 2).



Figure 2. (photo: BSPB / BirdLife Bulgaria © European Commission)

- Socio-economic benefits: *Tarnava Mare: promoting viability of agricultural communities to protect a Natura 2000 landscape - Romania (ADEPT Foundation).*** A project in Sighişara-Târnava Marein, Romania won the Socio-Economic Benefits Award, with an impressive example of Natura 2000 providing economic growth and sustainable livelihoods in rural areas. The project enables farmers to make a better living, while also preserving a unique landscape with rich biodiversity. Thanks to the project, 2,300 farming families in the region generate income of more than €2.5 million annually, and similar ideas are now being applied in other parts of Romania (Figure 3).



Figure 3. (photo: Fundatia ADEPT Transilvania, © European Commission)

- **Communication: *Rediscovered Steppes of the Louny region - Czech Republic (Nature Conservation Agency of the Czech Republic)*.** The Communication Award went to Raná-Hrádek in the Czech Republic for promoting the protection of dry grassland habitats in the Louny region. A major strength of this project is that it managed to communicate widely and effectively on a largely unknown and difficult to comprehend habitat type. A 'Celebration of the steppes' event attracts 1,000 people every May, and an annual art competition helps make children more aware of conservation work. The project raises awareness amongst EU citizens about the value of natural heritage (Figure 4).



Figure 4: (photo: J. Maresova, © European Commission)

- **Reconciling interests/perceptions: *The LIFE+ 3WATER Project: a model for sustainable cooperation - Belgium (European Landowners' Organization)*.** The Reconciling Interests/Perceptions Award went to a project in the Vijvergebied van Midden Limburg site in Belgium. Landowners, nature organisations and authorities – once in conflict over nature conservation – now work together here to manage wetlands, thanks to an innovative approach combining economy, ecology and education (Figure 5).



Figure 5: (photo: ELO, © European Commission)

- **Networking & cross-border cooperation: *Quality standards for Natura 2000 site 'Rebollar de Navalpotro' management plan - Spain* (Fernando González Bernáldez Foundation, EUROPARC Spain and Consejería de Agricultura - Junta de Castilla La Mancha).** The Networking & Cross-Border Cooperation Award went to a national technical cooperation network in Spain for developing quality standards for management planning and a reference website on the state of the Natura 2000 network in Spain. Rebollar de Navalpotro in Guadalajara is one area where these actions have been successfully applied, showing how Natura 2000 is both a network of species and habitats and a network of people (Figure 6).



Figure 6: (photo: Fundación Fernando González Bernáldez, © European Commission)

The strengths of these applications are discussed in more detail in the catalogue of good practice below.

4 Rationale and structure of the Environmental Benchmarking Report

4.1 Aim of the report

The Environmental Benchmarking Report has been designed in such a way that it contributes 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 the project teams that submitted proposals to the award, or inspiration for those who plan to do so 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 years' applications only and will be updated to include information on future years.

4.2 Structure and approach

The core part of the Environmental Benchmarking Report is a catalogue of ten elements of good practice. These have been derived from an analysis of the factors that made the successful submissions to the award scheme stand out during the evaluation process. Typically, these factors are in some way related to challenges faced by Natura 2000 sites. For instance, "attracting new actors" is an effective response to the observed lack of stakeholder participation and social support to the network.

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. Each chapter of the catalogue starts with a general description of its element of good practice, before highlighting how this was achieved by specific applications.

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 (i.e. Nos. 3, 7, 8, 9 and 10) reflect general rules of sound project planning and implementation.

The 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. Realizing socio-economic benefits,

7. Planning sustainability from the start,
8. Mobilizing a wide range of resources,
9. Measuring and communicating success,
10. Learning, knowledge sharing and communication as core project components.

5 Catalogue of good practice

5.1 Attracting new actors

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 particularly true as the network aims to promote the coexistence of different land uses at individual sites, while ensuring that they are sustainable overall, and contribute to improving the status of their target habitats and species.

Attracting new actors - be it as consortium partners or through external project relationships - is a recurrent trait of success in all award categories and contributed to the effectiveness, durability and originality scores of applications during the evaluation process, as it often led to innovative institutional setups of the projects submitted.

There are two main ways in which the involvement of new actors contributed to the success of individual projects and the sites where they were implemented: On the one hand, a number of projects succeeded in engaging hitherto missing de-facto stakeholders to join the formal Natura 2000 planning and management process. This made governance and management setups more effective and stable, as it reduced antagonism and negative interventions from important stakeholders who had previously not been considered part of the official stakeholder community. Among the projects falling into this category were the following:

- Several successful projects established relationships with land owners in order to further their conservation objectives. The European Landowners' Organization (ELO) whose objective is to promote a sustainable and prosperous countryside and to increase awareness relating to environmental and agricultural issues, convened a multi-partner consortium to develop *"The LIFE+ 3WATER Project, a Model for Sustainable Cooperation"*. This project aimed at reconciling fishery, forestry and conservation perspectives on the Vijvercomplex van Midden Limburg SPA/SCI in Belgium, and succeeded in improving the conservation status of bittern and tree frog in the area based on this collaborative approach. *This project won the Natura 2000 Award 2014 in the category Reconciling Interests/Perceptions.*
- Land users are an equally important group of actors that deserves a stronger role in Natura 2000 management. The Federation of Hunters of Languedoc Roussillon Region in France submitted a project entitled *"When hunting overlaps with conservation"* which aimed at raising awareness on Natura 2000 among the 72,000 hunters of the department. While there was serious opposition to and incomprehension of the aims of Natura 2000 among the hunters before the project, they now are actively involved in the management of various SPAs in the region, through participation in the management planning process, contractual agreements, charters of good practices and practical conservation action in favour of two high priority bird species.
- A number of projects involved companies from the extractive sector - particularly quarrying - as applicants or key partners. For example, McGrath's Limestone Cong Ltd. (Ireland) submitted a project on *"Reconciling Interests and Perceptions of Quarrying in a Sensitive Area"*. This project comprised a range of activities to min-

imise the negative impact of quarrying operations on three Natura 2000 sites in the immediate vicinity. ENCI Maastricht (part of the HeidelbergCement Group), convened five important stakeholders to develop a joint vision for the re-naturation and sustainable use of a quarry at the Natura 2000 sites of St. Pietersberg & Jekerdal, which will soon be abandoned. This project (*"Mount Saint Peter - inspired by the future"*) is based on very positive experience from nearby similar areas and. Additional projects of a similar nature were submitted from France (*"The quarry, an opportunity for the conservation and the creation of natural environment"*), Germany (*"Restoring connections between rare grassland habitats in the Middle Main valley, Bavaria"*) and Greece (*"Cross-border partnership for the conservation of remarkable endemic species in a quarry in Greece"*). They show the high potential to achieve strong conservation benefits if companies from the extractive sector take responsibility for the restoration and ecological management of sites under their control.

- Faith groups are another interesting and sometimes overlooked type of actor. The project *"Almendralejo's Purification Church: A divine Special Protection Area for the Lesser Kestrel"* of the Spanish NGO Defensa y Estudio del Medio Ambiente (DEMA) developed a partnership with the local Purification Church, which houses a colony of Lesser Kestrel and is the first urban SPA designated in the EU. The project established a large number of artificial nests on the church, which enjoyed a high adoption rate. Forming an alliance with this local church thereby led to significant conservation outcomes for the target species, while also leveraging wider support among the local community of Almendralejo. Faith groups generally are a promising new actor in Natura 2000 management because they often have high authority among the wider public and also often own land (Figure 7).



Figure 7. (photo: DEMA, © European Commission).

On the other hand, some projects that brought in new Natura 2000 actors simply provided opportunities for new social groups to experience and develop a relationship to Natura 2000 sites. This is equally important as it contributes to improved ownership and public support to Natura 2000 and reveals aspects and values of the sites that may have gone unnoticed by site managers, conservationists and other "conventional" stakeholders. Examples of this type of projects include the following:

- The project ***"Natura 2000 goes to school"***, which was submitted by the Auring Biological Station Hohenau Ringelsdorf (Austria), aimed at increasing awareness raising and knowledge on Natura 2000 and in particular the SAC/SPA of March-Thaya-Auen among local elementary school students, and by extension among their teachers as well. The learning process involves a two-hour educational session in class on biodiversity and the Natura 2000 site, followed by a field visit to the site for practical and theoretical education. By winning local schools as cooperation partners, the applicant was able to invite young schoolchildren to get to know and appreciate "their" local Natura 2000 site. Given the impressionable perceptions and attitudes of schoolchildren, this can be seen as a long-term investment into local public support to Natura 2000.
- Similar examples where Natura 2000 sites were opened up to new groups were the ***"Thanet coast footprints in the sand partnership project"*** of Thanet District Council (UK) and partners, which attracted "harder to reach" community members such as young, elderly and socially disadvantaged to a coastal Natura 2000 site in southern England, and the project ***"Nature for all in Natura 2000 sites of the Eifel"*** of the administration of Eifel Nature Park (Germany), which provided access to the park for disabled people, among other measures.

The above projects from the 2014 round of the Natura 2000 Award are merely a few examples how new actors can improve the management, conservation status and social appreciation of Natura 2000 sites. Nevertheless, even this limited number shows the huge potential of widening involvement in the network, and the success already made in this direction throughout the EU.

5.2 Involving all stakeholders

While bringing new actors onto the Natura 2000 scene promises great benefits, it is equally important to engage and involve - to the appropriate degree - the whole range of existing stakeholders relevant to any particular project or site. To achieve this, it is necessary but not sufficient to conduct a sound stakeholder analysis as part of the general situation analysis (See Section 5.3 below).

A well-planned stakeholder engagement strategy was particularly relevant to the award category "Reconciling interests/perceptions" and usually contributed to the effectiveness, durability and originality scores of successful projects.

Many projects which successfully engaged a wide range of relevant stakeholders did so because they went beyond conventional consultation formats and instead gave stakeholders a role in core project planning and execution phases. Examples of these more elaborated stakeholder engagement approaches include the following:

- ***The winner of the Natura 2000 Award 2014 in the category of "Reconciling interests/perceptions"***, the ***"LIFE+ 3WATER Project, a Model for Sustainable Co-***

operation" of the European Landowners' Organization, was developed jointly with seven important stakeholder groups from the start. In this way, important groups such as conservation NGOs, municipalities and landowners became part of the core project planning and implementation structure, which goes far beyond conventional levels of stakeholder participation.

- The Nature Conservation Agency of the Czech Republic submitted the project ***"The first complex long-term contract in the Czech Republic concerning Natura 2000"***, which focuses on the management of eight forest SACs in cooperation with private forest owners. This project started with a comprehensive stakeholder consultation process but then went beyond this, by entering into contractual agreements for conservation management with the forest owners. Contracts defined voluntary, obligatory and prohibited activities in the forest lands affected and thereby contributed to improved conservation management there. This also helped to overcome mistrust between forest owners and conservationists. Contractual agreements, which are still an unusual instrument in Central Europe, were considered a highly effective way of stakeholder involvement, because of the durability of such agreements and the good replicability of the overall approach.
- Similarly, engaging stakeholders to implement wetland management measures can be as effective as their involvement in decision making. The Greek NGO "Society for the Protection of Prespa" devised a project for the ***"Management of Lake Lesser Prespa through a multi-stakeholder participation process"***. While participatory decision making on the water level of the lake – a management issue that was highly contested between fishermen, pastoralists, farmers and conservationists – was arranged through a wetland management committee, local stakeholders were also involved in the implementation of the management actions. They undertook most of the habitat management programme, implementing activities such as reed bed cutting and grazing which are of benefit to both nature and the local economy. This has brought clear benefits for all stakeholder groups: restored wet meadows are ideal

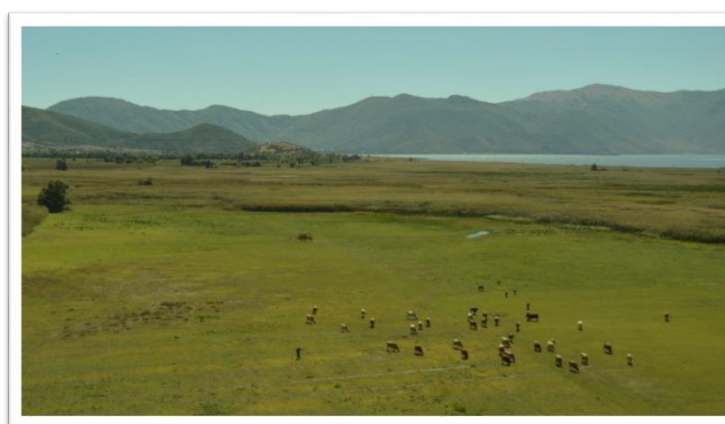


Figure 8. (Photo Society for the Protection of Prespa, © European Commission)

(Figure 8).

for fish spawning in the spring (fishermen) and provide pasture during the summer (livestock breeders). Flooding of the meadows in early spring has benefitted feeding waterbirds (conservationists) and water storage for irrigation (farmers)

- Bringing fishermen into the conservation boat is often challenging, but offers considerable added value. An example is the Blue Marine Foundation's project *"The Lyme Bay Fisheries and Conservation Reserve"*. Located in the southwest of England, the reefs and sea caves of this SAC suffered from the use of unsustainable fishing gear in the past. To address this, the applicant convened the Lyme Bay Working Group with key stakeholders including government, fishermen and conservationists. This working group jointly elaborated a win-win-win perspective, integrating conservation, scientific and economic needs, that was cast into a Memorandum of Understanding. Again, the participation of resource users was possible because they were directly involved in decision making on stock management and research.
- There were also examples where permanent institutionalised platforms for stakeholder communication on conflictive projects greatly contribute to overall conservation success. The project *"A way of public relations: The contact office Wolves in Saxony in Germany"* of the Ministry of Nature and Agriculture of the German Federal State of Saxony was launched in response to deep concerns among local stakeholders about the ongoing natural re-colonization of the area by Eurasian Wolves. The office aims to produce and disseminate reliable information on the biology of the wolf and possible threats to livestock and people, and to be a permanent contact point for the public on wolf issues. As a result of the multiple and - most importantly - two-way communication efforts of this office with the often very critical local stakeholders, the local public is gradually getting



Figure 9. (photo: Kontaktbüro, © European Commission)

used to the presence of wolves in the area, and acceptance levels are expected to improve progressively. The key success factors of this project appear to have been (1) tailored communication offers for a wide range of stakeholders, and (2) not shying away from engaging the most critical stakeholders in relation to wolf re-colonization, such as livestock breeders (Figure 9). A similar approach of supporting large carnivore conservation - in this case Brown Bears - by improving stakeholder support was also taken by the project *"Creating a favourable social environment for bear conservation in Cantabrian Natura 2000 sites"* of the Spanish Brown Bear Foundation (Fundación Oso Pardo).

- The project *"Rediscovered Steppes of the Louny region"* of the Nature Conservation Agency of the Czech Republic, *which won the Natura 2000 Award in the cate-*

gory of "Communication", took a similar inclusive approach to engaging a wide range of local and national stakeholders of eight grassland SCIs in Louny region, but combined this with targeted support to local farms in the field of traditional grassland management. This approach went even further than many stakeholder communication projects by including socio-economic support measures to those most affected by designation of these Natura 2000 sites.

There are also situations where various government stakeholders need to be convened for effective joint conservation management. Because of this, engaging the whole range of stakeholders was relevant not only for the award category "reconciling interests/perceptions" but also for the category "Networking and cross-border cooperation":

- The project *"Cross-regional cooperation to enhance the natural structure and public awareness of the Sonien forest"*, which was implemented by the Agency of Nature and Forest under the Belgian Ministry of Environment, Nature and Energy, boosted regional cooperation in a forest and catalysed an evolution from a regionally divergent approach to a joint management vision, expressed by a single, distinguishable forest identity. In this case, the key stakeholders were the regional management authorities who had previously managed parts of the Sonien forest in a fragmented manner, and the key step in bringing them together was the development of a joint vision. Following this vision ultimately increased forest integrity as well as connectivity and led to the expansion of reserves, more coherent external communication and a more integrated tourism strategy, which may also have increased tourism revenue and hence financial incentives in favour of nature conservation in this Natura 2000 area.

The above examples show that successful stakeholder involvement in Natura 2000 management typically means strong involvement not only in decision making but also in the implementation of management actions. It is also important to reach out not only to people with a positive attitude to nature conservation, but particularly to the most critical ones. However, this cannot be generalised to all sites. Each site and each situation requires its own degree of and mechanism for stakeholder involvement, and it is often the responsibility of site managers and their partners to find this mechanism. The submissions to the Natura 2000 Award have demonstrated the serious commitment to stakeholder participation among Natura 2000 actors, as well as their creativity in devising effective ways of participation for the highly diverse spectrum of sites.

5.3 Starting from a sound situation analysis

A sound situation analysis is an indispensable basis of any project planning process. In the context of Natura 2000, a central part of this analysis is an assessment of the conservation state of the habitats and species for which a given site was established, and a clear understanding how project outputs will combine to improve conservation status.

Being part of general good practice in project planning, this element of success is relevant to all award categories although the link to the conservation status of habitats and species was particularly clear in the conservation category. Sound planning directly affected project effectiveness, but also had indirect effects on the scoring of projects in all other selection categories, particularly durability and cost-benefit ratio.

In spite of the general nature of the requirement of a sound situation analysis, the scope and depth of initial assessments differed considerably among the submissions to the 2014 round of the Natura 2000 Award. Examples of good practice include the following:

- The project ***"Saving the Imperial Eagle: Insulating the Electricity Grid to Secure Hunting and Breeding Grounds"*** of the Bulgarian Society for the Protection of Birds started with a clear baseline analysis of the conservation status of target species in the four SPAs in question, including the threats affecting it. This analysis identified electrocution of juvenile imperial eagles as a critical threat, and enabled the project to focus its efforts on this threat, maximizing effectiveness, cost efficiency and durability. The initial situation analysis also served as a baseline for impact monitoring of the project. Partly because of this, the project ***won the Natura 2000 Award 2014 in the category "Conservation"***.
- In other projects, the situation analysis considered not only the status of species and habitats with the direct threats affecting them, but also the socio-economic drivers of these direct threats. ***The winner of the Natura 2000 Award 2014 in the category "Socio-economic benefits"*** was the project ***"Târnavă Mare: promoting viability of agricultural communities to protect a Natura 2000 landscape"*** of the Romanian NGO ADEPT Foundation. This project focused on socio-economic benefits, but it built its intervention logic on a clear understanding of how socio-economic drivers have led to changes in land management and have thereby compromised the conservation status of grassland habitats in the Sighișoara-Târnavă Mare SPA/SCI. This led to positive conservation impacts based on positive socio-economic incentives for sustainable land management.
- A feasibility assessment of the methodological approach can also greatly contribute to the overall effectiveness and cost efficiency of projects. The Dutch NGO Natuurmonumenten submitted the project ***"Island of Tiengemeten: welcome to unique nature near the city"***. This project focuses on a suite of activities to develop touristic attractions at the recently restored Natura 2000 site Haringvliet, based on targeted market research. The initial systematic assessment of the local and regional tourism market enabled the NGO to fine-tune its socio-economic activities in support of the Natura 2000 site at Haringvliet (Figure 10).



Figure 10. (photo Natuurmonumenten, © European Commission)

- Sound baseline analysis is also a prerequisite for strategic communication planning. The same is true for communication in support of Natura 2000. The Czech Nature Conservation Agency's project *"Rediscovered Steppes of the Louny region"* won the *Natura 2000 Award 2014 in the category "Communication"*. It comprised a wide range of communication activities in support of eight SCIs with dry grassland habitats in the context of a wider LIFE+ project focusing on the restoration and conservation of the aforementioned habitats. This communications package was based on a meticulous analysis of local and regional stakeholders, together with the most suitable messages and channels of communication. As a result, highly original and effective communication measures for the various stakeholder groups could be designed, awareness about Natura 2000 among the local public and stakeholder groups was increased, and cooperation with local counsellors and mayors as well as hunters' groups was improved.

The above examples illustrate that careful situation analysis on multiple levels - from the conservation status of habitats and species to the feasibility and best application of various intervention strategies - has a great potential to boost the effectiveness, resource efficiency and sustainability outlook of projects related to Natura 2000.

5.4 Promoting conceptual and technical innovation

The immense diversity of Natura 2000 sites means that there is no generic way of conserving a given habitat type or species, or of involving a given stakeholder group. Even typical challenges present themselves differently across the Natura 2000 network. Therefore, a considerable degree of creativity is required for site level management. This was also reflected in the high innovativeness of many submissions to the Natura 2000 Award.

The importance of innovation was obvious in all Award categories and was usually measured through the selection criterion of originality.

Many successful projects derived their strength primarily from technical innovation. This included the development of new tools, the application of modern information technologies or the development of methodologies for specific areas of conservation, such as species re-introductions:

- The Consejería de Medio Ambiente y Ordenación del Territorio (Environmental Agency) of the Spanish Region of Andalusia submitted a project on *"New Iberian lynx (Lynx pardinus) population reintroduction strategies"*. Following an innovative captive breeding/reintroduction programme, there were more



Figure 11. (photo: Consejería de Medio Ambiente y Ordenación de Territorio, Junta de Andalucía, © European Commission)

than 60 individuals in two reintroduction sites in 2013, all of them coming from reintroductions or offspring from captive-bred individuals. Monitoring has shown that mortality of reintroduced individuals is around 25%, which is lower than expected. This is an example of how innovative modifications to classical conservation instruments like species re-introductions can contribute to ensuring the survival of one of the most threatened and at the same time most iconic species of the EU (Figure 11).

- The ***"Dove Stone RSPB/United Utilities partnership blanket bog restoration"*** of RSPB and United Utilities (UK) restored degraded blanket bog habitat owned by the latter. While using dams to raise water level is well-known, the specific approach of blocking (with dams and heather balls) natural dendritic gullies was more innovative. Heather ball blocking (using heather plants to keep water back in the bog by blocking drainage) and trials of reintroduction of sphagnum in spots spread over the site was also using innovative approaches. These restoration techniques were innovative on the EU level. The collaboration of a private water company and RSPB was also an innovative element.
- The project ***"A spatial optimisation tool to support implementation of conservation objectives in Flanders, Belgium"***, which was implemented by the Agentschap voor Natuur en Bos (ANB) under the Ministry of Environment, Nature and Energy of the Flemish region jointly with two research centres, developed a spatial, high-resolution land-use model to allocate new Natura 2000 areas in a densely populated and intensively used environment. This came up with a solution that is optimal in both ecological and socio-economic terms. Key sectors were invited to formulate sector-specific but spatially generic requirements that were then integrated into the model. As a result, 46,000 ha have been designated as SACs, with the added value of securing general approval of this important conservation measure by all stakeholder groups. The consistency, transparency and detail possible through this technical innovation, ensured that results were accepted by all socioeconomic parties. Technical innovation in spatial planning is likely to contribute more to the designation and management of Natura 2000 sites in the future. This project was also conceptually innovative because it involved strong inter-sector and interdisciplinary cooperation. An additional example of an innovative spatial decision making tool was contributed by the application ***"AERIUS: balancing economy and ecology in Duinen Ameland"*** of the Dutch Ministry of the Environment. This project developed a user-friendly online tool which contains all the necessary basic data and a scientifically sound method to calculate the 'nitrogen footprint' on Natura 2000 habitats, and hence to inform decision making on agricultural activities there. An independent, international review determined that the methodology developed particularly for calculating the 'nitrogen footprint' is scientifically state-of-the-art.
- The application of modern communication technology is another promising field of technological innovation: ***"Knowing and preserving the 12 bat species of Alviela's cave"*** of the NGO Centro Ciência Viva do Alviela - Carsoscópio Center of Living Sciences in Alviela used live-streaming from a set of cameras to allow visitors to observe populations of the 12 bat species of the SAC of Serras d'Aire e Candeeiros



Figure 12. (photo: Centro Ciência Viva do Alvila, © European Commission)

(Portugal). Through the use of this technology, it has become possible for visitors to experience the behaviour of these elusive species first-hand, which is likely to result in more positive perceptions and attitudes towards this highly sensitive and much maligned group, and hence in an improve the conservation outlook (Figure 12).

- The project ***"The comeback of burnt black pine forests on Mount Parnon, South Peloponnese, Greece"*** of the Greek Wetland-Biotope Centre (EKBY) focused on an innovative structured approach to restore sub-Mediterranean pine forests (a priority habitat type) in the SCI of Mount Parnonas following a 2007 wildfire. This approach is innovative because (1) it helps identify burnt areas to be restored not only on the basis of soil conditions but also on the basis of flora and fauna and importance for connectivity between non-burnt forest remnants, (2) it can be developed without specialised software and can be incorporated in any decision-making system, and (3) it can be used for other forest habitats sensitive to wildfires. This new approach was developed from zero by the applicant consortium and appears to be original at national and EU level.

Other projects were innovative on a more conceptual level. Examples of conceptual innovation include the attraction of new actors, which is acknowledged separately (see Section 5.1). Another example (albeit preceding the award itself) is the designation of Almendralejo's Purification Church (Spain) as an urban SPA. Among the submissions to the Natura 2000 Award, the following examples of conceptual innovation stand out:

- The project ***"The daring Dutch: restoring the dynamic dunes"*** of the PWN Waterleidingbedrijf Noord-Holland (Waterworks North Holland) pioneered a novel approach to dune restoration that required breaking a centuries-old tradition of building protection facilities along the Dutch Atlantic coastline. The success of this project in remobilizing dunes, re-establishing the typical flora of this habitat and attracting high conservation value species such as the little ringed plover and Eurasian stone curlew would have been impossible without questioning traditional concepts of shoreline protection and devising bold and innovative interventions to modify them.
- Other projects were innovative by bridging communication gaps between communities usually working separately. For example, the project ***"Quality Standards for the Natura 2000 Site "Rebollar De Navalpotro" Management Plan"*** of the Spanish

NGO Fernando González Bernáldez Inter-University Foundation and EUROPARC Spain, **which won the Natura 2000 Award 2014 in the category "Networking and Cross-border Cooperation"**, established a network that comprised not only site managers and other practitioners, but also academic experts in the field of nature conservation. This enabled the consortium to incorporate scientific advances into the management practice of Natura 2000 sites, which is an innovative approach, in Spain and beyond.

Since innovation often arises from efforts to resolve specific conservation challenges in individual sites, no general recipe for being innovative can be derived from the above examples. However, these examples show both conventional conservation methodologies and the development and application of new IT based tools (some of them involving the internet) as promising areas for technical innovation, while also underlining the potential added value of more general, conceptual innovation for improved management and promotion of Natura 2000 areas.

5.5 Looking beyond individual sites

Strengthening Natura 2000 also means strengthening its network character. This is particularly true for activities that increase connectivity throughout the network in line with Article 10 of the Habitats Directive because only a closely interconnected system of individual sites will improve the conservation status of many target habitats and species. It is also true for the SPAs which were established under the Birds Directive, for instance in relation to migratory birds. At the same time, Natura 2000 is also a network of actors and stakeholders, and its overall effectiveness benefits from improved communication and cooperation among these institutions and individuals - both within countries and throughout the EU.

This is why looking beyond individual sites was also a characteristic of many high-scoring submissions to the Natura 2000 Award. This element of success was relevant to all award categories but most clearly to the category "Networking and cross-border cooperation". It particularly boosted the effectiveness and originality ratings of successful projects.

Examples of projects that aimed at improved site connectivity and local/regional network coherence included the following:

- The project **"Cross-regional cooperation to enhance the natural structure and public awareness of the Sonien forest"**, which was implemented by the Agency of Nature and Forest under the Belgian Ministry of Environment, Nature and Energy, improved the coherence of the parts of the Sonien Forst SCAs and SPA that are located within three different administrative regions of Belgium. Apart from increasing the core areas of the protected forests and other positive impacts, this project also managed to improve ecological connectivity between its component core areas.
- Large carnivores typically roam over extended territories and therefore need site networks rather than individual sites for effective conservation. The project **"Saving the world's most threatened cat: the Iberian Lynx"** of the long-established Portuguese NGO Liga para a Protecção da Natureza and partners took this into account, by entering 5-year management agreements with local partners for more than 7,500 ha potentially suitable habitat, among them 56 ha of ecological corridors. Together with additional measures such as support of healthy prey (rabbit) populations, it is

hoped that this network approach will contribute to re-establishment of the Portuguese Iberian Lynx population in the foreseeable future.

- The coherence of Natura 2000 at the regional and national level depends not only on the existence of corridors and stepping stones, but also on a coherent management approach. This was the focus of the project *"Quality Standards for the Natura 2000 Site 'Rebollar De Navalpotro' Management Plan"* of the Spanish NGO Fernando González Bernáldez Inter-University Foundation and EUROPARC Spain, which established a technical cooperation network on Natura 2000 management at all levels (local, regional and national), aimed at effective, coherent management across the national network. This led to a more homogenised approach on the national level and the establishment of an effective network for exchange of know-how among technicians involved in Natura 2000 management planning and implementation. Another,



Figure 13. (photo: LIFE to ad(d)mire NAT/S/000268, © European Commission)

more specific example of a multi-site approach to pursue best practice standards for site management was the project *"Life to admire - restoration of mires and wetlands in Sweden"* of the Jämtland county administrative board. This project developed a peatland restoration approach, which was then applied consistently in 35 Natura 2000 sites (Figure 13).

The latter project's emphasis on developing and catalyzing a network of technicians - and hence the social dimension of the Natura 2000 network - was even more prominent in other projects, for instance the following:

- The *"Association of Natura 2000 site managers of Brittany: a human network serving the Natura 2000 policy"* (France) made its own establishment and activities the focus of its application. This association, which at present involves 38 site managers responsible for some of the 56 SCIs and 25 SPAs, aims to overcome deficiencies provoked by the fact that the highly specialised and effective work carried out by the 38 managers in Brittany has been too often confined locally and that the human capital involved in the Natura 2000 management has been underestimated and underused as a result, making the network less well known and less effective. Not only did the association succeeded in improving the collective work of the managers but it also managed to promote the regional Natura 2000 work to the public and to the authorities. As a result, the association has become a reliable and sought after partner – it has already been asked to provide inputs into important policy documents at

departmental, regional, and national level. This approach appears to be at the same time very original in the Natura 2000 field, and highly replicable in other regions and countries.

Initiatives like these promise to enhance not only the ecological functionality of the Natura 2000 network, but also the capacity of the institutions that are tasked with managing them. Institutionalization of networks and associations of site actors also is a great way of improving the visibility and policy impact of Natura 2000.

5.6 Realizing socio-economic benefits

The discussion on [the economics of ecosystems and biodiversity](#) and the EC initiative "Mapping and Assessment of Ecosystem Services" have clearly demonstrated the benefits to human society at the global and European level from ecosystem services. However, the challenge remains to identify these benefits on the site level, to make them tangible to local stakeholders, and to also use them as incentives to support biodiversity-friendly, sustainable land management. Since potential benefits, ways to realise them, and linkages to nature conservation objectives cannot be defined in a generic way, this challenge calls for the ingenuity of site actors and stakeholders.

The importance of these benefits justifies both the inclusion of an award category on "Socio-economic benefits" (which was the most relevant to this element of success but by far not the only one where it had an impact) and their importance as general elements of project success. Successful schemes to harvest socio-economic benefits typically scored high for effectiveness, but also for originality (as not many functioning schemes to achieve this exist to date) and durability (because they can create self-sustaining economic incentives).

- ***The winner of the Natura 2000 Award 2014 in the category "Socio-economic benefits" was the project "Tarnava Mare: promoting viability of agricultural communities to protect a Natura 2000 landscape" of the Romanian NGO ADEPT Foundation. This project aimed to protect the traditionally farmed landscape of Transylvania (particularly the 85,000 ha Sighișoara-Târnava Mare SPA/SCI) with its high value grasslands and associated habitats, through the promotion of the economic viability of small-scale farming businesses. It succeeded in doubling the average uptake for agri-environment grassland measures. Technical and value chain related assistance to the tourism and particularly dairy sector provided an additional income of €350,000 per year to over 200 dairy farmers in the area, also halting the decline of livestock numbers and traditional grassland management. This yielded clear conservation benefits for the protection of three priority grassland habitats and two non-priority habitats. Another project on sustainable grassland management through improving socio-economic benefits to livestock farmers was implemented by the Slovak NGO Prales ("Primeval Forest") at "Strážovské vrchy - a living and rich region". "Strength through Unity in Touraine Champeigne" by the Communauté de Communes de Loches Développement won the French Grand Prix Natura 2000 in 2012 and also engaged a wide range of stakeholders in particular farmers, hunters and conservationists helping them enter agri-environment measures for grassland birds.***

- A similar example from a coastal area was the British Blue Marine Foundation's

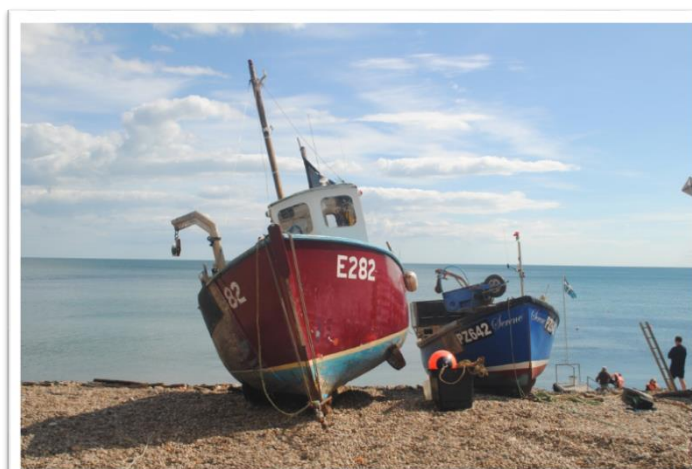


Figure 14. (photo: Blue Marine Foundation, © European Commission)

project *"The Lyme Bay Fisheries and Conservation Reserve"*. While primarily focused on the initiation of a multi-stakeholder dialogue to improve the conservation of this marine SAC, the project also strived to secure a higher quality and ecological certification of the seafood caught

by fishermen, for marketing purposes and to secure higher prices. After joining a Responsible Fishing Scheme, fishermen could brand their catch and market it at higher prices. In addition, technical assistance helped to install insulated fish tubes on board fishing vessels, securing direct icing after catch. This secured that the fish landed and sold are as fresh as possible, thus again yielding a higher price (Figure 14).

- The above projects show how socio-economic benefits can be realised through the marketing of natural resources based products from Natura 2000 sites. Tourism is another popular way of seeking such benefits because nature based tourism can provide alternative income and at the same time incentives for nature conservation. The Dutch NGO Natuurmonumenten submitted the project *"Island of Tiengemeten: welcome to unique nature near the city"*, which sought socio-economic benefits through the development of tourism infrastructure and related marketing, including museums, information and visitor centres, accommodation and others. The project is likely to have created significant socioeconomic benefits in the area and for the local/neighbouring inhabitants, although these were not qualified by the applicant. The number of visitors rose from 30,000 to well over 50,000, and is expected to continue rising until operations will become self-sustaining at a visitor number of 80,000. By creating employment and income that depends on the natural attractions of the island, the project hence boosted local interest in conserving these values.
- There were other examples of using sustainable tourism development to generate socio-economic benefits from Natura 2000 sites, such as the project *"Lands of Priolo: Building a sustainable tourism destination"* of the Portuguese NGO Society for the Study of Birds, which used local branding, tourism infrastructure development and similar approaches to develop the SPA Pico da Vara/Ribeira do Guilherme in the remote eastern part of São Miguel (Azores) into a sustainable destination for visitors. The project *"Economically sustainable conservation of Aquila fasciata in Spain"* of the NGO La Sabina - Associació per a la Salvaguarda de la Biodiversitat i la Natura, included developing a specialist tourism product around the presence of

Bonelli's Eagles at the site (e.g. bird photo trips, hides, guides, etc.), including accommodation and meals in a nearby village. The project *"Le réseau des Ambassadeurs du patrimoine Biodiversité et Paysages"* of the Syndicat Mixte pour la préservation et la gestion de la Camargue gardoise entered a cooperation with local tourism operators in order to maximise socio-economic benefits from sustainable tourism.

The above projects are convincing examples of how win-win solutions for nature and people living near Natura 2000 areas can be found. These solutions appear to be particularly feasible in areas where biodiversity depends on traditional land management, and in areas with high tourism potential. However, the example of quality and/or ecological labelling of biodiversity products as a basis for socio-economic benefits and incentive for sustainable fishing illustrates a different approach with even wider applicability. It will be interesting to see what additional ways of realizing the socio-economic benefits of Natura 2000 sites - and of using them in the interest of nature conservation - will be identified in future rounds of the award.

5.7 Planning sustainability from the start

The question how project impacts can be sustained beyond the lifespan of the actual project is a recurrent theme not only in biodiversity conservation, but in project management in general. An important answer that was reflected in the project design of various applicants to the Natura 2000 Award 2014 was to make sustainability a core criterion for project design, rather than treating it as an add-on that could be considered at some stage towards the end of their projects.

This approach, which was relevant to the durability of projects in all award categories, deserves wider attention in future rounds of the award. The following examples provide additional detail on how sustainability was put centre stage by applicants:

- Analysis of previous experience during project planning: PWN Waterleidingbedrijf Noord-Holland (Waterworks North Holland) used the project *"The daring Dutch: restoring the dynamic dunes"* to restore natural dune habitats with their flora and fauna in the SCI of Kennemerland-Zuid. In order to ensure a lasting restoration impact, the carefully studied the dune formation processes and European experiences in this subject prior to the project. This knowledge was then incorporated in the project. The applicants were aware of the need for further, perhaps decades-long, management of the restored habitats, and figured this into their project planning. They secured funding for follow-up management for three years and identified partners (including the NGO Natuurmonumenten) who, together with volunteers, could take over follow-up management after the project (Figure 15).
- Measures to maximise durability of engineering works: The sustainability of project impacts often depends on the durability of the infrastructure involved. An example where particular care was taken to maximise this durability was the project *"Conservation of water bird species at Pomorie Lake, Bulgaria"* of the national NGO Green Balkans Federation. The project is focused on restoring birds nesting substrate in the Pomorie Lake SPA, by establishing a new artificial islet that facilitates breeding of target species. Special attention was given to the durability of the islet

construction. The chosen earthen dike had already been there for 40-50 years. Using a material of geo-textile and geo-web filled with gravel minimised erosion, while at the same time securing the preferred substrate by the target species. Thanks to this durable design, long term-maintenance requires only the removal of unwanted vegetation.



Figure 15. Dunes before and after restoration (photo: Harm Botman, © European Commission)



Fotografie: © Harm Botman - 1 - Artist Impression: © Ulla Gienemeyer 2018

- Using natural succession to support project sustainability: A common challenge in species reintroduction projects is to establish a stable population that then can survive and grow by its own. The application *"Conservation activities carried out in*

order to rescue Angelica palustris in the Czech Republic of the Nature Conservation Agency of the Czech Republic demonstrates how this can be achieved. *Ex-situ* plant material from the SCI Hrdibořské rybníky, where the species had persisted until 1986, were used to establish an *ex situ* rescue culture. Subsequently, large numbers of seedlings were planted on the site in 2009 and three spontaneous, self-sustaining populations are now established there. To support re-colonization, management measures such as regular mowing of meadows, hydrological studies and communication activities towards the public were implemented. In combination, the rescue activities resulted in more than 2,364 flowering plants and around 2,000-3,000 non-flowering plants at the site in 2013.

- Investing in support networks over the long term: A central pillar of the durability strategy of the project ***"Almendralejo's Purification Church: A divine Special Protection Area for the Lesser Kestrel"*** of the Spanish NGO Defensa y Estudio del Medio Ambiente (DEMA) was the robust local support network for Lesser Kestrel conservation that the NGO had developed over a long period. This support network provides both the necessary (local) political backing and a resource of supporters of practical follow-up measures to the project.
- Replication and follow-up projects: A follow-up project building on the submitted project (budget: €6.7 million) was secured by the project ***"Cross-regional cooperation to enhance the natural structure and public awareness of the Sonien forest"*** of the Agency of Nature and Forest under the Belgian Ministry of Environment, Nature and Energy. This ensured not only the sustainability of the original project, but also widened the range of partners. The follow-up will be jointly implemented by the three regions involved in the original project, but also by the Roads and Traffic Agency, the surrounding municipalities of Hoeilaart and Overijse and the Department for Environment, Nature and Energy of the Flemish Government.
- Up-scaling: The project ***"A spatial optimisation tool to support implementation of conservation objectives in Flanders, Belgium"***, which was implemented by the Agentschap voor Natuur en Bos (ANB) under the Ministry of Environment, Nature and Energy of the Flemish region jointly with two research centres, ensured a sustained impact of the developed spatial, high-resolution land-use model by offering it for use at various levels including with stakeholders on the ground and decision makers. As a consequence, the applicant received green light to carry out the process of optimizing the entire SPA network in Flanders, based on supportive amendments in legislation. This enhanced both the impact and the durability of the project.
- Long-term contracts and Memorandums of Understanding: The project ***"The first complex long-term contract in the Czech Republic concerning Natura 2000"*** of the Nature Conservation Agency of the Czech Republic had its sustainability strategy mentioned in the project name. The signing and implementation of the model contract for the management of eight forest SCAs was proof and guarantee of the parties' long-term commitment. The contract guaranteed a durable relation (2013-2021), while ensuring some degree of flexibility with possible adjustments. Other

projects used less binding but potentially equally effective approaches to ensure sustainability, such as memorandums of understanding.

These examples illustrate how sound project planning, initial feasibility and sustainability assessments, the use and formalization of existing support networks, contractual agreements as well as the timely planning for replication, up-scaling and follow-up projects etc. can all contribute to improving overall project success and the durability of project impacts. Not all of these strategies will be equally applicable for all future projects. However, the general lesson that can be learned from these projects is that it pays off to consider sustainability as a central part of project design and implementation.

5.8 Mobilizing a wide range of resources

One of the general challenges to strong conservation management in Natura 2000 sites is a lack of resources - be it financial, staff related or infrastructural. While the funding of the Natura 2000 network remains first and foremost a responsibility of the Member States (with the support of the relevant EU funding instruments), a diversification of the resource base will also greatly contribute to strengthening it. Many submissions to the Natura 2000 Award 2014 have broken new ground in mobilizing hitherto unused resources.

This has benefitted projects in all Award categories, but has often been reflected in the cost-benefit and originality scores obtained. However, original new ways of resource mobilization can have also supported the financial sustainability and hence durability of project impacts.

While some projects were original primarily in raising funding, others have tapped into non-monetary resources, which can often be as helpful to Natura 2000 management as the former. Examples of successful financial resource mobilization include the following:

- Contributions of businesses: The project *"Saving the Imperial Eagle: Insulating the Electricity Grid to Secure Hunting and Breeding Grounds"* of the Bulgarian Society for the Protection of Birds partnered up with the regional electrical network operator to insulate almost 600 electricity poles near SPAs with strong Imperial Eagle populations. The costs for the technical insulation measures (ca. €30,000) were covered by the grid company, probably in part because it had an interest in reducing shortcuts due to bird electrocution. Identifying and using this interest allowed the project implementer to attract an additional significant funding source for the project.
- There are also cases where finances were gained without such interests, from the corporate social responsibility commitments of business companies. One such example is the project *"Mount Saint Peter - inspired by the future"* of ENCI Maas-tricht (part of HeidelbergCement Group), which aimed at ecological restoration and sustainable use of abandoned quarry areas and was funded in part through a foundation which had been partly capitalised by ENCI HeidelbergCement, together with other donors.
- Leveraging funds from agri-environmental measures: The application *"Alkaline fen protection supports local community in the Biebrza Valley - Szuszelewo story, Poland"* of the Administration of Biebrza National Park (the largest of all Poland's national parks) and partners aimed at restoring 103 ha of the habitat type 7230 (al-

kaline fens] with occurrence of several plant species of community interest such as *Liparis loeselii* and *Saxifraga hirculus*, as well as the moss species *Drepanocladus vemicosus*. Among other activities, it promoted agri-environmental measures as an incentive for sustainable land management and helped farmers to participate in these schemes, contributing their ownership of the project outcomes and hence its sustainability. The project ***"Tarnava Mare: promoting viability of agricultural communities to protect a Natura 2000 landscape"*** of the Romanian NGO ADEPT Foundation included a similar approach.

Other projects have mobilized tourism and other revenues to support Natura 2000 management. However, finances are only one kind of resources needed for Natura 2000 management and promotion. Another important resource is time. Contributions of working time in support of site management can be invited from volunteers, or offered in exchange for access to natural resources, as illustrated by the below projects:

- The project ***"Natura 2000 goes to school"***, which was submitted by the Auring Biological Station Hohenau Ringelsdorf (Austria), facilitated a nature learning experience for school children at the SAC/SPA of March-Thaya-Auen. The monetary budget of this project was kept to a modest €38,600 because a large part of the project's activities were implemented by volunteers. This is only one example of the huge contribution of volunteers to Natura 2000, and of the benefits of using this valuable resource consciously and effectively.
- The project ***"Management of Lake Lesser Prespa through a multi-stakeholder participation process"*** of the Society for the Protection of Prespa (Greece) supported multi-stakeholder wetland management. They secured pivotal management actions such as reed control through the involvement of local farmers, who directly benefitted from this practice and the resulting access to resources. There are many scenarios in which a replication of this overall approach appears possible.

There are other means of resource mobilization which were not highlighted to the same degree by the submissions to the 2014 Natura 2000 Award. These include, for instance, the whole range of payment for ecosystem services. The important lesson learned from the 2014 submissions is that seeking innovative funding and resourcing options can greatly influence cost efficiency - both at the project level and for the general management of Natura 2000 sites.

5.9 Measuring and communicating success

Similar to a sound initial situation analysis, a well thought-out sustainability strategy or an adequate range of project resources, measuring and communicating projects outputs and impacts is a general requirement of project planning and implementation. This requirement was met to varying degrees by the projects submitted to the 2014 round of the Natura 2000 Award.

Measuring and communicating success is equally relevant to all award categories, although gauging project impact (as opposed to effort) seems to be a particular challenge for communication projects. Clear project indicators have been a prerequisite to demonstrating and

rating effectiveness, but they have also been reflected in the cost-benefit, durability and replicability scores of outstanding projects.

Good impact monitoring systems among the projects of the 2014 award round measured both conservation impacts and socio-economic impacts. Examples of the former are the following:

- The project ***"Montecristo, the largest Mediterranean island got rid of its rats"*** of the Parco Nazionale Arcipelago Toscano Authority and its partners conducted a rat eradication programme on this Italian island, in order to improve the conservation status of breeding birds such as yelkouan and Cory's shearwaters, as well as other native biota. As with all rat eradication projects, it was crucial that the project objective was fully reached and that re-introductions could be ruled out. To check this, a follow-up monitoring programme was initiated: There are currently 50 active stations with rodent bait dispensers located all over the island; the stations are regularly monitored to detect any new traces of the presence of rats (Figure 16). This is an example of a very technical and simple monitoring scheme, which reflects the technical nature of the project. A similar case is the monitoring of the success of the project ***"New Iberian lynx (*Lynx pardinus*) population reintroduction strategies"*** of the regional environmental agency of Andalusia (Spain), which used radio-tracking among other techniques to follow the fate of re-introduced animals. Again, monitoring was continued by the implementing agency beyond the lifespan of this project.



Figure 16. (photo: Francesca Giannini, © European Commission)

- While it is usually relatively straightforward to measure species or habitat level impacts of technical conservation projects like those mentioned above, some submissions to the Natura 2000 Award 2014 showed that it is also possible to demonstrate conservation impacts of projects with a broader methodological approach, including those focused on communication and socio-economic benefits. The ***"LIFE+ 3WATER Project, a Model for Sustainable Cooperation"*** of the European Landowner's As-

sociation, **which won the Natura 2000 Award 2014 in the category "Reconciling interests and perceptions"**, contributed to a measurable improvement of the conservation status of two priority species of the Habitats Directive (Bittern and European Tree Frog) by convening a joint project development and implementation process with seven stakeholders with diverging attitudes and perceptions. The resulting LIFE project was the culmination of reconciliation efforts between the Flemish Agency for Nature and Forests, nature organisations, cities and private landowners. This led not only to a change in attitudes, but also to a doubling of Bittern numbers and a notable increase of the tree frog population.

- A more comprehensive system of before/after monitoring was included in the project **"The daring Dutch: restoring the dynamic dunes"** of PWN Waterleidingbedrijf Noord-Holland (Waterworks North Holland). In order to monitor the biotic responses to dune remobilization, insects have been inventoried before and after the intervention, vegetation structure is being mapped each year, and a breeding bird census will be conducted every five years. In addition, foresters are documenting changes in the landscape from fixed points. The ornithological monitoring showed that, during the season of 2013, typical dune species such as the Little Ringed Plover and Eurasian Stone-curlew re-appeared. This is considered as proof of the successful restoration of the habitats, and thus of project impact.
- An outstanding example where project success was not only measured, but also communicated widely is the project **"Saving the Imperial Eagle: Insulating the Electricity Grid to Secure Hunting and Breeding Grounds"** of the Bulgarian Society for the Protection of Birds. Based on meticulous impact monitoring, the project team established contact, exchanged experience and collaborated with more than 20 projects and over 25 organizations from Bulgaria and abroad. The project was presented at international meetings in Italy, Slovakia and Hungary. It also helped to inform the "International Action Plan for conservation of the Imperial Eagle". This helped to maximise replication of the approach and multiply the conservation impact of the project.
- Additional good practice examples of conservation impacts include the monitoring of Lesser Kestrel number and breeding success at **"Almendrales's Purification Church: A divine Special Protection Area for the Lesser Kestrel"** by the Spanish NGO Defensa y Estudio del Medio Ambiente, and the monitoring of wetland restoration impacts on migratory birds which was done in the framework of the project **"Marjal dels Moros, a Spanish Mediterranean Wetland Preserved for the Future"** of the Regional Government of Valencia, Spain.

However, not only conservation impacts but also communication results and socio-economic benefits generated by Natura 2000 need to be measured and communicated. Several submissions to the 2014 round of the award demonstrated how this can be achieved.

- The project **"Strážovské vrchy - a living and rich region"** of the Slovak NGO "Prales" ("Primeval forest") aimed at improving the conservation status of a number of Habitats Directive habitat types, through the improvement of the competitiveness of small-scale farming businesses. This was partly implemented by online market-

ing. The project team monitored the success of this marketing strategy based on the number of visitors to their website and followers on social networks, showing a modest but overall positive trend in interest in the locally sourced products.

- The ***"Regional partnership between Natura 2000 and forestry experts, for Natura 2000 forests and associated species"*** of the French BirdLife partner LPO focused on integrating conservation objectives into private forest management in nine contiguous Natura 2000 sites in the Poitou-Charentes Region. Afterwards, LPO was able to demonstrate that the awareness of 1,459 people (out of which 897 were forest owners) had been raised over the project duration of five years, and that 19 Natura 2000 contracts for 45 hectares as well as 144 charters for 466 hectares of 14 Habitats Directive habitat types had been signed. They also showed that a total of 23 Habitats Directive species (two of which are of priority) and 13 Birds Directive species benefited directly through specific measures agreed in these contracts and charters. Similarly, the number of people reached by the various communication activities of the project ***"Rediscovered Steppes of the Louny region"*** of the Nature Conservation Agency of the Czech Republic, ***which won the Natura 2000 Award in the category of "Communication"***, was used as an indicator for the primary impact of these activities. Changes in attitude as a result of them were also considered.
- Another way of measuring socio-economic impact is based on income generation: The project ***"Tarnava Mare: promoting viability of agricultural communities to protect a Natura 2000 landscape"*** of the Romanian NGO ADEPT Foundation monitored the additional farm income afforded by its various interventions (in addition to visitor numbers and other indicators), coming up with impressive figures at the order of magnitude of millions of Euros. As part of its project communications, ADEPT Foundation is already advising three other areas in Romania, on developing a similar project. ADEPT also has received EU-wide awards in 2012 and 2013 from DG Agriculture for innovative communication with farmers, which brought international attention and promotion of activities in the area.

Measuring and communicating success are important parts of project design and implementation, but they are also indispensable to raise awareness and promote the Natura 2000 network as a whole. This is very much in line with the overall objectives of the Natura 2000 Award. It is therefore hoped that submissions to future rounds of the Award will emphasise impact monitoring and reporting even more strongly.

5.10 Learning, knowledge sharing and communication as core project components

Communicating success (see Section 5.9 above) is important to maximise project impacts. However, there are other aspects of communication, learning and knowledge sharing that can greatly enhance project impact and replicability. The first round of the Natura 2000 Award provided some outstanding examples how these activities can be integrated as core project components.

This element of success was relevant to all project categories, but particularly to the "Communication" category. Investing in learning and knowledge sharing boosted the effectiveness and particularly the replicability scores of those projects that successfully engaged in it.

A wide range of approaches to learning, knowledge sharing and communication were adopted by the applicants' projects, including scientific and general use publications, websites, events, guideline documents for replication, and mentoring schemes for spinoff projects. Particular interesting examples include the following:

- A particularly elaborate approach to knowledge sharing was adopted by the project *"The comeback of burnt black pine forests on Mount Parnon, South Peloponnese, Greece"* of the Greek Wetland-Biotope Center (EKBY), which focused on a structured approach to restore sub-Mediterranean pine forests (a priority habitat type) in the SCI of Mount Parnonas



Figure 17. (photo EKBY, © European Commission)

following a 2007 wildfire. The lessons learned during this project were communicated not only in five conferences as well as 20 press articles, 200 internet articles, one specialised film, a dedicated website and various leaflets, but also through the production of a technical methodological publication with the guidelines of the structured approach. This technical guideline publication will make it particularly easy to replicate the structured approach developed by the project (Figure 17). Similarly, instructions for regional branches of the Czech National Conservation Agency taking up the methodology of the project *"The first complex long-term contract in the Czech Republic concerning Natura 2000 management"* were being drafted in the form of internal guidelines, as a means of sharing the lessons learned during this project.

- A good example of how knowledge generated at the site level can be shared with a wider audience at the national level was the project *"Quality Standards for the Natura 2000 Site Rebollar De Navalpotro Management Plan"* of the Fernando González Bernáldez Foundation and EUROPARC Spain. While primarily focused on the development of quality standards for seven SCIs including "Rebollar de Navalpotro", the project team addressed a much wider issue from the outset: The development of tools for the effective management planning of Natura 2000 Sites in order to guarantee coherence across the Spanish network. This was achieved through the establishment of a 90-strong technical expert network, two thematic workshops to share experience, the development of quality standards for management plans and a collaborative website on the status of the development of the Natura 2000 planning

process at the national level. As a result, the approach to Natura 2000 management in Spain became more homogeneous, and an effective network of exchange of know-how among technicians involved in Natura 2000 management was initiated. ***This project won the Natura 2000 Award 2014 in the category of "Networking & cross-border cooperation".***

Irrespective of the concrete approach chosen, the common denominator of applicants that shared this element of success was that they understood their projects also as parts of their own learning process, and that they did not shy away from promoting the lessons learned among their peers. This commitment to learning and passing on new insights is an important element of good Natura 2000 practice.

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 shortlisted projects, but also by all Natura 2000 actors who participated in the scheme in 2014. Having been assembled from the solutions developed by individual projects, this catalogue is more like a mosaic - to which new tiles might be added in future rounds - than a complete, final set of what the award team or the EC would consider good practice. The list of good practice reflects what the award scheme as a whole has demonstrated - 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 2014 has shown a rich diversity of methodological approaches and creative ideas, submissions have not been homogenous in terms of categories, Member States and submitting organizations. This indicates a potential for increased participation of projects in hitherto underrepresented 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 163 applications received, only eight were submitted under the award category of *"Socio-economic benefits"*. The limited number of submissions under this category may reflect the fact that not all habitat types and species listed on the Directives' annexes offer opportunities for win-win solutions combining conservation and socio-economic benefits to the same extent as, for instance, grassland habitats or areas of high tourism value. Nevertheless, there may also be an as yet unused potential to develop projects based on synergies between nature conservation and sustainable use aimed at socio-economic benefits, and it is hoped that this potential will increasingly be realised in future rounds of the award.
- **Potential for more submissions under the category "Networking and cross-border cooperation":** Natura 2000 aims to be a European network and lists connectivity among its objectives, but out of the 163 applications received, only ten were submitted under the award category of *"Networking and cross-border cooperation"*. This may be partly explained by the fact that projects focusing on individual sites are *by definition* less suitable for addressing connectivity and cross-border cooperation. However, some of the submissions to the 2014 round of the award clearly showed that the two can be combined. Site connectivity will become increasingly important for the overall effectiveness of the Natura 2000 network under scenarios of continued climate change, and there appears to be an untapped potential to produce creative solutions to strengthen linkages between individual sites. The same is true for the harmonization of management and practical cooperation across borders.
- **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, 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 round of the award. Similarly, the 2014 round of the award highlighted a wide range of broad and very relevant Natura 2000 actors, but still received by far the biggest share of applications 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.

- **Closer integration with core management:** The Natura 2000 Award invited applications for clearly distinguishable initiatives, activities or projects, which by their very nature are of limited duration and often separate from the day-to-day management of the sites on which they focused. However, the degree to which submitted projects were integrated with the baseline management of the sites where they were conducted varied greatly. Some were explicitly aimed at improving the work of management authorities, e.g. by setting standards for management planning, whereas others were essentially stand-alone, one-off activities. While both approaches are justified, it is expected that the highest effectiveness and best durability will result from strong integration of future projects with the everyday management of their home sites.

As a consequence of Natura 2000 being a network in progress, and the fact that there is room for new improvements and new ideas as described above, managers and other Natura 2000 actors should not attempt to simply copy experiences from highlighted examples, but rather allow these examples to inspire them in their search for the solutions that work best in their specific context. As long as project solutions address site-specific and general challenges to conserving European nature (such as those listed in Section 2.3 of this report), and as long as Natura 2000 actors strive to meet general good project planning and implementation standards such as those discussed in Sections 5.2 and 5.7-5.10 above, it is desirable to see new adaptations of the general approaches highlighted in 2014, or even completely new project ideas.

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