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Nature 2000 - selected issues

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ABSTRACT

The EU Nature 2000 network is generally not a network of strictly protected areas in which no economic activities should take place. Therefore, in most Nature 2000 sites, a strict wilderness approach will not be the most appropriate form of management. This guidance document should therefore not be interpreted as the Commission aiming to turn all Nature 2000 sites into wilderness areas. However, in specific cases, a wilderness approach can be the most appropriate or even necessary management approach for specific Nature 2000 sites hosting habitat types and species of Community interest, the maintenance or restoration to a favourable conservation status of which is dependent on some degree of wilderness qualities and natural processes. Moreover, there will be sites for which a wilderness approach can be useful but not necessarily the only way to restore or maintain the species and habitats at a favourable conservation status. This guidance document is applicable to those specific Nature 2000 sites.

Keywords: Conflict management, Nature 2000, Nature conservation, Public participation, Sustainable development

INTRODUCTION

Nature 2000 is not a system aimed at providing a barrier to activities. Instead, human activities need to comply with the provisions outlined in Article 6 of the Habitats Directive, to ensure that these activities are in line with the conservation objectives of Natura 2000 sites. Whereas Nature 2000 fully embraces the principles of conservation and sustainable use a

variety of protection approaches can be applied to the sites by Member States at national or regional level. Several Member States apply strict protection in parts of their Nature 2000 network to protect sites' natural conditions. As a management measure this means ensuring minimal human intervention in order to allow natural processes to predominate. There are examples of such setting aside of areas for nature or non-intervention management in the Nature 2000 network. Natural processes require sufficiently large areas to allow for dynamic changes over time and space. Natural areas, where natural processes predominate, which are sufficiently large and lack infrastructure, or are managed to achieve those qualities, are for the purposes of this guidance document being called wilderness areas. Many Member States designate areas with the purpose of preserving those qualities of wilderness, or a set of them, and may have a special class of protected areas for this purpose. However, it is important to note that occurrence of wilderness qualities is not limited to areas formally designated for their protection.

HUMAN ACTIVITY AND RULES FOR THE PROTECTION OF HABITATS AND SPECIES LIVING CONDITIONS

Nature 2000 network protects valuable natural habitats and rare or endangered plant and animal species. Nature in Europe is particularly vulnerable to threats on account of increasing interest in occupying areas that have not been built-up so far, agriculture intensification, infrastructure or industry development. Researches and environmentalists are convinced that if European societies follow the same course of development, a considerable number of plant and animal species will become extinct in the near future. A large part of Nature 2000 sites constitutes areas not previously protected and not requiring protection regimes which are applied in nature reserves or national parks. However, the idea of sustainable development should underlie any human activity. Nature 2000 does not interfere with any investment. On the contrary, natural values of the sites create a chance for many branches of economy to thrive and provide work for the unemployed. Nonetheless, human activity should not negatively affect the status of natural habitats and species protected under the Nature 2000 network.

NATURE AND WATER

River valleys are the source of constant conflicts between those who support protection of their natural values and others who opt for river regulation and improved flood protection. Having entered the EU, all the decisions concerning the management of river valleys - independently of Nature 2000 - have to be made in accordance with the Water Framework Directive. The aims of the directive are among others: the protection of the quality of waters and water ecosystems and integrated management of water resources in river basins. The requirements of Nature 2000 concerning river valleys are fully consistent and complementary with the requirements specified by the EU Water Framework Directive. They do not block flood protection activities but only require that it is implemented by means of modern methods which take into consideration river's natural dynamics and flow and leave space for the development of the river environment. It can be expected that Nature 2000 and its regulations will encourage people to find the balance between water management, flood protection and the needs of the environment and river valleys.

NATURE AND THE SEA

Nature 2000 sites protect not only land habitats and species - a significant part of the Polish Baltic Sea (both in the internal waters, territorial sea and exclusive economic zone) is also located in the network. Marine areas have their own specificity - a significantly smaller number of species and habitat types in comparison with the mainland, a uniform structure of ownership (State Treasury), the threats to the Baltic Sea wildlife are also different. In accordance with the Nature Conservation Act for marine areas, protection plans are drawn up instead of protection tasks. Directors of marine offices keep watch over maritime areas located outside of national parks. Marking and effectively managing marine protected areas are actions consistent with the implementation of the Helsinki Convention, as well as with the EU Marine Strategy Framework Directive.

NATURE 2000 AND FORESTS

Forests are not only the home for many crucial elements of biodiversity which have key importance for the environment but also a way of utilising the land. They provide economic benefits such as wood or fruits of the forest. Forest management, therefore, interacts in various ways with the objectives of unique natural habitats and species protection. That is why it is possible to find the balance between forest management and the objectives of Nature 2000, introducing only minor modifications in accordance with decisions of Technical-Economical Commissions, forest organisation planning or provisions of the Environment Protection Programme.

NATURE 2000 AND AGRICULTURE

A large part of natural values protected under Nature 2000 network is concentrated in the areas of cultivation, especially permanent grasslands. It particularly concerns the newly accepted Member States where the traditional methods of land cultivation and farming are preserved in the degree not met in the rest of the Member States. However, the intensification of agriculture leads to extreme reductions in agro-ecosystems. Therefore, the Common Agriculture Policy of the EU gradually evolves in the direction of motivating the farmers to adopt an environmental-friendly policy of farming. Agri-environmental schemes are examples of such motivating mechanisms. Chiefly, the programmes provide voluntary agreements for the farmers who oblige themselves to perform certain activities. They are an example of constructive cooperation between the users of the land and environmental protection administrators. Payments are calculated for every Member State and for every kind of activity in the way that the farmer can receive compensation for the losses resulting from extensive farming, balance the costs and become interested in participation in such programmes.

In the EU, over 10 million agreements within agri-environmental schemes have been signed so far which involved several percent of farmers. Environmental management schemes are basically independent of Nature 2000, however, they are considered to be one of the key mechanisms in achieving the Nature 2000 objectives on agricultural lands. In all EU states, it has become noticeable that Nature 2000 sites cover the areas where environmental management schemes are implemented. For example, on Nature 2000 sites in Poland the payments from agri-environment schemes have automatically increased by 15%.

Preserving traditional farming of semi-natural ecosystems is necessary to efficiently protect species and natural habitats, required under Nature 2000. The network will primarily promote enriching the offer of voluntary agri-environment schemes to be applied by farmers. If the protection of natural habitats or species in the Nature 2000 site requires introduction of regulations limiting the freedom of farming economy, the farmer will be given financial compensation.

NATURE 2000 AND BUSINESS ACTIVITY AND INVESTMENT

It is often emphasised that environmental protection under Nature 2000 network does not exclude investment and development. However, planned investments and draft projects and plans which can have negative impact on Nature 2000 sites require preliminary assessment of their impact on natural habitats and species for which the site has been designated.

It must be stressed that all plans and investments that will not have a significant negative impact on protected species and natural habitats will be accepted. Even if significant negative impacts on the Nature 2000 site are recognised, it is not completely impossible to develop the project or accept the plan. Competent authorities can allow such a project or plan to be developed if it meets the requirements of overriding public interest and that interest cannot be achieved by any other means. In such a situation, it is necessary to provide compensation measures for the affected sites in order to maintain the network cohesion (e.g. by designating other habitats suitable for the protected species). If the project or plan is to have a negative impact on priority habitats or species, the permit may be issued only on the condition that overriding public interest means protection of human life or health, ensuring public safety or bringing advantageous consequences of primary importance to natural environment. In special instances the Member State have to ask for the European Commission's opinion before issuing the permit.

CONCLUSION

Nature 2000 protects areas of high biodiversity value across the European Union. It is the largest coordinated multi-national network of protected areas in the world, covering more than 18% of the European terrestrial territory of the Member States as well as significant marine areas. As establishment of Nature 2000 nears completion the focus is increasingly shifting to the effective management and restoration of sites in the network. Ensuring a fully functional Nature 2000 network is central to achieving the EU target of halting and reversing the loss of biodiversity and ecosystem services in the EU by 2020.

Nature 2000 is not a system aimed at providing a barrier to activities. Instead, human activities need to comply with the provisions outlined in Article 6 of the Habitats Directive, to ensure that these activities are in line with the conservation objectives of Nature 2000 sites. Whereas Nature 2000 fully embraces the principles of conservation and sustainable use a variety of protection approaches can be applied to the sites by Member States at national or regional level. Several Member States apply strict protection in parts of their Nature 2000 network to protect sites' natural conditions. As a management measure this means ensuring minimal human intervention in order to allow natural processes to predominate. There are examples of such setting aside of areas for nature or non-intervention management in the

Nature 2000 network. Natural processes require sufficiently large areas to allow for dynamic changes over time and space.

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