

**EU Ministerial Round-Table on
"NATURA 2000 - AN OPPORTUNITY FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT
IN EUROPE"
(Tuczno, 25-27 August 2006)**

As you no doubt remember, during our recent meetings on the occasion of several ministerial conferences, Prof. Jan Szyszko, Minister of the Environment of the Republic of Poland has informed EU Ministers on his intention to organize the EU Ministerial Round Table on "NATURA 2000 - an opportunity for sustainable development in Europe", which would include interactive dialogue on some specific issues highlighted below.

Round-Table Programme

Ministers will be requested to address questions related to NATURA 2000, such as:

1. IS THE NATURA 2000 PROGRAMME A SUFFICIENT TOOL FOR THE ASSESSMENT OF BIODIVERSITY RESOURCES ?

The NATURA 2000 sites are designated on the basis of the occurrence of natural habitats and bird species which are covered by the Bird and Habitat Directives. Certain natural habitats and species covered by the Directives exist in close relationships with human activities. In particular, this is the case with the forest habitats managed for economic purposes like beech and alder stands or certain bird species, such as the white stork, closely linked to extensive farming activities. Does the designation of protected sites for these habitats and species contribute to the biodiversity conservation in a given State? Does the limitation of the measures to the special conservation of these habitats not narrow down the real needs of biodiversity conservation?

BIRDLIFE/WWF/EEB RESPONSE

The Nature Directives allow and help maintaining all economic activities which are in line with (or favourable for) the conservation objectives of the individual sites. Moreover Natura 2000 is an essential contribution to healthy ecosystems on which society and long-term economic development depend.

The Natura 2000 network, when implemented fully, is a flexible and efficient tool for the conservation of the EU's threatened fauna and flora. It has been proven, again and again, that without the firm legal protection of the Directives, the biodiversity value of sites will deteriorate due to the enormous pressures on land from various economic activities.

The Directives are excellent and flexible tools to mediate potential conflicts between nature conservation and economic development, helping to develop win-win solutions that can benefit people while preserving the natural assets upon which we depend. They provide a process for evaluating potential negative impacts on nature values from infrastructure development and other human activities and identifying alternatives. Where these alternatives are not possible or practical, the Directives can help identify mitigation and compensation measures to limit the negative impacts on the nature values as much as possible. For example, the Directives enabled expansion of the port of Rotterdam in a way which satisfied economic partners as well as nature protection NGOs.

Implementation of the Nature Directives is only half way through, therefore it is premature at this stage to claim its insufficiency for biodiversity conservation. In the last years most EU Member States have dedicated much effort and resources to site designation and protection, now is the time to make Natura 2000 work and to benefit from it. Adequate management and protection schemes are needed now, innovative use should be made of existing financing opportunities and all should join forces to achieve the EU's 2010 target of halting biodiversity decline.

2. IS THE NATURA 2000 PROGRAMME AN EFFICIENT TOOL FOR BIODIVERSITY CONSERVATION IN THE LIGHT OF CLIMATE CHANGE?

Climate change is likely to have an adverse effect on the functioning of many species of flora and fauna. The most threatened populations will be those that have very specific habitat requirements, low capacity of adaptation to new conditions or where their occurrence areas have been significantly fragmented and/or isolated. Is there a threat that NATURA 2000 will become "a trap" for these populations? How the spatial coherence of NATURA 2000 sites can be enhanced? Shall ecological corridors allow in practice the natural migration of species requiring large feed/breeding areas or population of species already heavily dispersed as a result of continuing changes in natural conditions?

BIRDLIFE/WWF/EEB RESPONSE

Natura 2000 is an essential tool to help threatened habitats and species as well as ecosystems as a whole (on which we all depend) to adapt to climate change. This unique network of sites represents an important biodiversity reservoir and an essential shelter for species and habitats from existing pressures and pressures arising from climate change.

In order to accommodate climate change induced distribution changes of species and habitats Article 10 of the Habitats Directive needs to be used more broadly to increase the connectivity and resistance of the network. For the same reason pressures on biodiversity in the wider landscape must be reduced.

When the provisions from Article 10 are fully and adequately implemented, the Natura 2000 network and other measures from the Nature Directives will serve to tackle biodiversity conservation challenges arising from climate change.

3. CAN THE NATURA 2000 NETWORK DRIVE THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE ECONOMY AND COMPENSATE THE DIFFERENCES AMONG REGIONS?

On one hand, the dynamic economic growth in Europe over the last century resulted in significant degradation of nature on our continent. On other hand, joint efforts undertaken to protect natural habitats and species, including the implementation of the NATURA 2000 Network are not fully accepted by different communities. Without such acceptance, the idea of the protection of natural heritage through NATURA 2000 Network can not be successfully implemented.

Therefore it becomes inevitable to identify and specify the emerging problems, in order to be able to reverse the unfavourable trends. The NATURA 2000 sites were designated in areas where the natural habitats and species covered by the Habitats and Birds Directives are well preserved. In general, these sites are characterised by unfavourable social conditions caused by insufficient economic development, high unemployment rate etc. It may be argued that NATURA 2000 programme imposes on these areas additional restrictions halting their development, preserving the persistence of underdevelopment and the absence of prospects for their residents. The success of the NATURA 2000 supported by the public acceptance will depend on whether the benefits and opportunities can be easily identified and consumed. Can the NATURA 2000 include not only conservation issues, but also be oriented for stimulation of economic development of regions and jobs creation respecting the principles of sustainable development ? Can other problematic areas be identified which would involve higher economic and social costs related to the implementation of the NATURA 2000 Network?

BIRDLIFE/WWF/EEB RESPONSE

While the main and widely agreed objective of Natura 2000 is to conserve the last remaining and most important parts EU's biodiversity, it has been proven many times that the network also maintains and boosts economic activities that are compatible with conservation activities. The integration of nature conservation into the various EU funds is an excellent opportunity for sustainable development based on this network.

Many studies on the benefits of Natura 2000 show boosts of economic activities that are compatible with conservation activities, such as ecosystem services, local products and tourism. For example, the nature protection of Border Moor in Austria which minimises the pre-treatment costs of water supply. Peat bogs of Lille Villose in Denmark are important for carbon store, wetlands in the Emjooe Suusoo Mire of Estonia retain enormous quantities of water and absorb a large amount of sediment including pollutants and the waters of the ATRT site in Latvia provide self purification capacity. Producers in Sierra del Segura (Spain) have embraced the opportunities which their climate and growing conditions influence and the market has recognised the attraction of products from environmentally sound resources.

The EU, Member States and all stakeholders must increase efforts to show citizens how nature supports our well-being, and that the Natura 2000 network provides a big opportunity for socio-economic development, especially in regions which "unfavourable social conditions".

4. ARE THE FLOOD CONTROL MEASURES WITHIN NATURA 2000 SITES, AS REQUIRED BY THE RELEVANT EU LEGISLATION, SUFFICIENTLY CORRELATED WITH NATURE CONSERVATION?

Flood control measures are required by the respective EU legislation. These measures include i.a. different kind of hydro-engineering activities (maintenance works) and control of green cover in river valleys in a way which would be appropriate from the flood control point of view. These measures may be considered as contrary to the conservation status of NATURA 2000 site located in river valleys.

In the light of the existing EU legislation, it is very difficult to correlate nature conservation measures in river valleys with those designed for flood protection. Therefore a question on the adequacy of correlation between the provisions contained in legal acts establishing the flood control-related obligations and Bird and Habitat Directives can be raised. How this problem should be addressed ?

BIRDLIFE/WWF/EEB RESPONSE

The Water Framework Directive and the Nature Directives are fully compatible and reinforce each other, if implemented properly and fully. The measures of the WFD can help reinforcing the protection regimes of many Natura 2000 sites lying in catchment areas, which are dependent on water.

Public security is not against nature conservation, but rather work together, as it has been continuously demonstrated. For example, in the concrete case of flooding, an adequate protection of biodiversity in catchment areas can substantially mitigate their negative effects, as in Schilfflinger Brill/Roeserbann SPA (Luxembourg).

5. WHAT CHANGES ARE NECESSARY IN ORDER TO ENSURE THAT NATURA 2000 CAN BECOME A REAL OPPORTUNITY FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT?

The NATURA 2000 should include both the nature conservation and stimulation of sustainable development at regional level. Is this the direction in which the process of implementation of the NATURA 2000 network really going to? What changes should be proposed to address also the issues of regional development, improvement of social conditions, jobs creation etc.?

BIRDLIFE/WWF/EEB RESPONSE

As stated above there are many studies showing that Natura 2000 maintains and boosts economic activities that are compatible with conservation activities. The recent Millennium Ecosystem Assessment showed that conservation of nature and biodiversity is a pre-requisite for functioning ecosystem services and an essential part of sustainable development. The cost of restoring lost ecosystems services can be much higher than the costs of simply avoiding their destruction.

The integration of nature conservation into the various EU funds is an excellent opportunity for sustainable development based on Natura 2000.

The preservation of our natural heritage is also an ethical obligation agreed by governments, societies and religions worldwide.

BIRDLIFE/WWF/EEB FINAL REMARKS

The Heads of State of the EU committed themselves to halt biodiversity loss by 2010. The review of the EU Biodiversity Strategy clearly showed that the most important progress in its implementation can be clearly linked to the Nature Directives, which are the only legal tools for the conservation of biodiversity across the EU.

The new Biodiversity Communication adopted in May 2006 reinforces the overall importance of the Directives in achieving the 2010 target. The Nature Directives are also the main tool of the EU to contribute to global biodiversity commitments (notably under the CBD).

The main focus at this point, as the European Commission has repeatedly said in several occasions recently, lays in the full and adequate implementation of these Directives. If correctly implemented, the Directives serve to their purpose and ensure the sustainable long term development of the areas concerned, and generally of the countries.

The event will take place in Tuczno, a small town in Wielkopolska Voivodship, from 25 to 27 August 2006. The Ministers and High-Level Officials will have the opportunity to engage in an interactive, constructive dialogue on topics identified above. Short field trip is foreseen to demonstrate how Poland implements NATURA 2000 in practice.

Ministers dialogue will follow Chatham House rules. Poland feels that the direct, free exchange of views among Ministers and High-Level Officials could help in better understanding of different interests of the EU Member States. The language of the meeting will be English.