

Biodiversity

Biodiversity in the EU, and increasingly in the Candidate Countries, is coming under serious threat as a result of human activity. The rapid decline in global biodiversity is one of the most serious threats to our planet like climate change. The growth of human population, environmental degradation, the over-use of natural resources (e.g. overfishing) and climate are putting stress on species and ecosystems. Developing infrastructures, the rise in mobility, urban sprawl, intensive agriculture and forestry, and tourism are all fragmenting and encroaching on habitats.

The implementation of the Birds Directive and the Habitats Directive, two key directives to protect Europe's most important wildlife areas by establishing the Natura 2000 network of sites, has been difficult. Infringements relating to the two directives account for over a quarter of instances where the European Commission has taken legal action against Member States.

Currently the proposed Natura 2000 network covers approximately 18% of the European territory.

As the process of establishing the Natura 2000 network enters its final stages (it is supposed to be completed by the end of 2004) attention is increasingly focusing on the question of how to finance the cost of managing the network. Estimated costs are around €6 million per year for the enlarged Union, to be co-financed by the EU.

The European Parliament should ensure the correct implementation of the Birds and Habitats Directives and ensure that sufficient amounts of co-financing are allocated to the management of Natura 2000, taking into account the needs of the old Member States and the increased needs of the new Member States.

The use of Structural Funds both in the old and new Member States must also be closely monitored in order to ensure that these funds are not used to damage important sites for nature conservation. Proposals for the new regulations for Structural and Cohesion Funds will be tabled in mid-2004. It has to be ensured that from 2007 the new generation of Structural and Cohesion Funds will be used to protect and improve the environment and that environmental considerations are integrated in the EU's regional policy so that Structural and Cohesion Funds do not damage nature and the environment. Promoting environment protection and sustainable development must be key objectives for the allocation of EU regional funds.

MEPs should also insist on the effective integration of nature conservation objectives into all relevant sectoral policies (in particular transport, fisheries, agriculture, and regional development).

What important decisions have been taken at EU level in the past?

The EU Heads of States and the European Commission have set 2010 as the target for halting the decline of biodiversity (Gothenburg Summit, 6th Environmental Action Programme). The target was also reinforced by the Kiev Ministerial Conference at Pan-European level in May 2003.

The 1979 Birds Directive and the 1992 Habitats Directive are two key directives established to preserve Europe's natural environment.

The EU Biodiversity Strategy of 1998 is currently being reviewed and progress at EU and Member State level in the implementation of the strategy is being assessed. As a follow-up

to the strategy, biodiversity action plans are being drawn up to promote the integration of biodiversity concerns in other sectors (agriculture, fisheries, etc.)

Where did the European Parliament make a difference?

The European Parliament played a very important role in scrutinising the implementation and enforcement of the Birds and Habitats Directives.

During its discussion session on implementation the EP Environment Committee very often takes up problems and complaints concerning species and habitats protection.

What is in the pipeline for the months after the elections?

The issue of financing Natura 2000 should receive major attention in the coming months.

The Commission will propose in a Communication (to be published in April 2004) to fund Natura 2000 via existing funds (rural development [pillar II of the CAP], Structural Funds and a dedicated fund (LIFE-nature) for specific management activities.

MEPs should ensure that a dedicated environment objective is introduced for the new Structural Funds regulations (proposals are expected in mid-2004), with a significant part of the funds dedicated exclusively to support Natura 2000. A significant amount of rural development funds should be used for Natura 2000 management. Non-farmers should also be allowed to apply for rural development funds. MEPs should also promote the continuation of a substantially increased LIFE-nature fund after 2006, which offers much-needed opportunities for innovation and pilot projects.

The European Parliament should also ensure that the new regulations for Structural and Cohesion Funds will be used for nature conservation and that Structural and Cohesion Funds do not damage nature and the environment.

MEPs should also ensure that nature conservation concerns are integrated in sectoral policies (transport, fisheries, agriculture, etc.).

The European Parliament should encourage the Commission to continue its work on biodiversity indicators to monitor state and trends in biodiversity, the implementation of policies and assess the progress towards the goal of halting the loss of biodiversity by 2010.

Questions that could be asked to candidates to get to know their positions and level of commitment

If you are elected MEP:

LIFE-nature is extremely important in financing small innovative projects and pilot projects in general. Will you vote in favour of the continuation of the LIFE-nature fund beyond 2006 and a substantial increase of the funds available for LIFE?

Will you support the introduction of a dedicated environment objective for the new Structural Funds regulations (proposals are expected in mid-2004), with a significant part of the funds dedicated exclusively to support Natura 2000?

Will you support the strict implementation of the Birds and Habitats Directive and the monitoring of their correct application?

Are you willing to bring cases which disregard these and other legislation for important directives for biodiversity (such as WFD, EIA Dir) to the attention of the EP Environment Committee and Petitions Committee?