



Luigi Boccardo (RSFB)

Organic olive grove plantation in Calabria, Italy.

Protection of Natura 2000 sites and economic development

What are Natura 2000 sites?

Natura 2000 is the EU's ecological network of protected areas composed of Special Protection Areas, designated under the Birds Directive, and Special Areas of Conservation, classified under the Habitats Directive. These sites are the "jewels in the crown" of European nature and their protection is a key element of European biodiversity policy – the target of which is to halt the loss of biodiversity by 2010.

Is economic development possible in Natura 2000?

Absolutely. The Nature Directives allow a fair balance between nature conservation and economic development. As Natura 2000 is the cornerstone of EU biodiversity policy, nature conservation objectives rightly take precedence within these sites. But this does not mean that all other land use and development activities such as tourism, recreation and built development must stop. On the contrary, all these activities are possible to the extent that they can be reconciled with the nature conservation priorities of the site and the Directives set out a process for achieving this reconciliation.

Article 6 Habitats Directive – reconciling Natura 2000 and development

This article sets out the decision-making process to be followed when plans or projects that may affect a Natura 2000 site are being planned. The overall aim is to assess the effects of potential development and reconcile nature and development interests, thus preventing damage to Natura

2000 from inappropriate development. But projects of overriding importance can proceed despite damage to Natura 2000 in specific limited circumstances.

The Article 6 assessment process consists of the following steps:

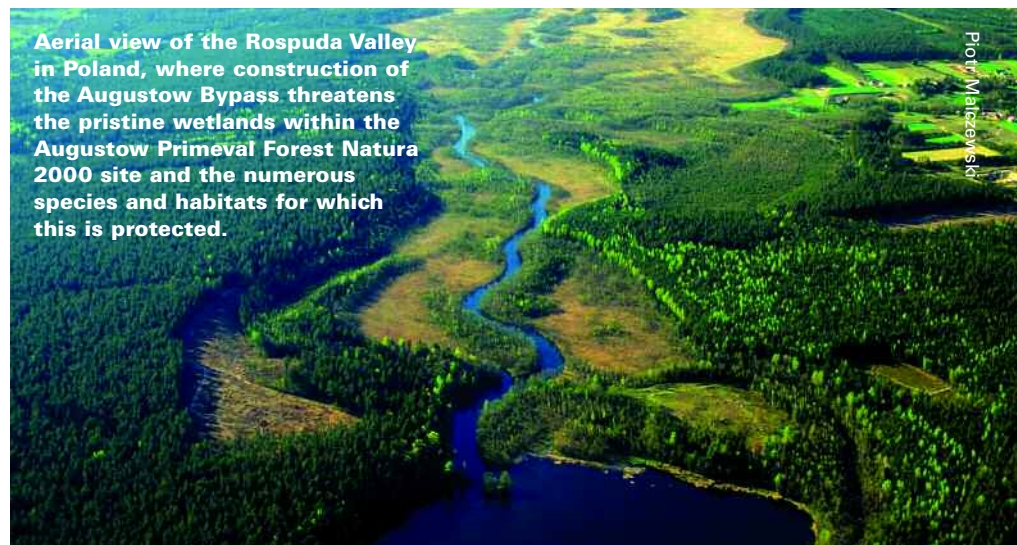
- **Screening** (preliminary assessment) of all plans or projects which could have a significant impact on the Natura 2000 site's conservation objectives.
- **Assessment** if screening cannot exclude the possibility of significant impacts on wildlife, a more detailed assessment of the plan/project must be carried out. This is to determine whether it will have a negative effect on the ecological integrity of the site (an assessment commonly known as Appropriate Assessment).
- **Authorisation** plans/projects can only be authorised if the assessment concludes that they do not have a negative effect on integrity. Where

negative impacts cannot be ruled out, less damaging alternative solutions must be sought.

- Where less damaging alternative solutions do not exist, the plan or project can only go ahead if it is considered essential for Imperative Reasons of Overriding Public Interest (IROPI) and if compensatory measures are put in place to compensate for the loss of habitats and/or species caused by the development. Where there are priority species or habitats (as defined in the Habitats Directive), the European Commission must be consulted on the application of IROPI and compensatory measures.

Is this approach workable?

Yes – it is an excellent example of a flexible framework addressing the crisis of biodiversity loss while allowing sustainable



Aerial view of the Rospuda Valley in Poland, where construction of the Augustow Bypass threatens the pristine wetlands within the Augustow Primeval Forest Natura 2000 site and the numerous species and habitats for which this is protected.

Piotr Matczewski

Birds coming in to roost at RSPB Saltholme nature reserve where terns, peregrines and water rails can be found a short distance from the heavy industry of the Tees Valley.

economic practice. There are a range of good examples of it working in practice, e.g. informing selection of the route for the Rail Baltica transport corridor.

Some vocal critics claim that the Article 6 process is too complicated, that it causes delays and stops projects. Of course, there are sometimes conflicts between conservation objectives and development and some of these cases do result in legal actions and sometimes fines. However, it is BirdLife International's view that in the vast majority of cases, with careful planning and involvement of conservationists early in discussions about development activities, problems can be avoided and alternative solutions found or negative impacts compensated. Most of the conflicts arise from slow or poor implementation, misunderstandings or deliberate misinformation about the assessment process.

In our view, the provision is successful because it has stopped ill-judged development proposals and triggered consideration of alternative solutions. It has also allowed developments of overriding public importance to go ahead when there have been no alternatives, and where compensation has been put in place.

What are the benefits of this approach?

The approach is very flexible and embodies the concept of sustainable planning. Rather than viewing Natura 2000 sites as "no go" areas solely for the protection of wildlife, it recognises the interplay between the needs of biodiversity and the needs of other stakeholders, such as local people, and encourages the creative planning of projects, such as sustainable tourist initiatives, which satisfy these varied needs.

What are the future challenges?

- Better promotion of the requirements of Article 6 – to enable better understanding of these by key stakeholders such as authorities, developers, and consultants. Promoting best practice is essential (see briefing paper on case studies).
- More collaborative working – co-operation is the best solution and all stakeholders, including conservationists, developers and decision makers, need to work together to find solutions.
- Better strategic planning – consideration of Natura 2000 issues at the strategic level, e.g. land use plan, so that solutions can be identified when the range of possible alternatives is still broad, rather than storing up problems for the level of individual projects.

- EC guidance initiatives – we welcome the Commission initiatives to produce guidance¹ on the application of Article 6 in key sectors such as wind, ports and minerals.

What can the European Parliament do?

- Call for the full implementation of the Birds and Habitats Directives across the EU and for measures to be taken to ensure that Natura 2000 sites are properly protected, managed and monitored, and their conservation status improved.
- Press for renewed efforts by the European Commission to increase public awareness and support for the Directives by informing and engaging the relevant sectors, communities and interest groups in the better implementation of the Nature Directives.

¹ http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/natura2000/management/guidance_en.htm

For further information, please contact:
Alistair Taylor – EU Biodiversity Policy Officer
 Tel: +44 (0) 1767 693450 (Direct Dial)
 Fax: +44 (0) 1767 683211
 E-mail: alistair.taylor@rspb.org.uk

www.rspb.org.uk

The RSPB speaks out for birds and wildlife, tackling the problems that threaten our environment. Nature is amazing – help us keep it that way.

We belong to BirdLife International, the global partnership of bird conservation organisations.

The RSPB
 UK Headquarters
 The Lodge, Sandy,
 Beds SG19 2DL, UK

