

Choices made by farmers and foresters can ensure that their land will host wildlife – such as this barn owl.

## Nature conservation and land use

### How does land use impact biodiversity?

Land use choices are vital for the survival of biodiversity and for the maintenance of environmental quality. Badly designed infrastructures or urban development are important causes of habitat loss and fragmentation. However, the impacts of farming and forestry operate at a much larger scale and therefore represent major threats to wildlife and their habitats. On the other hand, sound planning can divert development away from the most sensitive habitats, and the redevelopment of degraded urban sites or brownfields could also improve the natural environment. Choices made by farmers and foresters can ensure that their land will host wildlife, maintain soil fertility, and improve water quality and provide a host of other public services.

### How do the Birds and Habitats Directives impact land use choices?

The EU Birds and Habitats Directives do not include a list of prohibited or obligatory activities for Natura 2000 sites and do not include rigid land use proscriptions. They do, however, help factor biodiversity into land use and spatial planning. The Natura 2000 protected sites are Europe's most precious biodiversity areas and carry a legal obligation to give priority to conservation objectives in these areas. The Directives provide a flexible framework for assessing the impact of activities and for planning land use in a way that can minimise harm to valuable species and habitats on these sites. Natura 2000

management plans are documents that take a site's conservation objectives and translate them into specific measures to guide human activities toward sustainability.

### Does Natura 2000 designation prevent farmers and foresters from using their land?

Not at all. Natura 2000 designation does not mean a set of rigid prohibitions; it means an obligation to maintain or restore the quality of a site for the animals and plants for which they were designated. In most cases of farmland designated as Natura 2000, the conservation objectives are about maintaining the traditional farming activities that have helped the survival of these species in the first place. While some activities such as converting natural grasslands into arable fields would not be compatible with site designation, site management can help support local farmers

in continuing their traditional activities, such as extensive grazing or hay making. Indeed, Natura 2000 designation can become a leverage for the branding of traditional agricultural products linked to biodiversity-rich habitats, and can be the basis for the diversification of farmers' income by tapping into the growing recreation and tourism market. Similarly, sustainable forest management is usually compatible with the Natura 2000 objectives, while large-scale clear-cutting, plantations of exotic species, or removal of dead wood are not.

### What EU funding is available to support private land owners managing Natura 2000 sites?

Several EU funds are available for supporting private owners, such as farmers and foresters, managing Natura 2000 sites. Rural development funds, a part of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), include a range of

### Hay cutting in the Msichy Biebrza National Park buffer zone and Natura 2000 site in Poland. White storks like extensively managed meadows.



**Dehesa forest with cork trees, Spain. Cork can be sustainably harvested while maintaining biodiversity.**

measures that can compensate farmers for eventual management obligations or provide investment for machinery, infrastructures etc. Regional development funds can be used for a wide range of investments, from habitat restoration to the development of visitor facilities. Life+ provides funding for innovative and experimental projects, as well as covering areas that are not eligible under other funds. In most cases, however, the decision about the use of EU funds for the management of Natura 2000 sites lies with the national and regional authorities.

**How can sound land planning help conserve biodiversity?**

Most conflicts between land use and nature conservation arise from poor planning. If the needs of wildlife and nature are strategically taken into consideration at early stages, most conflicts can be avoided. Infrastructure can be developed away from protected sites and can often be built in a way that minimises impact on habitats and wildlife.

Urban development can favour the rehabilitation of degraded lands rather than absorbing land that is valuable for ecological services, biodiversity and food production. Agriculture and forestry systems can integrate the needs of wildlife and provide buffers and landscape features that maintain

the functionality of ecosystems and help wildlife move around. The key challenge is to find a compromise between the various needs and activities that affect the land, which can only be done in an integrated and strategic way.

**What are the benefits of integrating land use choices with respect for the Birds and Habitats Directives?**

Finding positive compromises between the need of people to use the land, and the needs of wildlife and nature to live on and off the land, brings great benefits well beyond biodiversity conservation.

Sustainable land use means having plentiful and clean water, fertile soil, pollinating insects and functioning ecosystems, all vital to support basic human needs. Maintaining natural habitats also means mitigating floods and droughts, an ever-increasing priority in the face of mounting climate change. Finally, sustainable agriculture and forestry are the key to our long-term capacity to keep producing the food, materials and energy that we need. Biodiversity is both a condition for land-based production, and an indicator of the sustainability (including long-term economic sustainability) of our production systems.

**What can the European Parliament do?**

Crucial to developing sustainable land use approaches is the reform of EU policies and incentive measures for agriculture, principally the Common Agricultural Policy.

**MEPs should:**

- press for the integration of biodiversity conservation concerns into the Common Agricultural Policy in order to deliver conservation objectives and secure the ecosystem services on which agriculture and, ultimately, human societies depend
- press for the adoption of sustainable land management practices that will enable biodiversity to adapt to the impacts of climate change
- promote the integration of nature conservation and ecosystem protection and restoration in spatial planning and encourage harmonisation and co-ordination between national planning policies.

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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.

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