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Mowing and bush removal with specialised machinery in the Msichy Biebrza National Park buffer zone and Natura 2000 site in Poland.

## The management of Natura 2000 sites

### Why manage Natura 2000 sites?

The European landscape has been formed and influenced by human activities over several millennia. Many of Europe's most valuable wildlife habitats are the products of traditional land use activities such as hay meadows in Poland, open woodlands grazed by livestock in Spain or low-impact forestry in Slovenia. The EU's Natura 2000 protected areas, designated under the EU Birds and Habitats Directives, are no exception in that the vast majority of them contain managed landscapes.

The habitats and landscapes of Natura 2000 sites need to be maintained in certain conditions that create the right environment for threatened plants and animals to survive. This often means actively managing them, and sometimes restoring them to ensure these conditions. Wilderness areas, which are essentially areas without human intervention, also have a very important role to play in conserving Europe's wildlife, although they form only a small part of the Natura 2000 network.

### What do the Directives say about Natura 2000 management?

Article 6 of the Habitats Directive highlights the importance of establishing conservation measures to maintain or restore, if necessary, the good conservation status of the species and habitats of Natura 2000 sites. The same Article emphasises the importance of avoiding disturbance to wildlife and deterioration of habitats on these sites as part of maintaining good conservation status.

Article 6 also highlights the need to develop management plans setting out the objectives and specific measures (usually restrictions or proscriptions of certain activities) for each site, and integrating these objectives and measures into other development plans. The Birds Directive has similar obligations related to Special Protection Areas for birds, which are also part of the Natura 2000 network.

### How do we know if a protected site is in good status?

The overall goal of the Habitats Directive is to keep or restore species and habitats of European Community importance to a favourable conservation status. The main tool to achieve this is the Natura 2000 network of protected areas. The Birds Directive has similar objectives for threatened and migratory bird species. The conservation status of a species or habitat is assessed by looking at various ecological factors, including the population of a species, or the area of a habitat, and their future prospects.

To be able to measure the success or otherwise of the Directives in achieving this goal it is essential to establish what condition the sites were in at the time when they were designated (often called a baseline) and whether at that time the species or habitat was at a favourable status or not. To evaluate this, one needs to identify the level at which the populations of a species or a habitat can be considered as having a favourable status. This level is called the Favourable Reference Value (FRV). The

FRV is the ultimate conservation objective we want to achieve for each particular species or habitat at Member State and, ultimately, EU level.

### How to develop Favourable Reference Values for sites

BirdLife International has developed a position on how one can assess the conservation status of species and habitats



Sue Tranter (rspb-images.com)

Reed cutting is important for maintaining wetland habitats.



Andy Hay (rspb-images.com)

**Tree felling being carried out to clear an area to allow for heathland restoration.**

at a site and how to set FRVs for them, based on bird species. The key points of our approach can be summarised as follows.

- If the baseline represents a favourable condition, this should be used as the FRV.
- If there is historic or other data to show that the species or habitat was not in a favourable status, a FRV that is more ambitious than the baseline needs to be set. This can be done by looking at historic data, using information from other sites where the species or habitats are in a good status, or looking at some other parameters, such as breeding success or mortality.
- Sometimes the species' populations are still on the increase where only a temporary FRV can be set, to be reviewed at regular intervals.

**How to use Favourable Reference Values**

FRVs are very important for setting key targets (or milestones) and objectives for the management of Natura 2000 sites. FRV levels will help determine what sort of management is needed in each of the key habitats and for each species and whether restoration is needed. Sometimes the objectives of the different species and habitats will be in conflict and a compromise between them needs to be found.

Monitoring of key species and habitats needs to be done against FRVs, to show whether conservation status is improving or declining. FRVs can also inform decisions about mitigation or compensation measures if damaging human activities must be carried out at the site.

**What are the challenges of management in the future?**

A large number of Natura 2000 sites across the EU do not have clear FRVs and management plans. Management and restoration activities need considerable sums of money (see leaflet on financing), which is not yet forthcoming. In anticipation of the rapidly changing climate, flexibility is essential and management methods might need to be adapted to changing conditions.

Moreover, monitoring of the condition of protected areas is only happening in a few countries. All these challenges need to be tackled urgently to make the Natura 2000 sites robust and efficient in protecting our key wildlife heritage, now and in the future.

**What can the European Parliament do?**

- Urge the Commission to develop guidelines for site management and setting Favourable Reference Values.
- Urge the Commission to make the Natura 2000 database publicly available with information on Favourable Reference Values for each site.
- Urge the Commission to research and estimate the appropriate level of funding required to establish and maintain an effective Natura 2000 network and to meet its commitments to halt biodiversity loss by 2010.

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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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