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**Danube Delta Natura 2000 site. Investing in wildlife and our ecosystems is investing in the delivery of vital services and in our future.**

## The socio-economic benefits of Natura 2000 sites

**There should be no doubt that nature conservation benefits society:** it produces the resources to sustain and enhance our health; it offers educational opportunities; it supports and generates economic activity.

Nature provides the very foundations of our existence without which we simply cannot survive. While we should protect nature for its own sake, doing so safeguards the environment that we depend on for our quality of life, and long-term survival, and hands over a healthy planet to future generations.

### **What public socio-economic benefits does Natura 2000 generate?**

Protected areas are some of the most obvious and oldest features of nature conservation. The Birds and Habitats Directives, the key pillars of nature conservation in the European Union, require Member States to set up a comprehensive network of protected areas called Natura 2000. This set of protected areas is unique in the world in its size and geographical spread, now covering about 17% of the EU's territory and numbering more than 26,000 individual sites.

Apart from protecting the most valuable sites for wildlife and nature, it also delivers a broad and substantial array of benefits to people and enhances wellbeing across the European community. Biological diversity, the totality of species and communities at a given site or area, is essential in the long-term provision of these benefits. The most important benefits can be summarised briefly as follows:

- **Ecosystem services – gifts of nature**  
Ecosystems are specific combinations of communities of animal and plant species together with the non-living conditions (soil, water, temperature) under which they develop. A freshwater lake, a mountain grassland or a forest, if functioning naturally, can all be considered ecosystems. Protected Areas usually contain a range of such ecosystems and in general provide a multitude of ecosystem services which, when monetised, add up to billions of Euros a year.

For Europe, forests and peatlands sequester carbon, upland areas can help purify water, many wetlands help moderate flooding and many sites provide a home for the pollinators (bees, bumblebees) needed for vegetable and fruit production. It is only recently that these invaluable services have been

recognised and we are beginning to understand the true value to us of protecting biodiversity and the Natura 2000 network. Unfortunately, they rarely appear in economic calculations of costs and benefits.

- **Enhancing the European quality of life for free**

Natura 2000 sites provide green spaces to millions of people and improve our health, educational potential and sense of wellbeing. In terms of health, physical inactivity is a major preventable health risk that leads to increased levels of obesity and heart disease, costing the UK economy €12.2 billion per year. A recent study commissioned by the RSPB in the UK shows the provision of natural areas, such as Natura 2000 sites, is a potential key facility to encourage physical exercise.

**Gathering mussels – many jobs are created through nature.**



Niall Benítez (rspb-images.com)

**Green spaces improve our health and wellbeing.**

For education, well developed programmes on Natura 2000 sites across Europe have proved effective in drawing school groups to on-site classroom facilities, site visits and outdoor learning opportunities. A fundamentally important value of protected areas is the intrinsic value that people put on their natural environment and the continued existence of wildlife. A recent report for the Scottish Executive, for example, estimated that the benefits of maintaining its Natura 2000 network to residents and visitors amounted to £210 million (€315 million) per year, and outweighed the costs of management by seven times.

**What private socio-economic benefits does Natura 2000 generate?**

- Employment opportunities**  
In a 2001 report, it was estimated that in the EU-15 Member States 125,000 jobs were supported in nature protection related activities. This includes direct employment and the many jobs created by visitors to Protected Areas. Significantly, nature conservation is a growth sector unlike agriculture and forestry, which have shed many jobs in the last decade.
- Diversifying rural economic opportunities**  
Many sites of high conservation value are found in remote or deprived rural

areas. Properly managed Natura 2000 sites support long-term employment and contribute to an economically diverse local economy. Many sites attract significant visitor numbers whose spending increases income diversification in economies often reliant on agriculture.

- Increasing tourism potential**  
Certain protected areas are suited to nature tourism development. If sensitively developed, eco-tourism can help diversify economies, supplement incomes, and maintain rural communities. A good example of this has been the Prespa wetlands in Greece, a Natura 2000 site where 50–60 people are employed in jobs that supplement existing incomes, mostly from farming, helping to stabilise the local rural community for the future.

**What can the European Parliament do?**

In fulfilling our moral duty to conserve biodiversity for future generations, we also contribute to the wider aim of sustainable development – delivering environmental, social and economic objectives together, rather than treating them as trade-offs. This has important implications for EU policy. The EU must promote good quality of life by integrating biodiversity protection and the protection and restoration of healthy ecosystems into all its policies. Investing in wildlife and in

ecosystems is investing in our future and will generate interests and returns forever.

To secure the socio-economic benefits of the Natura 2000 network and biodiversity conservation in general, the European Parliament should:

- adopt a post-2010 target that goes beyond halting the loss of biodiversity to championing the recovery of habitats and species in the EU
- press for the integration of biodiversity conservation and ecosystem protection concerns into all the relevant EU sectoral policies in order to deliver conservation objectives and secure the ecosystem services on which many sectors and ultimately human societies depend
- push for comprehensive financing for nature conservation and in particular for Natura 2000 sites as part of the EU budget reform.

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