

Socio-economic benefits of protected sites – the EU *Natura 2000* network

The European Union protected area network, the *Natura 2000* network, is important not only for the survival of its flora and fauna, but also for economic and social reasons. Recent advances in economic techniques are revealing the significant public benefits of protected areas. These benefits include both private and public economic benefits, significant health values and their value as a key educational resource.

A protected and well-financed *Natura 2000* network can play an important role in the solution to two current public policy challenges: rural economic decline and improvement in our quality of life.

Private local economic benefits

Many sites of high conservation value are found in remote or deprived rural areas. Growing evidence shows that proper management of these sites regularly benefits areas previously reliant on activities generating low economic returns. Properly managed *Natura 2000* sites are multi-functional and active: producing rural products, supporting employment, and contributing to an economically diverse local economy.

– Employment opportunities

It is estimated that in the EU-15 125,000 jobs are supported in nature protection related activities. Direct employment in the natural environment sector in the UK is estimated at 18,000 jobs. Local employment attributable solely to protected areas managed by RSPB-BirdLife in the UK is estimated at more than 1,000 jobs. This includes both direct and indirect local employment. Significantly, nature conservation is a growth sector unlike agriculture and forestry which have shed many jobs in the last decade.

– Direct local spending

In addition to employment effects, significant amounts of direct spending are attributable to protected sites. For example, spending on local goods and services at RSPB-BirdLife's protected sites in the UK, both for site management and by one million annual visitors, is more than £19 million (€28 million) each year. This spending increases income diversification in often agriculturally reliant economies.

– Growing tourism potential

Certain protected areas are suited to nature tourism development. If sensitively developed this has been shown to 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 with impressive wildlife, Prespa has developed its nature tourism successfully. It employs 50-60 people in jobs that supplement existing incomes, mostly farming. It has promoted wildlife friendly farming practices, extended the tourist season from 2-3 months to all year around, and has helped to stabilise the local rural community for the future.

– Broader economic benefits of the environment

From a broader perspective, studies show that environment-related activities support significant parts of many remote regional economies. For example, environment-related

economic activity in south-west England contributes approximately 100,000 jobs and some £1.4 billion (€2.1 billion) to the regional economy. This represents 5-10% of the region's GDP. A study for the Scottish Parliament shows that landscape tourism, such as walking and cycling, contributes £438 million (€560 million) of expenditure to the Scottish economy each year.

Public goods

The deterioration of biodiverse sites is partly attributable to the failure of traditional economic assessments to capture the full benefits of biodiversity. Well-maintained, semi-natural and natural ecosystems provide diverse public services such as flood prevention, pollution capture, and recharging of groundwater. The costs of allowing these assets to degrade are typically only recognised when natural disasters occur as a result of actions such as forest clearance.

– The value of nature's life support systems

A 1997 economic study estimated that globally these ecological 'life-support' systems provide US\$33 trillion (€27 trillion) of services annually. Further studies suggest that global expenditure of US\$50 billion per year on conservation measures would help to preserve US\$5,000 billion of such services. Translated to the country level, in Scotland such services have an estimated value of £17 billion (€25 billion) per year. Although subject to some uncertainty, such figures begin to reveal the true value of maintaining our natural systems.

In the past, the conversion of natural habitats often benefited society, but current evidence shows that conversion of remaining habitat for activities such as agriculture fails to make economic sense.

The value people put on the environment

An important non-use benefit of protected areas is the intrinsic value that people put on their natural environment and the continued existence of wildlife. If a robust approach to managing Europe's natural resources is to be taken then such values must be estimated and taken into account. Modern techniques allow for this to be done.

A recent report for the Scottish Executive examined such intrinsic values for Scotland's network of Natura 2000 sites. It estimated that the benefits of maintaining this network to residents and visitors was £210 million (€315 million) per year, and outweighed the costs of management by 7 times.

Health benefits

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 BirdLife in the UK shows the provision of public green spaces and natural reserves, such as Natura 2000 sites, is a potential key facility to encourage exercise. The study goes on to show that the greater the natural diversity of a site, the more likely people will be to visit it regularly and therefore maintain exercise regimes. The provision of sites of high biodiversity interest, close to population centres, represents good value for money for taxpayers and would integrate health and nature conservation policy goals.

Education benefits

Many Natura 2000 sites have the potential to be an excellent educational resource. Well-developed programmes on Natura 2000 sites across Europe have proved effective in drawing

school groups to on-site classroom facilities, sites visits and outdoor learning opportunities. In the UK 40,000 students per year visit RSPB-BirdLife reserves during school time. Promotion of and investment in these sites is therefore necessary to maximise this potential.

Six billion Euro to realise Natura 2000 benefits

The European Commission has estimated that it will cost €6.1 billion per year to properly finance the Natura 2000 network. If the Natura 2000 network's public benefits are to be maximised and the EU target of halting biodiversity decline by 2010 is to be achieved then this funding will need to be put in place in a directed, robust and timely manner. Supporting Natura 2000 will produce significant non-market public benefits, and therefore is an appropriate and efficient use of public money.

For further information contact:

Sacha Cleminson, European Advocacy Officer: Tel +44(0)1767 680 551, Mob: +44(0)7771 74 33 46
sacha.cleminson@rspb.org.uk

or

Ian Dickie, Senior Economist: Tel +44(0)1767 680 551 ian.dickie@rspb.org.uk