

BirdLife's History in Objects: #7 ?The Gavel?

Title

Bringing the hammer down on governments to save nature

Our well-being and the resources we need to survive, develop and prosper all depend on diverse and healthy ecosystems. Yet this is not always taken into account by governments needing to maintain economic growth. Natural environments are plundered in an unsustainable manner for short-term financial benefit. Jobs may be created in the short term, but long term considerations can often be overlooked. BirdLife believes that sustainable development is integral to biodiversity conservation and regularly works closely with local people all over the world to achieve this. Still, when sites are under serious threat, the BirdLife Partnership is watching and ready to take action against the culprit. This includes national governments?

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The famous Natura 2000 site in the Rospuda Valley, Poland- home to several Species of European Conservation Concern

The hard-fought *Via Baltica* campaign

One of Europe's last great wildernesses, the Rospuda Valley in north-east Poland is an area of ancient peat bogs, wetlands and pristine primeval forest. In 1996, developers announced plans for an expressway, *Via Baltica*, which would cut directly through the heart of the Rospuda Valley, including Important Bird Areas. Poland, like all European Union (EU) member states, is required to designate its most important wildlife sites as protected areas, part of the European Natura 2000 Network. Despite the clear legal imperatives surrounding the Rospuda Valley site, the Polish authorities persisted with their plans.

In 2006, backed by thousands of people wearing green ribbons, BirdLife fought back against the *Via Baltica*. A coalition of Polish NGOs led by the Polish Society for the Protection of Birds (OTOP/BirdLife Partner) submitted a complaint to the European Commission (EC) on the grounds that the *Via Baltica* project would violate EU nature laws. When the EC was unable to resolve the situation through informal contact with the Polish government, the case was put before the European Court of Justice, and in 2009, the Rospuda Valley was officially saved from the expressway, along with additional Natura 2000 sites in the region.

Inadequate protection of the Romanian Danube Delta

The wetlands of the Danube Delta support key species such as the globally threatened Dalmatian Pelican

Meanwhile in Romania, one of Europe's premier

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<http://www.birdlife.org/community/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/dalmatianpelican-300x177.jpg>

wetlands was under threat. The Danube Delta is an intricate alluvial fan of marshes and water channels that supports a high diversity of ecosystems and rare species. But after Romania joined the EU in 2007, the Delta began to come under increasing pressure from development projects such as road upgrades, tourist complexes and wind farms, and unregulated hunting and fishing. Recognised as a Special Protection Area (SPA) under the EU's Birds Directive, the Romanian authorities should have been implementing adequate provisions to protect such a site's integrity, but were not.

To protect the Danube Delta in the long-term, SOR (BirdLife in Romania) supported by the RSPB (BirdLife in the UK) became watchdogs of the area, monitoring potentially harmful developments and campaigning to stop them. As well as protecting existing areas, BirdLife has over the years also lobbied to the EC against the inadequate provision of SPAs. In this vein, SOR fought hard for the long-term protection of the Delta SPA, providing information to the EC that led to the passing of an infringement action against the Romanian government at the European Court of Justice. Consequently, and after a rejection of a new law and further campaigning, in 2011 the Romanian President finally confirmed a law which imposes strict protection on 18 areas within a Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve. Here, the only permitted activities will be for research, education and ecotourism, and the conservation management plan will have primacy over other development plans in the region, which will eventually have to be harmonised with it.

BirdLife representatives meeting with José Manuel Barroso, President of the European Commission Ph

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<http://www.birdlife.org/community/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/barossosmall-300x199.jpg>

Having the power to divert massive development projects and take governments to court is a result of scientific expertise, solid policy work and effective campaigning. BirdLife's structure as a global network of national Partners with strong local representation in many countries

provides an ideal springboard for this action.

Because of the ever-increasing impact decisions taken at the European Union level have on nature and the environment, EU policy is a key priority for BirdLife. This is why BirdLife Europe has had an office located amidst the main EU institutions in Brussels since 1993. Through providing scientific expertise and policy stances, BirdLife has been instrumental in shaping the EU Birds and Habitats Directives since the 80s and 90s respectively. This article is part of a series celebrating BirdLife's 90th anniversary.



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