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## SoN 2015: Landmark report shows European biodiversity going lost at unacceptable rates: intensive agriculture main culprit

**Landmark report shows European biodiversity going lost at unacceptable rates: intensive agriculture main culprit. The Natura 2000 network of protected areas having a positive impact for conservation**

The State of Nature 2015 shows that only a minority of European species is in favorable conservation status in most Member States, and that the situation is even worse for habitats. Farming related activities are the most prominent threat to biodiversity in the EU today across species, habitats, sites and ecosystems. Unsustainable fishing is a main threat to the marine environment. Damage to rivers is the main threat to fresh water habitats and species. Among ecosystem types, grasslands are the worst crisis situation: this is clearly linked to agriculture intensification. The marine environment has a particular concentration of threatened species.

**Ariel Brunner, Head of Policy at BirdLife Europe**, stated: *“The new report shows that conservation efforts are having an impact but that the overall situation of EU biodiversity is still dire. If we do not deal urgently with some of the major drivers of biodiversity loss, agriculture in particular, we are going to miss the 2020 target, lose precious habitats and species and pay a high price as a society”*. *“On the positive side – added BirdLife’s Brunner - there are clear indications that the Natura 2000 network is having a positive impact. Over 100,000 European citizens in just one week have participated to the European Commission consultation on [www.naturealert.eu](http://www.naturealert.eu) to save Natura 2000. The findings of the State of Nature offer scientific support to these demands. Let’s hope the Commission takes both into consideration”*.

The State of Nature 2015 is the first harmonized report by the European Commission on the state of the EU biodiversity, based on data reported by Member States under obligations emanating from article 12 of the Birds Directive and article 17 of the Habitats Directive. State of Nature has been compiled by the EEA, for the period 2008-12 for the Birds Directive and 2007-12 for the Habitats Directive, on the basis of data provided by the Member States. The birds data included report are based on an extensive gathering of ornithological data by Member States, coordinated by the Commission, in cooperation with BirdLife International.

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## NOTES TO THE EDITOR – BACKGROUND INFO AND KEY FINDINGS

### State of Nature 2015

The first harmonized report by the European Commission on the state of the EU biodiversity, based on data reported by Member States under obligations emanating from article 12 of the Birds Directive and article 17 of the Habitats Directive. Nature and biodiversity policy in the European Union is largely based on two main pieces of legislation: the 1979 Birds Directive and the 1992 Habitats Directive.

Article 12 and 17 of these directives require that Member States regularly prepare and submit national reports on implementation progress and for the European Commission to use these as a basis for producing a composite report. Reporting under both directives adapted so that it is now possible to get one coherent picture of how habitats and species are doing across the EU. State of Nature has been compiled by the EEA, for the period 2007-12 for the Birds Directive and 2007-12 for the Habitats Directive, on the basis of data provided by the Member States.

The birds data included in the State of Nature report is based on an extensive gathering of ornithological data by Member States, coordinated by the Commission, in cooperation with BirdLife International. The process has included extensive consultation with stakeholders including the hunting community. The full analysis of populations and trends of all bird species in the EU provides the state of the art in terms of our knowledge of bird populations and allows comparison with similar exercises carried out by BirdLife in 2004 and 1994.

### Key findings:

#### For birds-

- Half of the bird populations are reported as being Secure in the EU27, around a sixth are regionally threatened (Vulnerable, Endangered or Critically Endangered) and another sixth are Near Threatened, Declining or Depleted. The status of the last sixth is Unknown, owing to insufficient data having been reported by Member States to assess their status reliably.
- There were slightly more decreasing breeding bird population trends in the short-term than in the long-term trends (although around a third of the assessments for the long-term trends were uncertain or unknown).
- Wintering bird populations appear to have fared better than breeding bird populations, although data was only available for a subset of birds, mostly waterbirds, many of which are better monitored in winter when they migrate to and congregate in Europe.
- Many bird species and subspecies on Annex I (for which SPAs are designated) are increasing. These results suggest that conservation action supported by the Birds Directive is having a positive effect on their populations. However, a high proportion of these birds remain threatened at EU level, owing to their small and/or declining populations and/or ranges.
- Annex I birds that have a Species Action Plan have an even higher proportion of increasing population trends, again confirming the effectiveness of such plans.
- Many bird species on Annex II (species which can be allowed to be hunted in some or all EU Member States) are decreasing, but the reasons behind these trends are unclear.
- Overall, the most frequently reported pressures or threats for birds were changes in agriculture, followed by modification of natural systems and use of living resources

(hunting, trapping, poisoning and poaching). Agricultural pressures/threats are particularly associated with grasslands or heathland and scrub ecosystems and include modification of cultivation practices and changes in grazing regimes. Modification of natural systems relates to changes in hydrological regimes and loss and fragmentation of habitats.

#### On other species-

- In almost half of the Member States about 30 % of the species conservation status assessments are favourable, and in four Member States (Ireland, Bulgaria, Estonia and Cyprus) more than 50 % of assessments are reported as favourable. The number of unfavourable-bad species assessments exceeds 30 % in six MS, including the Netherlands, Belgium, Sweden, Luxembourg, Austria and Czech Republic. Trends in unfavourable conservation status for species, as reported by the Member States, indicate that in most countries between 3% and 20% of unfavourable assessments are improving. However in the United Kingdom, Denmark, Poland, Belgium and the Netherlands more than 20% are improving. The average proportion of unfavourable-stable species assessments is 35 %, whereas the percentage of unfavourable assessments that are declining varies from 1.6% (Lithuania) to 79.6% (Italy).
- The **completeness of reporting since the last reporting period has improved considerably** and only 17 % of assessments were classified as unknown compared to 31 % of assessments in the previous reporting period.
- Conservation status assessments vary significantly between biogeographic regions, particularly among the marine regions. **The biogeographical regions with the highest proportion of assessments as Favourable are the Black Sea and Alpine, while the highest proportion of unfavourable-inadequate conservation status was the Pannonian region. The Atlantic and Boreal regions have the highest share of unfavourable-bad assessments (around a third).**
- The proportion of EU assessments for marine regions varied from zero (marine Black Sea) to 20% (marine Baltic) with a high percentage of unknowns in most regions. However the number of species assessed is low, especially in the marine Black Sea (3 species) and the marine Baltic (5 species).
- **The two most frequently reported high-ranked pressures and threats for species are the modification of natural conditions and agriculture**, followed by forestry. The 'modification of natural conditions', for example, account for over two thirds of the reported pressures on fish, a third of the pressure on molluscs and a quarter of the pressure on amphibians. 'Disturbances due to human activities' accounts for less than a tenth of the high-ranked pressures, but for a fifth of the pressures on mammals.

#### On habitats

- **Results for the conservation status of habitats vary considerably between Member States. The majority of Member States indicate a low level of habitats which are 'favourable' and a majority of the overall assessments for habitats have an 'unfavourable' conservation status.**
- **The proportion of national assessments reported as unknown has fallen from 18% to 7%.**

- **The Alpine, Macaronesian and Steppic regions stand out with comparatively high shares of Favourable conservation status (26 %-50 %), while the habitats in the Atlantic and Boreal regions have a particularly high proportion of unfavourable-bad assessments (each over 50 %).** A large proportion of habitats in the Marine Atlantic region were reported as improving (43 %), while the share of assessments reported as declining for the Marine Baltic region exceeds 70 %, followed by the Marine Black Sea region with 43 %. However the number of marine habitats is very low.
- **The two most frequently reported high-ranked pressures and threats for habitats are agriculture and modification of natural conditions (each 19 %).** Commonly reported agricultural pressures and threats include fertilization, changes in grazing by livestock, and the abandonment of pastoral systems/lack of grazing. For modification of natural conditions these include changes in hydrology such as river engineering and water abstraction from groundwater.
- **Pressures/threats on ecosystem types vary, but ‘agriculture’ and the ‘modification of natural conditions’ are found to be particularly significant, followed by ‘disturbances due to human activities’.** Within these overarching categories, the most pressing pressures/threats are: the modification of cultivation practices, grazing by livestock and use of pesticides (‘agriculture’), changes in water body conditions and other changes to ecosystems (‘modification of natural conditions’). Accordingly, the two most common *conservation measures* overall are ‘establish protected areas/sites’ and ‘legal protection of habitats and species’.
- **The most important pressure on river and lake ecosystems is ‘modification of natural conditions’, and particularly by changes in water body conditions.** Birds and non-bird species are also frequently affected by other changes to ecosystems, while habitats face the pressure/threat of pollution to surface waters. Accordingly, the most frequently reported *conservation measures* are to ‘establish protected areas/sites’ (freshwater birds and habitats) and ‘restoring/improving the hydrological regime’ (non-bird species).
- **The greatest pressures/threats to marine ecosystems are fishing, particularly for species, modification of natural conditions’ (particularly for habitats) and ‘pollution’.** The two most common reported *conservation measures* are ‘establish protected areas/sites’ and ‘legal protection of habitats and species’.
- Chapter 5 looks at the contribution of Natura 2000 to the achievement of the objectives set out in Article 3 of the Habitats Directive, as well as the growth of the network. **Covering more than 18 % of the EU’s terrestrial land area and a significant area of Europe’s seas (ca. 4 %), Natura 2000 represents the largest coordinated network of nature conservation areas in the world.**
- The Habitats Directive concept of conservation status requires considerable changes to occur before any improvement is observable, and habitats and species often require many years to recover. It should therefore perhaps not be surprising that no significant association between the conservation status of habitats and species and Natura 2000 coverage classes was observed. However, **the proportion of habitat and species assessments with stable trends is**

**relatively higher for those assessments reporting higher coverage, and the proportion of species assessments with decreasing population trend or declining unfavourable conservation status is higher among assessments with lower coverage than those with higher coverage. These associations suggest that Natura 2000 could be helping in stabilising trends and preventing further decline in many situations.**

- Measuring the ecological effectiveness of a network of protected areas is difficult as there is rarely baseline data and it is very difficult to find comparisons. As a result, there have been very few published studies of the effectiveness of international networks. While acknowledging these difficulties, a review of literature on Natura 2000 shows that while the network adequately covers the terrestrial species and habitats, it could be improved in some areas. However, the marine part of the network is far from complete. A literature review as part of the report also found a positive role of Natura 2000 in improving the status of birds and in halting the loss of common birds, but finds no similar studies for habitats or non-bird species. Natura 2000 is also shown to protect a large number of other species not directly covered by the EU nature legislation and demonstrates a need for improved and more regular monitoring of the habitats and species covered by the two directives.