

Scientists prove European bird protection law saves threatened species

The European Union's Birds Directive – often believed to be one of the world's most progressive and successful nature conservation laws – has had a huge impact in protecting Europe's most threatened bird species – says new research by the RSPB (BirdLife's UK partner), BirdLife International and Durham University.

The research, which is being published [today, Tuesday 28 July, 2015] in the journal *Conservation Letters*, analysed trends in populations of all EU bird species. It reveals the key factor determining the fate of species is whether or not it is afforded the highest level of protection under the Birds Directive. In the language of the Birds Directive, this means whether a species is listed under Annex 1 or not.

Species listed on Annex 1, which EU countries have to introduce 'special conservation measures' for, fared significantly better than the species that were not listed.

For example, Annex 1 species such as the Common crane, White-tailed eagle, Griffon vulture and White-headed duck are faring better, in comparison to species which don't enjoy the same level of protection.

Some Annex 1 nesting species have massively increased in number in the EU. There is now one hundred times the number of White-headed ducks and five times the number of Dalmatian pelicans compared with a few decades ago.

The study also shows that Annex 1 species fare better in the countries that have been EU members for longer.

The research is being published just days after the closure, on Sunday, of a public

consultation on the future of the European Union's nature laws. The European Commission is currently reviewing the Birds and Habitats Directives, looking into their effectiveness.

Hundreds of wildlife organisations across Europe believe threats to amend these are the biggest single risk to European nature conservation in a generation.

Bird Life Europe's Head of EU Policy, Ariel Brunner, said: "Just days after the crucial public consultation on the Birds and Habitats Directives closed, this is clear-cut scientific evidence on the effectiveness of these laws. At a time when the benefits of EU membership are increasingly questioned, this research shows that, at least for nature, the EU is making a huge positive difference. It would make no sense for the European Commission to demolish legislation proven to work and which enjoys a massive level of support among citizens."

Lead author of the paper, RSPB scientist Dr. Fiona Sanderson, who works for the organisation's Centre for Conservation Science, said: "We analysed information on all bird species breeding across the European Union. Our findings confirm that species with the highest level of protection under the Birds Directive, such as Dalmatian pelican, spoonbill, griffon vulture and greater flamingo, are more likely to have increasing populations, and that these results are most apparent in countries that have been members of the European Union for longer."

The scientists used information from two time periods: 30 years; and 12 years. They then analysed the population trends separately, with the results highlighting the benefits of protection for the Birds Directive.

Using a sophisticated statistical model, the scientists were able to exclude other factors such as changes in climate and habitat, providing clear evidence that the majority of species prioritised for action under the Birds Directive are responding positively and directly to the level of protection.

The RSPB's Principal Conservation Scientist, Dr. Paul Donald, said: "Our research proves that, in an era of unprecedented climate change and habitat loss, those threatened birds protected by the Birds Directive are more likely to prosper."

On 30 April, the European Commission launched its public consultation on the Birds and Habitats Directives. The consultation closed on Sunday 26 July, 2015.

Stop press:

More than half a million (520,325) people from across Europe have supported the call not to amend the legislation. This is by far the largest public response to any consultation published by the European Commission.

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For further information, please contact:

Finlay Duncan, BirdLife Europe Communications and Media Officer:

+32 (0) 2 238 50 94 Out of hours: +32 (0) 485 873291

To arrange an interview with Dr. Donald, please contact:

Grahame Madge, RSPB Senior Media Officer (Conservation and Policy):

+44 (0) 1767 681577 Out of hours: +44 (0) 7702 196902.

The paper will be available from the following link from 3am on the day of publication.

<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/conl.12196/abstract>