

EUSTAFOR Position Paper ⁽¹⁾ on the Fitness Check of the Birds and Habitats Directives and Their Implementation in State Forests

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European state forests for Natura 2000

Europe's forests play a major role in protecting the EU's biodiversity and in meeting the objectives of the EU's nature legislation and Biodiversity Strategy. Forests and wooded land cover approximately 182 million hectares, or 41 %, of the [EU-28](#) total land area. 50 % of the total terrestrial Natura 2000 area has been designated in forests and 21 % of European forest resources are part of the Natura 2000 network.

30 % of EU forests are managed by State Forest Management Organizations (SFMOs) which are highly committed to sustainable and multifunctional forest management. Members of EUSTAFOR satisfy the needs of European society by providing a multitude of goods and ecosystem services, including biodiversity. Out of 49 million hectares of managed land, more than 8 million hectares are protected by national nature conservation laws and another almost 8 million hectares have been designated as Natura 2000 sites.

The conservation status of Natura 2000 forest habitats and their flora and fauna is generally in a better state than other habitat groups ⁽²⁾. This is obviously the result of the high standards of forest management that have been practiced in state forests for decades by highly skilled forest professionals. The latter have a long, practical experience in managing forests for multiple purposes, including the protection of nature and ecosystem services. In numerous cases the status of nature conservation in state forests was already very high even before the Nature Directives were put in place. The enormous share of Natura 2000 sites in state forests indicates that past forest management preserved many forest ecosystems, subsequently making them worthy of being included in the Natura 2000 network. At the same time, state forests outside the Natura 2000 network are also managed according to very high environmental standards, but this is done more effectively, efficiently, economically and with fewer bureaucratic burdens than within the Natura 2000 network.

The conservation status of European forests

There are a few partly contradictory sources pertaining to the conservation status of European forests. The "State of Nature in the EU" report 2015 ⁽³⁾ is often quoted and misinterpreted in such a way that a gloomy picture of the conservation status of European forests appears. According to the report's 2015 assessment for the period 2007-2012, 80 % of forest habitats are in an unfavorable but stable status. However, it is important to keep in mind that the report provides information on the percentage of forest habitats assessed as having an "unfavorable" status, but it does not indicate the area of those habitats.

¹ Any statement in this document is to be considered as a reflection of the best available professional expertise and does not necessarily reflect the political commitments of individual member organizations.

² <http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/natura2000/management/docs/Final%20Guide%20N2000%20%20Forests%20Part%20II-Annexes.pdf>

³ http://ecologic.eu/sites/files/publication/2015/state_of_nature_in_the_euv2.pdf

The "State of Europe's Forests 2015" ⁽⁴⁾ draws another picture of the conservation status of European forests that is more consistent with the experience and assessments of European state foresters and managers. The report states that not only is Europe's forest area growing, but the quality of forest stands is also improving. Today, mixed stands are starting to dominate and continuously increase. More than 90 % of Europe's forest area is covered by semi-natural or undisturbed forest. Over the last 15 years, the area of protected forests, which have as their main objective the conservation of biodiversity or landscape, has increased by a million hectares annually. Also, the quantity of deadwood, which is one of the most important indicators of forest biodiversity, is increasing.

Forests are dynamic ecosystems and require a flexible implementation of the EU Nature Directives

Like every ecosystem, forests are dynamic systems that continuously change and adapt to new local conditions. Even the most conservative models indicate that a significant and alarming impact on forests from climate change should be anticipated over the next decades ⁽⁵⁾. Climate change will strongly affect forest tree species and the distribution of habitat types and will influence the competitive relationships between species. Shifts from forests to shrublands are expected in southern Europe as a result of droughts whereas, in northern arctic and alpine ecosystems, forests will replace tundra ⁽⁶⁾. The range of Norway spruce and Scots pine are expected to retreat from the south and west while beech and other temperate broadleaved species spread to the north ⁽⁷⁾.

A good example of the high dynamics in forest ecosystems are many central European oak-dominated forests that were designated as oak forest habitats. Often the reason for the dominance of oak was anthropogenic and resulted from favoring oak over other species. Under modern close-to-nature silvicultural methods, many of these oak forests would turn into beech-dominated mixed forests. It thus becomes challenging to protect and continuously rejuvenate an anthropogenic forest type ⁽⁸⁾. This is an example of why the Natura 2000 network must be flexible and ready to adapt to changing conditions in forest ecosystems when and where this is justified by new scientific knowledge. This also applies to the Annexes of the Directives which should not continue to list species that no longer require protection.

Participation of forest owners and managers

At all levels and stages, forest owners, administrators and managers must be sufficiently involved in relevant decision-making, implementation and management processes. A participatory bottom-up approach which includes all relevant actors will not only lead to better implementation, by ensuring their practicality, but also to better acceptance of measures. Forest managers have a profound knowledge about the forests they work in. Their knowledge and experience provide a valuable basis for finding the best areas to which the Natura 2000 network can be extended, for the development of management plans and for implementing plans and establishing site conservation measures.

⁴ <http://www.foresteurope.org/docs/fullsoef2015.pdf>

⁵ http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/analysis/external/euro_forests/full_report_en.pdf

⁶ https://www.ufz.de/export/data/global/30749_Hickler-et-al_Vegetation_GEB-2012.pdf

⁷ http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/external-studies/2008/euro-forests/factsheets_en.pdf

⁸ http://www.eustafor.eu/uploads/Eustafor_Natura2000_web-2.pdf

The European Commission's publication "Natura 2000 and Forests" ⁽⁹⁾ is a good example of a participatory process and is a helpful guide for promoting the integration of the Natura 2000 conservation objectives into forest management. European guidelines on the implementation of the Nature Directives help to harmonize implementation approaches and to provide a level playing field across Member States.

As part of its dialogue with the European Union, EUSTAFOR published the booklet "Natura 2000 – Management in European State Forests" ⁽¹⁰⁾. The publication offers case studies which demonstrate the integrative approaches applied by SFMOs. The latter integrate and combine economic, protective and recreational objectives within their active forest management, contributing extensively to the goals of the Nature Directives.

Forest management and the goals of the EU Nature Directives are reconcilable

Most European forests have a long history of being managed by humankind. Natural untouched forests are an exception throughout the continent. The fact that so many managed forests have been included in the Natura 2000 network and that they continue to have a high biodiversity value proves that sustainable forest management covers the conservation needs as regards forest biodiversity.

European State Forest Management Organizations adhere to the principles of sustainable and multifunctional forest management based on economic, social and environmental values and functions. They apply high standards in their everyday management, including in nature conservation, by strictly following national forest legislation and related regulatory frameworks, such as silvicultural guidelines or forest management planning, which serve as a basis for sustainable forest management in state forests in the EU. It is therefore of fundamental importance that Natura 2000 management plans and forest management plans are aligned with each other.

Natura 2000 needs funding

In many cases the implementation of the EU Nature Directives in forests leads to extra costs. Direct costs arise, for example, from the administration and management of Natura 2000 sites, from compulsory "Impact Assessment" procedures and the monitoring of habitats and species. Indirect costs arise due to the exclusion of specific operations during certain periods of the year as well as through requirements to move away from commercial tree species or commercial activities in designated areas, leading to an unplanned reduction of the timber harvest. Very often the implementation of conservation measures requires the application of special approaches or exceptional silvicultural techniques.

In addition to providing multiple forest goods and ecosystem services to the society at large, SFMOs are very often obliged to achieve economic objectives and goals, just like any other market operator. Therefore, the extra costs resulting from the designation of Natura 2000 areas in state forests need to be taken into consideration in their financial objectives and covered by their own resources. Furthermore, the bureaucratic burdens related to the implementation of conservation measures should not be underestimated.

⁹<http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/natura2000/management/docs/Final%20Guide%20N2000%20%20Forests%20Part%20II-Annexes.pdf>

¹⁰ http://www.eustafor.eu/uploads/Eustafor_Natura2000_web-2.pdf

Currently state forests are not entitled to EU funding to compensate the increased expenditures and reduced income due to the implementation of Natura 2000. The EU funding strategy for state forestry is inconsistent with the provisions for other land uses of state land. EUSTAFOR and its members share the view that SFMOs should be eligible for EU support for environmental measures related to Natura 2000 in the same way that public land owners are compensated for the financial impacts of agricultural environmental measures.

A significant improvement to Natura 2000 financing and funding instruments can be achieved through the introduction of an independent EU nature funding scheme that should support, among others, administration and management of Natura 2000 sites, management planning and the monitoring of habitats and species ⁽¹¹⁾.

Conclusion

The EU Birds and Habitats Directives are important and powerful tools to effectively preserve populations of wild species and to maintain or restore natural habitats of community interest while at the same time allowing to maintain the economic, social and cultural aspects of the forests in which they have been designated. As a policy framework, the EU Nature Directives provide a suitable level of detail when addressing conservation requirements and measures and this part of the EU's legislation should not be re-opened for any changes. Instead, EUSTAFOR and its members strongly advocate for an improvement in the implementation of the two Nature Directives on both national and local levels. This must be done by ensuring a proper role for forest owners and managers, among others, in designing the implementation strategies and conservation measures included in Natura 2000 management plans.

SFMOs strongly advocate for a sound EU financing instrument, which enables compensation for the extra costs connected to the implementation of Natura 2000 measures and/or the income foregone due to restrictions on forest management. Such a system should support the provision of environmental services independently from the type of ownership. Anchoring this principle in European legislation would further encourage the efforts of State Forest Management Organizations in their management of Natura 2000 territories.

As a result of decades of experience in sustainable forest management, SFMOs have been able to contribute to Natura 2000 from the very start. They will continue to contribute and to integrate Natura 2000 objectives into their daily operations and management planning, helping the network to become an even greater success story!

EUSTAFOR's 30 members (state forest organizations managing state forests) represent around one third of the EU forest area. They are committed to sustainable forest management and work with the existing forest certification schemes. The total harvest of EUSTAFOR members is about 120 million m³ of round timber per annum and together they employ more than 100 000 individuals.

For further information please contact the EUSTAFOR office (office@eustafor.eu) or consult our website at www.eustafor.eu.

¹¹ http://www.eustafor.eu/uploads/Eustafor_Natura2000_web-2.pdf