

## ***MEMO on Commission strategy to protect Europe's most important wildlife areas – frequently asked questions about NATURA 2000.***

**With the aim of promoting greater awareness and understanding of its work to protect Europe's most important wildlife areas, the European Commission has prepared a paper which explains what the NATURA 2000 network of protected areas is and how it is being set up. This answers frequently asked question about NATURA 2000, the most important initiative ever undertaken in the EU to conserve areas of high importance for threatened species and habitats. By protecting these 'precious components of biodiversity' NATURA 2000 aims to meet the European Council's goal of halting biodiversity decline within the EU by 2010. It represents a major contribution to global nature conservation and a model for international co-operation on sustainable development.**

Environment Commissioner Margot Wallström said, "EU citizens actively support the protection of our European natural heritage. We need to do more to make sure that our flagship policy, NATURA 2000 is better understood. There are misconceptions about NATURA 2000 and opponents of our policy sometimes deliberately spread these. These misconceptions have provoked unfounded concerns. We need to respond to these concerns by communicating more effectively, especially with the different stakeholder groups that are involved in the management of NATURA 2000 areas. I am convinced that, through partnership with the Member States and stakeholders, we can reconcile economic and social goals with our responsibilities towards nature".

### **What is Natura 2000?**

- Natura 2000 is the centrepiece of EU nature & biodiversity policy. It is an EU-wide network of nature protection areas established under the 1992 Habitats Directive. The aim of the network is to assure the long-term survival of Europe's most valuable and threatened species and habitats. It is comprised of Special Areas of Conservation (SAC) designated by Member States under the Habitats Directive, and also incorporates Special Protection Areas (SPAs) which they designate under the 1979 Birds Directive. The establishment of this network of protected areas also fulfils a Community obligation under the UN Convention on Biological Diversity.

### **Is Natura 2000 a network of parks and reserves?**

- Natura 2000 is not a system of strict nature reserves where all human activities are excluded. Whereas the network will certainly include nature reserves most of the land is likely to continue to be privately owned and the emphasis will be on ensuring that future management is sustainable, ecologically, economically and socially.

### **How are Natura 2000 sites selected?**

- The selection of NATURA 2000 sites is based exclusively on scientific criteria, such as the size and density of populations of target species and the ecological quality and area of target habitat types present in the site. The directive does not

lay down rules regarding the consultation process to be followed in selecting the sites. This is for the Member States to determine.

### **Who manages Natura 2000 sites?**

- The Member States are responsible for the management of Natura 2000 sites. However, it is recognised that marine sites where management activities may involve regulating fisheries activities would benefit from action at Community level. The Commission has consistently promoted the development of management plans for this purpose.

### **Is development restricted on Natura sites?**

- There is not any *a priori* prohibition of new activities or developments within Natura 2000 sites. These need to be judged on a case by case basis. There is a clear procedure in the Habitats Directive for assessment and subsequent decisions relating to development proposals that are likely to have an impact on designated sites.

### **How much of their territory must Member States designate as an area protected under NATURA 2000?**

- The nature directives do not say how much land and water need to be included in NATURA 2000. This will depend on the biological richness of the different regions. If, for example, a Member State is particularly rich in specific species and habitats, it is expected to designate sites in proportion to this wealth in biodiversity.

### **Is the network complete?**

- While the establishment of NATURA 2000 is not yet complete, considerable progress has been achieved and an area larger in size than Germany, equivalent to more than 15% of the EU's territory, has now been proposed for conservation under the network.

### **How is Commission involved with Member States ?**

- The Commission works closely with Member States and key stakeholder groups on implementation issues. This is ensured through the Habitats and Ornithology Committees, which have a statutory role in implementation of the nature directives, and a more recently established biannual meeting with Nature directors. Regular meetings are also held with the European Habitats Forum and Habitats Users Forum, which represent the different key stakeholders. These contacts are invaluable for discussion of issues including the financing and protection of the Natura 2000 network. The Commission is also developing guidance documents on a range of topics to promote better implementation.

### **How is the network funded?**

- Current EU policy measures, in particular those under Rural Development Policy such as the agri-environment regime, as well as the dedicated LIFE Nature fund, are already providing substantial support to the establishment of NATURA 2000.

Discussions are ongoing concerning future financing of Natura 2000. An independent report on financing NATURA 2000 has recently been finalised and is available on the web site of the Commission's web site at [http://europa.eu.int/comm/environment/nature/finalreport\\_dec2002.pdf](http://europa.eu.int/comm/environment/nature/finalreport_dec2002.pdf)

**Do Member States have to ensure compliance with NATURA 2000 legislation to receive structural funds?**

- Member States should ensure full compliance with the legal requirements of NATURA 2000 regardless of whether or not they are in receipt of Structural Funds. However, it is particularly important to ensure compliance in situations that involve Community funded programmes. In light of this concern the Commission previously indicated to Member States that a failure to present lists of NATURA 2000 sites could result in the suspension of payments under certain structural fund programmes. The threat of suspension of payments from such programmes was a precautionary measure to ensure that Community funded programmes would not contribute to irreparable damage to sites before they have been proposed officially for the protection under the Natura 2000 regime.

**What still needs to be done?**

- Finalising the selection of sites;
- Further development of NATURA 2000 in the offshore marine environment;
- Clarifying the framework for Community funding;
- Improving communication/explaining better the objectives of Natura 2000;
- Working closely with the Candidate Countries on preparations for implementing NATURA 2000.

**Where can I get an up-to-date overview of Natura 2000 sites (country by country?)**

- At present the main sources of information available on NATURA 2000 are to be found in web sites of the Member States. The Commission's web site provides a link to these at: <http://europa.eu.int/comm/environment/nature/home.htm> The Commission intends to provide information on the overall sites in the NATURA 2000 network once the Community lists of sites have been adopted.

**When are candidate countries expected to designate Natura 2000 areas?**

- The early implementation of Natura 2000 in candidate countries is important in order to ensure that future developments in these countries take full account of their rich natural heritage. Therefore, no transition periods have been agreed with candidate countries for the Natura 2000 network and they will be required to designate Special Protection Areas under the Birds Directive and propose Sites of Community Interest under the Habitats Directive at the time of Accession. At their latest meeting of January 2003 the Environment Ministers of the candidate countries have restated their commitment to NATURA 2000 and towards its early establishment.