



## Natura 2000 Award Scheme

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# BENCHMARKING REPORT

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# 1 Executive Summary

The European Natura 2000 Award was launched by the European Commission in 2013. In spite of the extraordinary richness of Europe's nature, and the success of Natura 2000 since its inception in 1992, knowledge and understanding of the network among the European public remains relatively limited. The Award aims to change this. Its objectives are to:

- Raise awareness about the Natura 2000 network among the public;
- Recognise excellence in the promotion of the Natura 2000 network and its objectives;
- Recognise excellence in the management of Natura 2000 sites;
- Encourage networking between stakeholders working with nature protection in Natura 2000 sites; and
- Provide role models to inspire and promote best practice for nature conservation.

In the first three years of the Award, winners were selected for five categories: Conservation, Socio-Economic Benefits, Communication, Reconciling Interests/Perceptions and Cross-Border Cooperation and Networking. Eligible applications were evaluated according to the criteria of effectiveness, originality, durability, cost-benefit and replicability by a team of independent experts, resulting in a shortlist. The winners were then chosen by a jury consisting of representatives of EU Institutions and different organisations active in the field of nature conservation. Starting in 2015 and continuing in 2016, a public vote was also introduced to choose the winner of a sixth prize: the European Citizens' Award.

In its third year, 2016, the Natura 2000 Award received 83 applications from 20 Member States. This was fewer than in the first year when 163 applications were received or in the second year when 93 applications were submitted. As in 2014 and 2015, by far the greatest number of applications was received under the Conservation category, followed in decreasing order by the categories Communication, Reconciling Interests/Perceptions, Socio-Economic Benefits and Cross-Border Cooperation and Networking. As in 2014 and 2015, applications were received from a wide range of actors including NGOs, businesses, land users and national, regional and local authorities. The largest number of applications was submitted by NGOs who often worked together with other actors to engage them in consortia. As in previous years, many applications focused on activities which had been funded through LIFE+, demonstrating the importance of this funding programme for Natura 2000 management.

The aim of the annual Benchmarking Reports is to contribute to the identification, recognition and promotion of good practice in Natura 2000. It is also intended as an instrument for the exchange of innovative ideas between the applicants who submitted applications to the Award, or as inspiration for those who plan to submit applications in the future. The report is targeted mainly at the Natura 2000 community, including past and potential future applicants to the scheme. These include site managers, staff and volunteers of nature conservation NGOs, representatives of land users active on Natura 2000 sites and other local stakeholders. A certain level of knowledge about Natura 2000 is assumed but overly technical language has been avoided as far as possible.

This current Benchmarking Report is based on an analysis of successful applications in the third year of the Award, particularly but not exclusively the Award winners and finalist applications. The report presents a catalogue structured according to 11 elements of good practice identified using examples taken from the submitted applications. After each element of good practice, the report outlines recommendations aimed particularly at future applicants.

The Report highlights the huge amount of expertise, experience and ingenuity being invested in the network by a diverse community of Natura 2000 actors, in order to jointly preserve and make the most of Europe's impressive natural heritage. The report shows that Natura 2000 is a network in progress, and one of the great achievements of the European Union.

## 2 Introduction

Europe boasts an extraordinarily rich biodiversity. The steep climatic and ecological gradients along the latitudinal, longitudinal and altitudinal axes mean that the continent is home to an exceptionally wide range of ecosystems and - as a consequence - an impressive richness of species and habitats.

However, biodiversity in Europe is threatened. Alarming rates of decline in the condition, number or distribution of many habitats and species are being observed. The 2010 target to halt biodiversity loss was not met and progress towards the 2020 target to halt biodiversity loss and restore it as far as possible is slow (EEA 2015). Research indicates that globally, we may be entering an anthropogenically-caused mass extinction (Ceballos 2015).

Biodiversity is important to Europe's citizens for environmental, social and economic reasons. Attempts have been made to put a monetary value on biodiversity through the Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity (TEEB) which estimated the financial costs associated with failing to halt biodiversity loss. On a global level, the cost of lost forest ecosystem services alone was calculated as being in the range of US\$2–4.5 trillion per year every year. The economic benefits of the Natura 2000 network itself are equally significant. The economic benefits, such as ecosystem services, water and climate regulation, ecotourism and fuel, fibre and food, have been calculated on a site and habitat basis in a range of Member States. A European Union study has scaled these up to the EU-level and estimates overall benefits in the range of €200-300 billion annually (European Union 2013).

The European public agrees that biodiversity is important to them. The latest Eurobarometer Flash Survey shows that 80% of respondents think that the decline and possible extinction of animal species, flora and fauna, natural habitats and ecosystems in Europe is a problem (Eurobarometer 2015). However, the same survey showed how poor public knowledge about Natura 2000 is with only 26% of respondents knowing what it is. The Natura 2000 Award aims to change this.

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### 2.1 Natura 2000 – a centrepiece of biodiversity policy

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The European Union has established a significant body of work from legislation to guidance, awareness raising and coordination actions, to manage biodiversity. Natura 2000 forms the centrepiece of these efforts.

The Natura 2000 network of over 27,000 terrestrial and marine protected sites, consists of Special Protection Areas (SPAs) designated under the 1979 Birds Directive and Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) designated under the 1992 Habitats Directive. Site designation and management is required to protect the most threatened species and habitats. The directives also provide strict protection for certain species across the wider EU terrestrial and marine territory (including outside protected sites).

The crucial importance of Natura 2000 for EU biodiversity policy is reflected by the EU Biodiversity Strategy to 2020 (European Commission 2011b), which sets out the long-term vision and medium-term headline target of EU biodiversity policy:

- **2050 vision:** *"By 2050, European Union biodiversity and the ecosystem services it provides — its natural capital — are protected, valued and appropriately restored for biodiversity's intrinsic value and for their essential contribution to human wellbeing"*

*and economic prosperity, and so that catastrophic changes caused by the loss of biodiversity are avoided."*

- **2020 headline target:** *"Halting the loss of biodiversity and the degradation of ecosystem services in the EU by 2020 and restoring them in so far as feasible, while stepping up the EU contribution to averting global biodiversity loss."*

Among the six targets of the strategy, the first focuses exclusively on the full and timely implementation of the Habitats and Birds Directives, while the other five complement it. More specifically, target 1 aims to *"halt the deterioration in the status of all species and habitats covered by EU nature legislation and achieve a significant and measurable improvement in their status so that, by 2020, compared to current assessments:*

- *100% more habitat assessments and 50% more species assessments under the Habitats Directive show an improved conservation status; and*
- *50% more species assessments under the Birds Directive show a secure or improved status. "*

The establishment of the Natura 2000 network has allowed Member States to work together to conserve biodiversity under one legal framework. It has also enabled the targeting of resources to the sites most at risk. Importantly, a common reporting framework has been set up. Member States must report every six years on progress with implementation of the Habitats Directive. Reporting on the Birds Directive has recently also been brought in line with Habitats Directive reporting.

The State of Nature report (EEA 2015) summarises the most recent round of Member States reporting from the Birds and Habitats Directives, providing a snapshot of the current situation with regard to conservation status and trends for over 2,000 species and habitat types protected by the directives. The report shows a mixed picture: the headline figures of 20% of habitat assessments favourable or improving, 28% of species assessments favourable or improving, and 52% of bird species secure, hides a great deal of complexity and regional variation. While some successes have been seen, demonstrating the effectiveness of certain targeted measures to protect biodiversity, progress towards meeting the targets of the Biodiversity Strategy described above is in reality limited.

Further information was provided by the Mid Term Review of the Biodiversity Strategy which reported on progress towards meeting the targets halfway to 2020. This found that although progress was being made towards meeting Target 1 – Full implementation of the Birds and Habitats Directives, it was insufficient. The number of species and habitats in secure / favourable or improved conservation status has increased slightly since the 2010 baseline; however, many species and habitats which were in unfavourable status remain so and some have deteriorated further. No significant progress has been made towards the headline target of halting biodiversity loss (European Commission 2015b).

The performance of the Birds and Habitats Directives themselves is being assessed through the Fitness Check of EU Nature Legislation (European Commission 2015a) which is included in the wider Regulatory Fitness and Performance Programme (REFIT), examining the burden of EU legislation with the aim to contribute to a clear, stable and predictable regulatory framework. The Fitness Check examines the effectiveness, efficiency, relevance, coherence and added value of the directives. The commission financed an independent review into the Directives. The emerging findings (Milieu *et al.* 2015) found that though the Directives are essential for meeting the biodiversity targets, there are barriers in place to their effective implementation. These include lack of management plans and poor enforcement in certain Member States. A particular problem is sufficient financing to deliver the aims of the Directives. The draft findings were discussed at a stakeholder workshop in November 2015. A Commission position is due to be released.

## 2.2 Typical challenges to Natura 2000

In the first Natura 2000 Award Benchmarking Report, some of the key site-level challenges to Natura 2000 were identified through a literature review. These are summarised and expanded with further references in the table below.

| Challenge   | Description  | Example References   |
|---|--|--|
| Insufficient stakeholder participation in site designation and management               | Since Natura 2000 does not afford strict protection, effective management relies on successful communication with stakeholders. In some areas this has been limited. Stakeholder participation can also in itself be very resource-intensive.  | Beunen & De Vries (2011), Ioja <i>et al.</i> (2010)                                      |
| Conflicting interests of other sectors  | Key economic sectors such as agriculture, forestry, fisheries, tourism and the extractive sector often have interests that are in conflict with nature conservation objectives of the sites affected. Enforcing legal requirements on certain actors can still be problematic in some Member States. | Snethlage <i>et al.</i> (2012)   |
| Poor conservation status of habitats that depend on traditional agricultural practices  | The latest reporting shows that species and habitats which depend upon on agricultural ecosystems continue to do worse than the assessments of other ecosystems due to agricultural intensification or abandonment.  | EEA (2015) Halada <i>et al.</i> (2011) BirdLife (2015), European Commission (2015b)      |
| Lack of habitat connectivity especially in the context of climate change                | Habitat fragmentation, caused amongst other things by infrastructure development, means that species cannot easily move between protected areas. This is particularly problematic in the context of climate change, where adaptation to changes in biogeographic boundaries is needed.               | Opdam and Wascher (2004)   |
| Lack of strategic, adaptive management planning aimed at favourable conservation status | Management planning for Natura 2000 still lags behind designation. In cases where plans exist, their strategic direction towards improving the conservation status of target habitats and species is sometimes insufficiently elaborated.  | Hochkirch <i>et al.</i> (2013), Ioja <i>et al.</i> (2010) ; Millieu <i>et al.</i> (2015) |
| Inconsistent on-the-ground monitoring of conservation status                            | Despite the reporting requirements of the Birds and Habitats Directives, monitoring is not always sufficiently standardised between Member States.   | Hochkirch <i>et al.</i> (2013)   |

|  |  |  |
|--|--|--|
| Weak social consensus to support conservation of Natura 2000 sites | Weak consensus about the importance of Natura 2000 management has slowed down implementation and made it more difficult to integrate biodiversity management into the activities of other sectors.   | Hochkirch <i>et al.</i> (2013), Grodzinska-Jurczak & Cent, (2010), Iojă <i>et al.</i> (2010)               |
| Lack of resources for effective management of Natura 2000 sites    | To meet the management requirements of Natura 2000 sites would cost an estimated €5.8 billion annually. These funding requirements are not being met. The estimated costs however are outweighed by the benefits estimate at around €200-300 billion per year. | Iojă <i>et al.</i> (2010); European Commission (2011a); European Union (2013); Milieu <i>et al.</i> (2015) |
| Marine Natura 2000 network not fully in place                      | While the terrestrial Natura 2000 network is thought to be largely complete, there are still significant gaps in the marine network and delays have been experienced in the designation of marine Natura 2000 sites.   | Milieu <i>et al.</i> (2015)  |

The Natura 2000 Award categories described below have been designed to encourage applications which address some of these commonly recognised challenges.

## 3 Natura 2000 Award

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### 3.1 Objectives of the Award

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The Natura 2000 Award has five interdependent objectives:

- **Raise awareness about the Natura 2000 network among the public**

In spite of its above-mentioned social, economic and environmental importance, knowledge about the Natura 2000 network amongst the general public, even those living on or near sites, remains low. According to a survey carried out in 2015, only 26% of respondents had heard of Natura 2000, and only 10% really know what it is (Eurobarometer 2015). The Award therefore aims to celebrate the achievements of the Natura 2000 network and to bring them to public attention throughout the Union. To do this, it focuses on what matters most: the huge diversity of Natura 2000 sites and the ingenuity of all those who work towards their effective management and promotion. Focusing primarily on the site level makes the richness of the network even more tangible to the general public, because it highlights achievements that can be directly demonstrated to and experienced by site visitors and stakeholders. The public vote aims to draw all citizens into decision-making around the Award and engage them in reading about and selecting winners.

- **Recognise excellence in the management of Natura 2000 sites:** Establishing, managing and improving the Natura 2000 network has posed a wide range of practical challenges to site managers (see Section 2.2 above), which have been addressed through an equally wide range of innovative solutions. This is one of the great social achievements of the Natura 2000 network. More than 20 years after implementing the Habitats Directive, it is time to take stock of and celebrate this creative achievement. The body of good practice that is emerging as a result of the multiple problem-solving successes of site managers and their partners has not been used to its full potential in the past. It needs to be recognised and promoted in such a way that it can be replicated progressively throughout the entire network. This is another way in which the Natura 2000 Award will contribute to achieving the aims of the Habitat and Birds Directives.

- **Recognise excellence in the promotion of the Natura 2000 Network and its objectives:** While the management of individual Natura 2000 sites has given rise to a multitude of innovative solutions, the same is true for efforts to promote sites or even the network as a whole and its objectives. The Natura 2000 Award also aims to recognise efforts to promote Natura 2000 as the centrepiece of the EU biodiversity policy which can be proven to have an impact on the individual site level.

- **Encourage networking between stakeholders working with nature protection in Natura 2000 sites:** People who work in and around individual Natura 2000 sites may be or feel isolated from the vast experience that already exists among their peers. To overcome this, the Natura 2000 Award contributes to forming a European Natura 2000 community where individual site managers support and learn from each other. This applies to the social level - with applicant representatives gathering at the annual Award ceremonies and getting to know their colleagues from other success-

ful applications - as well as on a more technical level: The good practices revealed in the applications is being analysed and compiled in the award's documentation for further dissemination, including this Benchmarking Report. This strengthens the character of the Natura 2000 community as a mutual learning network.

- **Provide role models to inspire and promote best practice for nature conservation:** As a social effort, Natura 2000 is run by a diverse community of inspiring people. The Natura 2000 Award aims not only to promote outstanding solutions to conservation challenges, but also to provide a stage for the people who develop these solutions. This will inspire others and bring new people into site administrations, NGOs and other partners, and provide role models for future generations of conservation managers.

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## 3.2 Description and justification of the categories

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Under the first three rounds of the Natura 2000 Award, applications were invited under five different categories, which reflected broad thematic areas where innovation and good practice are likely to yield the highest benefits for the overall effectiveness and conservation status of the Natura 2000 network. This is partly because the five categories address recognised challenges such as those identified in Section 2.2. These categories are Conservation, Socio-Economic Benefits, Communication, Reconciling Interests/Perceptions and Cross-Border Cooperation and Networking. Although submissions could be made under one category only, the categories clearly are interdependent and some applications demonstrated cross-cutting methodological innovation and good practice.

### 3.2.1 Conservation

This category focused on achievements that have improved the conservation status of a particular habitat and / or species. Target habitats or species had to be in the Habitats Directive Annex I or II or Birds Directive Annex I, or be a regularly occurring migratory bird, and be the habitat or species for which the main application site was designated.

### 3.2.2 Socio-Economic Benefits

This category recognised socio-economic benefits that have come about as a result of a Natura 2000 site or activities on one. It aimed at activities that maximised the generation and utilisation of such benefits, for instance by allowing sustainable producers to establish niche markets or obtain better prices for their products by labelling or other suitable approaches.

### 3.2.3 Communication

This category was centred upon successful communication activities aimed at increasing awareness or promoting Natura 2000, particularly those that brought lasting changes in attitudes or behaviour towards the network among specific stakeholder groups or the general public.

### 3.2.4 Reconciling Interests/Perceptions

Based on the observation that effective reconciliation often involves compromises between stakeholders with differing interests and views, this category rewarded successful efforts that brought together opposing socio-economic or political forces, land- or resource-users in a way that benefitted Natura 2000.

### 3.2.5 Cross-Border Cooperation and Networking

This category covered two potentially distinct but interrelated aspects, namely:

- (1) Cross-border (or cross-region in federal states) collaboration in order to achieve better conservation of a species / habitat. It can also include cooperation within a biogeographical region.
- (2) How networking activities with similar themes have resulted in lasting positive impacts for Natura 2000.

### 3.2.6 European Citizens' Award

While not a category in itself, a sixth prize was awarded in 2015 as in 2016 to the finalist application receiving the largest number of votes through an online public vote. A total of 37,381 votes were submitted (compared with 24,904 in 2015). The winning application (by a clear margin) received 5938 votes. The aim of this Award was to engage the public more directly in the process of choosing the winners and to encourage the applicants to promote their own applications and the Award more widely.

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## 3.3 Description of the selection criteria

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Following an eligibility check, the submissions under each category were assessed by a team of evaluators using five selection criteria: effectiveness, originality, durability, cost-benefit and replicability. These selection criteria can be summarised as follows:

- **Effectiveness:** In order to judge how effective a given application was, the evaluation assessed how clearly the activities' / achievements' impact had been demonstrated in relation to its goals and to the conservation values in question (e.g., species / habitats from the Habitat and Birds Directives' annexes). Was the impact of the activity measured, and / or was there a clear difference between the situation before and after the activities? Depending on the category, effectiveness was expressed as: the conservation status of species or habitats in question; socio-economic benefits; changes in attitude of the target audiences; changes in views between interest groups and how far apart they were initially; and / or number of countries / regions involved in networking. Of key importance for all of these was demonstrating explicit benefits to Natura 2000.
- **Originality:** Originality was assessed at the EU and individual Member State levels. Applicants were asked to self-assess the originality of their activities / achievements. This self-assessment was critically re-evaluated by the evaluators, taking into account the overall approach and specific methodologies and tools employed, as well as the types of organisation and partners involved. Originality was included among the selection criteria as it underpins methodological and/or contextual innovation.
- **Durability:** The criterion of durability focused on the likelihood of the impacts of the activities / achievements being long-lasting, on how self-sustained these impacts would be after the conclusion of the activities themselves, and on the extent to which follow-up activities ensuring durability had already been initiated or at least prepared. This included the physical and financial sustainability of mechanisms or structures

established through the applicant's activities, observed trends in key impacts allowing a prognosis of their future development, documented or formally agreed partner commitments and other relevant indicators.

- **Cost-benefit:** The monetary cost of applications was evaluated in relation to their documented impact (for example: change in conservation status/habitat for conservation projects; size and type of audience reached for communication projects and recorded changes in attitudes; degree of involvement of previously opposing stakeholders for applications in the Reconciling Interests/Perceptions category; new jobs and revenues generated under Socio-Economic benefits projects, etc.). For conservation projects in particular, the European importance of the target was also taken into account (e.g., % of European Union population of targeted species or surface of habitat).
- **Replicability:** This selection criterion focused on how replicable an applicant's approach or methodology would be in other Natura 2000 sites and what actual steps had been undertaken by the applicants in this direction. This is a particularly important question in relation to the Award's purposes of promoting good practice and mutual learning within the Natura 2000 community. In order to evaluate replicability, the evaluators assessed if an application's activities / achievements had already been replicated or at least promoted in other contexts, to what extent the preconditions of replication had been considered by the applicants, what steps for dissemination of results and lessons learned had been taken, and what was the overall potential to achieve replication in the future.

After the evaluation according to the above criteria, the evaluation panel agreed a short-list of 24 applications and passed on their results to the Award jury who selected the winning applicant for each category. In parallel, as described above, a public vote was held to select the winner of the European Citizens' Award on the basis of the summaries provided by the applicants (edited by the European Commission to ensure a similar length and standard of English) published on the Natura 2000 Award website. The general public was encouraged to vote on their favourite finalist application.

### 3.4 Applicant statistics

The 2016 Natura 2000 Award received 83 applications from 20 Member States (compared to 93 applications from 24 Member States in 2015 and 163 applications from 26 Member States in 2014). Figure 1 shows the applications from 2014-2016.

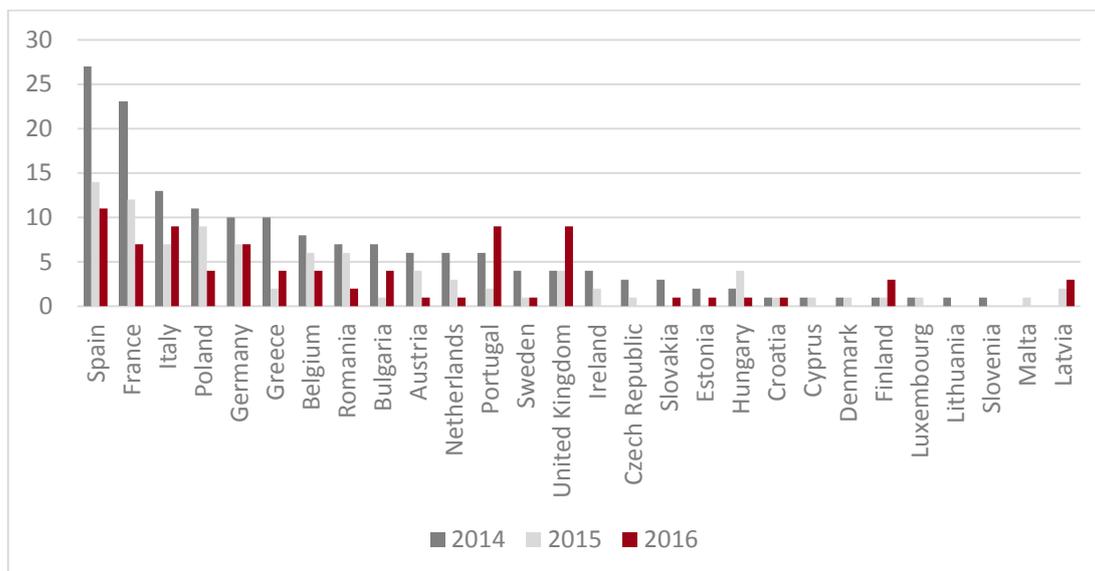


Figure 1. Number of applications per Member State

In general, the relative number of applications reflected the total area of SCIs/SACs and SPAs in each country - those countries with the largest areas of Natura 2000 sites also submitted most applications. Exceptions to this rule were the Benelux countries, which submitted more applications than would be expected from their network areas, and the Nordic EU countries (Denmark, Finland and Sweden), from which very few applications per square kilometre of Natura 2000 sites were received.

With regard to the Award categories, as in 2014 and 2015, by far the greatest number of applications was received under the Conservation category, followed by Communication. Reconciling Interests/Perceptions, Cross-Border Cooperation and Networking and Socio-Economic Benefits (Table 1) received fewer applications. While the numbers of applications received remained low in these categories, there was a sufficient number of high quality applications submitted.

| Category                                | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 |
|---|------|------|------|
| Conservation                            | 58   | 40   | 32   |
| Communication                           | 49   | 27   | 21   |
| Socio-Economic Benefits                 | 8    | 9    | 11   |
| Reconciling Interests/Perceptions       | 38   | 6    | 12   |
| Cross-Border Cooperation and Networking | 10   | 11   | 7    |

Table 1. Number of applications per category

In 2016, as in 2015, applicants were asked to categorise their organisation when registering on the Award website. In 2014, this was not included in the form so results are not directly comparable, however applicants were allocated categories by the secretariat. In every year, environmental NGOs were also by far the biggest group. National, regional and local authorities are also well represented. Fewer applicants identified themselves as resource users

such as farmers or hunters. However, the graph only identifies the main applicants and other actors may be included as partners.

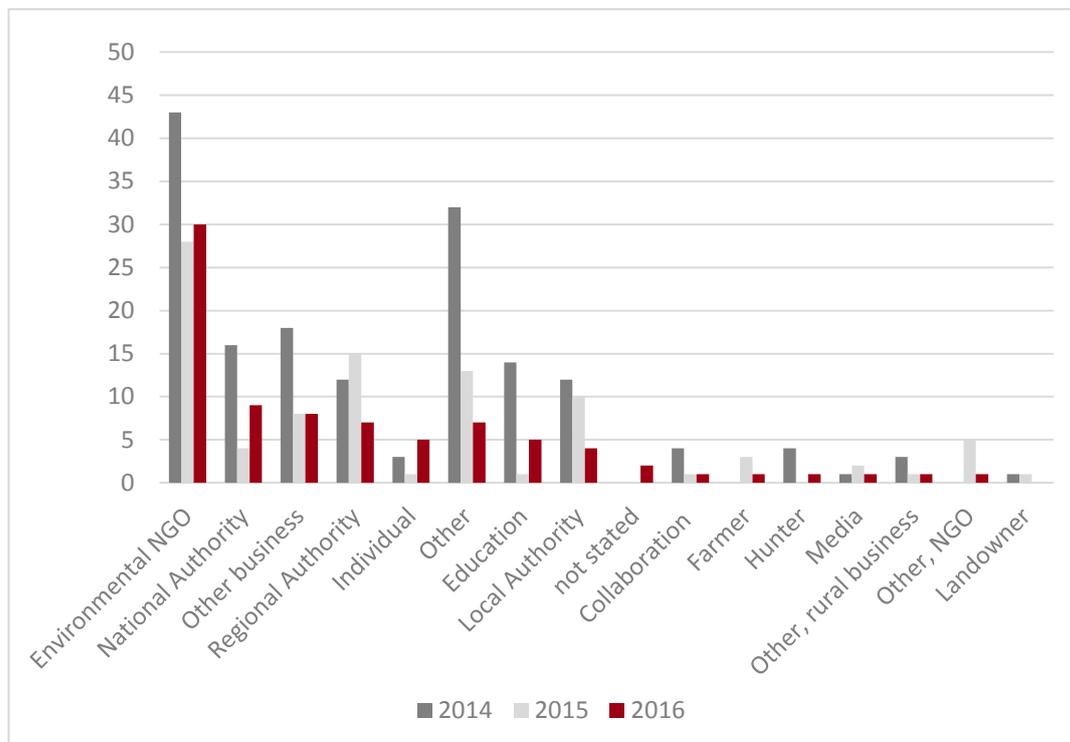


Figure 2. Type of applicant 2014-16. Applicants selected from the categories listed. NB. Other NGO = NGO where environment is not the main focus; Other rural business = not farmer or landowner; Other business = not rural business; Other = range of different applicants not always further defined.

The overview of actors involved in the applications is similar to and reinforces the general trends identified in 2014 and 2015:

- Diversity:** The diversity of applicants ranged from site administrations through various businesses to art groups. This reflects the wide range of actors and stakeholders who support - in one way or another - the management and promotion of Natura 2000 sites, and highlights once more the considerable social capital that is already invested in this network.
- Important role of NGOs:** The 2016 Award highlighted that, within the wider spectrum of actors, civil society plays an indispensable role for nature conservation and sustainable development of Natura 2000 sites. NGOs often catalyse innovative solutions that are then also taken up by state institutions, and bring together other stakeholders such as site administrations, land owners, resource users and academic institutions for collaborative conservation initiatives.
- Importance of consortia:** Consortia of different types of institutions (such as site managers and academia, or NGOs and resource users) contributed some of the most innovative applications in all three years of the Award. This may have to do with the fact that entering consortia helped individual actors to overcome narrow

perceptions and open their mind to unconventional and more challenging intervention strategies.

- **Emerging actors:** all three rounds of the Award highlighted the growing importance of emerging categories of actors, such as land owners, natural resource users (e.g., hunters and fishermen) and business companies even if their representation each year is variable. More unusual actors included faith-based organisations, the military, sports clubs and artists.
- **Dedicated funding:** The applications submitted were also diverse in terms of their funding sources. As in 2014 and 2015, a significant number were EU-funded LIFE+/LIFE projects, demonstrating the high importance of this funding programme for management of Natura 2000 sites. However, other donor- and state-funded activities, use of corporate social responsibility (CSR) funding by businesses, and the engagement of volunteers to carry out key activities were also noted.

### 3.5 Short introduction of winners by category

The winners of the Natura 2000 Award 2016 are presented briefly below:



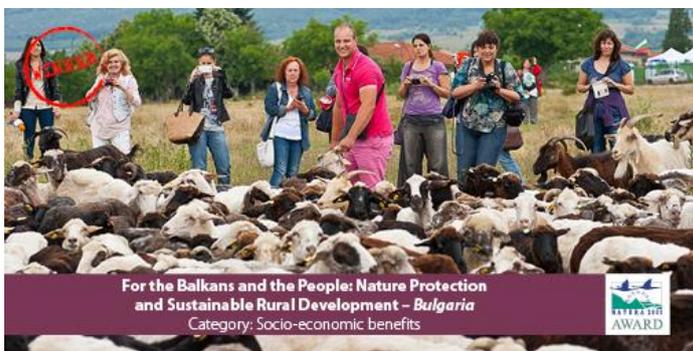
*RSPB and United Utilities, a wildlife charity and a water company, are restoring blanket bogs together to protect biodiversity and improve water quality.*



*Latvia's Nature Concerthall events organised in a collaboration between artists and scientists, entertain audiences while educating them on habitats, species and how to protect the environment.*



A partnership involving transmission system operators, environmental interests and local authorities found innovative and cost-effective alternatives to vegetation clearance under overhead power lines, thus improving landscapes and enhancing biodiversity.



An innovative Payment for Ecosystem Services scheme established by WWF and partners helps farmers and rural businesses reap the economic rewards of wildlife-friendly practices.



A “flyways approach” spanning the lesser white-fronted goose’s entire Eurasian migration path and involving an impressive network of organisations is spreading knowledge and fighting to protect the highly threatened species.



The Government of Andalusia and private partners came together to bring the Iberian lynx back from the brink of extinction. This application submitted in the Conservation category won the public vote for the EU Citizens’ Award.

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## 4 Rationale and structure of the Benchmarking Report

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### 4.1 Aim of the report

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The Benchmarking Report aims to contribute to all five objectives of the Natura 2000 Award (see Section 3.1), but it particularly aims to identify, recognise and promote good practice in Natura 2000 management and promotion. It also is intended as an instrument for the exchange of innovative ideas between applicants or inspiration for those who plan to submit an application in the future.

The report is targeted mainly at the Natura 2000 community, including past and potential future applicants to the Award. These include site managers, staff and volunteers of nature conservation NGOs, representatives of land users active on Natura 2000 sites and other local stakeholders.

**This report is based on experiences from the first three years' of the Award. The catalogue of good practice is based on the 2016-edition applications.**

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### 4.2 Structure and methodology

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The core part of the Benchmarking Report of the 2016 edition of the European Natura 2000 Award is a catalogue of 11 elements of good practice. These were derived from a stepwise analysis of the factors that made the successful submissions to the Award scheme stand out during the evaluation process. The following methodology was used:

1. The application documentation submitted and the evaluations – particularly those of the finalists for each category - were read.
2. Evaluators' comments on finalist applications were collected, clustered and categorised, giving rise to a first tentative list of elements of good practice.
3. Non-shortlisted applications (particularly those highlighted by the evaluators as having certain qualities in spite of not being short-listed) were screened based on the tentative list of elements of good practice, and additional examples of original application attributes that had been noted as strengths of those applications – even if these strengths had not been sufficient to qualify them as a finalist – were identified. At the same time, the list of elements of good practice was refined and adjusted.
4. A representative sample of 3 to 5 applications illustrating key aspects of each element of good practice was collected – primarily from shortlisted applications but also including other relevant applications.
5. Each of the applications identified in step 4 was briefly described in relation to the element of good practice for which it had been selected (N.B. this implied that some applications were listed under more than one element of good practice, which reflects the fact that some applications were strong in more ways than others).

6. Additional comments from the evaluators relevant to each element of good practice were collected and briefly discussed, in order to provide further guidance to future applicants.

This stepwise process was conducted fully in 2014 and revised in 2015, leading to the addition of one more element of good practice (perseverance).

As already pointed out in the 2014 and 2015 Benchmarking Reports, not all of these elements of good practice are equally relevant to all Award categories and selection criteria - the relevance of each element is noted at the beginning of each chapter. However, most of them can be regarded as general attributes of good practice in the Natura 2000 context. As in 2014 and 2015, some of the elements of good practice specifically refer to the management and promotion of the Natura 2000 network (i.e., Nos. 1, 2, 4, 5 and 6), while others reflect general rules of sound project planning and implementation (i.e., Nos. 3, 7, 8, 9 and 10).

Each chapter of the catalogue starts with a short summary of how the respective element of good practice was relevant to the submissions to the 2016 Award, and what differences were noted in comparison to the two previous years.

**The 2016 elements of good practice discussed in Section 5 below are the following:**

1. Attracting new actors;
2. Involving all stakeholders;
3. Starting from a sound situation analysis;
4. Promoting conceptual and technical innovation;
5. Looking beyond individual sites;
6. Realising socio-economic benefits;
7. Planning sustainability from the start;
8. Mobilising a wide range of resources;
9. Measuring and communicating success;
10. Learning, knowledge sharing and communication as core application components;  
and
11. Perseverance.

Following the description of each element of good practice, suggestions or recommendations for future applicants are highlighted in a box. This allows applicants to go directly to the recommendations and read the longer text providing examples for the areas which are particularly relevant to their activities.

The report concludes with an Outlook section (Section 6) which addresses the use of the report's findings, and a number of thematic and geographic areas where there may be room for further development in future rounds of the Award.

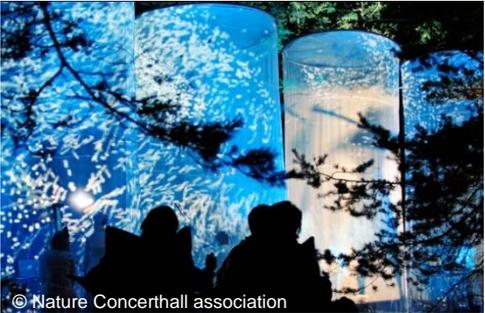
## 5 Catalogue of good practice

### 5.1 Attracting new actors

New actors widen the social base of the Natura 2000 network. In addition, they often add innovative perspectives and thereby enhance management effectiveness and benefits. This can greatly contribute not only to the conservation state of the species and habitats in question, but also to the range of social groups benefiting from the network.

Many new and emerging actors already contributed to the success of applications to previous rounds of the Award. Examples were agricultural land owners, hunters, the military, business companies from the e-commerce and extractive sectors, faith groups, school children and people with disabilities, as well as recreational divers. The 2016 round again added to this range:

- **The project “Nature Concerthall”** submitted by the Latvian association of the same name (**Society “Dabas Koncertzāle”**) won the **Natura 2000 Award in the category “Communication”**. The overall objective of this project was to use music – supported by interactive and multi-media displays – to raise public awareness on the importance of the environment and biodiversity. Each year a specific area or species was selected, which then dictated the development of an event in terms of location (so that audiences could see the element first-hand), the music created specifically for the purpose, and interactive workshops crafted by that year’s key scientists/ researchers to showcase the species. The activities have covered so far eight Natura 2000 sites in different regions of Latvia (e.g. lowland hay meadows, coniferous forests, coastal reefs) and species of Community interest (e.g. the fire-bellied toad *Bombina orientalis*) as well as other species. By becoming Natura 2000 actors, the artists and musicians involved in the project have broadened the way in which Natura 2000 habitats and species are perceived, and have thereby also managed to engage a wider segment of the general public, while at the same time highlighting and realizing the aesthetic benefits of their sites and species. This project has high Community-wide replication potential.



© Nature Concerthall association
- The application **“Monitoring Insects with Public Participation, a Citizen Science Initiative”** submitted by an **Italian LIFE+ Nature project** of the same name developed efficient and low impact monitoring methods for nine insect species of Community interest within protected areas, including six Natura 2000 sites. One distinguishing feature of this project was the involvement of citizen scientists in the collection of data, and indirectly in the dissemination of a strong message about the importance of preserving old-growth for-



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ests (habitats related to dead wood and their inhabitants). The targeted insects were five saproxylic beetles (including the European stag beetle *Lucanus cervus*), 3 butterflies (including the apollo *Parnassius apollo*) and the bush cricket *Saga pedo*. The project included development of a mobile phone app to identify species and report insect observations, and has yielded 980 insect records (contributed by more than 300 people) which have been validated as useful. New distribution hotspots of some of the targeted species have also been discovered. Citizen scientists, trained non-professional aficionados represent a huge and largely untapped reservoir of expertise and conservation commitment, which has the potential to greatly contribute to biodiversity monitoring and practical conservation action of Natura 2000 sites.

- Land owners have already been involved in previous rounds of the Natura 2000 Award. However, the application **“Collaboration between Public and Private Bodies to Downlist an Endangered Species, the Iberian Lynx”** led by the **Regional Government of Andalusia in southern Spain**, which won the **Natura 2000 European Citizens’ Award**, piloted an interesting and particularly effective way of engaging them.



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The objectives of the LIFE Nature projects presented in the application were to prevent the extinction of the Iberian lynx (*Lynx pardinus*) and to restore its populations in 22 Natura 2000 sites in Spain. In order to achieve this, the applicant and conservation NGOs employed stewardship agreements as a novel tool for implementing habitat management measures and protecting rabbit populations, rabbits being a key food source of the lynx. These agreements represent voluntary contracts with private landowners to implement conservation measures on their land, in exchange for compensation payments, land improvement measures or consulting services. They have the advantage of being voluntary, inclusive and more flexible, and have proven so successful that private landowners now apply for having their properties considered as potential areas for lynx reintroduction. This project represents the largest application of such a voluntary land conservation mechanism in Spain (and probably Europe) to date. As a result of this and other measures (such as lynx reintroduction, habitat management, support of rabbit populations, and actions against poisoning and illegal hunting), the Iberian lynx population was downgraded from “Critically Endangered” to “Endangered” in the IUCN Red List in 2014.

- In addition to these examples, there were other submissions by relatively uncommon actors including private businesses (e.g. **“From Bricks to Newts: where Clay Extraction Meets European Nature”**, of the Belgian brick and clay manufacturer **Wienerberger Group**) and the military (**“Win-win Triangle in Adazi - Nature Conservation, Military Training and Beekeeping”** of the Latvian **State Centre for Defence Military Objects and Procurement**).

### Suggestions / Recommendations for future applicants

While a wide range of actors have been involved in applications in all three Award years, some important groups are underrepresented (see Figure 2 in section 3.4). In all three years of the Award, there were some cases where potential actors who would have been crucial for the implementation of applicants' activities were actually not among the implementing team or among the submitting consortium. Applicants to future rounds should check thoroughly if they have all the key actors on board in the early stages of initiating their activities.

Even more importantly, the full range of partners should be represented in the Award application. This was again not always the case in the 2016 round.

Looking ahead towards future rounds, it would be welcome if a larger number of small organisations, which are not supported by LIFE+ projects or similar large-scale funding, submitted applications to the Natura 2000 Award.

## 5.2 Involving all stakeholders

In comparison to the 2014 and 2015 rounds of the Natura 2000 Award, when most ingenuity was invested by applicants into **whom** to involve, the 2016 round saw even more important innovations regarding general approaches to stakeholder involvement, i.e. **how** to identify stakeholders and particularly how to facilitate their constructive cooperation in a Natura 2000 context:

- The project **“Sturgeons: Protect Danube’s Treasure”** carried out by **WWF Romania** (together with its sister offices in Bulgaria and Austria) aimed to raise awareness on overexploitation of Danube sturgeons in Romania and Bulgaria, and to change attitudes and behaviour in order to improve their conservation status. Among other measures, this project employed mediation between fishing communities, law enforcement agencies, decision makers, sturgeon breeders and caviar processors and traders by WWF “sturgeon advocates”. Applying mediation techniques to conflictive situations in a fisheries context is, while very helpful to reduce conflict, rarely practiced. This contributed to the originality of this project. The “sturgeon advocates” mediated and improved the relationship between authorities and fishermen and organised workshops on alternative income for fishermen. Initial and final surveys revealed significant changes in fishermen’s attitudes: In 2013, more than half of the interviewed fishermen did not see an alternative income source to fishing, whereas in 2015 the majority (76% in Romania and 90% in Bulgaria) were interested in alternative sources. Likewise, the majority of fishermen were against the sturgeon fishing ban in 2013, whereas the ban was considered by most as a good measure to protect sturgeons by 2015.



- The application **“Collaboration and Partnership Working to Protect Marine Natura Sites”** submitted by the **Pembrokeshire Coastal Forum** (UK) had stakeholder participation and cooperation at its very heart. It aimed to balance different stakeholder views and to reconcile the interests of recreational users in order to achieve a sustainable use of the marine and coastal environment, as well as reduced disturbance of three marine mammals (grey seal *Halichoerus grypus*, harbour porpoise *Phocoena phocoena* and bottlenose dolphin *Tursiops truncatus*) as well as three bird species (Manx shearwater *Puffinus puffinus*, Atlantic puffin *Fratercula arctica*, and razorbill *Alca torda*) in four Natura 2000 sites in South Wales. The main problem targeted was the heavy tourism pressure on the Pembrokeshire coastline. Working groups encompassing 400 individual members – including representatives of all stakeholders – were formed. These included 54 commercial companies (100% of activity outdoor businesses), regional and national statutory bodies and NGOs. Building on this strong base of support, voluntary codes of conduct specific for each recreational activity were jointly developed and agreed, and voluntary seasonal access restrictions were applied to sensitive areas for marine species. These are largely being observed. Users are now aware that their livelihoods rely on the good conservation status of the species within the Natura 2000 sites; consensus, cooperation and mutual trust have increased. The outdoor operator companies also agreed to attend training events, and to inform and promote the codes of conduct and good practices among visitors and marina users.



© Pembrokeshire Coastal Forum

- The observed lack of knowledge and awareness of Natura 2000 cannot be overcome without engaging youth. At the same time, capturing the attention of young people requires a language that is accessible to them. One application that found such a language was **“Natura 2000! What’s that? — A Short Film Produced by Junior Rangers Provides Answers”** carried out by the German NGO **“Biological Station for the Aachen City Region”**. Its overall objective was to increase the awareness of the visitors of the Eifel National Park towards the three Natura 2000 sites located within its limits. The initiative first organised a two-day film workshop for ten junior rangers and then supported them with the creation of a short film (“Natura 2000! What’s that?”) about the aims and ideas behind Natura 2000. Using few resources, largely found in the forest, the result was a spontaneous but nevertheless professional film in which children explain Natura 2000 in their own words. The six-minute film was hence conceived by children and young people themselves, which increases the likelihood of it appealing to other youth. It is now available on YouTube, via the websites of the National Park and the LIFE project which supported it, and at National Park Information Centres, which have over 300,000 visitors annually.



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### Suggestions / Recommendations for future applicants

The 2016 round of the Award shed light on important ways of involving various stakeholders. However, ensuring stakeholder participation and support remains a great challenge in many sectors, particularly agriculture, extractive industries and fisheries.

Future applications should pay particular attention to demonstrating how the stakeholders who are attracted to cooperate with Natura 2000 related activities are actually linked to problems affecting habitats and species of Community interest, with their root causes, and how they are crucial to realizing the full range of potential benefits of the network.

## 5.3 Starting from a sound situation analysis

An important prerequisite for the success of any conservation activity, is that it is built on a good understanding of precise conservation goals, the main direct and indirect threats affecting these values, and opportunities to address these. The feasibility and efficiency of the conservation measures that are envisaged also need to be analyzed. This is also true for initiatives related to Natura 2000 sites, as was already demonstrated in the 2014 and 2015 submissions. The 2016 round of the Award provided further examples:

- A sound situation and needs analysis is particularly critical to design and fine-tune activities aimed at communication and information exchange. The submission on **“The French Natura 2000 Platform: Effective Support for Natura 2000 Professionals”** run by the public interest group **ATEN**, comprising 20 French organisations and public authorities, demonstrated exactly this. This project established and maintained a national Natura 2000 technical exchange platform to compile, capitalise on, and disseminate knowledge and experience among planning authorities, site managers, administrative services, and other users in France. It first defined the expectations of the target audience – the key French Natura 2000 operators described above – by a needs assessment study, and subsequently conducted constant feedback checks. Thanks (in part) to this thorough needs assessment and regular feedback, the platform has managed to reach over 1,000 people, including 600 Natura 2000 project managers, 250 representatives of State services (Ministry of the Environment and decentralised services in Regions and Departments), members of the Natura 2000 steering committee and individual thematic experts. Members of the ATEN network have access to tailor-made guidance documents and training (e.g. on site management planning) and are encouraged to participate in information exchange and peer-to-peer learning. The resulting conservation benefits would be impossible without the detailed and continuing attention to the needs of the platform’s target audience.
- The risks associated with certain management practices are also an important element of any initial situation analysis. For instance, the application **“A Collaborative Approach to Managing Fisheries in Eng-**



**lish European Marine Sites” of the UK Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA),** aimed at securing effective fisheries management for the marine Natura 2000 sites at highest risk from fisheries activities. A baseline tenet was the recognition that fishing is one of the main potential negative impacts on marine Natura 2000 sites, particularly inshore reefs but also sandbank habitats. A first step was therefore an in-depth risk analysis related to fishing. A matrix showing the different risk ratings for fishing gear types was prepared and scaled. This risk rating approach in relation to management of marine fishing activities was a new concept in English waters. Based on the analysis, high-risk activities (red risk) were prioritised for the introduction of targeted management measures and the passing of corresponding bylaws. These bylaws give national legal protection to the European habitats. More than 80 areas covering 3,250 square kilometres were closed to bottom towed gear as a result, in agreement with fisheries operators.

- Apart from needs and risks, the feasibility of a planned intervention is another aspect that should form part of an initial situation analysis. One example where such a feasibility study was conducted was the application **“International Flight from Spain to Bulgaria – Lesser Kestrel Recovery in Sakar SPA”**. It was run by the Bulgarian NGO **Green Balkans – Stara Zagora** in its capacity of coordinating beneficiary of a LIFE+ funded project, in cooperation with the Spanish NGO Defensa y Estudio del Medio Ambiente (DEMA). The project not only presents an excellent example of cooperation between NGOs from different Member States and of effective knowledge transfer, but it was also based on a thorough feasibility study and habitat model. This concluded that natural re-colonisation of Lesser Kestrel (*Falco naumanni*) from the neighbouring Turkish and Greek populations was unlikely, but that it would be possible to re-introduce the species using the so-called “hacking” method. Thanks to the joint initiative, a total of 286 Lesser Kestrels were released in the SPA between 2013 and 2015, and the first breeding pairs after two decades were recorded soon after (8-9 pairs in 2014, 9-13 pairs in 2015). The achievements have particular merit for Natura 2000 since Sakar SPA was the last site with remaining individuals of *F. naumanni* in Bulgaria.



### Suggestions / Recommendations for future applicants

A clear analysis of beneficiary needs, the species and habitats of Community interest addressed, the pressures ameliorated and the overall feasibility of activities will go a long way in ensuring a sound impact logic of applications to the Award. How this can be achieved was demonstrated by some of the good practice examples of the 2016 round.

As in 2015, more concise baseline data against which to measure eventual success will considerably strengthen many future applications. The impact hypothesis of all applicants – including those in the Communication and Socio-Economic Benefits categories – should be clearly stated, particularly with regard to the conservation status of the species and habitats addressed.

One way of conducting such an initial situation analysis meeting these requirements would be application and adaptation of the Conservation Measures Partnership's Open Standards for the Practice of Conservation (Conservation Measures Partnership, 2013).

## 5.4 Promoting conceptual and technical innovation

The 2016 round of the Natura 2000 Award again yielded a very wide range of innovative approaches and methodological inventions. Many of these warrant Community-wide replication. While not all cases of conceptual or technical ingenuity can be mentioned, outstanding examples include the following:

- An example of a wide range of important methodological innovations – and at the same time an innovative consortium structure – is the application **“Co-existing with Bears in the 21st Century: Difficulties and Achievements: Kastoria, Greece”** which was carried out by the Greek NGO **Callisto** with its partners, the Region of Western Macedonia and Anka, an institution constituted by the Municipalities, the Association of Farming Cooperatives and the Chamber of Commerce of Kastoria Prefecture. This project set out to improve coexistence between bears and humans in the Kastoria region, by reducing the incidence of human-bear conflict in the area. The project introduced novel specifications to enhance traditional anti-bear barriers and signage on a major highway, as well as special wildlife reflectors. They also included the development of a national protocol on how to manage dangerous situations when bears approach inhabited areas. In addition, the establishment of an emergency response team and crisis management committees at national and regional levels represents another original approach for Greece. As a result of these innovations, the annual number of vehicle collisions involving bears was reduced from 8-9 at the beginning to 2-3 at the end of the project (a period of a few years), with only one single accident recorded in 2015. The attitude of the local population towards bears was also measurably improved.



- Technological innovation can also benefit awareness orientated initiatives: The Portuguese **Centro Ciência Viva do Alviela**, an interactive space for science and technology dissemination, submitted an application on **“Bats of Alviela’s Cave: Knowing to Preserve”**. In order to increase the awareness of the public about bats and the habitats which they depend on within the Natura 2000 site



*Serras de Aire e Candeeiros Natural Park*, the applicants employed an inventive communication technology: The interactive exhibition entirely dedicated to bats (the *Quiroptário*), which is on display at the Alviela Centre, includes the possibility to watch bats in their natural habitat through live streaming (cameras have been installed in a cave closed to public access). Wildlife live streaming is nowadays a widely used tool. However, it still targets mainly charismatic species such as birds or more appealing mammals, and its application to bats is hence innovative.

- Sometimes the real innovation lies not only in developing a theoretical concept, but also in making it work in practice. A **WWF-led NGO coalition** conducted the project **“For the Balkans and the People: Linking Nature Protection and Sustainable Rural Development”**, which won this year’s **Natura 2000 Award in the “Socio-economic Benefits” category**.



The project supported the realisation of socio-economic benefits linked to nature conservation in six Natura 2000 sites in the Balkan Mountains in Bulgaria; a region ranked among the poorest in the EU. This was pursued using a variety of tools, including payments for ecosystem services, financial support, marketing, training and changes in national policy. One particularly innovative aspect of this submission was that it actually managed to establish functioning PES schemes on the ground: Four private PES schemes were created. One of them, the PES scheme for watershed protection, attracted private financing from 12 businesses to restore forests in the watershed to improve water quality and quantity. This has had an impact on 60,000 people who were experiencing water shortages. Taken together, these PES schemes (as opposed to mere valuation exercises) are highly innovative at national/regional level and a fine example of theory being put into practice.

- Cutting-edge technology can open new avenues to address long-standing challenges to the effective conservation of species of Community interest. An example is the Spanish application **“STOP POISON: actions to save necrophagous birds in Natura 2000 site Sierra de Castril”**, which was developed jointly by the **General Directorate of Environment and Regional Planning of**



**Andalusia Region and the Castril Municipality.** It aimed at reconciling sustainable livestock farming with the conservation of vulture species in the area, namely the Griffon vulture *Gyps fulvus* and the Bearded vulture *Gypaetus barbatus*. In the past, these species suffered mortality from illegal use of poisoned baits. The initiative supported livestock breeders by building new watering places for livestock, repairing mountain shelters, building communal sheepfolds to protect the livestock against predation etc., in exchange for their commitment not to use poisoned baits to control predators, to maintain livestock in secured areas, and to permit inspections on their property. This was additionally supported by important and innovative surveillance technology: DNA analysis techniques were applied to identify the livestock flocks, and therefore the owners, that were the origin of the poisoned baits. Additionally, spatial and temporal models to predict potential areas where poisoned baits and dead birds were likely to be found were developed. Together with other parameters, these allowed the establishment of predictive maps on actual and potential high risk areas for poisoning. Survey efforts could then be concentrated to the high risk spots, leading to better preventative results.

- In contrast to the previous example, technological innovations do not need to be very complex in order to be effective: The French community organisation **Syndicat Mixte du Massif des Maures** submitted the application “**Manual Brush Cutting in Favour of Habitats and Species of Community Interest**”, which was aimed at conservation of the Hermann’s tortoise (*Testudo hermanni*), a species of Community



ity interest, and its habitats – the temporary ponds, which are also habitat of Community interest. The area near the Mediterranean coast to the East of Toulon is one of the French strongholds of this species. The project managed to replace an inadequate mechanical method for maintaining the forest fire breaks, which had traditionally been applied by the French Forest Fires Defence Agency to prevent forest fires, and which seriously affected the tortoises and their fragile temporary ponds. The innovation consisted in introducing much simpler manual clearing techniques instead, in cooperation with several local players including the Natura 2000 managing body, State services, Coeur du Var Community of Communes, and Plaine des Maures National Nature Reserve. A clear set of recommendations was developed and agreed for each of the target locations. These were integrated in the ToR of the subcontractors who execute the clearing works for fire prevention. According to the application, the efforts have led to a significant decrease in mortality of *T. hermanni* and better preservation of the temporary ponds.

#### **Suggestions / Recommendations for future applicants**

The above examples show that innovation in relation to Natura 2000 management and governance does not require rocket science – even if there are cases where the transfer of modern technology (e.g. molecular genetics or modern communication technology) to the conservation sector has clearly benefited Natura 2000 habitats and species.

Future applicants should continue exploring the added value offered by this type of knowledge and technological transfer, but should also seek more conceptual innovation, e.g. in terms of engagement of stakeholders. In addition, Natura 2000 actors should remain aware of the manifold opportunities to introduce innovation at the local or even national level, by learning from other sites throughout the network.

## 5.5 Looking beyond individual sites

Looking beyond individual sites promises added values in terms of the effectiveness of the overall Natura 2000 network. Not only is connectivity between sites one of the goals formulated in the Habitats Directive and migration between sites an integral part of the biology of many species of Community interest, but the huge geographical extent of the network and the corresponding diversity among the managers running it also offers considerable potential for cooperation and mutual support between Natura 2000 areas which are often located far from each other, i.e. in multiple Member States. The 2016 edition of the Natura 2000 Award has produced rich examples of these benefits of looking beyond individual sites:

- Migratory birds are among the clearest examples of the need to go beyond individual sites for effective conservation. The EU is large enough to cover substantial parts of the flyway of numerous species to make flyway-scale projects feasible, if not indispensable. One excellent example of such a project was the application “**Conservation without Borders for the Rarest Waterbird of Europe**” organised by the **Helenic Society for the Protection of Birds** in cooperation with their international BirdLife partners. This project won the **Natura 2000 Award in the category “Cross-border Cooperation and Networking”**. It aimed to conserve the wintering and staging grounds of the Fennoscandian population of the Lesser White-fronted goose (*Anser erythropus*) and thereby halt the decline of its population, which was measured at only 50-70 individuals at the outset of the project. The applicant focused on 14 sites in four countries (Bulgaria, Greece, Hungary and Finland, as well as Norway), where local conservation networks were built and a wide range of conservation actions implemented (monitoring, securing patrolling and habitat restoration, policy work, awareness raising, vocational training and environmental education). As a result, the project enhanced knowledge about the Lesser White-fronted goose population, correcting the estimated number to over 110 birds registered at present. Apart from this, the network of those involved in the conservation of the target species grew to over 100 people in 18 countries all along the species’ flyway. In addition, the project trained 50 staff of game breeding husbandries in Greece and Bulgaria in applying novel patrolling schemes, forming an effective patrolling network on the ground.



- Collaboration among Natura 2000 sites can also benefit non-migratory birds. The application **“Bearded Vulture Reintroduction Project in Andalusia”** submitted by the Spanish NGO **Fundación Gypaetus** supported the re-introduction of the Bearded vulture in the Natural Park Sierra of Cazorla, Segura y Las Villas by captive breeding and release of 37 bearded vulture chicks since 2006. The source populations were brought from existing populations of the species, similar to those used for Lesser kestrel reintroduction in Bulgaria using source populations from Spain (see application **“International Flight from Spain to Bulgaria – Lesser Kestrel Recovery in Sakar SPA”**). The Foundation's breeding centre in Guadalentín has also provided Bearded vultures for re-introduction in several other European areas. This further illustrates the added value of cooperation between sites (and often between Member States) for species reintroduction projects.



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- Within a single Member State but on an even more impressive geographical scale, landscape conservation promises to integrate conservation initiatives at the site level into one coordinated effort that covers the entire landscape. The project **“Futurescapes: Promoting the development of landscape-scale conservation across the UK”** run by the British **Royal Society for the Protection of Birds** is an example of how this approach can be applied to the Natura 2000 network. Its main objective was to encourage and support the development and implementation of landscape-scale conservation initiatives, involving many partners in 38 priority areas across the UK (each harbouring at least one, but usually complexes of Natura 2000 sites, with a total of 134 sites involved). To achieve this, partnerships to carry out direct conservation interventions and policy work were formed using creative engagement tools, and 198 individual (site-specific) projects were identified and in most cases implemented with the support of the local public and stakeholders. Actions ranged from linking iconic Caledonian forests in the Cairngorms, Scotland, to working with private water companies in Northern England to protect and enhance peatlands. This was accompanied by high-level advocacy and general communications work. As a result, 144 newly formed partnerships delivered more than 100,000 hectares of conservation enhancements – habitat restoration, site enlargement, enhanced connectivity and providing land manager advice. About 19% of interventions resulted in enlargement of Natura 2000 sites, 31% improved connectivity, another 31% improved management and 19% resulted in designation of new sites. The community engagement programme reached 310,000 people. Taken together, these outcomes strengthened connectivity and effectiveness of the individual sites and demonstrated that their sum can be considerably more than the parts.



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- There were additional applications directed at landscape-scale conservation. The submission **“Life TIB - Trans Insubria Bionet”** of the **Provincia di Varese**, as the lead implementer of a LIFE project of the same name, focused on habitat connectivity along the conservation corridor between the Ticino Valley (Parco Naturale della Valle del Ticino) and the Varese Pre-Alps (Parco Regionale Campo dei Fiori) in northern Italy. The project implemented in-situ conservation actions between the two targeted Natura 2000 sites, such as construction of underpasses for amphibians and other animals, creation of drywalls, ponds, and dead wood, planting of willows, installation of nest boxes, etc.. It also convened a “network agreement” by 42 municipalities, the beneficiaries of the project, and the site administrations of the two regional parks. The use of the new connectivity infrastructure by a number of species was confirmed, although most of these were not the target species of the project. Through the network agreement, all signees committed themselves to maintaining the ecological corridor through adequate planning. This included the commitment to carry out a “simplified” environmental impact assessment pursuant of Article 6.3 of the Habitats Directive for all planned projects near the Natura 2000 sites.


- The social and institutional connectivity of the Natura 2000 network is as important as its geographical and ecological connectivity. **“Connecting the Sonian Forest and its stakeholders near Brussels”** carried out by the **Agency of Nature and Forest (ANB)** of the Ministry of Environment, Nature and Energy, Government of Flanders, Belgium (with its partners) invested in this connectivity dimension. It promoted integrated management of the Sonian Forest, located at the intersection of the Flemish, the Brussels-Capital and the Walloon regions, including its four Natura 2000 sites. Important management targets where integration has shown results have been the strengthening of the core zone and biodiversity of the forest, visitor management (steering recreation towards well-developed recreational gates), development of ecological networks linking the forest with the surrounding environment, limiting fragmentation by infrastructure, and working towards one recognisable identity of the forest by harmonizing the regional approaches. This has led to more effective biodiversity conservation, better connectivity and an improved conservation status of target biodiversity, as well as an enhanced and easier-to-access recreational infrastructure and visitor experience. Most importantly, the forest has become the basis of one common, shared identity among those involved there, and hence tighter social connectedness.



### Suggestions / Recommendations for future applicants

Future applicants should take into account the good practice in terms of landscape and flyway scale conservation efforts demonstrated in the 2016 round of the Natura 2000 Award. The scale of connectivity solutions devised should be appropriate to the needs of the species and habitats in question. Technical, institutional and social aspects of connectivity are all worth considering.

As the impacts of climate change, a major challenge to the network's overall effectiveness, will only become more significant over time, new ideas to strengthen the network character of Natura 2000 will remain highly welcome.

## 5.6 Realising socio-economic benefits

The number of applications under the Socio-Economic Benefits category increased to 11 in the 2016 round of the Award, and included some noteworthy ways in which socio-economic benefits can be generated from Natura 2000 sites:

- Some projects concentrated on supporting local stakeholders in optimising the financial benefits they received from Natura 2000 sites while minimising environmental damage. For example, the Spanish NGO **Fundación Global Natur** implemented the project **“Promotion of Sustainable Farming Products in Natura 2000 Locations”**. This project targeted three Natura 2000 sites in Castile-La Mancha and Castile-Leon, in order to engage 400 farmers growing their products in Natura 2000 locations, especially in the surroundings of sensitive wetlands. It supported the production of organic legume, almond and other products through agricultural extension, value chains and certification as well as regional branding approaches: Seeds were provided to farmers, the produce was bought and packaged, making reference to its origin and supporting local, national and international marketing (e.g. fairs). In addition, farmers participated in training courses and networking. Cooperation among them was also supported, e.g. by creation of a cooperative of organic almond producers in Villacaña. This enabled the participating farmers to produce in a way that is both ecologically and economically sustainable, and hence realise the full economic benefits of agricultural activities in their Natura 2000 sites.



© Fundación Global Nature
- Beyond the potential to realise socio-economic benefits through technical and marketing support, some applications aimed to exploit the general potential of Natura 2000 sites to act as catalysts for the local identity, development and community spirit. The **Municipality of the Greek island of Skyros** and partners demonstrated what happens **“When a Mountain Becomes the**



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***Symbol of an Aegean Island, the Case of Skyros***". This project started from the Municipality's vision of an eco-friendly year-round model of holidays with quality services to contribute to local sustainable development and socio-economic benefits. It aimed to mobilise the productive, cultural and development forces of Skyros Island and its Natura 2000 site, the Mountain Kochylas, while respecting the natural environment, culture and traditions. Various biodiversity oriented tourism activities (e.g. birding tourism, green tourism) were set up, including a 38-km hiking trail that is at the heart of the green tourism-related activities. A participatory tourism action plan was prepared and realised with involvement of experts, local authorities and stakeholders. In addition, ecotourism activities were promoted in Greece and abroad. This attracted new, high-spending visitor groups and foreign operators, extended the tourism season and greatly contributed to the local annual income from nature based tourism of more than half a million Euros.

- As illustrated above, benefits that are related to tourism are among the most obvious socio-economic benefits offered by Natura 2000 sites. Among the submissions which enhanced these, the application ***"Oulanka - Wellbeing and Welfare for the Local Community"*** of ***Metsähallitus/Parks & Wildlife Finland*** was particularly interesting. As Oulanka is one of the most diverse Natura 2000 areas by number of habitats and plant species in Finland and potentially vulnerable for uncontrolled recreation use, the project addressed the need for planning and implementation of sustainable tourism. This was pursued through the area's management plan (under implementation since 2010), and the sustainable tourism development strategy, updated in 2011. Concrete measures included concessions with tourism companies, joint development projects with local partners and thematic outdoor events. For instance, local tourism businesses benefitted from a local brand, investments into the trail infrastructure at the site, from 26 cooperation/rental agreements, and support in the development of event-like and off-season tourism products. Taken together, this created benefits for both visitors and the local tourism industry.



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- The project ***"For the Balkans and the People: Linking Nature Protection and Sustainable Rural Development"***, organised by a **WWF-led coalition**, which won this year's **Natura 2000 Award in the "Socio-economic Benefits" category**, was not only innovative. It also managed to capture the socio-economic value of the ecosystem services provided by six Natura 2000 sites in a relatively poor area of Bulgaria. This allowed to acknowledge financially the activities of land users who help maintain these ecosystem services (i.e. watershed production, provision of genetic resources and other values of grasslands). Four private Payment for Ecosystem Services (PES) schemes were created and financing was attracted from 16 firms for the restoration of high natural value (HNV) grasslands and water ecosystems. For example, a high natural value grasslands preservation PES scheme was prepared jointly with the K-express restaurant chain. A local label was created and traditional meals were promoted, with a marketing impact on 7,300 customers in large cities and a media campaign that reached about 100,000 people was undertaken. About 10% of the revenues went to the purchasing of lambs for grazing of HNV grassland

habitat. It is highly desirable that the project's focus on setting up functional PES schemes to capture the socio-economic benefits of ecosystem services be replicated throughout the EU.

- It is important to focus not only on social benefits of Natura 2000 sites that can be expressed financially, but to also acknowledge their immense aesthetic values. For example, the project **“Nature Concerthall”** of the **Latvian association of the same name (Society “Dabas Koncertzāle”)** which won the **Natura 2000 Award in the category “Communication”**, was not only noteworthy for its unusual actors. By taking an artistic view on nature, it also drew the attention to these aesthetic values and offered an accessible way for the general public to experience and enjoy them. Considering the long tradition and scale of the activities, as well as the number of people reached to date, this clearly represents a prime example of realizing the social (if less the economic) benefits of the Natura 2000 network.

#### Suggestions / Recommendations for future applicants

The 2016 round of the Award has produced some interesting examples of both general social and more specific economic benefits. Both avenues should be considered by future applicants.

Most Natura 2000 related projects produce some socio-economic benefits as the species and habitats targeted by them contribute to ecosystem services, which in turn sustain and enhance human wellbeing. The challenge is often to demonstrate this at the individual application level. By clarifying the link between an improved conservation status of species and habitats on the one hand, and the generation of human wellbeing benefits on the other, future submissions will significantly enhance their chances of success.

This could be further complemented by a concise yet quantified financial cost-benefit analysis. The provision of information on the costs of the activities presented in an application is imperative under the Cost-Benefit criterion; this information is even more crucial for applications under the Socio-Economic benefits.

## 5.7 Planning durability from the start

Among the 2016 submissions to the Natura 2000 Award, various effective ways of securing the durability of project interventions were showcased. These addressed durability as an integral part of design of activities from the outset, considering factors as diverse as their partnership structures, land ownership and long-term contracts based on leveraging additional national funding, self-sustaining economic setups and climate change resilience:

- The project **“URBANCOWS: Restoration and Public Access of an Urban Coastal Meadow Complex in Pärnu”** of the **Environmental Board of Estonia** with its partners introduced conservation management of coastal meadows and lagoons in the city of Pärnu. The poor initial conservation status of the habitats had been due to overgrowth, eutrophication, drainage, and pollution with rubbish and wastewater. Management activities comprised of the mechanical removal of old reeds and bushes, reintroduction of cattle grazing, hydrological restoration of coastal lagoons, as well as a publicity initiative and building a visitor centre with a nature trail and two observation towers. Importantly, the durability of the project's results will depend on

the continuation of the recurrent grazing regime on the urban grasslands. This is being ensured in two ways: the activities are supported under the national Rural Development Programme - cattle owners signed five-year management contracts in 2015 and are likely to be offered the same for 2020-2026. On a broader scale, the entity responsible for future management will be two main consortium partners: the Environmental Board and Pärnu Town Government, which is also the main landowner. In combination, the long-term grazing contracts and the involvement of the town government – as the management authority and at the same time landowner – are well thought-out and should be sufficient to safeguard durability.

- As with the above case, a typical way of overcoming the challenge posed by short project lifecycles is to attract project partners who will stay involved in the long run once the project itself has finished. One example of this approach was provided by the project **“Creating Green Corridors for Biodiversity under High-tension Lines in Belgium and France”** of the implementing consortium of the **LIFE-Elia project**. This involved Elia (the Belgian grid operator), RTE (the French grid operator), the Walloon Region, and the Belgian NGOs Solon-Nature Gestion Photographie and CARAH (Agricultural Services of Hainaut Province). The project aimed at creating green corridors under overhead electrical lines in Belgium and France, within and between 35 Natura 2000 sites, to decrease disruption of ecosystems, the landscape, and local land use. The involvement of the grid operators in the project consortium from the very outset is an excellent guarantee for the long-term maintenance of the corridors in question. Moreover, the new vegetation management model developed by the project is cheaper than the traditional one, and hence more likely to be taken up by additional commercial companies. These efforts to ensure sustainability were accompanied by additional investments into long-term durability of project impacts, such as training and capacity building for corridor maintenance companies and the facilitation of stakeholder dialogue to build a broad support base.



Moreover, the new vegetation management model developed by the project is cheaper than the traditional one, and hence more likely to be taken up by additional commercial companies. These efforts to ensure sustainability were accompanied by additional investments into long-term durability of project impacts, such as training and capacity building for corridor maintenance companies and the facilitation of stakeholder dialogue to build a broad support base.

- In addition to applications focusing on institutional durability as the one described above, there were others that focused more on the economic sustainability of their results as a main prerequisite for overall durability. The project **“Terre dell’ Oasi: Sustainable Farming in Nature Reserves”** of the WWF spin-off **WWF Oasi** is a prime example of this approach: The goal



of the project was to create a new brand and market niche for organic farming products from four Natura 2000 sites, thereby recovering traditional local agricultural practices and supporting farmland species depending on them. An agricultural cooperative was established to assist local producers of spelt and ancient wheat varieties in processing and nationwide marketing. Revenues are generated from the direct sale of the products both in the shops of the sites and online through an e-

commerce website. This business model does not rely on external funding and is hence economically self-sustaining. In just five years since the launch of the project in 2010, revenues have increased nine times. Further growth appears possible, given that the organic farming market is growing in Italy.

- On a longer time scale, the effectiveness and sustainability of the Natura 2000 network as a whole to conserve biodiversity will depend on its ability to adapt to climate change. Since climate change is likely to lead to shifts in ecological factors along latitudinal and altitudinal axes, the adaptation potential of the Natura 2000 network will depend on the degree to which it allows for adaptive range shifts and migrations of biota. This is why connectivity and hence projects aimed at landscape scale conservation also contribute to network sustainability in the face of climate change. One example of such a submission is the project **“Futurescapes: Promoting the development of landscape-scale conservation across the UK”** of the British **Royal Society for the Protection of Birds**, which promoted connectivity within 38 priority areas containing a total of 134 Natura 2000 sites, as discussed above under Section 5.5.

#### Suggestions / Recommendations for future applicants

Durability of the described activities was one of the areas that attracted most comments and questions from evaluators during both the 2015 and 2016 Natura 2000 Award cycles. To assess durability, it is necessary to first identify the need for long-term impacts of an activity and then to measure what was actually achieved against these needs. Applicants also need to clearly distinguish between possibilities, plans and concrete achievements in relation to durability.

It is recommended that applications to the scheme are only submitted once measurable results have been achieved, and an informed judgement of the durability of these results can be made.

## 5.8 Mobilising a wide range of resources

Useful and replicable ways of resource mobilisation in support of Natura 2000 activities were showcased by applicants to the 2016 Natura 2000 Award. This focused largely on engaging financing partners from the business sector and the use of non-monetary resources such as volunteering. Typical examples of all of these approaches include the following:

- The British NGO **Blue Marine Foundation** implemented the project **“The Lyme Bay Fisheries and Conservation Reserve”**, which promoted a sustainable and profitable future for fishermen in the Natura 2000 site “Lyme Bay and Torbay”, enabling conditions for habitat recovery for reefs in the area, and a local seafood brand. In terms of resource mobilisation, the most interesting aspect of this sub-



mission was that the retailing company Marks & Spencer – one of the major business partners of Blue Marine Foundation – covered a large proportion of the costs of this project (in addition to the UK Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs). Identifying potential win-win constellations for funding arrangements and engaging the partners necessary to bring these to life, is a promising approach for diversifying resources and developing activities independent of major EU funding streams. This should be considered more widely.

- There are also examples where businesses have become partners to financially support the implementation of conservation projects on properties that they manage for profit. The project **“Coastal Habitat and Species Conservation in European Saltworks”** of the consortium of the Italian ***Instituto Della Ecologia Applicata*** and its partners in the framework of a LIFE+ project addressed the conservation of coastal and dunes habitats with their breeding avifauna in six Natura 2000 sites in Italy, France and Bulgaria. This was pursued through reconstructing sluices and drainage channels to improve the hydrological conditions in coastal saltworks, building artificial breeding islets, removing electrical power lines, etc. Interestingly, one of the project partners – who contributed almost half a million Euros to this project – was the French saltwork operator *Compagnie des Salins du Midi et des Salines de l'Est*. The cooperation and financial support of this business clearly contributed to the project's overall success.



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- As in previous rounds, the 2016 Natura 2000 Award produced fine examples of using the commitment, expertise and experience of volunteers as a resource in conservation projects. A consortium consisting of a **local branch of the German BirdLife partner NABU**, the Stechlin-Ruppiner Land Nature Park and two scuba diving organisations conducted the project **“Diving for Conservation”**. The focus of this project was the threatened vegetation of submerged macrophytes in numerous lakes within six Natura 2000 sites in the Federal States of Brandenburg and Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania. This project has a strong macrophyte monitoring component, which was largely implemented by volunteer recreational scuba divers. They were trained by conservationists to carry out independent macrophyte assessments and recommend changes. To date, more than 300 dives throughout Germany focusing on macrophyte composition have taken place. Conservationists as well as administrations and private landowners can use the data collected as an early-warning system indicating changing conditions and thus adapt management measures. By volunteering for this project, the divers themselves have found an additional mission and purpose for their hobby. This resembles the application **“Monitoring Insects with Public Participation, a Citizen Science Initiative”**, which developed efficient and low impact monitoring methods for nine insect species of Community interest within protected areas. The idea be-



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hind both projects was to train and then use volunteer aficionados for monitoring purposes.

- The project **“Breaking the Stereotype: NGO + Business Preserving Natura 2000 Together”** was run by **CEMEX España** (a large quarrying and cement producing company), together with the Spanish BirdLife partner SEO and the local NGO Grupo Naumanni and employed a combination of the two approaches described above. This project aimed to establish a collaboration between conservationists and the cement industry in order to better protect five bird species (including the Western Marsh harrier *Circus aeruginosus*, Purple swamphen *Porphyrio porphyrio*, and Black-winged stilt *Himantopus himantopus*) in two Natura 2000 sites near Madrid that are used for quarrying. Activities to build mutual trust and agreement on a mutually acceptable way to manage the risks of extractive activities to target species resulted in the establishment of a Memorandum of Understanding and a Biodiversity Action Plan. The project also comprised various practical actions including participatory actions to directly involve CEMEX staff in the conservation process and to increase their conservation awareness. In this way, CEMEX staff also contributed practically to the project, in addition to the company funding it, which represents an unusual resource for Natura 2000. Another original way of securing resources for operational funding of core activities after the project was the establishment of a trust fund with seed money from CEMEX.
- The project **“For the Balkans and the People: Linking Nature Protection and Sustainable Rural Development”**, of a **WWF-led coalition**, which won this year’s **Natura 2000 Award in the “Socio-economic Benefits” category** also highlighted the great potential of payment for ecosystems (PES) schemes to widen the resource base of Natura 2000 sites.



#### Suggestions / Recommendations for future applicants

The 2015 Environmental Benchmarking Report raised the question how PES can be institutionalised and used more widely to support and resource the Natura 2000 network. It is encouraging to see how successfully this question has been addressed by at least one application of the 2016 round. Additional examples of how the idea of PES can be turned into functioning mechanisms on the ground will also be welcome as submissions to future rounds of the Award.

## 5.9 Measuring and communicating success

The 2015 Benchmarking Report in the framework of the Natura 2000 Award identified a number of important potential areas of improvement in relation to measuring and communicating success. Although this area remains challenging for many applicants, the 2016 round saw several interesting solutions to the challenges identified a year ago:

- The project **“Demonstrating success in Blanket Bog Restoration at RSPB/United Utilities Partnership”** jointly managed by the British **Royal Society for the Protection of Birds** and the water company, **United Utilities** won this year’s **Natura 2000 Award in the category “Conservation”**. The aim of this project



was to improve water quality, conservation status for selected habitats and the conservation status of typical bird species of blanket bogs in a Natura 2000 site in the South Pennines/Peak District Moors. This aim was achieved by reducing drainage and raising water level in the area. In addition, sphagnum blocks were harvested from donor sites and transplanted to the target area. The project stands out for its well-designed, well-integrated and meticulously executed monitoring system: Bird monitoring data provide one of the best examples of population responses to blanket bog restoration in UK uplands. Three bird species were monitored, all of which increased in numbers since the restoration activities started. For Dunlin (*Calidris alpina schinzii*) there has been an increase from 15 to 43 pairs between 2010 and 2015. Golden plover (*Pluvialis apricaria*) increased from 72 pairs in 2010 to 92 pairs in 2014, and Curlew (*Numenius arquata*) increased from 36 to 43 pairs in the same period. This shows how the careful choice of indicators, the establishment of a clear baseline and continuous monitoring over a project’s lifespan can both measure and lay the foundation for demonstrating project success.

- One of the persistent challenges to project monitoring not only in a Natura 2000 context is the impact monitoring of communication and awareness raising as well as reconciliation and mediation activities, i.e. the measurement of changes in awareness and attitude and the results in terms of different actors working together. Among the encouraging examples which tackled this challenge was the project **“Sturgeons: Protect Danube’s Treasure”** carried out by **WWF Romania** with its partners. The objective of this initiative was to raise awareness about overexploitation of Danube sturgeon in Romania and Bulgaria. The project managed to measure the impact of its communication activities covering 6 Natura 2000 sites in Romania. A survey carried out with the 122 fishermen involved in the project, revealed significant changes in their attitudes: in 2013, more than half of the interviewed fishermen did not see an alternative income source to fishing, whereas by 2015 the majority (75.8% in Romania and 90% in Bulgaria), were interested in alternative sources of income; the majority were against the sturgeon fishing ban in 2013 but considered it a good measure to protect sturgeons by 2015. This is important information for judging the effectiveness of projects of this kind. Efforts of this kind should be made more often to measure the success of communication, reconciliation and mediation activities.
- Another example of measuring change of attitude was the project **“Co-existing with Bears in the 21st Century: Difficulties and Achievements: Kastoria, Greece”** run by the Greek **NGO Callisto** with its partners. Aimed at improved coexistence of humans and bears in the Greek region of Kastoria, this initiative included various measures to reduce traffic accidents involving bears, as well as bear damage to livestock and beehives and to reduce risks of bears approaching inhabited areas, through the installation of bear-proof waste bins. Emergency response and crisis

management mechanisms were also established. From a monitoring point of view, it is interesting that the applicant was able to demonstrate the attitude change triggered by the project. A questionnaire was conducted at the beginning and at the end of the project to assess the change of perception and opinion of the region's inhabitants regarding bear presence. In the first survey, 43% of respondents had the impression that bear population had strongly increased in the area, 49% expressed fear about the situation, and 71% considered the measures in place to resolve the problem ineffective. After the end of the project, their opinions were much more positive: 76% of the respondents considered that the project had diminished conflicting situations with bears, and 32% of respondents had actively participated.

### **Suggestions / Recommendations for future applicants**

Most of the recommendations to future applicants in the 2015 Benchmarking Report referred to measuring and communicating success. Several of the participants of the 2016 round presented valid and replicable solutions to the challenges previously encountered, particularly with regard to quantifying outputs, establishing baselines, and measuring change in attitude and behaviour. These should be borne in mind by future applicants.

Other challenges remain, including the clarification of links to Natura 2000 sites and species of Community interest, demonstrating impact by quantifying the area/habitat surface/species' population affected, discussing the baseline and resulting situation in terms of target audience attitudes, quantifying socio-economic benefits as well as general cost-benefit ratios, and documenting monitoring methods as well as referencing data. Any future submissions to the Award scheme that address these challenges will stand a considerable chance to add to the body of good practice in Natura 2000 applications.

In addition, generic project design approaches such as the Conservation Measures Partnership's Open Standards for the Practice of Conservation (Conservation Measures Partnership 2013) or the Conservation Management System (CMSi 2016) remain promising tools for Natura 2000 related activities as they can help clarify and present the relationship between actions, outputs, outcomes and impacts, or to design meaningful indicators of success. It would be desirable to see examples of applications applying these to Natura 2000 in the future.

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## **5.10 Learning, knowledge sharing and communication as core application components**

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Learning, knowledge sharing and communication remain important aspects of all Award categories in 2016, but particularly for the "Communication" category. Examples from the 2016 applications included communication and learning efforts directed at both the general public and more specialist audiences and encompassed various geographical scales ranging from local to Community-wide:

- The Austrian company **Suske Consulting**, together with their Croatian and German partners, entered the competition with **“My Little Piece of Land”**. The initiative addressed the problem that most citizens of rural areas are still insufficiently informed about the existence and purpose of Natura 2000. Therefore, the consortium focused on the important role of farmers in the protection of Croatia’s Natura 2000 habitats and species. Examples of successful coexistence between humans and nature were highlighted through an exhibition called “My little piece of land”, through which 14 farmers working within Croatian Natura 2000 sites were portrayed. This and associated dissemination tools illustrated the positive ways in which the work of farmers affect nature and society. The farmers portrayed in the exhibition received a tribute for their contribution, which also helped improve their image. Their personal stories enabled visitors to relate to the main messages more easily and understand the role of traditional farming for biodiversity conservation. The exhibition travelled across smaller towns and villages, which is not common in Croatia. The announcements of exhibition openings, as well as opening events etc. gathered a large number of curious visitors and catalysed useful discussions. Taken together, this shows how communication can be enhanced through personalisation and by taking the message directly to the people for whom it is intended.


- Other applications highlighted exemplary learning and communication mechanisms on a more specialist level. For instance, the application **“The Lyme Bay Fisheries and Conservation Reserve”** submitted by the British **Blue Marine Foundation** aimed at establishing more sustainable fisheries through the creation of a multi-stakeholder group, codes of conduct, stipulating pots and net limits, and overall more effective management to protect fish and shellfish stocks and their habitats. This project paid particular attention to ensuring replicability of its results. The multi-stakeholder management model developed for the site was deliberately designed in such a way that it can be applied in other marine sites in UK. The project was well documented and best-practice management tools were developed, which could inform implementation of similar plans elsewhere. It has further been an objective to create a scalable model adaptive to other sites and a similar project is already under preparation for duplication in the Solent on the South coast of England, which is also designated as a Natura 2000 site. In addition, a national conference was held in September 2013. This attracted 170 delegates from all around the UK and good media coverage. 15 other UK sites have expressed interest in the methodology developed, following this conference.
- One of the advantages of cooperation across the Natura 2000 network is that it can facilitate international knowledge exchange. In the framework of the programme **“International Flight from Spain to Bulgaria – Lesser Kestrel Recovery in Sakar SPA”** run by the Bulgarian NGO **Green Balkans – Stara Zagora** with its Spanish partner NGO **Defensa y Estudio del Medio Ambiente (DEMA)**, Lesser kestrels were transported from Spain to Bulgaria to re-introduce this species of Community interest in its former range there. Along with the birds, know-how from DEMA was transferred and the methodology was adapted to the Bulgarian context. The choice

of partner was based on DEMA being one of the leading organisations in Lesser Kestrel captive breeding and reintroduction. The specific method involved introduction of chicks from the DEMA captive breeding centre in Spain, and their subsequent accommodation with ‘foster’ parents in the Green Balkans captive breeding facility, where they spent some 20 days growing and fledging before being ready for release. Deploying this complex system requires excellent partnership and finely tuned communication and networking mechanism. Thanks in part to this international co-operation and learning effort, the species was successfully re-introduced in Bulgaria, and between 9 and 13 pairs were breeding at the project site in 2015.

- An even wider approach was taken by the application **“Coordination Group of the Boreal Natura 2000 Biogeographical Process” of the Finnish National Board of Forestry (Metsähallitus)**. This group was recently set up to foster networking among the countries of the boreal biogeographic region to enhance management of Natura 2000 sites belonging to that region.



During the 10-month networking effort so far, a coordination group was established involving representatives of all five boreal countries – Finland, Sweden, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. A series of eight training and practical exchange events was organised so far; similar measures are to be regularly repeated. These actions are designed to improve the management of all Natura 2000 sites in the five countries of this biogeographical region, based on exchange of experience, mutual learning and communication.

### Suggestions / Recommendations for future applicants

The 2016 round of the Award highlighted some convincing ways how Natura 2000 managers from different Member States can learn from each other, enabling them to be innovative at the national or local level without re-inventing the wheel. Given the size of the network and the wealth of experience and expertise concentrated within the Natura 2000 community of practice, it appears very likely that there is a much bigger potential for mutual learning than the one thus far realised. It would therefore be highly interesting to see additional applications focusing on the horizontal knowledge transfer and mutual learning in future rounds of the Award.

A number of applications reported activities without explicitly mentioning that they were conducted in Natura 2000 sites. Other designations referring to the same areas (e.g. National Parks or other protected areas categories) were sometimes used as central communication labels instead. The fact that the sites are designated as Natura 2000 must be emphasised in applications to the Natura 2000 Award, as in any communications effort referring to these sites. This includes for example using the Natura 2000 logo for labelling purposes.

## 5.11 Perseverance

Perseverance as an element of good practice was first considered in the 2015 Benchmarking Report. This was because long-term commitments and efforts made by Natura 2000 partners have been critical to bringing about many conservation benefits, but are at the same time not easily captured by the focus of the Award on activities which have yielded results over the last five years. Examples of applications from the 2016 round which fall into this category include the following:

- The application “**Conservation of the Endangered Priority Species Corsican Red Deer**” submitted by **WWF Oasi** – a private consulting company created in 2007 to manage 42 of WWF Italy’s most important protected areas – contributed to preventing the extinction of the Corsican Red deer (*Cervus elaphus corsicanus*) in Sardinia. Activities included a poaching prevention programme which consisted of patrolling to remove traps and drive away illegal hunters, as well as releasing trapped animals. In addition, an awareness-raising programme was implemented and the expansion of the Monte Arcosu protected area was promoted through lobbying. However, the project which formed the primary focus of the application built on WWF activities that date back to the late 1970s and 1980s. In 1986, WWF Italy bought 3,600 ha of land in the area and established a private reserve, which has formed the core area supporting recovery of the species from its historical low (70 individuals in 1979) to 1,700 individuals in 2014. Partly as a result of this long-term commitment, the Sardinian regional government established Gutturu Mannu Regional Park that surrounds and includes the private Monte Arcosu reserve, enhancing its protection regime. The impressive recovery of this sub-species of Red deer would have been impossible without the long-term commitment of the applicant.


- A long-term approach is as important for species reintroduction projects as it is for species recovery. The “**Bearded Vulture Reintroduction Project in Andalusia**” managed by the Spanish NGO **Fundación Gypaetus**, which promoted the reintroduction of the Bearded vulture (*Gypaetus barbatus*) in the Natural Park Sierra of Cazorla, Segura y Las Villas by captive breeding and release of 37 vulture chicks, was the effort of an organisation that was founded solely for this purpose in 2000 and built on practical preparatory efforts since 2006. This continuous work is now starting to pay off as two pairs have occupied territories in Andalusia recently, one of which bred successfully in 2015. Two further territories are occupied by individual vultures. These are expected to pair up soon.
- Another example of perseverance is the application “**Vultures Return to Vrachanski Balkan**” of the Bulgarian NGO **Green Balkans – Stara Zagora** and its NGO partners Birds of Prey Society and Fund for Wild Flora and Fauna. This project dealt with the reintroduction of Griffon vultures (*Gyps fulvus*) in a Natura 2000



site in Bulgaria. The actions started back in 2003, with the first feasibility studies. In the more recent past covered by the application, a supplementary feeding site and a vulture adaptation aviary were established, a public awareness campaign was carried out, electrical pylons were isolated and 43 Griffon Vultures were released into the wild. As a result, first breeding attempts were recorded in 2014 and 4 breeding pairs resulting in the first successfully fledged young were detected in 2015. Again, the success of the latest project, on which the application for the Natura 2000 Award focused, would have been impossible without the long-term commitment and initiative that spans more than a decade.

- Another example of outstanding perseverance is the application **“Co-existing with Bears in the 21st Century: Difficulties and Achievements: Kastoria, Greece”** which was carried out by the Greek NGO **Callisto** with its partners the Region of Western Macedonia and Anka. Through decade-long efforts, this small NGO has succeeded in improving road safety and coexistence between bears and humans in the Kastoria region, by reducing the incidence of human-bear conflict in the area. This involved constant communication and negotiation with a strong privately and EU funded trans-European transport network, which would have been impossible without the dedication and persistence of the applicant.

#### **Suggestions / Recommendations for future applicants**

The 2014-2016 rounds of the Natura 2000 Award show how perseverance is a crucial prerequisite for successful habitat and species recovery and re-introduction initiatives. It would be interesting to see additional examples of long-term commitment to the conservation and sustainable use of Natura 2000 sites from other thematic areas in future rounds.

In those cases where conventional – short-term – activities had success by building on a more long-term involvement of the applicants, it should be ensured that the short-term interventions and the activities preceding them over a longer period are clearly distinguished in the application document.

## 6 Outlook

The three years of the Natura 2000 Award have allowed a mosaic of good practice to be built up relating to a wide range of different aspects of Natura 2000 management and conservation. Experiences learned over these three years therefore give potential applicants and others working on Natura 2000 a thorough overview of good practice, innovative and original measures and ways to improve management on Natura 2000 sites. A few points drawn out from the Benchmarking are highlighted below.

- Applications are still not **balanced between Member States, categories and stakeholders**. While this is not in itself a problem, there is certainly an opportunity for future applicants to examine the gaps and submit interesting activities from the Member States from which few applications have been received and to the categories with lower numbers of applicants (Reconciling Interests and Perceptions and Socio-Economic Benefits in particular). In addition, applications from new actors (or actors with traditionally conflicting views working together) are particularly welcome.
- The Natura 2000 Award aims to raise awareness about the Natura 2000 network. It is therefore of high importance, that **applicants make the link of the actions and results to Natura 2000 sites clear** in their application. In particular, communication projects which do not use the Natura 2000 logo in their materials and activities are unlikely to do well in the Awards. All applications should make clear reference to the benefits of particular sites or the network.
- A number of applications which have been highlighted over the three years of the Award demonstrate how **Member States learn from one another**. Further initiatives in this area would be particularly welcome. Member States clearly have different levels of expertise with different problems and exchange of knowledge can prevent the need to “reinvent the wheel”.
- A welcome addition to this years’ Award applications was an application focusing very clearly on **payment for ecosystem services**. There is greater potential for more applications in this category. A significant number of applications are providing ecosystem services. Finding innovative ways to pay for these is of interest to a wide range of Natura 2000 actors.
- The impact of the **LIFE funding stream** is clearly confirmed by this years’ applications. The number of finalists and winners receiving LIFE funding is encouraging in demonstrating how effective these projects are. None-the-less, applications which are funded in other ways including much smaller, local projects would be welcome in order to demonstrate how everyone can contribute to benefiting the Natura 2000 network.
- There were several applications which were **resubmitted several years** in a row and some which were submitted in all three years. This is encouraged by the Award as long as there is a clear improvement / development in the application from its first submission, and if a certain evolution in achievements over the years is evident in the application. Feedback can be obtained from the Award secretariat on an application and applicants should also make reference to this report in order to learn from the good practice of others.

The catalogue provided in this report aims to provide inspiration for those working on Natura 2000 sites in general terms as well as for those interested in applying for a Natura 2000 Award. Since Natura 2000 is a network in development across widely varying physical and political conditions across Europe, it is rarely the case that particular experiences highlighted

in one application can be applied without alteration elsewhere. These examples should inspire Natura 2000 actors to find solutions that work in their particular context addressing the site-specific issues they are dealing with.

The Natura 2000 Award continues to be an excellent means to promote your activities related to Natura 2000. Sharing good practice through an Award application benefits both your own activities (through the increased attention they receive) and other Natura 2000 actors (by inspiring them with new ideas from other applicants). These benefits exist for the winners and finalists but also for every applicant whose project is described on the Award website. All Natura 2000 actors engaged in promoting and managing Natura 2000 are encouraged to join the “Award-network” and submit an application.

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