

Nature priorities for the new EU Mandate

Proposals from the European Habitats Forum for the European Commission and Parliament



Protecting and restoring nature is not just about saving wildlife. Nature contributes to our overall health and wellbeing. [More than half of the global economy](#) depends on nature and all the services it provides. Healthy ecosystems are also a fundamental tool in tackling the twin climate and biodiversity crises, they make Europe more resilient to extreme weather events and are crucial for ensuring food security.

Although the recognition of the importance of biodiversity is growing, with the [Global Risks Report 2024](#) counting extreme weather events and critical change to Earth systems as the greatest concerns facing the world over the next decade, we are still losing nature at an unprecedented rate. Globally, one million species are threatened with extinction. In Europe the situation of nature also remains critical: according to the latest [State of Nature in the EU report](#), less than half of our bird species have a secure status, over 80% of Europe's habitats are in poor condition and only 23% of species monitored under the EU Nature Directives, the Birds and Habitats Directives, are in good health.

During the 2019-2024 EC mandate, biodiversity became for the first time a political priority in the EU. This resulted in the adoption of the EU 2030 Biodiversity Strategy and the Farm to Fork Strategy in May 2020, and supported the adoption of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework under the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) in 2022. However, the changing geopolitical context with the war in Ukraine caused a dramatic shift in political support for nature protection and restoration, and environment as a whole, with nature legislation being framed as a hindrance to food and energy security. This resulted in the scrapping of existing environmental safeguards under the Common Agricultural Policy, and the long deadlock (Nature Restoration Law) and withdrawal (Sustainable Use of Pesticides Regulation) of much needed new green laws. In addition, the level of the rollout of Green Deal Strategies, especially related to biodiversity, has been slow and the EU is set to miss its 2030 targets unless those efforts are significantly stepped up.

Reckless calls for a 'pause' on further environmental measures and deregulation will only bring nature closer to the brink of collapse, along with our economies, as the cost of inaction is ever increasing. Several [reports](#) show that we are not on track to reach our biodiversity commitments and that implementation needs to be accelerated. The recently published [European Climate Risk Assessment](#) shows that we are also not prepared to face the impacts of climate risks.

We call on EU decision makers to respond to the urgency of the intertwined crises of climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution by implementing a reinforced European Green Deal, in order to achieve a nature positive Europe by 2030. For this to happen, EU decision makers must:

1. Step up implementation and enforcement of existing EU Nature laws and maintain existing safeguards
2. Establish binding and effectively managed Protected Areas
3. Make large-scale nature restoration a reality across Europe
4. Close the funding gap for nature
5. Adopt a new legal framework on climate resilience, setting legal requirements for ecosystem-based adaptation, with strong ambition on freshwater ecosystems
6. Ensure coherence in EU policy frameworks

1. Step up implementation and enforcement of existing EU Nature laws and maintain existing safeguards

Preserving and restoring ecosystems and biodiversity as a core element of the European Green Deal requires the consistent and result-oriented implementation of existing nature laws (Birds and Habitats Directives (BHD) and Water Framework Directive (WFD)), as well as the full implementation of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework and the EU Biodiversity Strategy 2030. This needs to become a real political priority.

Both the Birds and Habitats Directives and the Water Framework Directive have been declared fit for purpose, and the Fitness Check evaluations of those Directives concluded that substantial improvement in their implementation is needed to deliver results on the ground. The focus should be on accelerating this implementation; delays or widened use of exemptions should not be allowed.

Provisions of the Birds and Habitats Directives and Water Framework Directive form an interdependent and closely interacting system. Synergies between the Directives are multiple and should be enhanced. Achieving good ecological and chemical status of water bodies, as required under the Water Framework Directive, can help achieve the favourable conservation status of species and habitats of community interest. Similarly, achieving the objectives of the Birds and Habitats Directives can contribute to the achievement of the good ecological status of surface water bodies.

In the current highly fragmented and overexploited landscape, maintaining a coherent network of Natura 2000 sites and strengthening their connectivity will greatly contribute to increasing the resilience of habitats and species populations, particularly those of migratory fish, bird species, and pollinators.

The extinction of species is occurring at an unprecedented rate. Therefore, in addition to improved spatial coherence, effective and adaptive management of sites needs to be ensured. Species protection must be science-based, with adequate measures to prevent, and where needed address, conflicts with human activities. In this regard, stronger investments to further develop and implement measures for coexistence with large carnivores are essential.

2. Establish Binding and Effectively Managed Protected Areas

To achieve [global](#) and [European](#) biodiversity goals, the next legislature must ensure that at least 30% of our land and of our sea is effectively protected by 2030, including 10% of our land and 10% of sea area subjected to strict protection measures. As of now, [about 26% of the EU land and 12% of its sea is under some form of protection](#), with a very low percentage (around 3% of EU land and less than 1% of EU sea) strictly protected. By June 2024, only 6 EU Member States had submitted their respective pledges on the Protected Area commitments in the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030. This showcases that voluntary processes are not sufficient and another approach is strongly needed to reach the Protected Area commitments by 2030, such as through making targets legally binding.

Regarding strict protection goal, we call for proper implementation and enforcement of the concept of Strict Protection, in line with the [EC guidance](#), to ensure that the ecological integrity of the sites is maintained, allowing natural processes to occur with minimal human interference and preventing further degradation.

All protected areas need to be effectively managed for biodiversity and the provision of affiliated ecosystem services we rely on (protection against flooding, water retention, pollination, etc.). Such effective management should include the formulation of clear conservation objectives and measures, the monitoring of their achievement, and safeguarding the ecological coherence of protected areas throughout Europe. This will help maintain the integrity of ecosystems.

It is important that a diverse array of conservation strategies, including private and community-based management mechanisms, is formally recognised. Traditional, indigenous and local knowledge systems can play a significant role in nature conservation, often providing effective and empowering methods for managing natural resources.

It is only through a solid network of effectively managed protected areas, including strict protection zones, that we can halt nature loss, mitigate the most adverse effects of climate change and increase the resilience of communities.

3. Make large-scale nature restoration a reality across Europe

Achieving and maintaining a healthy state of ecosystems is a vital requirement for a resilient Europe. However, nowadays the remaining biodiversity patches are often too damaged, too fragmented or poorly managed to sustain healthy ecosystems in the long-term, especially in the light of increasing external pressures (such as climate change, growing infrastructure development and pollution). A powerful and strategic way to turn the tide is to boost large-scale restoration across the region with strong policies and projects on the ground. The benefits are countless if we can make it happen now.

Global leaders united their efforts in the UN Decade of Restoration and the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework with targets to put 30% of degraded ecosystems under effective restoration by 2030. With the adoption of the [EU Nature Restoration Law](#) in June 2024, the European Union has now legally binding targets to restore at least 20% of land and 20% of sea areas by 2030 and all ecosystems in need of restoration by 2050.

The momentum for nature restoration is clearly there and as we approach the halfway point of the UN Decade of Restoration, we need to scale up existing restoration initiatives via a timely and robust implementation of the Nature Restoration Law. We thus call for the establishment of a dedicated fund to support the implementation of this law, and for the development of strong and coherent National Restoration Plans by the Member States, in line with the need to tackle the environmental crises we face. These plans should be science-based and involve all relevant stakeholders to ensure clear national buy-in.

4. Close the funding gap for nature

Effectively tackling the current environmental crises requires substantial financing. The EU Biodiversity Strategy proposes to unlock €20 billion per year to meet its needs by mobilising public and private funding at the EU and national levels. Under the current Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), the EU planned to spend 7.5 % of its annual budget on biodiversity objectives in 2024 and 10 % in 2026 and in 2027. A [2022 report of IEEP and Trinomics](#) found that an extra €22 billion per year is needed in addition to current spending. Such an investment would need to be topped up further if we want to make large-scale nature restoration a reality across Europe. The costs to implement the EU Nature Restoration Law have been estimated by the Commission at a minimum

of €6 - 8.2 billion annually. In this context, it is important to remember that nature restoration is an investment that will pay off, not only a cost. According to the [EC's impact assessment](#), every euro invested in nature restoration gives a return of 8 to 38 euros in ecosystem services.

As it stands now, the EU is not on track to meet its spending targets and needs. Contrary, EU spending is moving further away from its targets by weakening the environmental conditionalities in the Common Agricultural Policy, which covers a major share of total expenditures for biodiversity. The quality of spending is also unsatisfactory. The EU must turn these worrying trends and increase its financing for biodiversity in a transparent way.

We need a better use of funding for nature throughout the existing funding instruments like CAP and regional development funds. In addition, we call for a dedicated fund, strengthening the existing LIFE fund, to effectively restore nature and implement Natura 2000. Such a fund would facilitate coherent long-term financial security and planning. Meanwhile, the EU must also ensure that no public subsidies or investments are harmful to biodiversity. In this context, harmful subsidies must look into activities beyond fossil fuels, such as perverse incentives in agriculture, bioenergy and fisheries policies.

5. Adopt a new legal framework on climate resilience, setting legal requirements for ecosystem-based adaptation with strong ambition on freshwater ecosystems

Europe is the fastest-warming continent in the world. Extreme heat is becoming more frequent, while precipitation patterns are changing. As a result, extreme events such as floods, droughts and wildfires have become more frequent and intense. Climate risks compromise food and water security, energy security and financial stability, and the health of the general population. In tandem, climate change is impacting terrestrial, freshwater and marine ecosystems.

The [Initiative for Water Resilience](#), announced as one of the three priorities for the European Commission in 2024, has created expectations to prioritise restoring the broken water cycle. Water resilience must come from maintaining and enhancing the many benefits healthy and resilient ecosystems provide. This includes wetlands, which naturally absorb, filter and store water and provide natural buffers against floods and droughts, and diverse forests, which support the water cycle, as well as deltas which maintain the balance between salty and freshwater conditions. Ecosystem-based approaches should be prioritised over building new water reservoirs, water transfers or desalination plants.

There is also a strong need for the EU to guide, coordinate and drive Member States' climate adaptation actions in a more stringent way, including via a new Climate Resilience Law. Such a law should set legal requirements for ecosystem-based adaptation, using nature as a buffer against floods, droughts and wildfires. This means that climate adaptation requirements should be added to existing environmental legislation to ensure the EU addresses the climate, biodiversity and pollution crises together. The law must tackle freshwater ecosystems in setting up natural 'water reserves' in water-stressed areas. This will protect critical water supplies - including groundwater - together with their catchments, require restoration actions, and mandate 'ecological flows'.

6. Ensure Coherence in EU Policy Frameworks

Nature does not exist in a vacuum, and European policy must reflect this truth. In the pursuit of a just and sustainable future, it is vital to embed environmental policy coherence across all sectors, particularly in the transition towards nature-friendly industry and farming. The transition towards productive practices with methods that are in harmony with the environment requires a Just Transition for those who are impacted by these changes - such as farmers and fishers. Policies must be synchronized to guarantee that nobody is left behind and that environmental restoration is achieved without compromising the livelihoods of those who depend on industries under transition. By creating a framework that equally values ecological and human wellbeing, legislators can cultivate resilience in rural communities and promote biodiversity.

Policy coherence is also crucial in aligning the new renewable energy initiatives with our broader environmental objectives. Legislators must ensure that the Green Transition does not backpedal environmental progress and complements efforts to protect and restore natural habitats.

Similarly, infrastructure projects—whether they are in transport, industry, or the extraction of critical raw materials—require rigorous environmental assessments and must adhere to sustainability criteria to prevent and mitigate ecological disruption. Otherwise, we risk losing all the environmental progress that we have spent the last 30 years carefully working towards.