



Report of the European Parliament Intergroup
“Climate Change, Biodiversity and Sustainable Development”

MEETING

“Support for the European Overseas through the BEST scheme”

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of the European Parliament Intergroup on “Climate Change, Biodiversity and
Sustainable Development”*

Introduction

Maurice Ponga (EPP, France) expressed his pleasure in hosting the first conference on BEST at the European Parliament. The acronym **BEST** stands for the voluntary scheme for **Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services in the Territories of the European overseas**. BEST is a follow-up to the 2008 meeting in the Reunion Island, where it was decided to implement a voluntary scheme similar to *Natura 2000*. The idea was to have an accessible and flexible program which would be adapted to the reality of the overseas. Progress has been made recently, as the European Union included a €2 million budget line dedicated to the BEST scheme in the 2011 budget line. MEP Ponga declared himself keen on protecting biodiversity in the European overseas territories, some of which are declared biodiversity hotspots. In order for the BEST initiative to be sustainable, he argued, it is crucial for overseas stakeholders to get mobilised, think strategically and work together to ensure that BEST is a success.



Presentations



Etienne Coyette, *Climate Change Policy Coordinator at the European Commission (DG DEVCO)*, started by saying that BEST is focused on biodiversity issues, but that biodiversity and climate change (and in particular adaptation to climate change) are closely intertwined. As far as implementation of cooperation initiatives and actions on the ground are concerned, the Commission noticed that it is almost impossible to separate the actions related to biodiversity from those on adaptation to climate change. They should be linked right from the beginning. Ecosystem-based approaches are truly part of a strategy for climate change adaptation. Mr. Coyette also said that he took part in the EU-OCT conference in Nouméa and in another meeting on climate change organised by the EU services in Vanuatu. He noted that the Commissioner for Development Andris Piebalgs was present in both occasions. The participants particularly appreciated some of the initiatives taken in the overseas territories and said that BEST could strengthen some projects which have already been implemented or are on the verge of being implemented by local authorities.

Regarding cooperation strategies on adaptation to climate change, Mr. Coyette said that dealing with climate change adaptation always brings back to the core of the problem, namely the management of natural resources and the services they provide: water, soil and vegetation, soil fertility and protection against erosion. Coastal area management is also a key problem for the OCTs; ecosystem-based approaches represent a huge potential for climate change adaptation strategies in this context. Mr. Coyette said that for the time being, the funding related to the partnership between the EU and OCT takes part in the framework of the European development fund (EDF), whose overarching objective is the fight against poverty. Yet, this framework is not fully adapted for the OCTs and raises many issues in terms of project implementation and program proposals.

Mr. Coyette concluded by stating that DG ENV is very involved in the BEST initiative, which opens up new prospects in terms of successful cooperation on ecosystem services and adaptation to climate change.



Karin Zaunberger, *Policy Officer for Biodiversity and Climate Change in DG Environment at the European Commission*, stated that since the conference in La Reunion in 2008, there have been a number of references made to the message conveyed in that meeting in various policy documents, and more specifically to the idea of establishing a voluntary scheme for the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity and ecosystem services: this idea is present in the Environment Council conclusions of June 2009 and in two Commission Communications - COM (2008) 642 final: *The outermost regions : an asset for Europe* and COM (2009) 623: *Elements for a new partnership between the EU and the overseas countries and territories (OCTs)*. The 2006 Biodiversity Action Plan already foresaw a dedicated action for biodiversity and ecosystem services in European overseas entities and the upcoming EU biodiversity strategy which will be up for adoption in May 2011 will include a specific reference to BEST.

The objective of BEST is to promote the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity and ecosystem services in the European overseas entities; it is inspired by experiences in the field of European conservation and biodiversity policies. It is not only purely about conservation but also about reconciling development and environmental needs. Biodiversity in European overseas is spectacular and fabulous, but also very vulnerable; measures have to be taken to conserve it. BEST shall be one way of doing that. It is based on two pillars: the first pillar is the conservation of biodiversity through the designation and management of protected areas. This means managing areas which already exist, enlarging them and possibly creating new ones. It also implies the reduction of threats to biodiversity, such as invasive species, over-exploitation, pollution, habitat change and fragmentation. The second pillar is the sustainable use of biodiversity and ecosystem services; it also includes climate change adaptation and mitigation measures.

Since the 2008 conference in La Reunion, a concept note has been drafted by DG Environment, some Member States and the OCTs: this is a work in progress which tries to work out how the scheme should look like, what its objectives should be and how to achieve these objectives. A number of principles came out, among which a very important one: flexibility. The needs of the outermost regions and OCTs are very different: they have different locations, populations, sizes... In order to serve all

these needs, the scheme should be very flexible and have a sound scientific basis. Above all, the BEST scheme needs the engagement and commitment of local people who have to carry it out, which is why already existing mechanisms and instruments will be fully recognised. BEST is not about creating something entirely new but about valorising and strengthening what is already there. Another important element is that the accessibility to BEST has to be as easy as possible in a European context. Mrs. Zaunberger suggested exploring the possibility of using the *Rio Convention's Ecosystem and Climate Change Pavilion*¹ at UNFCCC COP 17 in Durban at the end of the year as a stage to showcase some of the first BEST projects.

The most recent development for BEST has been the adoption in December 2010 of the budget for the preparatory action: €2 million are to be committed for BEST in 2011. On March 1st, the Commission adopted its financing decision: the preparatory action will be implemented through a call for proposals which will be published in early May 2011 (http://ec.europa.eu/environment/ngos/finansup_11_best.htm). The deadline for submission of proposals will be September 9th and the projects should be launched by November-December 2011. To be eligible, the applicants must be registered in an EU Member State or OCT or be an international organisation. It is possible to include partners from third countries in the consortium. The target beneficiaries are public and private bodies in the EU outermost regions and OCTs.

The Commission hopes to receive project proposals for the conservation of biodiversity through the designation and management of protected areas; projects for the sustainable use of ecosystem services under the second pillar, the implementation of a green infrastructure with a view of adapting to or mitigating climate change; proposals which try to bridge the gap between environmental and development needs; and networking proposals which foresee education and capacity building initiatives. The objective of the call is to identify and finance a number of projects which will show the potential multiple benefits of BEST and demonstrate the validity of the idea. To do so, she argued, "We should both build on existing networks and encourage new partnerships." Furthermore, "It is important to prepare the establishment of a governance structure for a durable implementation of BEST beyond the lifetime of the preparatory action." Mrs. Zaunberger hopes that the €2 million for 2011 represent only the beginning of a bigger scheme, so it is necessary to identify projects which prepare the ground for the continuation. Efforts are ongoing to prolong the preparatory action, which would mean that a second call could possibly be launched in 2012 to stabilise the scheme. By then the scheme should be up and running sustainably. Agencies such as the *Agence Française de Développement* and the *World Bank* could possibly take over and fund this type of projects. The validity of BEST therefore has to be demonstrated.

In conclusion, Mrs. Zaunberger said that the European overseas biodiversity is an asset. BEST offers the potential for a win-win situation: it is a potential low input-high output measure. Thanks to the preparatory action established by the EP, there is now a unique opportunity to show the validity of BEST and prepare the ground for long term durability. Yet, in order for that to happen, there is a need for strategic thinking, solidarity and collaboration.

¹ See <http://ecosystemspavilion.org>



Jean-Philippe Palasi, *Director for EU Policy at Conservation International Europe*, underlined that the biodiversity of EU overseas entities is an asset and a responsibility at the same time for the EU as a whole. The nine outermost regions are a full part of the EU, and therefore it is normal that some EU initiatives should be taken for biodiversity in those areas. It is an obligation and not a bonus, as the EU is committed to protecting biodiversity on its territory. The outermost regions (ORs) are not all in the same situation in EU policies on biodiversity: the Acores, the Canary Islands and Madeira are covered by *Natura 2000*, but other entities like the French “*départements d’Outre Mer*” are not. There are regions which are a full part of the EU and among the richest in biodiversity, which yet fall out of the main European policy in terms of habitats and biodiversity. This anomaly had to be solved, and that is one of the main motivations for BEST. However, the stakeholders involved in the discussions around BEST felt it would be a shame to limit the scheme to the outermost regions, as OCTs are also very important.

The Overseas Countries and Territories (OCTs) were therefore also included in the scheme. Although OCTs are not part of the EU, they are part of some Member States, are home to European citizens, and some of them are represented in the European Parliament. It is important not to forget them as they have important biodiversity and form with the outermost regions a very important network at the global scale, particularly on ecological terms. These entities are also concentrated in key areas for the global environment; and they often belong to the same regions as some independent ACP countries which have a privileged collaboration with the EU. OCTs are very important for the global environment: for example there is about the same number of endemic species in New Caledonia alone as in the whole continental Europe, and OCTs represent 7% of the world’s coral reefs, on which 300 million people depend. It is also important to note that the combined marine area of ORs and OCTs is by far the first in the world, ahead of the United States.

Through the overseas entities, the EU has an opportunity to reinforce its contribution to a healthy global environment. One of BEST’s objectives is to have a systematic identification and management of key areas, like is it the case with *Natura 2000*. This objective of identifying and protecting habitats is crucial to protect biodiversity and livelihoods, but also for climate change adaptation. Climate change

comes on top of existing ecological threats like pollution and invasive species; and when the habitats are already fragmented and polluted their capacity to resist climate change is reduced. The challenge of BEST is to bring a systematic approach which integrates this challenge to increase the resilience of ecosystems. This is crucially important for economic activity and the security of local populations.

Mr. Palasi presented some of the motivations behind BEST: the gap in EU legislation; the global importance of natural heritage in overseas entities and the importance of these ecosystems for local livelihoods, economic and social situations; climate change adaptation which can be done in great part through maintenance and increased resilience of ecosystems; the need for technical and financial support to local stakeholders; the need for a systematic approach at the scale of green infrastructures; and the objective of valuing EU expertise on nature management.

BEST is also a way of valuing the outermost regions and OCTs in global and regional environmental policies. Mr. Palasi declared that the first phase of “raising awareness” was not taken over by the second phase of “planning BEST.” €2 million represent a great opportunity, but this amount is not for the BEST scheme itself. It is seed money for preparation work, and should be used very strategically. Some of the money should be used to work on the definition of the final scheme itself. It is important to have concrete ideas about the next steps. Mr. Palasi also urged not to divide the money too much, which would lead to the loss of a historic opportunity. If all the actors work well, a full fledged project will see the light, with a long-term technical, legal and financial framework. Yet, a lot remains to be done: defining the coordinating body or mechanism, establishing the legal framework to put in place, etc.



Dominique Benzaken, *Coordinator of the IUCN European Union Outermost Regions and Overseas Countries and Territories Programme*, reminded the participants that European overseas are present in all major regions of the world, stressed their rich biodiversity and location in several biodiversity hotspots and their disproportionate vulnerability to natural and human induced impacts, including climate change. ORs and OCTs represent an incredible asset for the EU in international biodiversity fora.

The IUCN review of the implementation of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) in European overseas is based on national studies of ORs and OCTs of the UK, France, the Netherlands, Spain, Portugal and Denmark, and on an analysis of their engagement in their region of proximity. The status of biodiversity planning in European overseas shows that these six EU Member States (EU MS) with overseas territories had developed a National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plans (NBSAP), but not all refer to overseas entities. Only two EU MS had developed national strategies for their overseas territories (France and the UK). Many OCTs do not have local biodiversity action plans, an essential step to defining biodiversity objectives and actions. The patchy status of biodiversity planning in European overseas means that large areas could potentially not be covered by biodiversity policies and programmes.

In addition, there is limited awareness and understanding of the CBD. Overall, biodiversity conservation has limited priority in local biodiversity strategies. Technical and institutional capacity to develop local biodiversity action plans and dedicated funding for biodiversity conservation is also limited, in particular in the OCTs. In general, most ORs and OCTs do not actively engage in regional biodiversity planning and programmes, because of their status and ineligibility for international programmes. However, despite these limitations, good progress has been achieved in many ORs and OCTs, in particular in the field of legislation and protected areas.

The IUCN review recommends that biodiversity conservation in OCTs and ORs be a shared responsibility between all EU actors: the EU, the EU MS, and the ORs and OCTs themselves. Specific recommendations include increasing local awareness of CBD obligations and providing guidance for local biodiversity planning, encouraging active participation of ORs and OCTs in global and regional policies and programmes, and a more coherent and coordinated approach to EU MS and EU biodiversity policies and programmes, which could require a review of financial instruments.

Overall, challenges facing European overseas in their progress towards a biodiversity and climate change agenda include: the limited visibility of European overseas within the EU and internationally; complex governance arrangements reflected in the internal and external policies and programmes of the EU and its Member States; and limited integration of ORs and OCTs in their region of proximity.

There are important opportunities to build upon: The conference on *The European Union and its entities: strategies to combat climate change and biodiversity loss*, held in the Reunion Island in 2008, brought together European overseas actors for the first time. The message of La Reunion, which was endorsed then, gives a solid foundation for future action. Recent EC initiatives, including a memorandum of understanding between France, Portugal, Spain and their ORs on a common vision (2010) and the revision of the OCTs Association Decision underway are important

steps towards a more coherent approach. The BEST initiative will progress this agenda further.

At the international level, the CBD 10th Conference of the Parties (COP 10) which took place in October 2010 in Nagoya defined new global biodiversity targets for 2020 and represented an opportunity to revise and update National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plans and to reconsider the contribution of European overseas to this process. Similarly, the In-Depth Review of the CBD Island Biodiversity programme of work is an opportunity to engage European overseas in shaping and contributing to the global and regional island biodiversity action, potentially giving the EU a leadership role in those processes.

Ms. Benzaken noted that the BEST scheme is a preparatory action and is therefore about designing the future and building on achievements to date. It is an opportunity for a more integrated and strategic approach to mainstream biodiversity and climate change issues of European overseas within EU policies and programmes, particularly in the context of the new EU financial mechanism for 2013-2018. Its focus on biodiversity conservation and sustainable use, inclusiveness and partnerships (between all actors and within regions) will be critical to its success. BEST can facilitate regional collaborative projects and provide a mechanism for complementary funding for activities in OCTs and ORs to match those in ACP countries. Last but not the least, BEST has very strong political support from champions such as MEP Ponga.





Hon. Reuben Meade, *Chief Minister of Montserrat and President of OCTA*, highlighted the importance of recognising that EU overseas entities are host to 60% of the EU Member States' entire biodiversity; yet, they do not have access to the resources necessary to conserve and manage this wealth. Most agencies tend to exclude EU overseas territories stating that this function is the responsibility of the governing state. The overseas territories are pleased that BEST is being introduced to provide this critical support. Mr. Meade said that what is important for the people living in the OCTs is to preserve their livelihood: spear fishing on coral reefs and making souvenirs from coral can be seen as a way of life with no consideration for preservation. The basic need for food and shelter is pre-eminent; it is therefore essential that the resources are made more readily available for sustainable development projects. That way, the residents' quality of life will be improved and they will be more capable of recognising the need for the management and conservation of their biodiversity. BEST should be supported, while continuing to work on other aspects of funding for sustainable development projects.

BEST promotes the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity and ecosystems in the EU overseas entities by addressing the wide ecosystem challenges of climate change through the main tenant of healthy and resilient ecosystems, fostering of ecosystem based approaches, promoting capacity building, transfer and exchange of best practices, strengthening the existing nature conservation programmes and related efforts in and outside of conservation areas. This includes island-wide environmental management, improving the knowledge base and filling the knowledge gaps. BEST also promotes the sustainable management of marine and terrestrial resources within protected areas. It is a vehicle by which the European OCTs will be able to draw the social and economic benefits from the conservation and sustainable use of their exceptional biodiversity. It is a voluntary scheme with no legal obligation to join, but the decision to join it will entail an agreement that the beneficiary will respect the agreed principles. We must ensure that it is a simple process, which does not require prerequisite qualifications which could be too

difficult for the territory to fulfil. Mr. Meade urged the EU to really make the application proposals process simple.

BEST contributes to the implementation of the CBD programs of work on island biodiversity, of local biodiversity action plans and national environmental management strategies. Many OCTs have not been able to meet the conditions to sign environmental conventions because of capacity and resource gaps. However, BEST provides funding opportunity for the identification, design and management of sites according to an agreed management plan, as well as for the collection of baseline data in places where this information is missing and capacity building for local managers. It also provides research studentships, additional human resources and the maintenance and restoration of high value biodiversity areas and healthy ecosystems. This can be put into practice through tourism related activities for example, such as hiking, bird watching, diving...

Climate change adaptation and mitigation of ecosystem services will also benefit from BEST. It will be important to monitor climate change impacts on biodiversity and ecosystems, the impact of invasive alien species, the communication, networking and education activities. Intense recovery programs for critically endangered species are also necessary. BEST provides financial support, although limited, to prepare proposals for the designation and management of sites. The major questions are the following: what will the conditions be for accessing such support? Will the process be simple enough to allow for access to much needed resources? And will the scheme have a long life?

Mr. Meade then talked about the relevance of BEST to Montserrat and some of the Caribbean overseas territories. BEST will go a long way towards the conservation and sustainable use of biological resources in the EU overseas territories; this is expected to have social and economic benefits and enhance the residents' quality of life. Montserrat is in the process of developing a climate change vulnerability and capacity assessment for a new town in Little Bay, thanks to a UK-DFID (Department for International Development) sponsored project. Alongside this, it is developing a national climate change adaptation policy. However, given the current economic climate, the financial resources are insufficient in all of the overseas territories to fully implement a climate change adaptation policy. Given the level of resource allocation, sectors like education, health and infrastructure development are given priority funding by the local governments over biodiversity conservation and ecosystems management. This is one of the reasons why BEST is becoming such an important factor for the OCT. They hope that it will give them an opportunity to address issues related to conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity and ecosystem services so that this sector is not forced to compete for resource allocation within the local governments' budgets. Sound management of biological resources like coral reefs and forests can lead to climate resilience of natural ecosystems and physical capital. Climate resilience is a crucial issue for Montserrat and other EU overseas territories in the Caribbean, as they are small island territories situated in a hurricane belt.

The OCT biodiversity has to be seen as part of the EU's biodiversity. In Montserrat, prior to volcanic activity, tourism contributed between 20 and 36% of GDP. Now, the Montserrat Tourist board and government have embarked on a tourism development program aimed at attracting ecotourism and nature and villa tourism.

Tourism is seen as one of the main economic drivers for the development of the Caribbean OCT, so the proper management, protection and sustainable use of biological resources are important for social and economic wellbeing. In Montserrat, BEST will be instrumental in the implementation of the Conservation and Environmental Management Act (CEMA), which will give legislative authority to affect the work of environment departments. This is similar in most Caribbean OCT. CEMA is to provide administrative bases for the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity, natural resources and natural heritage of Montserrat, through the designation and management of protected areas, pollution control, regulation of activities, the incorporation of international obligations with respect to the international environmental law and the establishment of an environmental fund. The overseas territories also have a contribution to make, through collaboration with international agencies and NGOs. They have developed skills in biodiversity conservation, sustainable use of natural resources and management of invasive species; they are therefore in a position to share these skills with other EU overseas entities. The overseas territories must link their resources as much as possible in order to get maximum benefits and share experiences. Mr. Meade ended by saying that he hoped that BEST will become a sustainable part of the development of the overseas territories.

Debate with the audience

MEP Ponga reminded the assistance that the €2 million grant was a joint initiative taken by his colleague Elie Hoarau and himself at the European Parliament.

MEP Hoarau (European United Left – Nordic Green Left, France) said that he took part in the meeting in La Reunion in 2008. He since then became an MEP and fought to give BEST a budget line, which is key for its survival. He asked whether, if a program meets the BEST objectives, the EU was going to fund it only for the beginning of the project or also for the follow-up part. He believes that when acting in favour of the environment, it is necessary to think over the long-term. This is a key question for him, as it will enable MEPs to make grants, credits and actions more sustainable. The financial means must all be pooled together, not only the European ones. Mr. Hoarau's second question was on the governance of BEST: he said that it was logical for the program to be led by DG ENV, but that there should also be a clear follow-up assessment given to the project. He asked how other stakeholders could be involved in order to carry out a self assessment of their work.

Karin Zaunberger answered that she could not reply in full detail as the project is only just starting. On the issue of the governance structure, the Commission hopes that some of the projects proposals that it will receive will contribute to that. She would not say that the governance structure has to sit within DG ENV but more broadly within the Commission.

Jean-Philippe Palasi, in answer to the question on financing, added that for the time being, there is no structured BEST project. He believes that various activities can be financed, as long as they play a strategic role in the follow-up of the project. One of the main elements which should be financed is a working group to decide on the

future structure of BEST. A part of the money has to be dedicated to making concrete proposals for the future and to financing pilot projects. Regarding the governance and follow-up mechanism, he thinks that BEST is a unique opportunity to bring DG REGIO, ENV and DEVCO closer together. There is a division on the financial flows and there has to be better coordination and consultation between the DG. He would be happy to see a permanent integrated working group between the three DG, which could also open up to others, like DG EMPL for example. This would be key for European consistency. There is also a lack of funding for biodiversity in the outermost regions and OCT, so the DG should work together to increment funding. A joint working group would help to better pilot and integrate sustainable development projects in European overseas.

Etienne Coyette gave some additional information regarding the need to open up to other financial resources. One possibility on the short run would be to look at the thematic program on Environment and natural resources. As regards the funds, in order to be eligible one has to be in conformity with the OCDE criteria; this is something that the EU will probably not be able to change. On the long run, two criteria should be taken into account: regarding the OCT, it is necessary to prepare the association framework and to prepare for financial prospects. A new financial period will start in 2013. We have to focus on cooperation on financial instruments. Development aid has to meet the criteria of the OCDE. The cooperation between the different financial instruments should be made easier; this would be a big progress. Regarding future prospects, Mr. Coyette said that in the framework of the CBD convention, the stakeholders will want to earmark funds for biodiversity, climate change, sustainable management... and this will make funding more difficult as the initiatives are cross-cutting. It is necessary to remain flexible in the thematic programs and not to enter into specific details. This will make fund allocations for BEST easier.

Christophe Lefebvre, European councillor to IUCN in charge of Oceans and European and International Affairs Delegate for the French Agency for Protected Areas, said that marine areas covered by the exclusive area of the European overseas was almost twice the size of the EU. This represents significant challenges in terms of biodiversity. The budget constraints mean that some priorities will have to be defined. He then asked Mrs. Zaunberger what the impact of BEST financing will be in the exclusive area of the European overseas.

Karin Zaunberger answered that the designation and management of protected areas figure among the elements which can be supported by BEST, but will not be a specific priority in the first call for proposals. The priority of this first call is to show the multiple benefits of a potential BEST scheme. Marine areas are not a specific priority just now. It is true that the overseas marine biodiversity is amazing, but it will be dealt with not only through the conservation pillar, but also through the sustainable use and climate change adaptation pillar. She added that it will be much easier to answer this question in a year. At the moment, the seed money has to be used in the best way possible and the idea of BEST has to be validated so that the scheme can be established.

Yavus Gubukcu, Environmental advisor at the Turkish delegation to the EU, said that there are two directives which deal with biodiversity in the EU: Natura 2000 and the Birds and Habitats directive. As the overseas entities are part of the EU, these directives should be applicable to them too. He asked Mrs. Zaunberger if any Natura 2000 sites have been declared in the OCT by the local governments or member states. He believes it could be a way to obtain more financial aid.

Mrs. Zaunberger answered that the BEST scheme was inspired by Natura 2000, which covers the EU member states and outermost regions of Spain and Portugal (Madeira, the Acores and Canary Islands). It does not cover the outermost regions of France nor the OCT. That was the motivation for BEST. It was believed that installing legislation like Natura 2000 would be too heavy in terms of administration and obligations, so a voluntary scheme seemed like a better idea.

Conclusions

MEP Ponga ended the meeting by thanking the participants. He stressed the importance of working together and of using the funds which have been allocated. He declared himself willing, with Mr. Hoarau, to ask for a budget line again next year for BEST activities.