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Natura 2000 management in Central and Eastern Europe – Challenges, problems and good practices

Background document to the Nature Directors Meeting, 8-9 June 2009, Prague

With the Natura 2000 designation process almost completed in most new EU MSs (though important tasks still remain in Poland and Romania), the focus in Natura 2000 implementation has now shifted on ensuring appropriate management of the sites. Undoubtedly this is a learning process for EU MSs, where governments, biodiversity experts, land users as well as the local communities need to develop the best tools to identify objectives, elaborate management tasks, ensure community support and involvement and provide sufficient financial resources. Of course these management tools can only work effectively if embedded in an appropriate regulatory framework, where the external pressures on Natura 2000 sites are successfully regulated through a holistic environmental policy.

Within this learning process it is important to regularly overview the accumulated experiences and look into the challenges, where further work and improvement is necessary. Some good examples from the new MSs already exist, which can be also readily used in other countries as well as further adapted for the best implementation of the nature directives.

Objectives of management

The overall objective of the Habitats Directive is to achieve and maintain favourable conservation status (FCS) of natural habitats and species of Community interest and to contribute towards maintaining biodiversity in the EU. The Directive provides some guidance what FCS means in general through setting the parameters (range, area, population, etc.), but FCS needs to be defined specifically for each species and habitat at different levels (biogeographic, MS, site level). Favourable reference values must take into account local ecological conditions as well as historic data on species and habitats of Community interest. Clearly defined FCS for species and habitats shall provide important contribution to defining management objectives on Natura 2000 site level, and thus help designing management tools, identifying necessary financial needs, and carrying out appropriate assessments of plans and projects with likely significant effects. The monitoring system of Natura 2000 species and habitats shall be also adapted as necessary and future monitoring carried out against the set FRVs. Defining the FCS can also have an important role in improving the connectivity of the Natura 2000 network and thus ensuring the adaptation of species and ecosystems to climate change. As it is provided in the notes and guidelines for reporting under Article 17 and also highlighted in a guidance document on Article 10[1], when defining the favourable reference range for species and habitats connectivity issues also need to be considered.

Nevertheless, even after the 2007 reporting exercise most MSs lack scientifically sound data for FCS for most species and habitats, and could only base their assessment on best expert judgement. Good examples already exist though in some countries, including Bulgaria and Poland, where extensive work on FCS has been done or has started. **In Poland** within a pilot field monitoring project FCS criteria and indicators were defined for 20 habitats, 16 plants and 20 animals published in 2008[2]. They were tested by observations and assessment on 1580 plots. It is planned to elaborate FCS criteria and indicators for the next group of species and habitats by 2010. The concept of FCS also provides the basis of the new regulation for Natura 2000 management planning, which is now close to formal adoption. Within the new scheme so called "conservation action plans" are obligatory for each Natura 2000 site, while the

[1] Guidance on the maintenance of landscape connectivity features of major importance for wild flora and fauna, Aug 2007, by Marianne Kettunen (IEEP), Andrew Terry (IUCN), Graham Tucker (Ecological Solutions) & Andrew Jones (IEEP)

[2] „Monitoring gatunków i siedlisk przyrodniczych ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem specjalnych obszarów ochrony siedlisk Natura 2000 – faza druga"

elaboration of "full management plans" is facultative. Local criteria for each targeted feature of the FCS in each planned site need to be established in a site management planning process.

In Bulgaria an assessment matrix for each species and habitat types with specification of parameters and their threshold values for FCS was developed within a BBI/Matra project[3]. According to the Bulgarian assessment framework the FCS has to be assessed at two levels: at national and site level for both habitats and species. The national level is mainly important for monitoring the conservation status of Natura 2000 species and habitat types on national scale. In this case the national level values of range and area/population are combined with the sum of the conservation status assessed on site level. On site level the reference values of area, structure and functions (including typical species), and future prospects (including threats) are developed with the help of further parameters for habitat types. Reference values of population, habitat for the species (structures and functions), and future prospects (including threats) are developed with the help of further parameters for species types, as well. The parameters reflect on the specific ecological conditions and requirements of the species and habitats concerned, e.g. the fragmentation, ruderalisation of the habitat, presence of IASs (structure and functions), intensity of grazing, nutrient inflow (future prospects). It is also intended to use the parameters and the established threshold values of each parameter for planning the management objectives and tasks of a given Natura 2000 site, as well as for assessing whether plans and projects would significantly affect the habitat and species in Natura 2000 sites. However, the produced guidance document is currently not taken into account by the governmental bodies at all. It still needs to be officially adopted in order to be used in practice.

Despite the good examples of Poland and Bulgaria similar work has not been undertaken in many other CEE countries on defining FCS. This results or will sooner or later result in problems during management planning, monitoring, assessment of plans and other processes. As the exact definition of the management objectives is the prerequisite of most subsequent management measures countries which so far have not been working on the definition of FCS should aim to start with this process.

Management plans

Although the Directives do not specify the one and only way of ensuring proper management of Natura 2000 sites, most new MSs use management plans as an important tool to ensure FCS of species and habitats. However, Article 17 reports and recent NGO assessments[4] show that adopted management plans exist in only four countries (Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Slovenia[5]) out of the examined ten new MSs. NGO assessments indicate that management plans exist or are under preparation for less than one-third of all Natura 2000 sites, and implementation of the management measures is still insufficient. In additional six countries some management plans are under preparation (Bulgaria, Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovakia and Romania); or have been prepared, but have not been adopted and implemented (Poland). This process needs to be speeded up and proper financial and human resources ensured for the planning process.

Identifying the management tasks within management plans requires the full consideration of local ecological conditions and the FCS identified for the species or habitat. Appropriate management measures might differ from country to country. Sufficient scientific information is needed and extensive experience exchange and consultations among governmental, non-governmental and independent experts are necessary to define the best possible management goals and methods (e.g. in the form of a biogeographic seminar type discussion on management).

But even having management plans adopted does not ensure alone that they are implemented in practice. This is a crucial problem in many (if not all) of the countries. For instance in Latvia, many of the management plans just stand on the shelves, without funds and without obligation from the state or local municipalities to implement them. This can be regarded as THE MAIN nature conservation problem in Latvia – lack of on the ground activities: habitat maintenance, restoration and monitoring.

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[3] "Favourable Conservation Status of Natura 2000 habitat types and species in Bulgaria" run by Wageningen International (NL) in cooperation with Bulgarian Biodiversity Foundation (BG), Balkani Wildlife Society (BG), Daphne (SK) and Orbicon (DK)

[4] Natura 2000 fact sheets prepared by CEEweb members:
www.ceeweb.org/workingroups/natura2000/resources/index.html

[5] In Slovenia management goals are defined in a separate Natura 2000 Operational Programme. The goals have to be included later in sectoral management plans (e.g. forestry management plans) which ensures their implementation.

Taking into account the needs of the actual site managers in addition to conservation aspects during the management planning process can be mutually beneficial for biodiversity conservation and land users. This is proved by a good example from **Estonia**[6]. According to the Estonian Nature Protection Act the management plan of a protected area can provide specifications to the national regulations on management of semi-natural habitats. This possibility was also used in the case of Koiva-Mustjõe Landscape Reserve, where management problems are related to the maintenance and recovery of semi-natural habitats. The management of these meadows depends on national subsidies, namely, farmers have to follow strict rules and regulations. For example, the national regulation allows to mow 10 July the earliest. However, the quality of hay as forage is decreasing significantly during June-July and especially those farmers with large land units can not plan their time adequately. Also due to the late starting period they are not interested in mowing the small, humid patches and patches with restricted access. As a consequence, management concentrates on large and thus most profitable areas while the meadows with high conservation value remain constantly unmanaged because of size or access. From both points of view – profitability of farmers and efficiency of conservation works – the best solution would be more flexibility and more specification in the management rules. During the process of developing the management plan for Koiva (process carried out and the plan compiled by Estonian Fund for Nature) most of the stakeholders, including conservation experts, authorities and actual managers (i.e. farmers) were collected into joint round-table talks. Due to the fact, that the actual management has been overtaken mainly by local farmers their proposals proved to be very valuable, while their personal involvement also created a sense of common interest. During the joint talks agreement was found to make protection rules more flexible for farmers, which creates an opportunity to plan field work more efficiently. Managing (i.e. mowing and removing the hay) can be started earlier on drier meadows, getting more quality hay from some patches, whereas the most humid parts can be approached with machines later. It means that in total, more time will be left to manage the whole area and thus, potentially larger areas can be managed. As farmers are satisfied, it is expected that this management method will be taken over for larger areas in the future. Thus the solution in this case did not require strong financial support (e.g. EU funds), but simply more effective information of affected people about management obligations, and the preparation of those management plans, which better fit stakeholders' interest.

Defining responsibilities and ensuring public involvement for management

Conservation objectives and thus FCS can be only achieved, if the identified management tasks are fully implemented on Natura 2000 sites. Unfortunately though, as experience shows it is ambiguous in most cases, who is responsible for the implementation of management tasks and ensuring the FCS. The legal regulatory framework and the management planning process needs to specify responsibilities of authorities, management bodies and land users, while the management planning process also needs to ensure ownership from the land users and the wider community.

There are some good examples from new MSs, where ownership and involvement of the community in the Natura 2000 management could be ensured. On the Štěpánovské stráně Natura 2000 site in the **Czech Republic**[7] authorities, farmers and NGOs all play important role in Natura 2000 management. The area is a complex of meadows, which are rich in thermophile vegetation – five ha of xerothermic grasslands and many endangered plant species and other valuable habitats. The Štěpánovské stráně meadows have been abandoned land for several years. As a consequence, common vegetation started to overgrow the area and endangered species of plants started to disappear. There was a need to eliminate overgrowing and reinforce the biodiversity of plants. The solution was found: extensive pasture. Thus a project started with the cooperation of NGOs (Centaurea – Society for Landscape Monitoring and Management and Daphne ČR), the nature protection department of Pardubice municipal authority, land owners and others who carried out the management. The recurring management of the site is now ensured because local land owners were convinced to rent the land and establish extensive pasture (using sheep and goats), two times per year. A long-term engagement was made between the land owners and those carrying out the management. The Pardubice regional authority offered financial support to ensure pasture in the next years. So far the management of two hectares of xerothermic grasslands (approximately 40 % of area) was successfully restored.

Currently it is also unclear in most cases how the national level results of the Article 17 report will be channelled back into the management process of Natura 2000. Good example is shown though by

[6] Best practice example provided by Estonian Fund for Nature available at: http://www.ceeweb.org/workingroups/natura2000/resources/Bestpractice/index.html

[7] Best practice example provided by Association Arnika available at: http://www.ceeweb.org/workingroups/natura2000/resources/Bestpractice/index.html

Poland, where Art 17 report results are used as important criteria within the project selection process for financing from Structural Funds (Operational Program Infrastructure and Environment, V Axis – Biodiversity). U2 and U1 habitats and species are preferred as target of financing.

Additional possibilities for utilising Article 17 report results on national level can be prioritising the development of management plans for habitats and species in U2 and U1 status, orienting agri-environment schemes to habitats and species in worse condition, carrying out targeted awareness raising campaigns to decrease human pressure on most affected species and habitats, or to draw up sectoral action plans in case a negative sectoral effect is proved by the Art.17 reports. The results can be also readily used as a political argument that nature needs conservation efforts, as well as financial resources in order to be able to comply with EU nature legislation and achieve FCS of species and habitats of Community interest. It can be also used as arguments against more common derogations (and art 6.4 application) for the most threatened species and habitats.

Ensuring sufficient financial resources

Compensatory payments for land users of Natura 2000 sites from EU and national sources can be important guarantees for ensuring appropriate management. However, the Natura 2000 payment system is not fully in place in new MSs yet, and there are huge differences among MSs in this regard. While in the Czech Republic there is payment scheme in place for arable lands, grasslands, forests and wetlands, for instance in Hungary it only exist for grasslands. In Latvia, payment scheme for grasslands is in place within the Rural Development Plan, but it is poorly administered and in many cases creates more problems to the landowners than benefits. It is also often a problem that payments are too low compared to the real costs of the time-consuming and non-profitable grassland management (e.g. this proved to be the case for payments for grasslands in Estonia and Latvia). This process must be accelerated and proper payment schemes put in place for all types of Natura 2000 habitats as soon as possible in all countries.

Nevertheless, Natura 2000 can not only generate income from EU funds. It works much more towards sustainability if the ecosystem services provided by Natura 2000 sites generate income for the local community. This is a great potential of the Natura 2000 concept that local use for local benefit is not excluded, but on the contrary promoted through harmonising biodiversity, social and economic interests. CEEweb thinks this potential is still not utilised to its full extent in the new MSs. NGOs and conservation administrations can act as initiators of such processes instead of taking the whole responsibility for Natura 2000.

Numerous successful initiatives can be found across new MSs that show that Natura 2000 can be a starting point for local development. **In Slovenia**[8] the Natura 2000 site Secovlje Salina represents one of the last traditional salt-pans in the Adriatic Sea. While the majority of traditional salt-pans in the Northern Mediterranean were abandoned for salt making due to the changed market conditions, Secovlje Salina was revived with the support of a private company, the designation of a protected area and a Natura 2000 site as well as the provision of LIFE funding. Here the tradition of salt-making still goes on, while on the other part of the salt-pans a favourable ecological status was created for several endangered habitats and species. A part of the salt-pans was reconstructed (though the reconstruction has not yet finished) with the use of traditional knowledge for restoring water management infrastructure. The investment into nature conservation in the area was also accompanied by new opportunities for the local community: through the involvement of a private company several jobs have been created for the local population (salt-workers, rangers, guides, etc.). The preservation of the salt-pan customs and habits also aids the revival of the local cultural heritage. As a result of these activities the cooperation with the local community has been indirectly strengthened, which can be seen in the joint promotion of the area and the community. This project demonstrates that commercial activity (traditional salt-making) can co-exist with nature protection requirements. Thus conservation efforts are seen as an added value both for the development of sustainable land use practices and the provision of benefits for the local community.

The good example of the Barycz river valley **in Poland**[9] also proves that appropriate management of Natura 2000 sites and local development can mutually benefit each other. The Barycz river together with a complex of large and small fish-ponds (130 fish-ponds in total) creates a paradise for numerous

[8] Best practice example provided by Institute for Sustainable Development available at: http://www.ceeweb.org/workingroups/natura2000/resources/Bestpractice/index.html

[9] Best practice example provided by the Academic Section of the Polish Country-Lovers' Association in Krakow available at: http://www.ceeweb.org/workingroups/natura2000/resources/Bestpractice/index.html

birds, because of which it has been designated as SPA. The conservation values of the Barycz Valley are threatened by both the intensification of fish-farming, and by the abandonment of agricultural land. These threats result from the tendencies in rural development (e.g. decreasing and ageing rural population, dying local culture, rural impoverishment, unemployment). However, local NGOs and eight communes joined forces and started rural development activities with the support of the European Union LEADER+ Programme, which also proved valuable for the conservation status of the Natura 2000 site. Local stakeholders created a Local Action Group (which later became the Barycz Valley Foundation) and worked out an Integrated Strategy of Rural Development for the Barycz Valley. Within the initiative local resources (communities, natural resources, local knowledge) were used as a basis for long term development. As the region cannot establish for example big factories because of the Natura 2000 designation, they had to find other ways of creating income. All activities were planned taking into account the water protection and rehabilitation of the river valley, and also aimed to connect nature conservation with income creation. Activities included inventory of bird habitats and habitat reconstructions, as well as organization of trainings and workshops, festivals and exhibitions about the values of Barycz Valley and Natura 2000 in general. Consultations were held with local people and investors about planned investments in the region. Trainings were organised for local people who wanted to start tourism activities, and tourist traffic monitoring was established. The quality of local products improved and Barycz Valley became more well-known, while the awareness of local people about eco-tourism and Natura 2000 increased.

Regulating external pressures

Achieving the management objectives in Natura 2000 sites does not only depend on the proper fulfilment of management tasks in the area, but it is also influenced by the external pressures from human activities as well as the influences of natural processes. Thus the Habitats Directive requires appropriate assessment of plans and projects (article 6.3) to prevent significant negative influences from human activities.

However, experiences from new MSs show some serious shortcomings in the implementation of article 6.3. Problems already appear in the screening phase of the assessment: in many cases appropriate assessments are avoided despite likely significant effects of plans and projects on Natura 2000 (as pointed out by NGOs for example from Bulgaria, Poland, Hungary). It is especially true for plans that are traditionally out of scope of any environmental assessment (reconstruction of draining ditches, fish management plans, game managements plans, forest management plans or budgetary decisions related to financing development and conservation activities). For example, at the end of 2008, forest cutting limits were significantly increased in Latvian State forests, without any consideration of the effect of this decision on biodiversity. When assessments are done indeed, in most CEE countries the involved experts are directly paid by the developer, which impairs the objectivity of the elaborated reports. The quality of reports is also extremely low in some cases. For instance the SEA of the Rural Development Program for Latvia 2007-2013 was of exemplary poor quality, without assessing the real impact of rural development measures on biodiversity. Slicing method is widely used and neither the experts, nor the authorities take into account the cumulative effect of the several smaller projects objectively. Real alternatives are in many cases not proposed, but totally unrealistic options are put forward in order to comply with this requirement on paper. In many cases there is also low transparency and very limited opportunities for public participation. During and after the completion of the projects authorities often do not check if the specific conditions required by the authorities for issuing the permission have been fulfilled for mitigating the negative effects on Natura 2000 sites. Cases of proper implementation of Article 6.3. requirements have been reported from Poland only. (e.g. AA taking into account the cumulative effects of numerous parallel projects or the assessment of forestry management plans). Unfortunately in most CEE countries the implementation of nature, EIA and SEA directives requirements is weakened making it possible that eventually political decisions are taken about plans and projects.

These particular problems emerging in relation to specific plans and projects are, however, generated on an ever growing scale by the underlying economic drivers. Thus the growing pressures from development projects are enhanced by the Lisbon process on growth and competitiveness and the recent stimulus package responding to the economic crisis. Boosting the economy with unlimited resource and energy use is regarded as a high priority enjoying strong political support, but within the current economic and monetary framework it inevitably leads to environmental destruction. And the given responses of nature conservation targeting the state of environment and the environmental pressures cannot offset these trends and protect the Natura 2000 network. Thus it needs to be realised that the proper implementation of the nature directives and in particular of article 6.3 of the Habitats Directive is not possible without changing the boundary conditions of the economy. The level of environmental pressures need to be absolutely limited at EU level, which includes the reduction of total energy and

natural resources use, the limitation of the use of space by humans (which also includes giving land back to nature) and effectively controlling, preventing and mitigating pollution, GMOs and IASs.

About CEEweb for Biodiversity

CEEweb for Biodiversity is a network of more than 70 non-governmental organizations in the Central and Eastern European region (within the EU it covers all new Member States except for Cyprus and Malta). The mission of the network is the conservation of biodiversity through the promotion of sustainable development. It works through advocacy, influencing decision making, common projects, capacity building, networking and awareness raising.

The members cooperate on issues related to the implementation of the nature directives within the Natura 2000 Working Group. The activities of the WG include:

- serving as a watchdog of Natura 2000 implementation in new MSs, influence policy making at EU and national levels,
- sharing experiences on the implementation of EU nature directives among members through *inter alia* producing national fact sheets and collecting best practices,
- capacity building for NGOs,
- carrying out common projects, e.g. on military training areas.

In order to provide an enabling legal and socio-economic framework through holistic environmental, economic and social policies, the recently established CEEweb Policy Working Group deals with the indirect drivers behind the pressures on biodiversity. The proposed solutions aim to bring about a paradigm change and provide a favourable environment, where Natura 2000 implementation, rural development, tourism can be realised effectively and for the benefit of biodiversity based on the principles of sustainability. By this the more practical work of the Natura 2000 WG, Rural Development WG, CITES WG and Tourism WG of CEEweb is supported by a holistic policy framework.