



Unione Italiana degli Esperti Ambientali

Protected areas: a key element of Europe's sustainable future

Europe's protected areas play a key role in protecting biodiversity. But they are also a critical component of the continent's economy, contributing over EUR 15 billion a year in jobs, food, and other services for the people of Europe. 2012 marks both the 20th anniversary of the most important international multilateral agreement on Biodiversity, the UN's Convention on Biological Diversity and of the most important EU piece of legislation on nature and biodiversity, the EU's Habitats Directive. As today, 22 May, is international biodiversity day, it provides an ideal opportunity to examine the state of protected areas today and the many benefits they provide. Protected areas are sites with defined boundaries designated by national governments with the intention of conserving the area's natural habitats, species and ecosystems, not only on land but also in the sea. They are also elements of the broader national territorial planning system. They have long been established to conserve wild game, or to protect natural beauty so it can be enjoyed by visitors. However, the current rationale for designating a protected area in Europe combines two main motivations. Firstly, there has been a growing recognition of the role protected areas play in safeguarding biodiversity. But in addition to this concern for biodiversity there has been an acknowledgement that protected areas are vital parts of the European economy.

Economic benefits of protected areas

The production of food and creation of employment within their boundaries are the most easily measured economic benefits of protected areas. But there are a host of indirect services provided by protected areas that also contribute to our economy. These include so-called "ecosystem services", such as the provision of clean water as well as the regulation of the water cycle carried out by forests, wetlands and watersheds, all of which help to mitigate flooding. Well-managed protected areas also prevent soil erosion and desertification, and help sequester carbon. In marine environments, protected areas can maintain fisheries stocks at sustainable levels by providing areas for fish to breed and grow without being caught. On land they can ensure safe environments for pollinating insects, which ensure the viability of much of Europe's agriculture.

All of these indirect beneficial impacts of protected areas are difficult to measure in terms of monetary value. But recent research for the European Commission suggests that the economic benefits from the largest European network of protected areas – the [Natura 2000 network](#) – are between three and seven times its annual running costs of EUR 5.8 billion.

This position at the intersection of the economy and nature makes protected areas a key part of Europe's drive for sustainable development and for the creation of a green economy.

Protected areas in Europe

Protected areas today cover a relatively large part of Europe, with almost 21 % of the territory of EEA member countries consisting of protected areas. This compares to roughly 13 % in the USA, 17 % in China and more than 26 % in Brazil.

Where Europe differs from these countries is the relatively small size of its protected areas. The average size of a protected area in Europe is 50 km², compared to 900 km² in Africa and 500 km² in the Americas. This is largely due to the relatively large size of Europe's population and the continent's long history of habitation and development. This has meant that a large part of Europe's territory has been fragmented by infrastructure and urbanisation. This human presence has not harmed biodiversity. On the contrary, some of the richest areas of biodiversity (such as the Mediterranean region) have been in full contact with

human occupation for millennia. In establishing protected areas, Europe is also protecting the role that humans have played in preserving biodiversity.

In Europe today there are two main networks of protected areas: the Natura 2000 network, established as part of the 1992 [Habitats Directive](#); and the Emerald Network, set up in 1996 by the Council of Europe, and comprising 45 countries, many of which are outside the EU. The Natura 2000

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Network also includes the Special Protected Areas established under the [Birds Directive](#), which dates to 1979, making it the EU's oldest piece of nature legislation.

Protected areas cover a wide variety of ecosystems within Europe, encompassing eleven biogeographic regions, including Arctic polar deserts in the north, arid matorral zones in the south, heathland in the west and the steppic zones in the east. They also cover parts of the Atlantic, as well as the Mediterranean, Baltic and Black seas.

The Natura 2000 network is by far the more comprehensive system of protected areas. It covers more than 26,400 sites with a total surface area of 986,000 km². Roughly 70 % of protected areas in the EU are part of the Natura 2000 network, which co-exists and often overlaps with nationally designated protected areas. Approximately 18 % of land in the EU is covered by Natura sites, but only 4 per cent of seas and oceans under jurisdiction of EU countries. The [Emerald network](#) is still in its initial phase and has nominated 1,280 sites covering almost 95,000 km².

What next?

These networks of protected areas amount to more than the sum of their parts as they promote the exchange of information, and transfer of know-how and experience. This improves the effectiveness of protected area personnel and protected area policy.

But these networks need to be improved and extended. Better coordination of data collection would improve the quality of information available to stakeholders and scientists. Also, given the success of many protected area policies in a variety of fields, these measures could also be extended beyond protected areas.

The European Environment Agency will publish a more comprehensive report on protected areas later this year.

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