

The Message from Athens.

The objective of halting biodiversity loss remains as valid today as it did in 2001 when it was adopted by European Heads of State and Government.

Progress has been made over recent years at the EU level. Covering 17% of EU territory, NATURA 2000 is the largest network of protected areas in the world and is, without question, one of the most significant achievements in EU environment policy. The legal protection of the Birds and Habitats Directives has stopped the destruction of many unique natural areas and EU funding has played a critical role in protecting some of our most endangered species and habitats. Water quality has also improved significantly and sustainable agricultural practices have become increasingly widespread. The Commission has launched new initiatives to tackle illegal logging, to combat global deforestation and to promote sustainable consumption and production.

At the same time scientific indicators show that the EU's 2010 target will not be met. The speed and scale of the loss of biodiversity means that urgent actions are needed. The Message from Athens aims to identify the priorities and options for future EU policy.

There are strong ethical and moral arguments for protecting biodiversity. It is a part of our culture and our history. But, on their own, these arguments have not been sufficient to protect nature. There is increasing recognition that the benefits that human society derives from nature have a very high value and that sustainable human development is dependent upon the continued delivery of these benefits. The true value of these benefits is not reflected in conventional models of economic growth and until this basic failing is addressed, biodiversity will continue to be lost.

There is a very close relationship between climate change and biodiversity. Climate change will have a profound impact upon ecosystems including major shifts in the distribution of habitat types and species. Healthy resilient ecosystems play a major and cost effective role in mitigating, and adapting to the consequences of, climate change.

The way that EU policies relating to agriculture, fisheries, regional development, transport, energy, trade and development are implemented have significant impacts upon EU and global biodiversity. In many of these policy areas progress has been made in integrating biodiversity concerns, but much remains to be done.

EU environmental legislation has contributed significantly to the conservation of biodiversity. However, to be more effective, the separate pieces of legislation should be implemented in a more integrated and co-ordinated manner. A coherent approach to spatial planning needs to be developed and, in particular, the Natura 2000 network should be completed, managed effectively and resourced appropriately.

At a global level, where the target is to significantly reduce the current rate of biodiversity loss, the EU has taken a leading role. However, the impact of European consumption on global biodiversity is an issue that needs to be addressed and biodiversity conservation needs to be integrated more effectively into all the EU's policies that have an impact at the global level.

Priorities for EU Action

One: a vision of why biodiversity matters

It is necessary to develop and communicate a better understanding of why healthy ecosystems deliver tangible benefits that underpin our economic, social and cultural well-being. The message of "why biodiversity matters" needs to be clear and the sense of urgency in addressing its loss conveyed. The EU institutions and Member States should:

- Develop a clear target regarding biodiversity and submit this to the European Council. The post-2010 target should be ambitious, measurable and clear. It should maintain the emphasis given to the intrinsic value of biodiversity while also recognising the value of healthy and resilient ecosystems and the services they provide.
- Ensure that the post-2010 target developed for the EU includes sectoral sub-targets that address the key challenges facing European biodiversity.
- Mainstream the findings of the study on The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity (TEEB) to demonstrate the strong economic rationale for conserving biodiversity.
- Make biodiversity conservation a priority for future communication programmes. It is essential to engage the public at all levels – including through the education system - in order to build an understanding of "why biodiversity matters".
- Develop alliances with key stakeholders who are directly affected by biodiversity loss.

Two: a better understanding of where we are and what more we need to do

The scientific work of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has shaped the political response to climate change. A strong science-policy interface is equally needed with regard to biodiversity – particularly since the drivers for biodiversity loss are more complex than for climate change and the direct impacts are harder to measure. Given existing gaps in scientific knowledge the application of the precautionary principle is particularly important. The EU institutions and Member States should:

- Ensure effective coverage of the monitoring programmes for the assessment of the status and of biodiversity and ecosystems in the EU.
- Strengthen and further develop biodiversity indicators, based on SEBI 2010, that are robust, understandable and policy relevant. A specific objective should be the development a biodiversity baseline against which progress can be assessed.
- Improve the science policy interface, both through developing mechanisms within the EU and, at the international level, where the EU should continue to support the establishment of an Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES).

- Give a higher priority to biodiversity within EU and national research programmes.
- Strengthen implementation of the EU's Biodiversity Action Plan.

Three: a fully functioning network of protected areas

Protected areas contain our most precious species and ecosystems. They represent the foundation of biodiversity conservation in Europe and their effectiveness has been scientifically proven. The EU institutions and Member States should:

- Secure the sustainable management of the Natura 2000 network.
- Complete the network, including the marine component, as soon as possible.
- Support the development of similar networks in overseas territories.
- Improve connectivity between sites with a particular consideration to adaptation to climate change.
- Ensure that EU nature legislation is enforced more effectively. Successful management approaches should be identified and good practices promoted. Implementation of the legislation should aim to remove unnecessary administrative burdens.
- To improve communication with regard to the Natura 2000 network.

Four: biodiversity outside of protected areas

Protected areas are essential – but they do not exist in isolation from the rest of the landscape. The state of biodiversity to be found in urban gardens, parks and green spaces, as well as rural areas, is extremely important especially as this is the biodiversity that most of the European population is aware of and can contribute to.

The EU institutions and Member States should:

- Integrate biodiversity explicitly in the development and implementation of EU and domestic policies (water, air, marine, agriculture, fisheries, spatial planning, impact assessment etc).
- Use restoration and renewal of degraded land, intensively cultivated areas and waterways as a driver for sustainable economic development and the social renewal of depressed areas.
- Develop EU policy on biodiversity protection progressively towards a comprehensive approach incorporating the conservation of ecosystems and the protection of Europe's "Green Infrastructure".

- Develop a comprehensive set of EU policies for tackling Invasive Species including, where appropriate, new legislation.
- Implement effective measures to protect Europe's soils which are essential not only with regard to the conservation of terrestrial biodiversity but also for crucial ecosystem services.

Five: Biodiversity and Climate Change

We cannot halt biodiversity loss without addressing climate change, but it is equally impossible to tackle climate change without addressing biodiversity loss. It is therefore essential that climate change policy is fully complementary with biodiversity policy. The EU institutions and the Member States should:

- Ensure that climate mitigation and adaptation measures are fully compatible with policies for the conservation of biodiversity.
- Promote the implementation of “triple win” of measures that conserve biodiversity while actively contributing to climate mitigation and adaptation.
- Ensure that international climate negotiations respect the above principles.

Six: global biodiversity

At a global level, the EU is a leading player with a significant influence in international discussions. However, Europe's consumption patterns mean that our "biodiversity" footprint” in third countries is large and is growing. The EU institutions and Member States should:

- Support effective governance structures for the protection of international biodiversity.
- Actively support the process of Reduced Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation (REDD) to stop global deforestation. The measures adopted should combine climate mitigation with biodiversity conservation and the interests of indigenous people and local communities.
- Take measures to assess and reduce the impact of European patterns of consumption and production on global biodiversity loss.
- Increase cooperation with development institutions and partner countries to maximise the positive contribution that the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity can make to poverty reduction.
- Support efforts to complete and implement the global network of protected areas – in particular, in marine areas that are beyond national jurisdiction.
- Work to protect vulnerable marine ecosystems from destructive fishing practices, support an international agreement on marine genetic resources beyond national

jurisdiction and continue work with developing countries to improve fisheries governance in their waters.

- Ensure that biodiversity concerns are fully taken into account by bilateral and global agreements on trade and investment.
- Work to finalise an agreement by 2010 on an international regime facilitating access to and equitable sharing of benefits from the use of genetic resources in the context of CBD.

Seven: integration of biodiversity into other policy areas

Effective integration of biodiversity concerns into other policies is needed to (i) minimise damage (ii) maximise the positive contribution to nature conservation objectives and (iii) realise the potential of co-benefits resulting from the maintenance and enhancement of healthy ecosystems. To improve upon existing initiatives the EU institutions and the Member States should:

- Review the impacts that EU policies, and EU funds, have on biodiversity – including biodiversity loss in third countries.
- Identify and promote synergies between biodiversity conservation and other policies.
- Ensure, taking the TEEB study as a starting point, that the real value of ecosystem services are taken into consideration when designing relevant EU policies.
- Extend policies on sustainable consumption and production to also cover the sustainable use of natural resources.
- Reduce fishing pressure to sustainable levels in order to improve biodiversity in the marine environment.
- Promote investment in biodiversity as a part of efforts to "green the economy" and fully exploit the potential that biodiversity restoration and conservation offers in terms of job creation.
- Encourage market mechanisms that take biodiversity concerns into account (e.g. supporting sustainable agriculture, forestry and fisheries) and promote policies that allow EU businesses to profit from protecting biodiversity.

Eight: Funding

Many EU and national funds open the possibility of providing financial support for protecting biodiversity. However, the actual level of financial resources allocated to biodiversity conservation remains small (especially when compared to the welfare benefits that ecosystem services provide). The EU institutions and the Member States should:

- Evaluate the success of the "integration" approach. If there is evidence that it is not working, then propose a specific funding instrument for biodiversity.
- Mobilise private funding for biodiversity protection building on experience with climate change and other environmental finance initiatives.
- Review the opportunities for making progress on biodiversity, a pre-condition for access to some Community funding instruments.
- Ensure sufficient funding for biodiversity conservation in the EU budget-review.
- Identify and reform subsidies that have a negative impact on biodiversity.