

Summary of the outcomes of the 3rd Mediterranean Natura 2000 seminar 4-7 May 2021 (online)

1. Introduction

The third Mediterranean Natura 2000 biogeographical seminar was hosted fully online, with seminar sessions taking place from 9:00-13:00 over four consecutive days, allowing participants from many countries/organisations to actively participate. 124 registered participants from 10 countries attended; in addition some 10 people from the supporting team were also present. The first day was best attended with 115 participants, whilst the three following days gathered on average 80 participants.

The seminar focused on knowledge sharing, with many high-quality presentations. Besides larger plenary sessions and presentations it included 18 facilitated sub-group meetings, a knowledge market and additional facilitated group discussions to develop the road map for cooperation in the Mediterranean region.

2. Plenary sessions

The opening session started with a welcome speech from Mr. Sergio De Caprio, Regional Counsellor for the Protection of the Environment of Calabria Region, and Mr. Francesco Curcio, President of Sila National park. Next, Mr. Antonio Maturani, General Manager of the Directorate for Natural Heritage in the Italian Ministry of the Ecological Transition gave his opening address, followed by Mr. Humberto Delgado Rosa, Director for Natural Capital of Directorate General Environment (DG ENV) in the European Commission.

Frank Vassen (DG ENV) then presented on the EU Biodiversity Strategy 2020-2030 and the Multi-Annual Financial Framework 2021-2027. Maurizio Nicolai (EU Funds Management Authority Region Calabria) complemented this European perspective with a presentation on the regional use of EU funds for the protection of biodiversity in Calabria. Laura Patricia Gavilan (ETC-BD) followed with an analysis of the status of protected species and habitats in the Mediterranean region, based on the Habitats Directive Article 17 reporting. Finally, Sophie Ouzet (DG ENV) summarised the state of play in the Mediterranean region with regard to the biogeographical process and Rafael Hidalgo (Head of the Protected Areas Unit, Spanish Ministry of the Ecological Transition and the Demographic Challenge) reported on the round of five workshops his Ministry organised over the past years on harmonisation of procedures for monitoring, assessment and conservation of the habitat types of Community interest as a follow up from the second Mediterranean seminar. He opened up perspectives for continued cooperation in this respect.

3. Parallel thematic sessions and discussions

Work continued in parallel thematic sessions where four individual themes were discussed during two morning sessions, with a view to strengthening transnational cooperation around Natura 2000.

Thematic session 1: Defining and coordinating a Natura 2000 restoration agenda for the Mediterranean region

(Chair: Ioannis Tsiripidis; facilitator: Theo van der Sluis)

The session discussed how to decide on priorities and implement restoration activities in the Mediterranean region. Among good examples of restoration actions, participants mentioned that quantified goals and monitoring of results should be defined when preparing the restoration measures. These measures should address ecological processes and restore them where possible, which requires a good understanding of ecosystem functioning. Active involvement of local communities and the general public is important for long-term success of restoration. Therefore, communication with stakeholders is key, alongside sharing examples of successful restoration actions with local communities. Restoration projects mentioned as good examples often concern rivers, wetlands, coastal dunes and other coastal areas.

Networking greatly helps keeping a good flow of information between Member States. Restoration should not be a sum of projects: through coordinated activities and sharing common frameworks, better results can be achieved. A concerted plan of action is required to improve connectivity both within regions and across national boundaries where corridors exist or should be restored.

Within and between countries the communication between science, conservation practice and the administration is limited and therefore needs to improve (science-policy-practice interface). The round of workshops Spain initiated have covered ground in this respect. The information concerning biodiversity and restoration needs to be accessible to all administrative levels in the restoration process.

Thematic session 2: Defining conservation objectives at site level and monitoring impact of measures

(Chair: Carmelo Maria Musarella, Facilitator: Jorge Capelo)

Most Member States have set site specific conservation objectives, or are in the process of doing so. A few have also developed conservation objectives at regional or national level, or are developing them now. However, several participants also indicated that it is often difficult to explain the need for setting objectives to involved stakeholders.

One of the complicating factors in the Mediterranean region compared to other biogeographical regions is the high number of habitats and species for which site level objectives need to be set. Lack of knowledge and insufficient data are often major bottlenecks to setting objectives at site level. In particular, for many habitats and species, no information is available to set objectives for structure and functions. Some suggested 'indicator species' for habitats across the biogeographic region could serve as bioindicators of habitat quality, dynamics, or for structure and function. For mobile species that are moving beyond the boundaries of the Natura 2000 site, parameters might need to be set at a higher or regional level. Therefore, setting of common standards on these parameters is needed to allow for comparisons at regional, national and biogeographic levels.

Lack of resources to implement monitoring is an obstacle to the monitoring the impact of measures: too often, no staff or funding is available for contracting trained personnel. Some Member States monitor measures at site level using standardised protocols, some only undertake selected monitoring, while others do not monitor them at all. A limited number of studies are available on the monitoring of management success. France has an annual call for projects led by the French Biodiversity Agency to develop and stimulate field surveys of the effects of Natura 2000 measures. The lack of agreed (and simple) protocols which can be executed by site managers was also identified as a major bottleneck.

Thematic session 3: Addressing land abandonment in the Mediterranean region

(Chairs: Michael Vrahnakis and Yannis Kazoglou; facilitator: Carlos Sunyer)

Current land abandonment trends are driven by diverse and site specific factors (on which we need to expand our knowledge) and are expected to continue over the coming years. Land abandonment is at the same time threatening important nature values and creating an opportunity for increased natural ecological processes.

Key policy tools to curb this process include the improvement of farming conditions and the provision of support to rural communities. Farmers should also receive assistance to increase their net profits. To this end, innovative solutions are needed. Several examples were mentioned:

- Reducing costs: e.g. improving farmers' position in the food chain, payment for specific management measures or increased cooperation of farmers (who can create platforms e.g. for marketing or product branding, such as the example presented by Terra dell Oasi).
- Improve the marketing of products with specific labelling schemes, among which a Natura 2000 certification scheme which is considered essential.

Land abandonment also provides opportunities for ecological restoration and increased ecosystem services (carbon storage, increased resilience towards climate change, protection of aquifers, water catchments, etc.) If the natural processes at work in abandoned areas are managed and guided by specific measures, it can speed up the recovery of forests, reduce risks of land degradation (e.g. wild fires, erosion, invasive alien species), enhance biodiversity and increase resilience to droughts, wildfires and extreme temperatures. To this end, we need to define and share measures to improve biodiversity and habitat conditions in abandoned areas, including through active management.

Abandoned land management plans that share out abandoned land into areas with opportunities for rewilding and areas for maintaining high nature value farming could help tackle these contradictory challenges. Demonstration sites showcasing best practices could support the development of these plans.

Better integration of land abandonment into rural development policies and the biodiversity policy agenda would help address the threats and meet the opportunities it creates for Natura 2000.

Thematic session 4: Building capacity for Natura 2000 management

(Chair: Sabina Burrascano; Facilitator: Irene Bouwma)

There is a wide range of competencies Natura 2000 managers need for their work. Beside general knowledge on biodiversity, protected area planning and project development, communication and collaboration skills are of particular importance. Different national and international capacity building projects (e.g. LIFE e-Natura2000.edu) are working to improve the skills of Natura 2000 managers. According to participants, the best ways to improve competencies are exchange and field visits, internet-exchange platforms, and training events targeting multiple audiences (e.g. students, politicians). In this respect, they underline that intersectoral networks or communities enable people to learn from other sectors and develop increased abilities to integrate other's viewpoints and frameworks of thought in their practice. Training staff using interdisciplinarity (e.g. train foresters on conservation and vice versa) also efficiently contributes to such skills.

Participants called for a capacity building programme that addresses both national and regional needs, and action to harmonise and standardise approaches on protocols at regional level (e.g. protected area planning, monitoring). In addition, it is key to embed capacity building in the work of institutions so that long term strategies and funding are in place, and staff can continuously improve their competencies over time. Capacity building indeed requires long term action. However, one-off capacity building projects have a strong added-value as they explore, test and collect best practice and new approaches as well as develop programmes specific to Natura 2000 where they don't exist yet, including on a transnational scale, potentially paving the way for long term strategies.

Although the Covid19 pandemic has given a push to online training and have highlighted its high potential for spreading knowledge at unprecedented scales, participants still like blended training modes better and keep in mind online training is not effective for all objectives or all publics.

4. Knowledge market

Chiara Spotorno (NEEMO) opened the session with a presentation on opportunities for replication and transfer of knowledge from LIFE projects in the Mediterranean biogeographical region. Next, the 110 participants joined eight lively and informal sessions to learn more about over 30 projects from the biogeographical region.

5. Closing plenary session

On the final day, a film by Region Calabria on its astonishing landscapes and forests was shown just after the four chairs of the thematic sessions reported back on the outcome of discussions. Each of them suggested two topics that were then further debated between participants with a view to plan for practical action:

- 1. How can we develop a coordinated biogeographical region level approach for the restoration of Mediterranean habitats and species that are widely distributed across the region?** All participants see the need for a coordinated effort to define a restoration agenda for the Mediterranean region. To this end, a steering group composed of representatives from all Member States should coordinate action and define criteria for the selection of habitats and species of a particular ecosystem type. Based on the selection, actions should be defined for restoration. The steering group would work across levels, from site to biogeographical level, define the sites and actions, coordinate activities and ensure good flow of information between member states.
- 2. How can we cooperate to ensure funds aimed at cross border restoration projects?** To ensure such projects are funded, cooperation and coordination between national and regional levels has to be improved and environmental, tourism, agricultural and other sectors need to be better integrated.
- 3. How can we develop a biogeographical region level approach towards implementing coordinated conservation objectives for Mediterranean habitats and species that are widely**

- distributed across the region?*** Suggestions will be incorporated among priorities under the Natura 2000 biogeographical process and followed up in the cooperative work the Spanish Ministry of the Ecological Transition and the Demographic Challenge intends to further develop.
4. ***How can we secure resources to set up monitoring systems where the results of measures are only expected to materialise in the long (or unknown) term?*** It was proposed to develop a separate long-term funding tool (at EU or national level) to allocate funds for the monitoring of measures, and to review and consider the use of citizens science for monitoring.
 5. ***How to ensure political support for the maintenance, restoration or development of biodiversity in areas or regions subject to land abandonment?*** It was proposed to support the development of specific action plans at regional level in order to manage the process of land abandonment with a view to conserve existing agricultural areas and rewild others in a more controlled manner.
 6. ***How to ensure a good dissemination of technical knowledge and lessons learnt about the management and restoration of abandoned areas (either through rewilding or active management) in the Mediterranean region?*** Several strategies were suggested such as: involving the media to increase awareness of this silent process; and developing laymen reports for the general public, an internet forum with best practices, as well as communication strategies that target local and regional politicians.
 7. ***How to disseminate know how and lessons learnt in capacity building for Natura 2000 site management across biogeographical regions?*** Participants recognised the added-value of field exchanges in this respect and suggested specific funding should be applied for (e.g. under the Erasmus and LIFE programmes) to develop such opportunities. They dismissed the prospect of setting up a new internet exchange platform and instead supported options allowing for better access to existing experience (cross-linking, or a page with links to past and ongoing programmes and projects).
 8. ***How do we ensure that institutions include capacity building for skills and competencies other than the scientific ones required for the management of Natura 2000 sites in their strategies?*** It is key to draw lessons from organisations that have already developed strategies and projects that have established best practice. It was noted that accessing the exemplary experience gathered under LIFE on capacity building is far from easy and improving the search engine of the LIFE project database in this respect would help scaling up efforts. Evaluating long term results of capacity building initiatives and demonstrating the long term added value of enhanced capacity for the efficient use of resources and the achievement of actual conservation targets are crucial to ensure sufficient and long term allocation of resources to develop this type of skills. In certain contexts, an official recognition of the profession of Natura 2000 site managers might ease the leverage of funding for capacity building.

Mr. Nicola Notaro, Head of the Nature Protection Unit in DG ENV, concluded the seminar with perspectives for the Natura 2000 biogeographical process. The process will both keep a focus on the exchange of experiences and the development of cooperative action, and it will also become a forum for Member States to discuss their pledges for delivering on the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030. This strategic discussion will provide coherence on restoration targets and protected area targets at a biogeographical level.

Mr. Maurizio Battagazzore, Director of Division III - Biodiversity, Flora and Fauna, CITES within General Direction for Natural Heritage of the Italian Ministry of the Ecological Transition, thanked all participants for their attendance. He underlined that the Mediterranean region is rich in nature, particularly due to the high number of endemic species, but that the region has an important challenge ahead to implement the EU Biodiversity Strategy, not only for nature but also for people in the region and for the preservation of cultural traditions.

All presentations from the seminar, and in due time the full seminar report, will become available on the Natura 2000 biogeographical process webpages soon:

https://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/natura2000/platform/events/third_mediterranean_seminar.htm

or at the "Working together for Natura 2000" WIKI: <https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/wikis/x/TgLZJq>