



Natura 2000 Seminar for the Boreal Region



10-12 October 2023

Helsinki, Finland

Comprehensive Summary
4th Boreal Biogeographical seminar



Natura 2000 4th Seminar for the Boreal Region

The Natura 2000 Seminar for the Boreal Region was held in Helsinki, Finland from the 9th to the 12th of October 2023. The seminar provided a platform for discussing challenges and opportunities related to the implementation of Natura 2000 in the Boreal Region. Jointly hosted by DG Environment and the Finnish Ministry of the Environment, the seminar brought together experts, policymakers, and stakeholders to address key topics associated with the Natura 2000 initiative, which is central to European biodiversity conservation efforts.



First Day, November 10th

The plenary session was setting the tone and direction for discussions of the seminar. It included official welcomes, updates from DG-ENV, and a report from the previous Boreal seminar. Chaired by Mikko Kuusinen from the Ministry of the Environment, Finland, the plenary started with the official welcome and introduction by **Minister Kai Mykkänen**, who reiterated the importance of sharing expertise and knowledge related to Natura 2000 within the Boreal Region. Minister Mykkänen highlighted the focus areas for the Natura 2000 policy in Finland, which includes legislative processes, policy instruments, old growth forest preservation, and programs like METSO and Helmi, further underscoring the nation's dedication to nature conservation.

Humberto Delgado Rosa, Director for Natural Capital in DG ENV, delivered a video message that underscored the global significance of the Natura 2000 seminars for achieving the European Union (EU) biodiversity targets and addressing climate change. His message resonated with the overarching theme of the seminar - the vital role of the Natura 2000 Biogeographical Process for achieving EU-wide conservation goals.

Frank Vassen from DG-ENV provided an overview of the Natura 2000 Biogeographical Process and shared updates from the European Commission. One of the pivotal insights he shared was related to the 2019 Article 17 report, which highlighted the degradation of vital habitats like grassland, dune, bog, mire and fen habitats due to various pressures, including intensified agricultural practices. He also drew attention to the profound effects of climate change on the Boreal region, underlining the urgency of conservation efforts. He also presented the current state of the Natura 2000 network, encompassing 18.6% of land and 8% of marine habitats across the EU Member States. A central objective of the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 is to steer biodiversity toward recovery by 2030 through the creation of a cohesive EU-wide network of protected areas. This aligns with the EU Nature Restoration Law and the protected areas goals for achieving a coverage of 30% of protection and 10% of strict protection. Each Member State is expected to contribute to the 30% target and to submitting pledges. A second important target of the strategy provides that 30 % of species and habitats currently not in good status should show a positive trend by 2030, and that there should be no negative trend for the remaining species and habitats.

Hanno Zingel, representing the Estonian Ministry of Climate, presented a summary of the 3rd Boreal seminar, which took place in Tallinn, October 2019. Stakeholder engagement, priority areas for action, and the intersection of Natura 2000 with climate change were central to the discussions. Four habitat working groups were set-up, focusing on rivers and lakes, wetlands, forests, and grasslands. These groups conducted thematic discussions and carried out site visits to restored areas, which effectively complemented the thematic focus. Moreover, the seminar had a knowledge market component, which played a significant role in launching new cooperation projects as an outcome.

The previous Boreal seminar highlighted the value of such gatherings in shaping and advancing biodiversity conservation efforts within the Boreal Region.

Moira Wilputte, LIFE monitoring expert with ELMEN, presented the LIFE program for the period 2021-27. The program encompasses three sub-programmes: LIFE nature and biodiversity, LIFE climate change and mitigation, and Life circular economy and quality of life. Wilputte stressed the co-financing rates for LIFE projects, which range from 60% to 75%, and highlighted the importance of focusing on best practices to achieve nature conservation goals.

Iva Obretenova from DG-ENV presented the Nature Restoration Law, a new legal instrument aimed at improving the state of nature in the EU through national Nature Restoration Plans. The law, which still requires the endorsement of all Member States, sets specific targets for restoration measures by 2030: 30% of EU land and sea area, and restoration of 90% of degraded ecosystems by 2050. Besides focussing on Natura 2000 sites, the law also sets targets for agricultural and forest areas, pollinators and river connectivity, as well as for improving urban green spaces.

Julia Bovenhoff's presentation on the Freshwater Prioritization Tool provided insights into the status and indicators of freshwater habitats within the Boreal Region. The tool can be an asset for supporting cross-border cooperation and knowledge sharing among stakeholders. It provides a systematic approach to assess the condition of freshwater ecosystems, identify areas requiring immediate attention, and share information to inform decision-making. The tool can help address the challenges faced by freshwater habitats, in terms of prioritizing area for protection and habitat restoration.

The afternoon session focused on protected area targets and pledges. This session was chaired by **Aveliina Helm** from the Ministry of Climate, Estonia, and Scientific Advisor to the minister.

Elena Osipova from the European Environment Agency (EEA) presented an analysis of the protected area pledges submitted for the Boreal region. So far only Sweden has submitted pledges for that region, but the discussion showed that other countries are also close to finalising their pledges. The current protected area coverage for the boreal region is at 10%. Discussions focused on existing protected areas, excluding areas not counted in the 30%, and pledging both existing and future protected areas. Baseline updates with new statistics in 2024 were highlighted.

Maano Aunapuu from the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency discussed Sweden's pledge status, with a national pledge of 15.5% and 11.9% for the Boreal region. While achieving the 30% goal is challenging, achieving 10% of strict protection by 2030 is deemed realistic. An increase in protected areas is possible through national instruments such as national parks and nature reserves.

Agnė Jasinavičiūtė, Director of State Service for Protected Areas in Lithuania, presented the status of the preparatory work on pledges in Lithuania. Lithuania aims to reach 20% protection, but challenges remain, given that less than 6% of the national territory is currently strictly protected. The process for designating additional areas is considered very time-consuming.

Irene Bouwma from the Biogeographical Process presented the submitted pledges for conservation status improvement for species and habitats in the Boreal region, which was again based on data from Sweden only. Her assessment looked at the question whether the pledge is sufficiently ambitious in terms of habitats and species covered, and whether the proposed pledges suggest achieving positive trends for 30% of species and habitats currently in a bad conservation status. The assessment concluded that the ambition level of the Swedish pledge was relatively low. Three habitat types are

proposed for improvement: raised bogs H7120, and two beech forest types H9110 and H9130. For 16 bird species and 5 species of the habitats directive further deterioration is deemed unavoidable.

Outi Ala-Honkola from the Ministry of the Environment in Finland reflected on the pledge preparations in Finland. This work started in 2022, with 28 organizations being involved. The political endorsement process is still ongoing, with delays due to elections. Challenges are posed by conflicting land use interests and uncertainties in terms of available funding.

Herdis Fridolin from the Ministry of Climate in Estonia presented the Estonian pledge status. Favourable conservation status was reported for 56% of species and 57% of habitats. Restoration efforts in Estonia are focusing on mires, bogs, and grasslands. The choice of improvement targets and the involvement of landowners were emphasized in her presentation. The Estonian submission of pledges is expected in January 2024.

What is the main bottleneck in increasing the ambitions for the pledges

128 responses



In the last session of the day, 6 break-out groups discussed various topics linked to the pledges. Topics discussed included identifying the barriers for pledge submission, how pledges may help achieve the Biodiversity Strategy targets, how to align pledges between Member States and organize cross-border implementation, and what would be needed to scale up restoration efforts for species and habitats. Topics for discussion for Protected

Area targets where the coherence of the protected area network, the best areas and criteria for strict protection and management of strictly protected areas, as well as defining OECMs.

A **Knowledge Market** was held on the evening of the first day. Moira Wilputte (Monitoring expert LIFE – Elmen) opened the session. Posters presented included several LIFE projects, a protected area prioritization tool developed by NaturaConnect as well as a Europe Freshwater Prioritization Tool developed by The Nature Conservancy. Participants were provided with a comprehensive understanding of innovative tools and methodologies that can be employed in their conservation efforts. The Knowledge Market proved instrumental in promoting a culture of continuous learning and improvement, as stakeholders gained access to the latest developments and research in the field. After the dinner many participants took the opportunity to enjoy the sauna and a dive into the lake, continuing discuss conservation topics in a more casual setting.

Day 2. November 11th: Excursions

The participants visited the excursion sites in two groups. The first site, Nuuksio National Park, included the Aaltia Visitor Center and Taiga forests, as well as the presentation of an area where prescribed burning has been practised for biodiversity conservation purposes. Questions arose about the

ecological benefits for the fauna and flora linked to dead-wood, but also about possible negative impact, f. ex. on nesting birds.

The second site, the Espoonlahti-Luomalahti Nature Protection Area, is known for its semi-natural grasslands. Cooperation with local farmers was highlighted as crucial for the regular management of these areas, with maintenance relying on their involvement. However, the site faces several challenges, including reduced farmer interest in grazing schemes due to changes in the eligibility of the land for funding under the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), new challenges linked to the EU Deforestation Regulation (EUDR), and increasing wolf populations in the area.

These discussions shed light on the complexity of managing such unique natural areas and balancing ecological conservation with changing environmental and regulatory factors.

The evening again allowed for a visit to the sauna.



Third Day, November 12th

The third day started with parallel sessions for in-depth discussions on a range of Natura 2000-related topics. The themed sessions included **planning restoration and management**, the **pollinators initiative in the Boreal context**, **defining criteria for old growth forests**, and strategies for **protected area prioritization in the context of climate change**.

These focused discussions enabled participants to explore specific challenges and solutions in greater detail. They facilitated interdisciplinary dialogue and knowledge sharing, enabling stakeholders to delve into specialized areas of interest and expertise.

Olli Ojala chaired **Theme 1, Planning of restoration and management**. Three separate groups discussed the issue of restoration for mires, forest and agricultural habitats. Questions in the mires group focused on what might trigger more effective and successful implementation of restoration measures on the ground. The Grassland Group emphasized farmer support, advocating for coherent advice and funding with simplified regulations. The Forest Group highlighted a participatory, transparent process with neutral facilitators for successful restoration efforts.

Petri Ahlroth chaired **Theme 2, the Pollinators initiative in the Boreal context**. Member States propose pollinator actions with a variety of governance settings. Despite contextual differences, all agree on the need for enhancing the initiative's visibility. Accessible financing and awareness are crucial. Monitoring with available methods is emphasized, and the need for sharing of best practices is highlighted. Collaboration is key for knowledge exchange on topics like setting up pollinator species lists, developing new monitoring techniques, and exploring funding opportunities through LIFE.

Mart Külvik chaired **Theme 3: What are criteria for old growth forest?** Participants concluded that EU criteria for old growth forest are often too general. Specific, nationally tailored criteria are important,

with no need for harmonization among Member States. Second, targets based on scientific processes and alignment with regulations like non-deforestation and renewable energies were emphasized. While it is crucial to respect the timeline for pledges, the need for an appropriate stakeholder engagement was also underscored. Participants suggested to stimulate further discussions among Member States, to continue harmonizing habitat definitions at the Boreal region level, and to advocate a precautionary approach to identify both the best patches and areas with potentially high values.

Santtu Karaksela chaired Theme 4, **protected area prioritization in the context of climate change**. Modelling should explore the role of adaptive management, and remote sensing data should be used to improve site management. Prioritization of measures should consider habitat restoration needs. There is a need to reduce pressures, to facilitate the adaptation to climate change. One should not focus on protected areas alone but also on broader landscape impacts. Despite significant progress in our understanding of climate change impacts, there remains quite some uncertainty still about future climate projections. The network is static, countries need advice where to put effort and make more cost-effective choices. The NaturaConnect project could contribute by providing knowledge that would help site managers to make well-informed choices.

Plenary Session

The final plenary session provided a wrap-up of the seminar. It synthesized the outcomes of the discussions, highlighting key takeaways, summarized shared commitments, and identified action points. The importance of continued cooperation, stakeholder engagement, adequate funding, and political commitment were all emphasized as essential to achieve the ambitious Natura 2000 goals in the Boreal Region. The participants left with a renewed sense of purpose and a shared vision for the future, committing to further collaboration and collective action to ensure the success of the Natura 2000 Biogeographical Process.

Theo van der Sluis reported **outcomes of the discussion of the conservation status**. These discussions highlighted technical and political barriers in preparing and submitting conservation pledges. Proposed solutions included adopting a bottom-up approach with the involvement of a neutral facilitator, allocating more time for preparation and stakeholder consultation, and employing motivational tools, as was successfully demonstrated in conservation programs such as Helmi and Metso. It is crucial to address complicating factors, such as time constraints, lack of process clarity, decreasing funding, and lack of ownership and support. To overcome these barriers, the group emphasized the need to increase awareness and garner support for nature conservation, through an improved communication with landowners and the general public, and by clarifying the consequences of conservation efforts. To align pledges between Member States and organize cross-border implementation, the discussion emphasized the importance of cooperation and sharing best practices. Cross-border action was recommended through programs like INTERREG and LIFE, as well as regional seminars and networking events to facilitate contacts and cross-sectoral awareness. Political commitment and knowledge exchange through meetings in small groups and working groups were suggested to bridge gaps in understanding. To scale up restoration efforts for species and habitats, the discussion stressed the need to prioritize quality over quantity, act at the landscape level, reduce bureaucracy, engage landowners early, secure funding, and propose attainable targets. Participants recognized the varying timeframes for species and habitat restoration. Knowledge exchange and best practices were highlighted as essential components. Participants also suggested exploring private company funding such as carbon credits. Deterioration is seen as inevitable for certain species and habitats due to threats such as climate change, invasive species, land abandonment, diseases, and intensive management. Examples include Arctic and Alpine species like the Arctic Fox, European Crayfish, Moths, migratory birds, and the green toad, *Bufo viridis*. Proposed solutions include understanding species needs, changes in the CAP rules, LIFE project funding, use of umbrella species, adjustment of hunting rules, species reintroduction measures, and knowledge exchange.

The discussion on protected area targets, presented by **Kalev Sepp**, highlighted the importance of achieving network coherence. This involves ensuring a well-connected network representing all

