



Natura 2000 Biogeographical Process

# Networking event on the 10% strict protection target of the Biodiversity Strategy in the marine environment

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## Background Document



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## 1. Introduction to the Natura 2000 biogeographical process

The Natura 2000 biogeographical process was launched in 2011 by the European Commission to assist Member States in implementing their legal obligations under the EU Birds and Habitats Directives and to manage Natura 2000 as a coherent ecological network. The objective of the process is to promote knowledge exchange, networking, and cooperation on Natura 2000 related issues at a biogeographical region level. At the heart of the process lie the Natura 2000 seminars, as well as a networking programme consisting of the organisation of workshops, events, or meetings relevant to the objective of the process and various communication actions. This programme is supported by a consortium comprising NatureBureau Ltd and CEEweb.

Since Member States in each region are likely to face similar challenges in the management of Natura 2000 sites and protected habitats and species, the Natura 2000 seminars and networking events were intended to stimulate transnational exchanges and promote a coherent management of Natura 2000 at biogeographical region level<sup>1</sup>. This approach is particularly relevant for the marine environment, where the management of Natura 2000 sites often involves addressing transboundary or even basin-scale pressures and activities which also often affect highly mobile species not restricted to the marine area of one Member State.

## 2. Targets of the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030

In 2020, the European Commission adopted the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 “Bringing nature back into our lives”<sup>2</sup>, which was supported by Member States<sup>3</sup>. The strategy sets out a comprehensive, ambitious, long-term plan for protecting nature and reversing the degradation of ecosystems and ecosystem services. Specific targets are to be achieved by 2030, among them two that are particularly relevant for the Natura 2000 biogeographical process:

- **Protected areas:** legally protect at least 30% of the land, including inland waters, and 30% of the sea in the EU, of which at least one third (10% of land and 10% of sea) to be under strict protection. Effectively manage all protected areas, defining clear conservation objectives and measures, and monitor them appropriately.
- **Conservation status:** ensure that at least 30% of species and habitats covered by the Birds<sup>4</sup> and Habitats<sup>5</sup> Directives not currently in favourable status are in that category or show a strong positive trend, as well as ensure no deterioration in conservation trends and status of all protected habitats and species.

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://biogeoprocess.net/>

<sup>2</sup> EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 Bringing nature back into our lives <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?qid=1590574123338&uri=CELEX:52020DC0380>

<sup>3</sup> <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-11829-2020-INIT/en/pdf>

<sup>4</sup> <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32009L0147>

<sup>5</sup> <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A01992L0043-20130701>

These targets are not legally binding and do not replace the legal obligations that Member States have under the Birds and Habitats Directives. Rather, they represent a political agreement for action to drive their delivery and help stop and reverse biodiversity loss. Together with Member States, the Commission produced guidance documents that provide further clarifications for each of the targets<sup>6,7</sup>. These targets have also added a new and over-arching context for the Natura 2000 biogeographical process.

As part of the initiative to meet the objectives set out within the Biodiversity Strategy 2030, the European Commission has requested that Member States make pledges to show how they will meet the protected area and conservation status targets. These should follow the format<sup>8</sup> and contents agreed between the Member States, the Commission, and the European Environment Agency (EEA), using the Excel file template developed by the EEA and the European Topic Centre for Biodiversity (ETC-BD) for pledge submission to the EEA's Reportnet platform.

### 3. Strictly protected areas in the marine regions

The EU Biodiversity strategy applies equally to the marine as to the terrestrial environment. The protected area (PA) targets are to be met at the level of each marine biogeographical region by designating new, or expanding existing, Natura 2000 sites (special areas of conservation under the Habitats Directive or special protection areas under the Birds Directive) or MPAs designated under national legislation or through international agreements such as regional sea conventions. In this context, strictly protected areas are defined as follows<sup>9</sup>:

*“Strictly protected areas are **fully and legally protected areas** designated to conserve and/or restore the integrity of biodiversity-rich natural areas with their underlying ecological structure and supporting natural environmental processes. **Natural processes are therefore left essentially undisturbed** from human pressures and threats to the area’s overall ecological structure and functioning, independently of whether those pressures and threats are located inside or outside the strictly protected area”.*

This definition is interpreted as meaning:

- They are non-intervention areas, where only limited and well controlled activities are allowed;
- Natural processes are left essentially undisturbed but areas are not necessarily incompatible with some human activities, such as research, invasive alien species control, restoration, non-intrusive

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<sup>6</sup> Commission guidance on the protected areas targets: [https://ec.europa.eu/environment/publications/criteria-and-guidance-protected-areas-designations-staff-working-document\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/environment/publications/criteria-and-guidance-protected-areas-designations-staff-working-document_en)

<sup>7</sup> Commission guidance on the status improvement targets: <https://circabc.europa.eu/ui/group/6f30d1d2-d6f2-4c6e-a4dc-1feb66201929/library/bd8a2cd4-f774-4574-bd88-0b1fa012b725/details>

<sup>8</sup> Format for the protected areas target: <https://circabc.europa.eu/ui/group/6f30d1d2-d6f2-4c6e-a4dc-1feb66201929/library/55ebe353-e369-49ab-92b1-4ddb67424b0/details>

Format for the status improvement target: <https://circabc.europa.eu/ui/group/6f30d1d2-d6f2-4c6e-a4dc-1feb66201929/library/395c7cde-e2c4-40b0-9afc-638a214d6b39/details>

<sup>9</sup> Commission guidance on the protected areas targets: [https://ec.europa.eu/environment/publications/criteria-and-guidance-protected-areas-designations-staff-working-document\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/environment/publications/criteria-and-guidance-protected-areas-designations-staff-working-document_en)

activities and installations, non-intrusive and strictly controlled recreational activities, when such activities are compatible with the conservation objectives of the areas on the basis of a case-by-case assessment;

- Areas have sufficient size on their own or together with buffer zones to be functionally meaningful;
- Areas should incorporate
  - areas of very high biodiversity value or potential,
  - significant areas of carbon-rich ecosystems, such as wetlands, mangroves and seagrass meadows,
  - important fish spawning and nursery areas.

The concept of strict protection is also present in the IUCN Guidelines for Applying Protected Area Management Categories<sup>10</sup>, and it is often associated with the definitions of categories Ia, strict nature reserve, Ib, wilderness area, and II, national park. It should be noted, however, that while the definitions of categories Ia and Ib are largely in line with the objective specified in the strategy, of leaving natural processes essentially undisturbed to respect the areas' ecological requirements, the definition of category II allows for a process of zoning, in which strict protection does not necessarily apply to the whole protected area. A useful discussion paper on strict protection in the marine environment in the context of the Biodiversity Strategy was prepared for the meeting of the Marine Expert Group in 2021<sup>11</sup>.

Strictly protected areas have to be legally protected in their entirety, but it is possible that areas under strict protection form a part of wider protected areas. They can be designated through specific national legal instruments, such as some existing nature reserves, through specific long-term contractual agreements, or through zoning in the management planning of wider areas (in which case the strictly protected areas must be clearly identified in the management plans and those plans should have a legal standing).

Strictly protected areas can provide an important contribution to the restoration targets in the strategy, by creating the conditions for restoration efforts to be successful. Placing such areas under strict protection, especially the marine environment, will in some cases be sufficient to lead to the restoration of the natural values they host. If the restored areas comply with the criteria for protected areas, these restored areas should also contribute towards the EU targets on protected areas. The strategy also states that particular focus would be placed on tropical and sub-tropical marine and terrestrial ecosystems in the EU's outermost regions.

#### **4. Review of Member State pledges**

At present, five Member States have submitted pledges regarding marine protected areas (Table 1). Of these, only three Member States provided data on strictly protected areas (Denmark, France and

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<sup>10</sup> See special edition for MPAs: <https://www.iucn.org/content/guidelines-applying-iucn-protected-area-management-categoriesmarine-protected-areas-0>, in particular Table 5, page 27.

<sup>11</sup> <https://circabc.europa.eu/ui/group/00564ca7-9d16-4b81-bac5-b35fcb84aa33/library/cda6f30c-3fca-41a1-a587-c94de8458c63/details>

Spain). In the case of France, the pledge information was provided during the Mediterranean and Black Sea biogeographical seminar held in Marseille in March since the submitted pledge is not yet open for the public. Sweden is currently revising its pledge to include data on strictly protected areas which was inadvertently omitted from the original post. Denmark is the only Member State so far that has fully completed the pledge form for strictly protected marine areas (Table 3).

It should be noted that many Member States have confirmed that they are still working on protected area pledges owing to the significant consultation procedures involved.

**Table 1: Marine protected area pledges submitted on Reportnet, with data for strict protection**  
(area figures in km<sup>2</sup>)

Member State	Date of pledge upload	MATL	MBAL	MMED
Spain	1 March 2023			1,305
Germany	15 March 2023			
Denmark	28 April 2023	3,645	526	
Sweden	21 June 2023			
France	20 December 2023			112

**Table 2: Strictly protected area data from EU marine regions**  
(area figures in km<sup>2</sup>)

Region code	Whole Area	Strict protection current	Strict protection pledged	Strict protection % current	Strict protection % pledged
MATL (excl MMAC)	1,524,174		3,645	0.00%	0.24%
MBAL	368,694		526	0.00%	0.14%
MBLS	64,415			0.00%	0.00%
MMAC	1,857,163			0.00%	0.00%
MMED	1,224,297	1,417	1,417	0.12%	0.12%
<b>Whole EU</b>	<b>5,038,743</b>	<b>1,417</b>	<b>5,588</b>	<b>0.03%</b>	<b>0.11%</b>

Note: whole area figures are taken from the EEA

**Table 3: Strictly protected area pledge made by Denmark**

Region code	Whole Area	Strict protection current	Strict protection pledged	Strict protection % current	Strict protection % pledged
All Denmark	122,815	0	4,171	0.0%	3.4%
MATL	76,561	0	3,645	0.0%	4.8%
MBAL	46,254	0	526	0.0%	1.1%