

European Habitats Forum (EHF)¹ Detailed Response to the EU Biodiversity Strategy

30th May 2011

Taking action on biodiversity is of paramount importance given that species and habitats continue to be lost at an alarming rate both within Europe and around the world. Nature's 'free' services are the foundation of our societies and economies, providing us with clean air, water, food, fibre, fuel and healthy living-spaces. A recent Eurobarometer poll showed that 92% of Europeans advocate protecting biodiversity because human well-being depends on it.

The EHF therefore believes that increased political effort is required at EU and Member State level to meet the new EU biodiversity target to **"Halt the loss of biodiversity and ecosystem services in the EU by 2020 and restore them insofar as possible, and step up the EU's contribution to averting global biodiversity loss."**

1. General Comments

Whilst we welcome the new EU Biodiversity Strategy, the EHF has some concerns:

1. The new Biodiversity Strategy is an important signal of good intentions but it **does not have the real power** to stop biodiversity loss.
2. It is **not ambitious enough** as the targets and actions set out in the strategy represent a bare minimum level of ambition that will approach, but not achieve, the EU's 2020 biodiversity target
3. **Many of the targets are NOT measurable**, making accountability impossible
4. **No targets are given under the financing measures** which is a serious gap. Without adequate financing it is unclear how some of the actions in the strategy can be implemented and full integration into the new EU budget is essential.
5. There are too **few concrete milestones** that set out the way to 2020, so measuring progress will become difficult. Additionally there is no **clear timeframe** for revising and the evaluating milestones. A **detailed Implementation Strategy** is urgently needed to fill this gap.
6. **There is no clear definition of responsibilities** at EU, Commission and Member State level. A provision on penalties in case sub-targets are not achieved should be part of the evaluation plan.
7. Lastly, we are concerned by the **inadequacy of many EU data systems that** are necessary for monitoring the success of the strategy, so increased investment in this area is necessary, especially to in relation to monitoring the conservation status of species and habitats.

¹ The EHF, a group of 22 nature conservation NGOs provides advice in respect of the implementation and future development of EU biodiversity policy, with a special focus on nature legislation.

2. General Recommendations

To address these concerns, the EHF recommends that:

- **All Member States** should commit not only to achieve these targets, but to deliver concrete actions beyond those set out in the strategy.
- **All Member States** establish adequate systems for data collection and monitoring in relation to biodiversity.
- **The Council and Parliament** request more details from the Commission and a time line for the development of the so called "common framework for implementation"
- **The Council and Parliament** stress the need to ensure mainstreaming of biodiversity into all funding lines in the next financing period, with funding targets for biodiversity.

The EHF calls on the Council to **endorse** the propose EU Biodiversity Strategy as a **minimum level of ambition** and to **highlight** the above mentioned **shortcomings** of the proposed EU Biodiversity Strategy. The Council should emphasise the need to **develop a detailed implementation strategy by the end of 2011** which aims at taking **immediate action** to implement a **comprehensive and effective EU Biodiversity Strategy** which should be **reflected** in all relevant **upcoming EU reforms** (e.g. Common Agriculture Policy Reform, European Fisheries Reform, Multi Annual Financial Framework). In 2015 the European Commission should develop a **mid-term review** of the EU Biodiversity Strategy and should **adopt the strategy if needed**.

3. Detailed Comments on the Six Targets:

Target 1: Conservation Status of Species and Habitats and Natura 2000

To halt the deterioration in the status of all species and habitats covered by EU nature legislation and achieve a significant and measurable improvement in their status so that, by 2020, compared to current assessments: (i) 100% more habitat assessments and 50% more species assessments under the Habitats Directive show an improved conservation status; and (ii) 50% more species assessments under the Birds Directive show a secure or improved status.

- We believe that the Commission must step up its ambition under Target 1 and aim for a measurable improvement in conservation status for all habitats and species (as far as scientifically possible) protected under the Habitats Directive by 2020, not just some of them. In addition, it should also be made clear that there should not be any deterioration from current conservation status, alongside the improvements in conservation status for other species and habitats.
- The target as it is now could result in critically low ambition for groups of habitats and species with the lowest percentage in a favourable conservation status, with corresponding low levels of action and financing dedicated to them. For example, agricultural habitats have a particularly bad conservation status with only 7% in a favourable condition, compared to 21% for non-agricultural habitats. Even if the proposed EU target of 100% improvement is achieved this

means that by 2020 only 14% of agricultural habitats will be in a favourable conservation status, which falls far behind that of other habitats.

- The target should also take into account wilderness areas, as they require special management practices. The Wilderness guidance document, being developed by the Commission, should be used by all Member States for wilderness habitats.
- We strongly endorse the aim (action 1a) to complete Natura 2000 designation, including in the marine environment, by 2012.
- We believe that a deadline of 2015 is required for the completion of management plans or equivalent instruments for all designated sites under the Birds and Habitats Directives, instead of the current wording which states: “in a timely manner” (action 1c).
- In terms of financing, we believe that multi-annual planning for Natura 2000 (prioritised action frameworks), is the best instrument to ensure adequate contribution from different EU funding lines and national funding. We strongly believe this is an essential improvement for the whole of the EU necessary to meet the financing needs of Natura 2000. The need to significantly increase the budget and the role of the LIFE programme in financing Natura 2000 and biodiversity, should also be stressed.

Target 2: Ecosystem Restoration

By 2020, ecosystems and their services are maintained and enhanced by establishing green infrastructure and restoring at least 15% of degraded ecosystems.

- We welcome this target and the Commission’s aim to restore degraded ecosystems by 2020. However in order to achieve the EU’s biodiversity target it is necessary to restore biodiversity including species populations as well as ecosystems and the services they provide. We believe that species recovery programmes should be included within this target as well as within the new EU strategy on Green Infrastructure (action 6b).
- The establishment and maintenance of Green Infrastructure will greatly depend on its financing. It is therefore necessary to have a ring-fenced budget for green infrastructure within the Cohesion funds.
- A measure is needed to develop a coherent approach to spatial planning across the EU, as this is the only way in which to conserve and restore valuable ecosystems in Europe.
- We welcome the planned initiative to ensure there is no net loss of ecosystems and their services, however, we are concerned about its timing. Such initiative should be established alongside the new Cohesion and Common Agricultural Policies before the next financing period.
- Ecosystems play an essential role in climate change mitigation and adaptation, which should be the cornerstone in the future EU Climate Change Adaptation Strategy and climate change mitigation commitments. This should be emphasised in the actions.
- In particular, the strategy underestimates the importance of wilderness and wild areas in climate change mitigation and adaptation and maintaining ecosystem services. Whilst the strategy recognises wilderness in relation to forest, it should include the promotion and protection of

wilderness in all habitat types that are not dependent on human intervention and an increase in the share of wilderness in Europe. The coverage of wilderness areas should be increased in specific dedicated priority places by supporting wilderness and wild area restoration projects.

Target 3A: Agriculture

By 2020, maximise areas under agriculture across grasslands, arable land and permanent crops that are covered by biodiversity-related measures under the CAP so as to ensure the conservation of biodiversity and to bring about a measurable improvement () in the conservation status of species and habitats that depend on or are affected by agriculture and in the provision of ecosystem services as compared to the EU2010 Baseline, thus contributing to enhance sustainable management.*

- The target on agriculture is unacceptable as it is not clear and measurable and is also bound to Target 1, which is not ambitious enough (see comments under target one). As agriculture related habitats and species are generally in a worse state than other habitats and species the level of ambition for improving agricultural biodiversity must be increased. As only 7% of agricultural habitats are in a favourable condition compared to 21% of non-agricultural habitats, even if the proposed EU target of 100% improvement is achieved, only 14% of agricultural habitats would be in a favourable conservation status by 2020. The level of ambition for improving agricultural biodiversity must be set higher.
- The EHF therefore requests the alternative measurable target for agriculture that: “75% of EU farmland is covered by specific biodiversity conservation schemes”. This is in line with the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) Global Strategy for Plant Conservation, target 6, which says that 75% of agricultural land should be used sustainably, in line with the conservation of plant diversity. Furthermore the CBD strategic plan target 7 requires that "By 2020 areas under agriculture, aquaculture and forestry are managed sustainably, ensuring conservation of biodiversity", which implies that all agriculture areas are managed in a way that will maintain or increase the current level of biodiversity.
- There is no recognition of the specific challenges leading to biodiversity loss on farmland, particularly localised intensification on better land and abandonment on less productive farmland. These processes require a response in the form of adequate support through the CAP for types of farming that currently maintain our most valued or HNV farmland habitats (high-nature-value farmland). Significant progress has been made in this direction in recent years, as supporting HNV farming systems was a priority in the previous biodiversity strategy and in the EU Rural Development policy since 2005. Dropping this emphasis on providing support to key farming systems is a fundamental error at this critical time when reductions in agricultural support and economic globalisation are leading to increasing problems of abandonment in marginal areas, and especially of semi-natural farmland.
- Under action 8b, the Water Framework Directive (WFD) should be “included” instead of “consider including” under cross compliance from 2013 onwards. Diffuse pollution from agriculture is reported to be a problem in more than 90% of river basins, hindering the achievement of goals under the WFD and the Birds and Habitats Directives. The CAP should not be synchronised with Member States that are late implementing the WFD, but with Member States that are following the correct, legal timeframe for implementation.

- It is also essential to include the EIA Directive within the scope of cross-compliance (action 8b). This is a serious omission, as it is the only EU instrument with capacity to protect semi-natural grassland habitats from degradation due to agricultural intensification beyond Natura 2000 sites. Implementation is currently extremely weak in most Member States and linking to cross-compliance is an important opportunity to strengthen implementation.
- The commitment (action 9a) to integrate quantified biodiversity targets into Rural Development strategies and programmes, tailoring action to regional and local needs, is very positive in principle. However, it is necessary to ensure that these targets are meaningful and commensurate to the scale of the challenges on the ground.
- The EU has committed to achieving sustainability in the farming sector and to phasing out environmentally harmful subsidies by 2020. Meaningful reforms of the Common Agricultural Policy are essential, otherwise the credibility of the EU's commitment to achieve its own policy objectives, and to deliver on its international commitments, will be called into question.

Target 3B: Forestry

*By 2020, Forest Management Plans or equivalent instruments, in line with Sustainable Forest Management (SFM), are in place for all forests that are publicly owned and for forest holdings above a certain size** (to be defined by the Member States or regions and communicated in their Rural Development Programmes) that receive funding under the EU Rural Development Policy so as to bring about a measurable improvement(*) in the conservation status of species and habitats that depend on or are affected by forestry and in the provision of related ecosystem services as compared to the EU 2010 Baseline.*

- EHF welcomes a target on forests that addresses the need for sustainable forest management plans. However, we believe that the ambition is still too low, because forestry management plans in themselves are often not designed to ensure biodiversity protection. The Council should call the Commission to modify Action 12 so as to ensure that forest management plans or equivalent instruments include biodiversity-relevant measures on an obligatory basis – taking into account existing Natura 2000 management needs and obligations.
- The concept of sustainable forest management as defined under SEC (2006) 748² needs further clarification and indicators in order to reliably benefit biodiversity
- We are concerned that new funding should be made available for forest management, and we therefore welcome action 11b in relation to fostering innovative financing mechanisms as long as biodiversity protection is included within “payments for ecosystem services”.
- As stated under targets 1 and 2, the Council should call for the promotion and protection of wilderness not just in forest but all habitat types and for increasing the share of wilderness in Europe. The lack of ambition as regarding protection of wilderness has diminished which is a regretful step back compared to the ambitious wilderness initiative started by the Commission in recent years.

²Definition of Sustainable Forest Management taken from SEC (2006) 748 “The stewardship and use of forests and forest lands in a way, and at a rate, that maintains their biodiversity, productivity, regeneration capacity, vitality and their potential to fulfil, now and in the future, relevant ecological, economic and social functions, at local, national, and global levels, and that does not cause damage to other ecosystems”.

Target 4: Fisheries

Achieve Maximum Sustainable Yield (MSY) by 2015. Achieve a population age and size distribution indicative of a healthy stock, through fisheries management with no significant adverse impacts on other stocks, species and ecosystems, in support of achieving Good Environmental Status by 2020, as required under the Marine Strategy Framework Directive.

- We welcome the fisheries target and the commitment to achieve maximum sustainable yield by 2015. However achieving the target and measures mostly depends to the level at which they are integrated within the Common Fisheries Policy. Our main concern is therefore that these biodiversity measures are translated fully into the reformed CFP, as achieving ecological sustainability is the only way to ensure social and economic benefits to present and future generations.
- The EU has committed to achieving sustainability in the fishing sector and to phase out environmentally harmful subsidies by 2020. As was the case for the CAP, meaningful reform of the CFP is essential, otherwise the credibility of the EU's commitment to achieve its own policy objectives, and to deliver on its international commitments, will be called into question.

Target 5: Invasive Alien Species

By 2020, Invasive Alien Species (IAS) and their pathways are identified and prioritised, priority species are controlled or eradicated, and pathways are managed to prevent the introduction and establishment of new IAS.

- We welcome the target on invasive alien species, a major cause of biodiversity loss in the EU and in particular we welcome the measure (action 16) to develop a dedicated legislative instrument to combat IAS by 2012.

Target 6: Global Biodiversity

By 2020, the EU has stepped up its contribution to averting global biodiversity loss.

- We are very critical of the fact that this target is unclear and unmeasurable. It therefore requires a measure to reduce the EU's footprint, as a measurable way of reducing the EU's negative impacts on global biodiversity. Additionally, it is essential that a reduction in resource use is integrated within the future Resource Efficiency Roadmap. A specific target on this should be adopted at EU level.
- We do, however, welcome many of the measures under this target, such as the integration of biodiversity objectives into trade policies (actions 17b and c) and the need to mobilise additional resources for global biodiversity conservation (action 18). However, without measurable targets for financing, they will not be achieved. There is also an urgent need to integrate biodiversity into the EU's development cooperation policies and programmes and to develop a strategy to this end before the next programming round. This has been requested by the Council (June 2009) but very little progress has been achieved.

- A much stronger reference to protecting biodiversity in the EU's Overseas Territories and Outermost Regions should be included, as these areas harbour the EU's most outstanding biodiversity. The strategy has been focused on delivery mechanisms applicable within the European Union, but does not adequately consider approaches that could benefit the Overseas Territories and Outermost Regions. These areas are of significant value to biodiversity and they are often at risk. The EU Biodiversity Strategy needs to recognise and promote the importance of these areas, encourage a greater responsibility towards their conservation and achieve a commitment to developing effective means to provide the resources needed to do so.
- The Commission has failed to set out how it intends to phase out environmentally harmful subsidies, despite an ongoing commitment since 2001. An ambitious deadline should be set for reforming, phasing out and eliminating all subsidies harmful to biodiversity, in line with the new Cohesion, Common Agricultural and Fisheries Policies (2013).
- We are also disappointed that the strategy does not include any mechanisms to ensure that global biodiversity is not damaged by increased production of biofuels for export to the EU. It is vital that binding commitments are made to ensure that biofuel production does not directly or indirectly lead to a loss of semi natural land and biodiversity.

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