



Generation
Climate
Europe



YOUTH POSITION ON THE EU BIODIVERSITY STRATEGY FOR 2030

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Introduction

Biodiversity loss and ecosystem collapse are one of the biggest threats facing humanity. **70% of existing wildlife has already been lost since the 1970s and a million¹ more species are now facing extinction.** Species are disappearing at a rate 10.000 times greater than at any other time in human history². The facts are clear. We are experiencing the first human-made mass extinction. Human activities are directly responsible for the massive degradation of 77% of terrestrial and 87%³ of marine ecosystems, while exacerbating many threats to biodiversity - habitat loss, rising global temperatures, urbanisation, soil erosion, and pollution of air, soil, and water.

The EU has not been spared, with 81%⁴ of all habitats and species having a poor or bad conservation status. In an effort to protect biodiversity and address the ongoing sixth mass extinction, **the European Commission introduced in May 2020 the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030** (Biodiversity Strategy, hereafter), a long-term, comprehensive plan that sets out goals and targets to reverse biodiversity loss and restore ecosystems by 2030. Its main commitments and actions set to be delivered are the following:

- Establishing a **larger EU-wide network of protected areas** on land and at sea ;
- Launching an **EU nature restoration plan** ;
- Introducing measures to **enable the necessary transformative change** ;
- Introducing measures to **tackle the global biodiversity challenge.**

As the largest coalition of youth-led networks - bringing together 381 national organisations across 46 countries in Europe - on climate and environmental issues at the EU level, **Generation Climate Europe (GCE) is committed to making the voices of young people heard.**

This paper is supported by a thorough policy analysis of EU official documents, including the Biodiversity Strategy, environmental Directives and Regulations. In addition, to represent the voices of young people into the position paper, GCE ran a survey between 12 June and 5 July 2023 to study and analyse young people's knowledge and views on the Biodiversity Strategy. The data of the survey is used to illustrate and support GCE's demands to have an inclusive and ambitious Biodiversity Strategy. Overall, 163 responses were collected, representing young Europeans between the ages of 14 to 38.

Overall Assessment

Delayed implementation

Despite the ambition of the Biodiversity Strategy, only modest progress has been achieved since 2020 and **additional efforts are needed, with biodiversity declining at an ever-increasing pace.**

Lack of youth representation

As the main actors and upcoming victims of the effects of biodiversity extinction, we believe that **youth needs to be actively included as a key stakeholder and rights holder in the implementation of the Biodiversity Strategy**, and consulted through every step of the policy-making process. It is our right to be left with a safe and hospitable planet that does not hinder our future livelihoods.

Link with the climate crisis understated

Biodiversity loss tends to be disregarded as a key driver for climate change, when in fact, they are very much interlinked. Furthermore, **nature is a vital resource in the fight against climate change**: it regulates the climate and provides nature-based solutions to adapt and mitigate greenhouse gases emissions.

Wider public engagement needed

An ambitious biodiversity strategy would help mitigate the impacts of climate change, but also reduce the risks of forest fires, safeguard pollinator species, ensure food security, prevent future health crises, limit illegal wildlife trafficking and control invasive alien species. But these additional aspects of preserving biodiversity are mostly unknown to the wider public. Indeed, the data of our survey shows that 106 people out of 163 associate the biodiversity crisis only to climate change. Illegal wildlife trade, invasive alien species, poaching and unsustainable hunting practices were the topics least familiar to respondents. Yet, **these issues need to be equally addressed to ensure a holistic approach to biodiversity conservation and restoration.**



GCE Key Demands

GCE proposes three cross-cutting measures to combat biodiversity loss and restore natural ecosystems in the EU by 2030. These demands include involving young people more effectively in environmental policy-making processes, promoting policy coherence and monitoring the biodiversity framework.

A

Ensure consistency and synergy between various laws and policies

Biodiversity challenges are deeply interconnected and driven by our economic systems' dependencies and impacts on the natural environment. **It is thus fundamental to ensure that actions under the Biodiversity Strategy are coherent, thorough and ambitious enough to capitalise on synergies across sectors, so that it can deliver on its goals.** In light of the new Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework and the upcoming assessment of progress in implementing the Biodiversity Strategy, GCE calls for EU policy to be consistent, innovative, and conducive to transformative change.

B

Improve monitoring

The Biodiversity Strategy demonstrates a clear commitment towards improving and sustaining rigorous monitoring, aiming to enhance the pre-existing biodiversity monitoring frameworks. Nonetheless, there are weaknesses in the current monitoring efforts, including but not limited to lack of consistency in monitoring across Member States (i.e. fragmentation of monitoring, lack of high-quality data, and lack of long-term funding). Thus, **GCE calls for (1) the integration of (sub-)national monitoring systems into a supranational and unified EU-wide monitoring framework, (2) a harmonised approach to data collection that ensures data availability in all biodiversity-relevant taxonomic groups, and (3) a consistent and reliable long-term EU budget for biodiversity monitoring efforts that ensures funding needs are met across all Member States.**

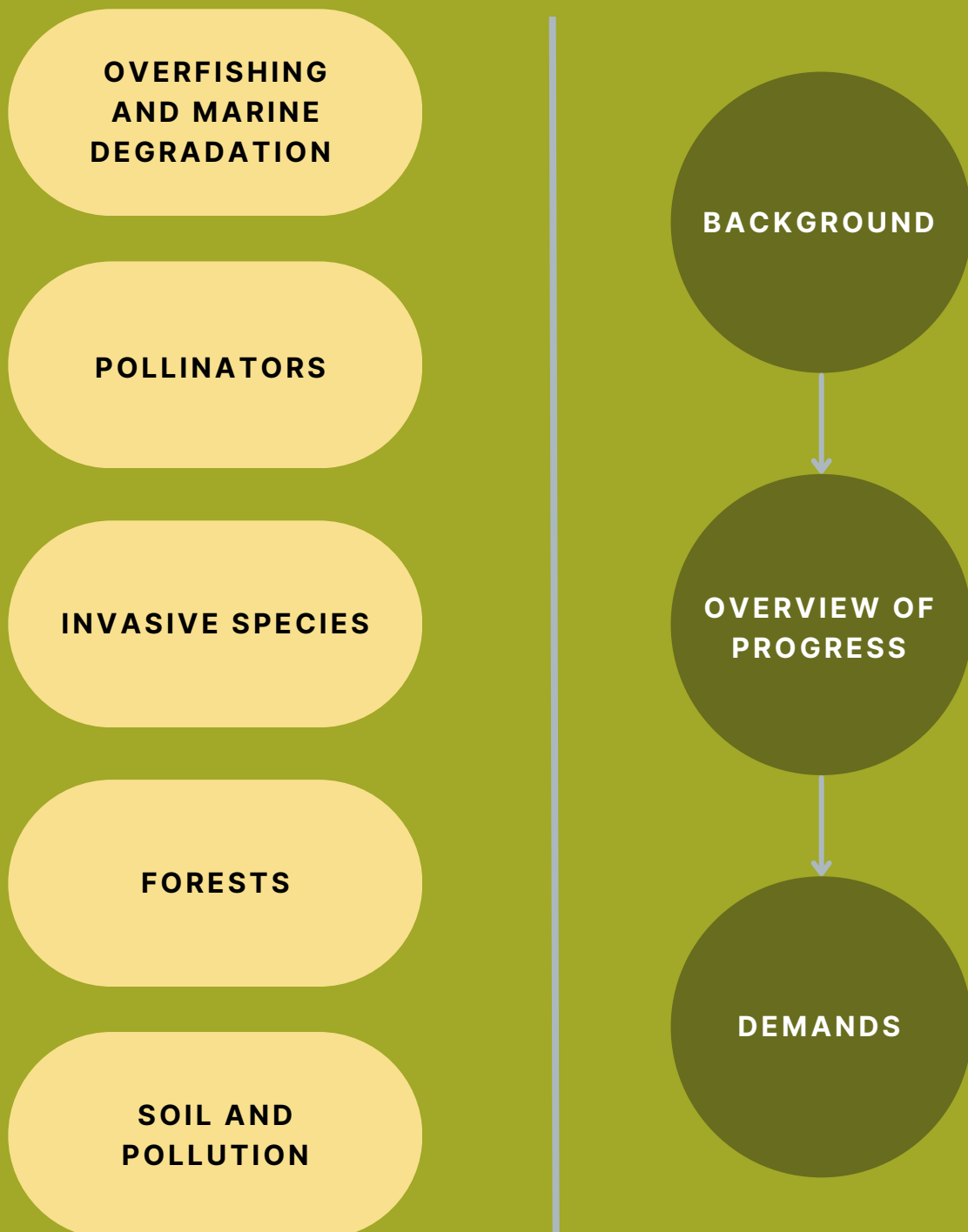
C

Promote education on biodiversity and increase youth engagement in the policy-making process

Young people and the generations to come are most affected by our planet's rapidly declining biodiversity, jeopardising their right to a liveable future. Unfortunately, young people are not aware of biodiversity loss drivers. Indeed our survey shows that 86 out of 163 respondents have received little to no education on biodiversity protection in school. Furthermore, as critical rights holders, it is imperative that the youth is actively involved in the policy-making process and is given the chance to shape a response to the biodiversity crisis. Being more impacted by the alarming biodiversity loss we already witness today, young people are particularly concerned with environmental issues and are determined to take action. . 114 respondents in our survey said they were interested in actively participating in campaigns or local projects that promote biodiversity restoration. They can be a source of inspiration by providing decision-makers with innovative and bold ideas and a reminder of what is at stake by conveying a sense of urgency. **GCE therefore calls for youth to be recognized as a vital stakeholder and actively involved in the process of implementing the Biodiversity Strategy.**

Structure of the Specific Recommendations

Given the rapid biodiversity collapse, GCE asks for more ambitious measures in the Biodiversity Strategy, and calls for stricter objectives in the following areas : 1) overfishing and the deterioration of marine ecosystems ; 2) the preservation of pollinators ; 3) the management of Invasive Alien Species ; 4) the degradation of forests ; and 5) the preservation and restoration of healthy soils.



Specific Recommendations

Overfishing and marine degradation

Background

Human activities are severely threatening marine areas. **Overfishing, water pollution, litter and habitat destruction lead to a dramatic decline in populations of fish, marine animals, and other sea creatures.** To address those threats, the EU is implementing marine protected areas (MPAs hereafter), which are designated sections of the ocean where human activities are limited to ensure the safeguarding of marine ecosystems.

Unfortunately, EU MPAs are nowadays considered as **'paper parks'**⁵, with more than 96% still allowing destructive activities, due to a serious lack of monitoring from authorities. **Bottom trawling is one of those destructive practices, consisting of the dragging of large weighted nets across the ocean floor**⁶. Thereby, it causes the destruction of seabed floor and species' habitats, by-catch⁷ of marine species, and the reduction of marine biodiversity and complexity, amongst others. Although it was recognised by the Commission as 'among the most widespread and damaging activities to the seabed and its associated habitats'⁸, bottom trawling is still nowadays the main fishing method used in the EU, even within MPAs.

Overview of progress

The protection of marine ecosystems is an essential part of the Biodiversity Strategy as it aims to legally protect a minimum of 30% of the EU's sea area (Target 1). Being a particularly threatening activity to marine ecosystems, two targets aim directly at reducing the harmful consequences of bottom trawling: the EU seeks to substantially reduce the negative impacts on the seabed through fishing **(Target 15)** and to eliminate or reduce by-catch to a sustainable level **(Target 16)**.

In February 2023, the Commission adopted the Action Plan to conserve fisheries resources and protect marine ecosystems, which includes the phase-out of mobile bottom fishing in marine protected areas (MPAs) by 2030. By 2024, Member States should aim to prohibit this practice in MPAs that are designated as Natura 2000 sites.⁹ According to the plan, Member States have to develop national roadmaps outlining the measures designed to implement the action plan. However, **the action plan is not a legally binding instrument**, and unfortunately, a majority of national ministers has already expressed their will to opt out. By 2024, the Commission will assess the progress of the Action Plan's implementation, and determine if further action or legislation is required to improve it.

Specific Recommendations

Demands

1

The development and implementation of a EU law that sets clear targets and objectives for MPAs in the EU: in light of the targets set out by the Kunming-Montreal Framework, we demand that the EU develops its own law to guarantee MPAs' protection and implementation in EU waters. This law should outline **specific measures to enhance the conservation and management of MPAs**, such as expanding their coverage, improving biodiversity protection, reducing pollution (e.g. chemical waste, litter, underwater noise), and mitigating the impacts of human activities. The targets should be time-bound and measurable to ensure accountability and progress tracking.

2

Adopt a legally binding ban on bottom-trawling that would profit both the marine environment and local economies: Such a ban would not only protect marine ecosystems but also the economy as huge amount of bycatch are discharged: over the past 65 years, this translates to USD 560 billion in resources being thrown away¹⁰ at a global scale. Additionally, a ban would have a **positive impact on small-scale and large-scale fishermen as healthier fish populations offer more jobs.**

3

Involve youth in the implementation of the Action Plan: Young people have to play a key role in developing the national roadmaps Member States have to adopt to implement the Action Plan to conserve fisheries resources and protect marine ecosystems. Additionally, they have to be actively involved in the joint special group the EC will establish in 2023, which will be specifically tasked with providing support to the Commission in implementing the Action Plan and monitoring its progress. **By actively involving young people, the EU can harness their creativity, passion for conservation, and unique perspectives to drive positive change** and secure the long-term sustainability of MPAs.



Specific Recommendations

Pollinators

Background

Pollinators are fundamental to ecosystems health and EU's food security. **Around 4 out of 5 crop and wild flowering plant species in the EU depend on them, and almost EUR 5 billion of the EU's annual agricultural output is attributed to insect pollinators¹¹.** However, pollinators in the EU have declined in occurrence and diversity during the past decades - with unsustainable use of land, intensive agriculture, invasive alien species, pollution and climate change being the main drivers of this trend. To respond to this situation, **Target 5 of the Biodiversity Strategy consists in reversing the decline of pollinators by 2030.**

Overview of progress

In an attempt to protect and reverse the decline of pollinators, **the EU established the EU Pollinators Initiative in 2018, later embedded in the Biodiversity Strategy.** Due to the insufficient progress made towards the goals in 2021, the Commission published in 2023 a revised "New Action Framework" consisting of 42 actions. This framework sets three priorities which aim to (i) **improve knowledge on pollinator decline**, (ii) **improve pollinator conservation**, and (iii) **mobilise society to promote strategic planning and cooperation.** Moreover, the Nature Restoration Law includes the incorporation of a legally binding target on pollinators, holding Member States accountable for reversing their decline by 2030, and ensuring populations' increase thereafter.



Specific Recommendations

Demands

1

Passing the Regulation on Sustainable Use of Plant Protection Products: The EU Pollinators Initiative states “mitigating the impact of pesticide use” as one of the five main actions to take in order to improve pollinator conservation and tackle the causes of their decline. **GCE thus urges the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union to adopt an ambitious Regulation on Sustainable Use of Plant and Protection Products before the third quarter of 2024.** Negotiations must not water down the current proposal, but rather guarantee long-term and concrete targets that aim to abolish the use of harmful pesticides.

2

Ensuring compliance with the Nature Restoration Law: Pollinator decline is an EU-wide problem that cannot be dealt with Member States individually, but should rather be addressed via joint efforts. In order to **ensure that legally binding targets on pollinators are implemented and Member States are held accountable for reversing their decline and restoring their habitats**, GCE urgently calls for a swift implementation of the Nature Restoration Law.

3

Monitoring and evaluating the revised EU Pollinators Initiative: Improving knowledge on the state of pollinators and the key causes of their decline through a comprehensive monitoring mechanism and continued research and assessment work is an essential condition to achieving success in reaching Target 5 of the Biodiversity Strategy. **GCE urges the Commission and Member States to complete the short-term actions set forth in Priority 1 of the New Action Framework**, in order to leverage the resulting tracking improvements to better inform conservation and restoration actions outlined in Priority 2.



Specific Recommendations

Invasive species

Background

Invasive alien species (IAS) pose significant threats to the environment, economy (at least EUR 12 billion per year in the EU alone¹²), and human health. They are one of the five major drivers of biodiversity loss, and represent a significant threat to native flora and fauna. The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species lists 395 European native species as critically endangered, of which 110 are threatened by invasive alien species¹³.

Overview of progress

So far, the EU has implemented various initiatives to combat the introduction and spread of invasive species, including the European Green Deal, the Biodiversity Strategy, and the IAS Regulation. These measures initially aimed to achieve the 2020 Aichi targets set by the Convention on Biological Diversity. **The IAS regulation was re-incorporated within Target 12 of the Biodiversity Strategy, which aims to reduce by 50% the rates of introduction and establishment of known or potentially invasive alien species by 2030¹⁴.** Despite progress in data accessibility and analysis, challenges remain.

Specific Recommendations

Demands

1

Strengthening the existing legislation and improving collaboration: Enhance and update the existing EU legislation on IAS (No 1143/2014), **to ensure it effectively addresses emerging threats and provides a comprehensive framework for the management of IAS.** This would include encouraging and supporting the collaboration between Member States in developing action plans to address the priority pathways outlined in the IAS Regulation by 1) enhancing surveillance systems and official control mechanisms ; 2) by investing in training, resources, and technological tools ; 3) by improving early detection, monitoring, and rapid response to invasive species. This will ensure a comprehensive and **coordinated approach to tackling invasive species across Europe.**

2

Monitoring and improving early detection for a rapid response: Develop and implement comprehensive monitoring and reporting systems to detect and identify potential IAS at an early stage, by encouraging public participation. **Early detection and rapid response are essential in preventing the establishment and spread of invasive species.** Investing in research and data collection to calculate the ecological, social, and financial impacts of various invasive species will support evidence-based decision-making and aid in prioritising species for inclusion on the Union List. Continuously update and refine the risk assessment criteria underpinning the IAS Regulation. **Ensure funding programs like the European Maritime Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund, Horizon Europe, and Common Agricultural Policy allocate resources specifically for invasive species management.**

3

Stakeholder and Youth Engagement: Promote public awareness campaigns, and offer training programs to empower local stakeholders. In particular, those campaigns and programmes could be targeted at youth, **as young Europeans can significantly contribute to invasive species management through research, innovation, and inspiring other citizens and businesses to take action.** Additionally, collaboration between researchers, policymakers, and practitioners should be encouraged to develop effective strategies to address IAS.

Specific Recommendations

Forests

Background

Forests and other wooded land cover over 43.5% of the EU's land space¹⁵, with only less than 4% not yet modified by human activities¹⁶. The EU's many forest types reflect its geoclimatic diversity (boreal forests, alpine coniferous forests, etc.) as their distribution depends on particular climates, soils, altitudes and topographies. **Essential to our health and well-being, we rely on forests as they provide us with air and water, and present a key opportunity for nature restoration.** Forests also increase resilience towards climate change as they absorb 245.4 million tonnes of CO₂ per year in the EU¹⁷. However, only less than 3% of all EU forests are "strictly protected"¹⁸.

Overview of progress

The EU has already made some progress in the implementation of its forest-related targets in the Biodiversity Strategy. On "the effective management of all protected areas, defining clear conservation objectives and measures, and monitoring them appropriately"¹⁹ (Target 3), **the Commission has recently published its guidance on "Defining, Mapping, Monitoring and Strictly Protecting EU Primary and Old-Growth Forests"**²⁰. It aims to improve forest monitoring and protection strategies at a national level. Furthermore, since 2021, the Commission has published and implemented its EU Forest Strategy²¹, with the ambitious goal of planting three billion additional trees in the EU (Target 9). However, **the protection of at least one third of the EU's protected areas, including all remaining EU primary and old-growth forests (Targets 1 & 2²²), still lacks concrete monitoring and implementation measures.** To address those issues, the Commission will publish the proposal for a Forest Monitoring Regulation in the upcoming months, which will have legally binding targets and be directly applicable to all Member States.



Specific Recommendations

Demands

1

Comprehensive legal framework, implementation plans and monitoring:

- **GCE calls for harmonised definitions, criteria and a common reporting format (which should at least include forest habitat, species composition and forest structure and functions²³) in the upcoming EU Forests Monitoring Regulation.** To avoid overlaps in data collection, minimising reporting burden and ensuring cost-effectiveness, the new EU monitoring framework must be built upon existing reporting schemes, in particular National Forest Inventories. A comprehensive assessment of existing data sources at Member States level is therefore necessary to address the current reporting gaps in the existing EU monitoring framework.
- In addition, **GCE recommends a more thorough and clear integration of indicators for strict protection and restoration of forests²⁴.** The indicators and criteria should take into account European forest diversity, as each type of forest needs adapted measures in regards to their unique geoclimatic features.
- The setting up of an EU monitoring system also requires an **allocation of adequate resources to process the data into more comprehensive information²⁵.**

2


Clear opportunities for public empowerment and consultation within the implementation process:

- **To ensure an improved implementation process of the upcoming regulation, monitoring indicators must be designed in consultation with various actors** (e.g. citizens, NGOs, local communities, the forest sector, and relevant authorities). It should also take into account human rights, the Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests, local communities, the Guidance on 'Defining, Mapping, Monitoring and Strictly Protecting EU Primary and Old-Growth Forests' and the Guidelines on 'Biodiversity-Friendly afforestation, reforestation and tree planting' into the data collection process²⁶.
- To facilitate public participation, **GCE also calls for the establishment of an EU-wide platform to support forest monitoring efforts.** This platform should make remote sensing data available in real time, and be paired with participatory tools²⁷. It is also necessary for it to rely on existing available ground data collected by National Forest Inventories, as field observations can help mitigate the risk of errors in drawing conclusions for policy making.

Specific Recommendations

Soil and Pollution

Background



Soil is a finite and non-renewable natural resource that provides a habitat to a vast array of organisms. It stores, filters, and transforms many substances, including water, nutrients, and carbon. **Healthy soils are essential for climate change mitigation²⁸ and adaptation, agricultural production, nature and biodiversity preservation, and human health.** However, 60% to 70% of European soils are in poor health due to poor management, pollution, climate change and urbanisation - leading to increased risks of droughts, wildfires, and food insecurity²⁹. The costs associated with soil degradation in the EU exceed EUR 50 billion per year³⁰. To respond to this situation, **Target 10 of the Biodiversity Strategy ensures significant progress in the remediation of contaminated soil sites by 2030.** The set of actions to reach this target includes the adoption of a Soil Health Strategy and the newly proposed Soil Monitoring Law published in July 2023.

Overview of progress

At present, no legal framework specifically dedicated to soils exists in the EU. Although some rules and provisions concerning soils can be found in other legislative acts, for instance in the Habitats Directive, soils are not sufficiently protected at the EU level. To change this, in 2021, **the European Commission presented the EU Soil Strategy for 2030, aiming to make all soils healthy by 2050.** To achieve this objective, the strategy envisioned the proposal of a Soil Health Law. In July, the European Commission published the proposal - now called "Soil Monitoring Law" - which includes a definition of healthy soil, a framework to monitor soil quality, sustainable management and regeneration principles, and measures to address contamination. Instead of focusing on restoring soil health across the EU, the new law's main objective was reduced to monitoring the state of soils.

Specific Recommendations

Demands

1

Raise the ambition of the Soil Monitoring Law: While the proposal of the Soil Monitoring Law is a first step in the right direction, it is lacking a well-defined roadmap, milestones, legally binding targets, and mandatory action plans for Member States to improve soil health in the EU and ensure healthy soils by 2050. Initially, the proposal should have been called Soil Health Law. The newly agreed title “Soil Monitoring Law” lowers the Directive’s initial ambition to go beyond monitoring strategies. More emphasis on actual implementation and protection of soil health is needed in the Soil Monitoring Law. **We call on the European Parliament and the Council to significantly improve the overall ambition of the current proposal, considering the fundamental role of soils in addressing the triple planetary crisis.**

2

Recognise the importance of soil biology: GCE believes that an effective Soil Monitoring Law should include a comprehensive list of scientifically robust, and actionable soil health indicators. **Efficient monitoring systems will lead to better ranking of good and bad conservation statuses of soils, and allow for the implementation of tailor-made strategies to restore soils.** In addition, adequate, science-based, guidelines on soil use must be added into the Soil Monitoring Law to make better use of soil health indicators and make agri-food systems more sustainable in the long-term.

3

Explicitly mention youth in the Soil Health Law: As the Law will define what soil governance looks like at the EU level, meaningful public participation and transparency will be fundamental tools to engender democratic decision-making. As of now, neither youth nor future generations are explicitly mentioned in the Law. **GCE thus is asking the Parliament to include youth as a stakeholder group within the Law.** The survey shows that 37 participants find soil degradation a pressing issue and fundamental driver of biodiversity loss. Soil degradation, monocultures and nutrient depletion are three of many issues that threaten soil health. **Concrete and specific youth consultations must be mentioned in the Law to ensure continuous research, training and awareness initiatives** on soil restoration practices. As rights holders, it is key that youth and future generations are left with healthier and more sustainable soils that will not hinder their livelihoods.

Conclusion

In this paper, we, as European youth representatives, have expressed young people's demands to improve both the content and the policy-making process of the Biodiversity Strategy. **We have laid out recommendations across key topics, from marine ecosystems, to pollinators, invasive species, forests, and soils - all interconnected issues that require a strongly integrated policy framework.** Our hope is that this call for action will be answered through concrete and coordinated responses that unequivocally support 1) increased consistency, 2) better monitoring, and 3) reinforced youth engagement.

We warmly welcome the passing of the Nature Restoration Law, a cornerstone of the Biodiversity Strategy, which sent a strong signal that the majority of EU officials are committed to respect the agenda of the Green New Deal. **Young people will keep fighting for the implementation of the Biodiversity Strategy through policies that protect biodiversity and people in the strongest way possible.**

The Biodiversity Strategy will be assessed in 2024 to track its progress. In this context, **we urge EU policy-makers to take our recommendations into account and to consult with youth in order to set a revised trajectory for the Biodiversity Strategy** that reflects their concerns and demands.

1

Increased consistency

2

Better monitoring

3

Reinforced youth engagement

Endnotes

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Acknowledgment

The EU Biodiversity Strategy Working Group at GCE aims to raise awareness among young people in the EU on biodiversity loss and the resulting sixth mass extinction, as well as the role of youth in the implementation of the EU Biodiversity Strategy, in addition to advocate on challenges the EU is still facing regarding the implementation of its 2030 Biodiversity Strategy.

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