

EU Birds and Habitats Directive: conserving Europe's ecosystems

Context

Introduced at a time when international conservation initiatives were just beginning to take shape, the **Birds Directive** (Directive 2009/147/EC) is the oldest piece of European Union's (EU) legislation on the environment and was unanimously adopted in April 1979. The **Habitats Directive** was adopted a few years later, in 1992 (Directive 92/43/EEC), and together with the Birds Directive, the Habitat Directive forms the cornerstone of the EU's biodiversity conservation strategy.

At the heart of both directives is the Natura 2000 network, which sets conservation goals and legal standards to manage sites sustainably and limit harm from human activities. Today, almost one fifth of the EU land area and around 10% of its marine area are covered by the EU Natura 2000 network (around 28,000 sites), making it the largest network of protected areas in the world.¹

Description: the Birds Directive

The Birds Directive relates to the conservation of all 500 species naturally occurring in the EU and their most important habitats. In addition to halting their decline or disappearance, the Directive aims to allow bird species to recover and thrive over the long-term. Member States must ensure species populations remain ecologically resilient, preserve diverse habitats, and prohibit activities like deliberate capture, killing, disturbance, nest destruction, and trade of wild specimens.

Derogations are permitted only if no alternatives exist and if they fit specific criteria, such as risks to public health or safety, significant damage to agriculture, fisheries, or forestry, or for research.

Certain species of birds are protected in slightly different ways, depending on which annex they are a part of. For instance, Annex I species are particularly threatened, and Member States must designate Special Protection Areas (SPAs) for their survival, which are directly included in the European Natura 2000 Network. On the contrary, Annex II species can be hunted under national legislation, without derogation.

Description: the Habitats Directive

The Habitats Directive mandates the protection of over 1,000 rare, endangered, or endemic species of mammals, reptiles, amphibians, fish invertebrates along with 230 habitat types across the EU, including forests, wetlands, grasslands, and marine habitats. The overall objective is to ensure that these species and habitats are maintained, or restored, to a favourable conservation status within the EU.

All forms of deliberate capture or killing in the wild as well as disturbance, destruction of breeding sites, nests or eggs and trade of wild specimens must be prohibited. Member States must also, where necessary, implement measures to ensure that the taking or exploitation of certain species is compatible with maintaining their favourable conservation status.²

¹ *Natura 2000 network's contribution to good status*. (2023, June 2). European Environment Agency's Home Page. <https://www.eea.europa.eu/en/topics/at-a-glance/nature/state-of-nature-in-europe-a-health-check/natura-2000-networks-contribution-to-good-status>

² *The Habitats Directive*. (2024, December 2). Environment. https://environment.ec.europa.eu/topics/nature-and-biodiversity/habitats-directive_en

Status

In 2015, the Commission carried out a 'Fitness Check' of the EU Nature Directives. The findings, published in December 2016, concluded that the two nature directives remain highly relevant and are fit for purpose.³ However, the Directives need to be better implemented by the Member States. The Habitats Directive established Natura 2000 across the EU, but designation alone falls short of the EU Biodiversity Strategy's goals: only 15% of habitats are in good condition, while 81% remain poor or bad. Additionally, 35% of species with unfavourable status continue to decline.⁴ As studies highlight, effective management, not just designation, is essential for species recovery and climate adaptation.⁵

Bird populations in Europe face significant challenges, with 1 in 5 species at risk of extinction and 1 in 3 declining in recent decades, according to the 2021 European Red List of Birds.⁶ Despite this worrying context, the situation has improved for many species over the last 40 years thanks to the Birds Directive, which has had a major impact on the conservation of wild birds across the EU. According to the latest State of Nature report, 52% of wild bird species are now considered secure, with notable recoveries among species listed in Annex I, which require Member States to designate Special Protection Areas (SPAs).⁷

Importance for biodiversity and climate

The Birds and Habitats Directives are crucial for protecting Europe's natural heritage. By designating and managing habitats critical to rare and threatened species, the Habitats Directive helps combat biodiversity loss and promotes ecosystem resilience. These habitats provide essential ecosystem services, such as carbon sequestration, flood protection, soil fertility, and clean water—all of which are vital in mitigating climate change and adapting to its impacts. Additionally, conserving diverse and intact habitats helps preserve genetic diversity, which is the foundation for ecosystems to adapt to environmental shifts, supporting both biodiversity and human welfare.

The Birds Directive is crucial in halting the decline of bird species and in allowing their recovery in the long term. It prevents millions of wild birds from being captured and killed across the EU, which is critical at a time when they are also threatened by other pressures like habitat loss and degradation, agricultural pesticides and industrial pollution.

Role of youth

Youth engagement is pivotal for biodiversity preservation, building long-term support for conservation efforts. In turn, protecting biodiversity is essential for youth, as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) warns that the window to secure a sustainable future is closing, putting young people's

³ *Fitness check of the EU Nature Legislation (Birds and Habitats Directives) Directive 2009/147/EC on the conservation of wild birds and Council Directive 92/43/EEC on the.* (n.d.). European Commission. https://commission.europa.eu/publications/fitness-check-eu-nature-legislation-birds-and-habitats-directives-directive-2009147ec-conservation_en

⁴ *Habitats and species: latest status and trends.* (2023b, April 4). European Environment Agency's Home Page. <https://www.eea.europa.eu/en/topics/at-a-glance/nature/state-of-nature-in-europe-a-health-check/habitats-and-species-latest-status-and-trends>

⁵ Biodiversity in Natura 2000 forest habitats is not static: Its conservation calls for an active management approach. *Journal for Nature Conservation*, 43, 250-260. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jnc.2017.07.004>

⁶ European Red List of Birds 2021: <https://www.birdlife.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/BirdLife-European-Red-List-of-Birds-2021.pdf>

⁷ Crotti, N. (2021, December 16). *New BirdLife report: 1 in 5 bird species in Europe is threatened by extinction.* BirdLife International. <https://www.birdlife.org/news/2021/10/14/press-release-european-red-list-of-birds-2021/>

rights particularly at risk.⁸ Young people can have a valuable contribution through citizen science, species monitoring, and habitat restoration, while also driving advocacy and awareness campaigns to protect bird species and their ecosystems.

In 2017, the Commission launched a LIFE call to engage European Solidarity Corps volunteers in Natura 2000 site conservation, supporting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) proposed by the United Nations (UN), and the EU biodiversity objectives.⁹ The LIFE Programme supports nature conservation projects in the EU. For example, the [Volamdo](#) project by SEO BirdLife involves young volunteers in the Doñana National Park, Spain, with activities like habitat restoration, biodiversity monitoring, education, and community outreach.¹⁰

⁸ European Council, Jamie Gorman. (2024) *Coyote Magazin: Youth eco-activism in Europe: participating in creating another world*. <https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/coyote-magazine/youth-eco-activism-in-europe-participating-in-creating-another-world>

⁹ European Commission. (n.d.). European Solidarity Corps. Retrieved from https://knowledge4policy.ec.europa.eu/biodiversity/eu-supported-projects-initiatives-biodiversity-education_e

¹⁰ *Volamando: Environmental Volunteering in Doñana* | European Youth Portal. (n.d.). https://youth.europa.eu/solidarity/opportunity/29408_en