

Natura 2000 – A network of protected areas to preserve the EU's species and habitats

Context

Natura 2000 is another piece of the EU's framework for biodiversity protection. Following the EU pledges at the Rio Summit of 1992, Natura 2000 was created to preserve Europe's land and marine landscapes and restore ecosystems. In synergy with the EU's Habitats and Birds Directives, this network of protected areas supports the first target of the EU's 2030 Biodiversity Strategy, namely to improve the conservation status of species and habitats. Natura 2000 now represents approximately 27,000 protected sites across the EU, making it the largest network globally.

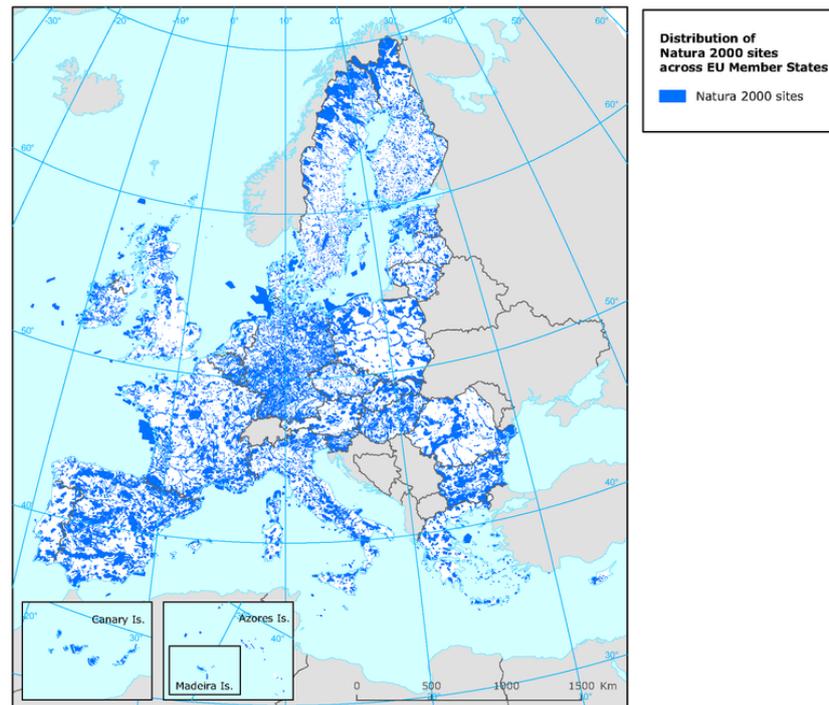


Figure 1: map of the Natura 2000 sites in EU Member States + UK

Description of the policy

To successfully implement the Natura 2000 network, guidelines were adopted to designate, manage, and finance the program.

→ *Designation of Natura 2000 sites*

The Natura 2000 program is regulated under the provisions made by the Habitats and Birds Directives. Hence, the requirements for the creation of a Natura 2000 site are detailed in both directives, ensuring coherence between the network and these texts. Member States aiming to integrate a natural site into the Natura 2000 network must show that this area is a core location for the breeding and resting of birds, and/or that it hosts a variety of protected plants and animals.

To illustrate, in France, the natural site of the Western Seine Bay in Normandy is an official Natura 2000 area. It hosts more than thirty species of migratory birds as well as marine animals including the

¹ <https://www.eea.europa.eu/en/analysis/maps-and-charts/distribution-of-natura-2000-sites-across-eu-member-states-1>

Harbor and Grey seals. The site is also home to kelp forests and other habitats that are key to the functioning of the region's ecosystems.²

→ *Management and financing of the sites*

Once a site is designated, Member States commit to certain standards of conservation that they need to uphold within the area. They must implement positive conservation measures and preventive tools to protect ecosystems in their Natura 2000 sites. Member States are also responsible for preventing projects or constructions that could significantly alter the functioning of ecosystems in the protected area. To follow the site's evolution and assess its state of conservation, Member States must provide conservation objectives tailored to the site and track their progress through monitoring measures and surveillance³.

Each year, managing Natura 2000 sites and protecting their natural capital costs 10.2bn euros⁴. About half of these costs arise from maintaining and restoring the network. The EU's funds play a key role in providing these financial resources, notably through the LIFE Programme, which supports nature conservation projects in the EU. Member States also participate in funding the preservation of their sites.

Importance of Natura 2000

Most importantly, the Natura 2000 network helps to raise the ambitions for the protection of habitats, animals and plant species. It supports the regulative framework set out by the Birds and Habitats Directives, thereby putting their protective measures into action. However, Natura 2000's effectiveness in protecting sites remains limited. It is difficult to monitor its impact over time and correlations between thriving habitats and species with the Natura 2000 label are challenging to establish.

Natura 2000 sites also promote socio-economic benefits. By protecting biodiversity, Natura 2000 participates in preserving the 4.4 million jobs in the EU that depend on ecosystems⁵. The network also plays a part in promoting cultural heritage within Member States and raising awareness amongst their citizens.

Role of youth

Youth involvement often takes the form of local scale initiatives such as the LIFE living Natura 2000 project in Bavaria, where every four years, students partake in programs to learn about local Natura 2000 sites and their unique plant and animal species.²⁸ The role of youth in Natura 2000 sites has also been recognised by the European Commission, which has created volunteering and vocational training opportunities for young people to help conserve Natura 2000 sites through the European Solidarity Corps scheme.²⁹

² https://environment.ec.europa.eu/topics/nature-and-biodiversity/natura-2000/designating-natura-2000-sites_en

³ https://environment.ec.europa.eu/topics/nature-and-biodiversity/natura-2000/managing-and-protecting-natura-2000-sites_en

⁴ https://environment.ec.europa.eu/topics/nature-and-biodiversity/natura-2000/financing-natura-2000_en

⁵ https://environment.ec.europa.eu/topics/nature-and-biodiversity/natura-2000/financing-natura-2000_en