

A coherent network of protected areas in Europe: State of play

FACE briefing note

Introduction

As we enter a new political term in Brussels, it is important to analyse the state of play of “**The coherent network of protected areas**”¹, stemming from the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030.

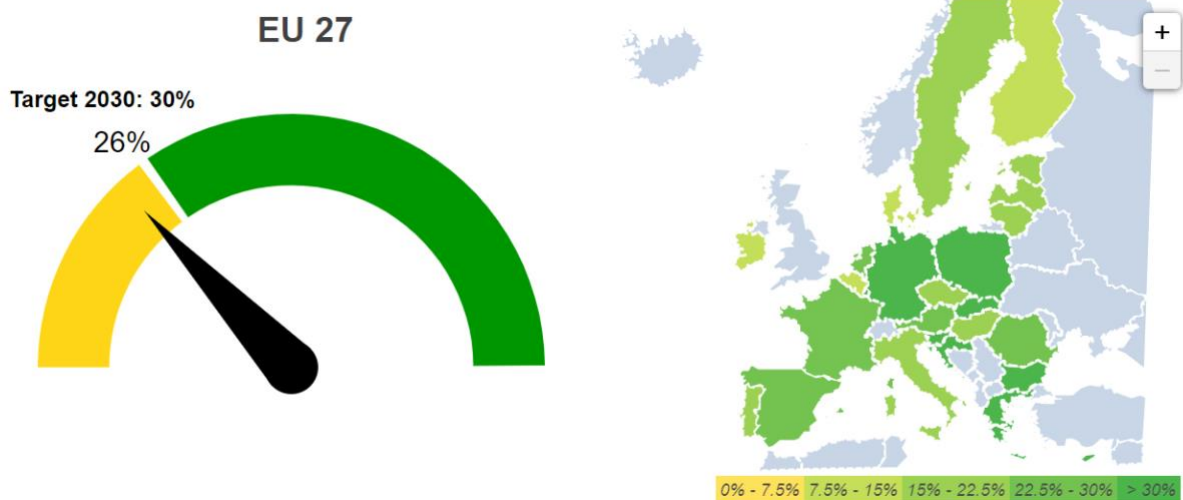
This initiative included three different targets:

1. *Legally protect a minimum of 30% of the EU’s land area and a minimum of 30% of the EU’s sea area, and integrate ecological corridors, as part of a true Trans-European Nature Network.*
2. *Strictly protect at least a third of the EU’s protected areas, including all EU primary and old-growth forests.*
3. *Effectively manage all protected areas, defining clear conservation objectives and measures, and monitoring them appropriately.*

The European Commission and the European Environment Agency (EEA) have identified a series of indicators to measure progress towards achieving these targets, which have been included in the EU Biodiversity Dashboard. The EU Biodiversity Strategy Actions Tracker provides a full overview of the actions undertaken (relevant for several targets).

Target 1 – Protected areas

Member States have been asked to step up their conservation efforts to protect 30% of Europe’s land and sea by 2030. The indicator “terrestrial protected area coverage” (used in the EU Biodiversity Dashboard) measures the percentage of land covered by protected areas by Member State and at EU 27 level. It considers both nationally protected areas and Natura 2000 sites. Below is a draft showing the situation at the EU level.



¹ This note specifically focuses on EU’s land area as this is the most relevant area for hunters.

Several Member States including **Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Germany, Greece, Luxembourg, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia are above the 30% at the national level, while the others range from the 29.2% of Austria to 14.2% of Belgium**². That said, it is important to underline that there is no obligation for Member States to achieve the 30% at the national level as this is an EU target. According to the EC's Staff Working Document "[Criteria and guidance for protected areas designations](#)", such a target should be reached per EU biogeographical region.

This target is also relevant internationally in the context of the [Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework](#)³.

Target 2- Strictly protected areas

Specific indicators have not yet been developed for this target, which has proven to be quite contentious. Identifying areas for strict protection on a continent as densely populated as Europe can prove problematic.

At the early stage of the process, the EEA made a calculation based on the areas belonging to the IUCN Categories Ia (strict nature reserve), Ib (wilderness area) and II (national park). According to this calculation, the EEA calculated that 3.42% of the land area of the EU is reported as strictly protected areas. Due to the non-inclusion of Nature 2000 site and the incomplete reporting on IUCN categories, the EEA concluded that the percentage mentioned above underestimate the actual coverage of strictly protected areas.

Target 3 – effectively managed all protected areas

Specific indicators have not yet been developed for this target.

Recent developments

The European Environment Agency (EEA) has implemented a dedicated reporting tool for submitting Member States' pledges on the designation of additional protected areas. Nevertheless, serious delays have been registered in submitting the pledges (the original deadline was the end of 2022).

So far, only Denmark, Czech Republic, France, Germany, Luxembourg, Spain and Sweden have submitted their pledges, which have been technically accepted⁴. Considering the lack of progress, the European Commission has asked Member States for ideas on how else the biodiversity commitments should be achieved. So far, suggestions have yet to be put forward. It is still being determined whether the Commission will consider that this progress by Member States is insufficient to meet the 2030 targets and whether new EU legislation is needed on protected areas.

² More information is available at <https://dopa.jrc.ec.europa.eu/kcbd/EUBDS2030-dashboard/1.1.0.1.1.1/?version=1#graphs>

³ TARGET 3: Ensure and enable that by 2030 at least 30 per cent of terrestrial, inland water, and of coastal and marine areas, especially areas of particular importance for biodiversity and ecosystem functions and services, are effectively conserved and managed through ecologically representative, well-connected and equitably governed systems of protected areas and other effective area-based conservation measures, recognizing indigenous and traditional territories, where applicable, and integrated into wider landscapes, seascapes and the ocean, while ensuring that any sustainable use, where appropriate in such areas, is fully consistent with conservation outcomes, recognizing and respecting the rights of indigenous peoples and local communities including over their traditional territories.

⁴ <https://reportnet.europa.eu/public/dataflow/703>

From the limited feedback, Member States are having difficulties with pledges for the strictly protected area target. A workshop dedicated to this issue will take place in Brussels in October 2024 and hopefully resolve some of the issues.

Actions undertaken to achieve the abovementioned targets

+ 1 - Commission guidance for identifying and designating additional protected areas, and appropriate management planning	COMPLETED	2021
+ 2 - Complete the designation of Natura 2000 sites, including the necessary designations of marine sites	IN PROGRESS	2030
+ 3 - Coordinate with Member States nature protection actions in the framework of the biogeographical regions and regional sea conventions	IN PROGRESS	2030
+ 4 - Possible adjustment of the reporting format for nationally designated protected areas	DELAYED	2023
+ 5 - Progress significantly in legally designating new protected areas and integrating ecological corridors	DELAYED	2022
+ 6 - Commission assessment of progress to the 2030 targets on protected areas, and of whether additional action is needed	IN PROGRESS	2024
+ 7 - Commission guidance on defining, mapping and strictly protecting all primary and old-growth forests	COMPLETED	2022
+ 8 - Promote and support investments in green and blue infrastructure and cooperation among Member States to set up ecological corridors	IN PROGRESS	2030
+ 9 - Protect and restore ecosystems in the EU's Outermost Regions, and support biodiversity action in the Overseas Countries and Territories	IN PROGRESS	2030

This list shows the actions the EU and its Member States committed to implement in the context of the targets under the **coherent network of protected areas initiative**.

Although the progress can be considered encouraging for the majority of them, action 5 *“the progress significantly in legally designating new protected areas and integrating ecological corridors”* (i.e., the pledge process) has registered significant delays as explained above.

Recommendation

For terrestrial protected areas, greater focus could be given to the EU target on effectively managing all protected areas. To reach international obligations under Target 3 of the Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF), a wider range of designated areas and ‘Other Effective Area-Based Conservation Measures’ (OECMs) could complement the existing protected area network in the EU. This could be demonstrated in National Biodiversity Action Plans. Notably, the GBF also requires that areas be effectively managed and governed. **This is key as many researchers warn against focusing solely on area targets. Evidence shows that well-managed areas deliver the greatest benefits for biodiversity** ⁵⁶⁷⁸.

⁵ <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-022-04617-0>
⁶ <https://doi.org/10.1111/conl.12650>.
⁷ <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13280-020-01426-5>
⁸ <https://doi.org/10.1038/s44185-024-00041-x>