Healthcheck for habitats and species in the EU

Amphibians are sensitive to climate change

Habitats depending on sustainable farming are doing badly

Efforts need to be stepped up

- EU Member States have, for the first time, systematically assessed the conservation status of the most vulnerable habitats and species in the Union

- Only a small proportion of the habitats and species is in a favourable status

- Grassland, wetland and coastal habitats appear under most pressure

- In some cases where trends are already positive, more time is needed to achieve good status

- The findings highlight the critical importance of conservation actions and the need to urgently intensify efforts

Dunes are threatened by tourism development

European Environment Agency

nature

environment

Background to the report:

The EU's Habitats Directive, adopted in 1992, forms the cornerstone of nature conservation policy in the Union, together with the older Birds Directive. Both directives were a reaction to the decades of nature destruction, overexploitation and loss of habitats and species. They outline both the aims of action and the means to achieve them. In 2007, EU Member States reported on the conservation status of habitats and species protected under the directive for the period 2001-2006.

The findings have been collated into a report which can be seen as the first ever comprehensive 'health check' of the EU's protected habitats and species. In the directive, 'conservation status' is defined as the combination of influences on habitats or species that affect their long-term distribution, structure, function and abundance.

The status of the otter (Lutra lutra) is improving

Results were reported by 25 member states using a standard methodology and analysed by the European Topic Centre on Biological Diversity of the European Environmental Agency. Some 1,180 species and 216 habitats types were covered, with nine groups of species and nine types of habitats across 11 biogeographical regions. Three grades of status were used – 'favourable', 'inadequate' and 'bad'.

Overall findings:

EU analysis on the biogeographical level shows that overall, only 17% of both habitats and species assessments were deemed favourable. For habitats, some 37% of assessments indicated bad status and a further 28% were inadequate. Meanwhile for species, 22% were assessed as bad and 30% inadequate. In addition, there was a significant proportion of uncertainty, with the status of some 18% of habitats and 31% of species classified as unknown.

Assessment of conservation status of habitats

- Unfavourable - Bad (37%)
- Unfavourable - Inadequate (28%)
- Unknown (18%)
- Favourable (17%)
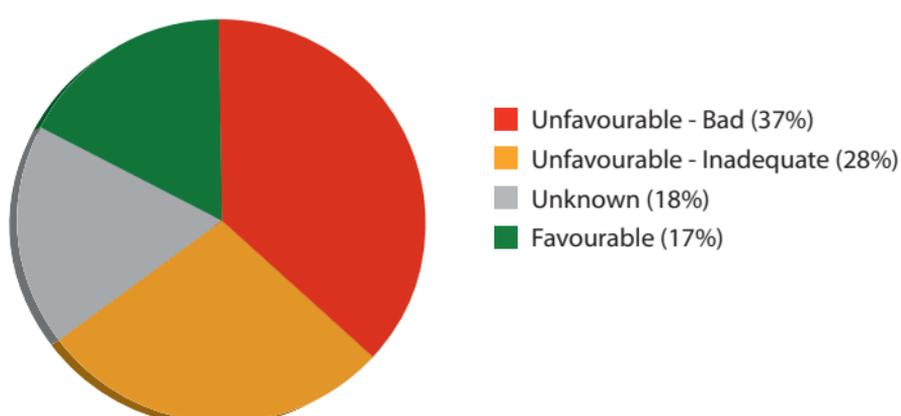
Map of biogeographical regions
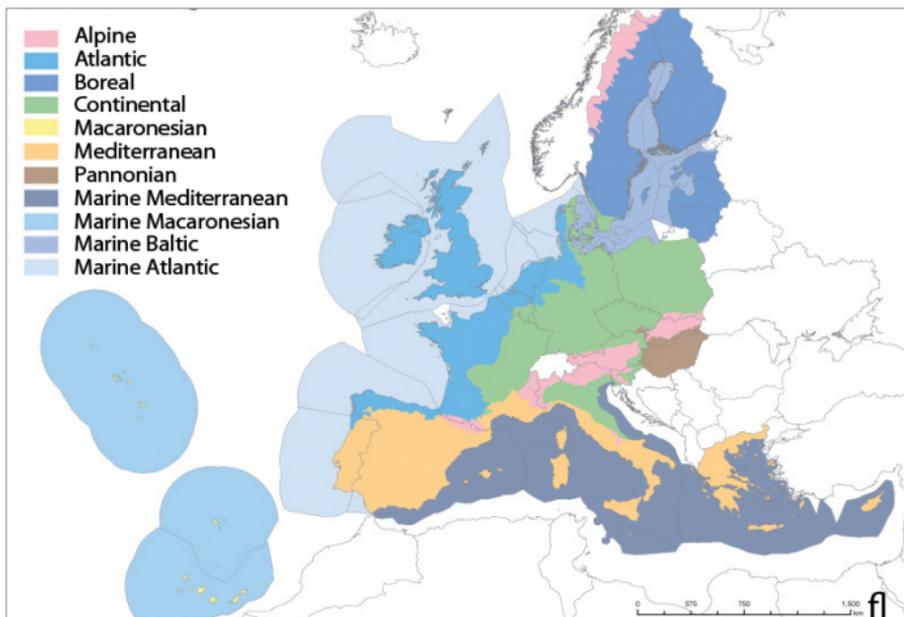
Looking at the results by biogeographic region, the Alpine region had the highest proportion of habitats in a favourable condition and Atlantic region the lowest. For species, the Boreal region had the highest proportion of favourable assessments and the Continental region the lowest. Dunes, wetlands and grasslands were found to be the habitat groups with the worst conservation status.

Specific findings:

One significant finding of the report is that **habitats associated with sustainable agricultural practices** show a worse conservation status than non-agricultural habitats, with only 7% showing favourable status compared to 21% for other types of habitats.

Pressures in these areas, which account for large areas of valuable habitats, include the abandonment of pastures, over or under-grazing, unbalanced fertilisation and use of pesticides, changing cultivation practices, the afforestation of grasslands and the removal of landscape features such as hedges.

Climate change was noted as having a significant impact for 19% of habitats and 12% of species. Wetlands areas in general were noted as being the most strongly influenced by climate change, followed by dunes. Amphibians were most widely noted as being sensitive to climatic changes.

Lessons learnt:

There was a wide difference in the amount of information provided by countries and its quality. Information was particularly lacking in southern Europe and marine areas. Marine conservation is still very much a developing area and better knowledge is needed.

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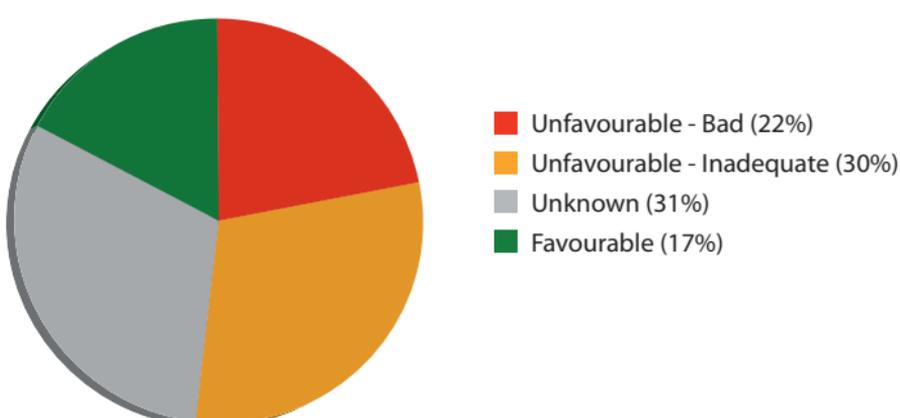
In future, better coordination will be needed between countries when collecting data and compiling the report.

Whilst the outlook from the report may seem bleak, it only looked at the most vulnerable and at risk habitats and species. It should therefore be expected that not many would come back with a favourable assessment.

It is too early to assess the effect of Natura 2000 network, which includes 17% of the EU's area and is the biggest ecological network in the world, given the timing of its establishment, the setting up of management plans and on-site measures. However, over 1,000 LIFE-nature projects demonstrate that conservation measures do work and multiplication of such projects is important.

Next steps:

The report clearly indicates that conservation efforts need to be stepped up for many habitats and species. However, the picture is not all negative. There has never been a comparable body of work of this scale or importance, and the findings will be invaluable for biodiversity policy for years to come. The knowledge that has been gained gives a good indication of where best to direct resources.

The process of producing these reports was difficult, but will become easier as monitoring systems become more developed. A review system is under way to develop better ways to compile and integrate data. The benchmark has been set, and will serve as the point of comparison when the reporting process is next repeated, in 2013.

More data is needed on marine species

More information:
Technical Article 17 report:
http://biodiversity.eionet.europa.eu/article17

Habitats Directive:
http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/legislation/habitatsdirective/index_en.htm

Natura 2000:
http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/natura2000/index_en.htm