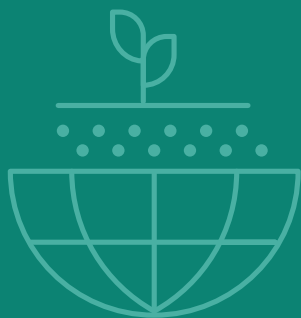




8th Environment Action Programme

Designated terrestrial protected areas in Europe



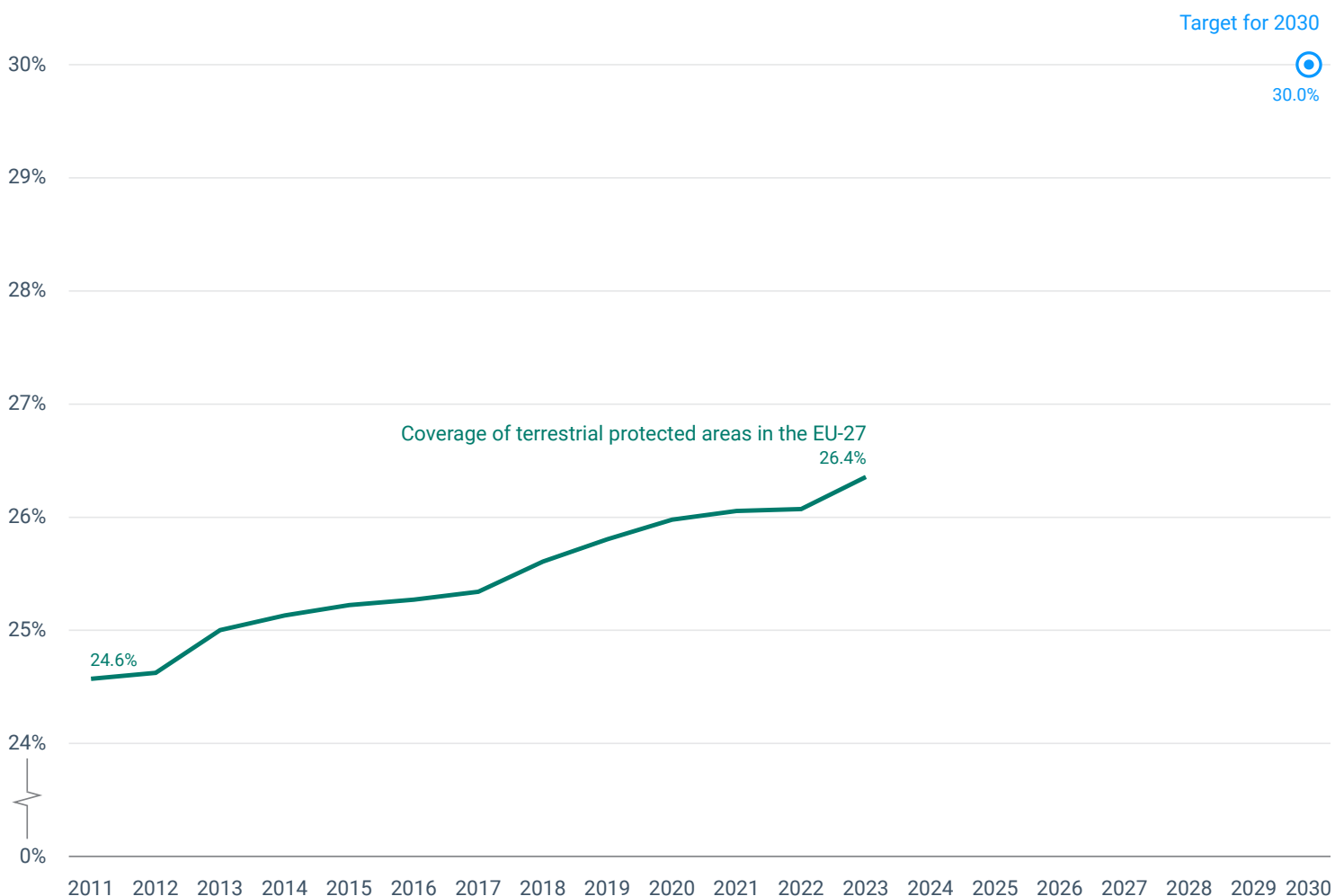


Designated terrestrial protected areas in Europe

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By the end of 2023, protected areas covered 26.4% of European Union land, with 18.6% of EU land designated as Natura 2000 sites and 7.8% under other complementary national designations. The EU biodiversity strategy for 2030 sets out a target of protecting at least 30% of EU land by 2030, while ensuring that all protected areas are managed effectively. The area reported as protected has steadily increased since 2011, by 1.8 percentage points, yet the pace of designation needs to more than double for the EU to meet the 30% target.

Figure 1. Coverage of protected areas in the EU-27 land area in 2011-2023



Protected areas benefit species, ecosystems, and the environment. They provide significant **economic and societal benefits**, including employment opportunities ^[1], contribute to human health and well-being, and have significant cultural value ^[2]. Historically, protected areas have taken many forms and have been established for different purposes, such as protecting wild game resources, preserving landscape natural beauty and, more recently, safeguarding biodiversity.

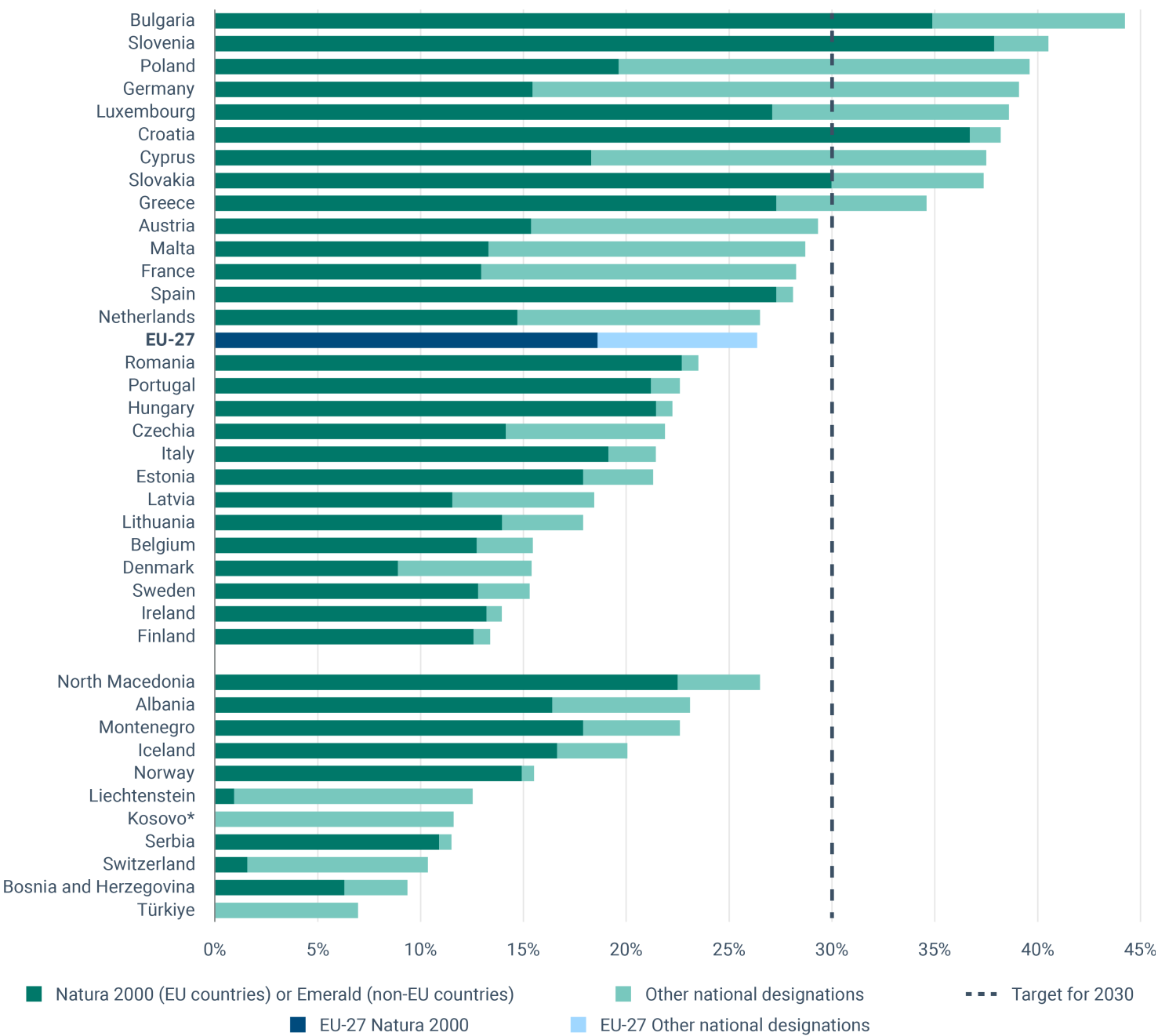
The EU's protected areas are highly diverse, varying in size, aim, and management approach ^[3]. They are large in number – over 100,000 sites in total – but mostly small in size, with an overall protected surface of 1,090 million km². This reflects the high **pressure** on land use, arising from agricultural intensification, transport and urban development.

The designation of protected areas is important to halt and reverse biodiversity loss. One target of the [EU biodiversity strategy for 2030](#) is to legally protect and effectively manage a minimum of 30% of EU land by 2030. The CBD [Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework](#) also includes a similar coverage target. Based on Member States reports, 26.4% of EU land was **protected** by the end of 2023, with 18.6% of EU land designated as [Natura 2000 sites](#) – areas protected under the [EU Birds and Habitats Directives](#) – and 7.8% as other complementary national designations.

While the area reported as protected has steadily increased since 2011 (by 1.8 percentage points), it remains uncertain whether the EU will meet its **30% target**. For this to occur, an additional 3.6% of the EU's land area would need to be protected, an area larger than the size of Greece.

The designation of protected areas is not a guarantee of biodiversity protection, as their management is a decisive factor in achieving conservation aims. However, there is a lack of comprehensive information on how effectively these areas are managed. A spatially robust, well-connected and effectively managed **network of protected areas** is a pre-condition to prevent species and habitats being lost. This requires building a network of protected areas that ensures both ecological coherence and connectivity within countries and across borders. To achieve this, Member States would need to establish appropriate conservation objectives and measures for all existing and future sites and ensure their consistent monitoring.

Figure 2. Terrestrial protected area coverage by country and in the EU-27 by the end of 2023



The environmental diversity of Europe’s countries and biogeographical regions is matched by the diversity in its protected areas. By the end of 2023, nine Member States had designated **more than 30%** of their land area as protected: Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Germany, Greece, Luxembourg, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia.

While **Natura 2000** is the backbone of the protected areas network in the EU, it is complemented by additional areas designated at national level. The different patterns among Natura 2000 and other national designations reflect the diversity of historical, geographical, administrative, political and cultural circumstances and the management regime. However it is clear that the designation of Natura 2000 sites has significantly increased protected areas in Europe [4].

Protected areas coverage in non-EU EEA member countries and cooperating countries varied hugely by the end of 2023. Many countries will **need to increase** their efforts to help reach the target for protected areas adopted as part of the [Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework](#).

In addition, Figure 2 shows the contribution of the [Emerald network](#) of sites, established under the [Bern Convention](#), to protect species and habitats in those countries.

▼ Supporting information

Definition

The indicator illustrates the changes in the share of terrestrial protected areas in the EU-27 land over time. It also distinguishes between protected areas designated as Natura 2000 sites or Emerald sites and other national designations.

A protected area is a clearly defined geographical space, recognised, dedicated and managed through legal or other effective means to achieve the long-term conservation of nature with associated ecosystem services and cultural values ^[3].

Methodology

The data for the nationally designated protected areas inventory are delivered by the [Eionet partnership countries](#) as spatial and tabular information. The inventory began in 1995 under the CORINE programme of the European Commission.

The Natura 2000 network is based on the [1979 Birds Directive](#) and the [1992 Habitats Directive](#). The European database of Natura 2000 sites consists of a compilation of the data submitted by the Member States of the European Union. This European database is generally updated once a year to take into account any updating of national databases by Member States. However, the release of a new EU-wide database does not necessarily mean that a particular national dataset has recently been updated.

The [Emerald network](#) is an ecological network made up of Areas of Special Conservation Interest. The objective of the Emerald Network is the long-term survival of the species and habitats. The Emerald Network consists of the Areas of Special Conservation Interest (ASCI) designated under Recommendation No. 16 (1989) and Resolution No. 3 (1996) of the Standing Committee to the [Bern Convention](#). The [Emerald Network aggregated database](#) is updated annually.

The 'other national designations' category includes a variety of designation types with different protection regimes and regulations. EEA collects information on nationally designated areas from 38 EEA member countries. This information is [updated annually](#) and provides an overview of the number of nationally designated areas in each country, their size and designation type.

The same geographical area may be designated several times under different legislation. When producing area statistics on protected areas, nationally designated protected areas and Natura 2000 datasets are overlayed to avoid double counting of overlapping site designations in the datasets. The Reporting guidelines with full details on the methodology are available from: <http://cdr.eionet.europa.eu/help/cdda> and <https://cdr.eionet.europa.eu/help/natura2000/>.

Policy/environmental relevance

The indicator is a headline indicator for monitoring progress towards the 8th Environment Action Programme (8th EAP) [5]. It contributes mainly to the monitoring of the 8th EAP biodiversity-related priority objective Article 2.e that shall be met by 2030: 'protecting, preserving and restoring marine and terrestrial biodiversity and the biodiversity of inland waters inside and outside protected areas by, inter alia, halting and reversing biodiversity loss and improving the state of ecosystems and their functions and the services they provide, and by improving the state of the environment, in particular air, water and soil, as well as by combating desertification and soil degradation'. The European Commission Communication on the 8th EAP monitoring framework specifies that this indicator should monitor progress towards the target to 'legally protect at least 30% of the EU's land area ... by 2030'.

The establishment of protected areas is a direct response to concerns over biodiversity loss. Accordingly, an indicator that measures protected area coverage is a valuable indication of commitment to conserving biodiversity.

Comprehensive data on officially designated protected areas are regularly compiled and there is international acceptance of the use of the indicator at the global, regional and national scales.

The EU biodiversity strategy for 2030 contains specific commitments and actions to be delivered by 2030, including establishing a larger EU-wide network of protected areas on land and at sea, building upon existing Natura 2000 areas, with strict protection for areas of very high biodiversity value.

The key commitments for nature protection in the EU biodiversity strategy for 2030 are:

- "1. Legally protect a minimum of 30% of the EU's land area and 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 remaining EU primary and old-growth forests.
3. Effectively manage all protected areas, defining clear conservation objectives and measures, and monitoring them appropriately."

Terrestrial protected areas are used in the [EU biodiversity dashboard](#) to monitor progress towards the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 and as an EU indicator to monitor progress towards the [Sustainable Development Goal 15: "Life on land"](#).

At the global level, new targets for protected areas have been adopted as part of the [Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework](#) ^[6], including [Target 3](#) to effectively conserve and manage at least 30% of the world’s terrestrial areas.

Accuracy and uncertainties

No uncertainty has been specified.

Data sources and providers

- [Nationally designated areas for public access \(vector data\) - May 2024](#), European Environment Agency (EEA)
- [Natura 2000 \(vector\) - version end 2023](#), European Environment Agency (EEA)
- [Emerald Network data \(vector\) - the Pan-European network of protected sites version 2024](#), European Environment Agency (EEA)
- [EuroBoundaryMap 2020 \(EBM 2020\)](#), Jan. 2020, EuroGeographics

▼ **Metadata**

DPSIR

Response

Topics

[# Biodiversity](#) [# Nature protection and restoration](#)

Tags

[# protected areas](#) [# Birds Directive](#) [# 8th EAP](#) [# Habitats Directive](#) [# SEBI007](#)
[# Emerald network](#) [# Natura 2000](#)

Temporal coverage

2011-2023

Geographic coverage

Albania	Austria
Belgium	Bosnia and Herzegovina
Bulgaria	Croatia
Cyprus	Czechia
Denmark	Estonia
Finland	France
Germany	Greece

Hungary
Ireland
Kosovo (UNSCR 1244/99)
Liechtenstein
Luxembourg
Montenegro
North Macedonia
Poland
Romania
Slovakia
Spain
Switzerland

Iceland
Italy
Latvia
Lithuania
Malta
Netherlands
Norway
Portugal
Serbia
Slovenia
Sweden
Türkiye

Typology

Descriptive indicator (Type A - What is happening to the environment and to humans?)

UN SDGs

SDG15: Life on land

Unit of measure

Percentage

Frequency of dissemination

Once a year

▼ References and footnotes

1. Mutafoğlu K., ten Brink, P., Schweitzer J-P., Underwood E., Tucker G., Russi D., Howe M., Maréchal A., Olmeda C., Pantzar M., Gionfra, S. and Kettunen M., 2017, *Natura 2000 and Jobs: Scoping Study*, IEEP, Brussels.
[↩](#)
2. European Commission: Directorate-General for Environment and Sundseth, K., 2019, *Natural and cultural heritage in Europe – Working together within the Natura 2000 network*,
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3. Dudley, N., Shadie, P. and Stolton, S., 2013, *Guidelines for applying protected area management categories including IUCN WCPA best practice guidance on recognising protected areas and assigning management categories and governance types*, IUCN, Gland.
[a](#) [b](#)

4. EEA, 2012. Protected areas in Europe: an overview, 2012, No 5/2012, Publications Office, Luxembourg.

5. EU, 2022, Decision (EU) 2022/591 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 6 April 2022 on a general Union environment action programme to 2030, OJ L 114, 12.4.2022, p. 22-36.

6. CBD, 2022, 'COP 15: final text of Kunming-Montreal global biodiversity framework', *Convention on Biological Diversity* (<https://www.cbd.int/article/cop15-final-text-kunming-montreal-gbf-221222>) accessed June 28, 2023.
