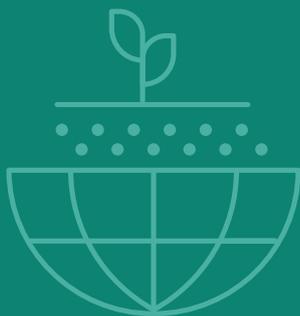




# 8th Environment Action Programme

Designated terrestrial protected areas in Europe

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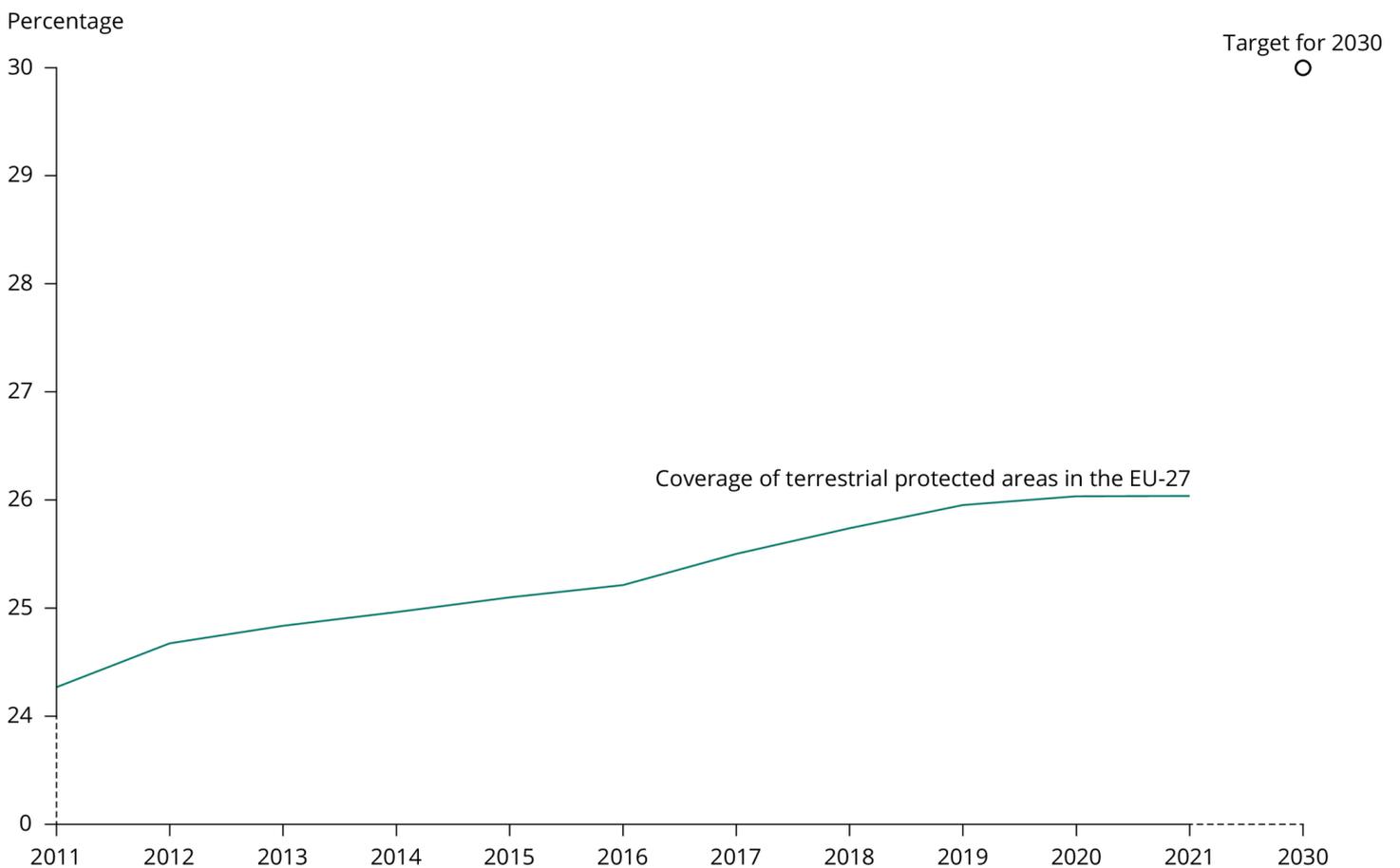
# Terrestrial protected areas in Europe

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[Home](#) > [Analysis and data](#) > [Indicators](#) > Terrestrial protected areas in Europe

By the end of 2021, protected areas covered 26% of EU land, with 18.6% of this area designated as Natura 2000 sites and 7.4% as other national designations. The EU biodiversity strategy for 2030 sets out a target of protecting at least 30% of EU land by 2030, while also ensuring that all protected areas are effectively managed. If the designation of protected areas continues at the rate seen in the past decade (1.7 percentage points increase since 2011), the target will not be met. However, EU Member States are in the process of submitting pledges to designate new areas by 2030. These pledges will provide further insights into the prospects of reaching the target and any major gaps that remain.

## Figure 1. Coverage of protected areas in the EU-27 land area in 2011-2021



Source: EEA/EuroGeographics.



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

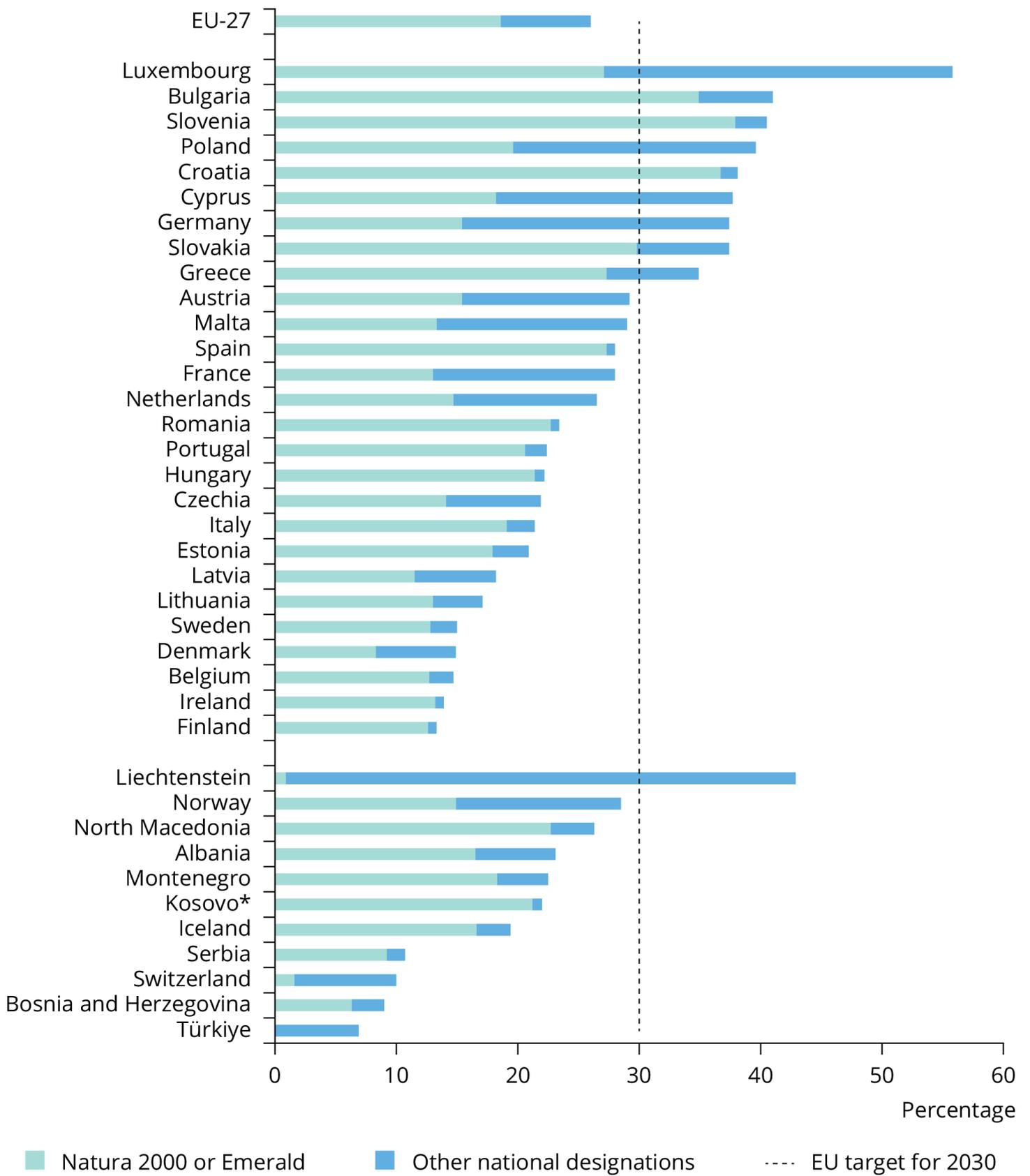
The EU's protected areas are highly diverse, varying in size, aim and management approach. They are large in number – over 100,000 sites in total – but mostly rather small in size. This reflects the high pressure on land use, arising from agriculture, transport and urban development, and the increasing competition for land for production of renewable energy and biofuels.

Designation of protected areas is an important policy tool to halt biodiversity decline. One of the targets of the [EU biodiversity strategy for 2030](#)<sup>[1]</sup> is to legally protect and effectively manage a minimum of 30% of EU land by 2030. Based on Member States reports, 26% of EU land was protected by the end of 2021. 18.6% of this area was designated by Member States as [Natura 2000 sites](#) – areas protected under the EU Birds and Habitats Directives – and 7.4% as other complementary national designations.

While the area that is reported as protected has steadily increased since 2011 (1.7 percentage points), at present it is rather uncertain whether the EU will meet the 30% target. For this to happen the rate of designation of protected areas will have to more than double by 2030. The submission of pledges for designating new areas by the EU Member States up to 2030<sup>[2]</sup> is expected to be available in the course of 2023 and will provide further insights into the prospects of achieving the target. This may help identify any major gaps that remain.

The designation of protected areas is not in itself a guarantee of biodiversity protection as their management is a decisive factor in achieving the conservation aims. However, we currently lack comprehensive information on how effectively these areas are managed. Moreover, protected areas in the EU can no longer be managed as isolated units but need to be understood as part of a wider Trans-European network, as emphasised in the EU biodiversity strategy. This requires building an ecologically coherent network that ensures both spatial and functional connectivity within countries and across borders.

## **Figure 2. Terrestrial protected area coverage by country and in the EU-27 by end of 2021**



Source: EEA/EuroGeographics.



The environmental diversity of Europe's countries and biogeographical regions is matched by the diversity in its protected areas. There are different patterns among Natura 2000 and other national designations, reflecting the diversity of historical, geographical, administrative, political and cultural

circumstances and the management regime. It is clear, however, that the designation of Natura 2000 sites by EU Member States has significantly increased protected area coverage in Europe<sup>[3][4]</sup>.

Protected area coverage varies between EU Member States. Figure 2 shows that by the end of 2021 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 Trans-European nature network, it is complemented by additional areas protected at national level. A coherent, well-connected and effectively managed network of protected areas is a pre-condition to prevent many species and habitats being lost forever. To achieve this, Member States will need to establish appropriate conservation objectives and measures as well as monitoring for all the existing and future sites.

Protected areas coverage in the non-EU EEA member countries and cooperating countries varied hugely by the end of 2021 and many countries will need to significantly intensify their efforts to reach the 30% 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](#)<sup>[5]</sup>, to protect species and habitats in those countries. As the EU is a signatory to the Bern Convention, the Natura 2000 network is considered the EU Member States' contribution to the Emerald Network.

## ▼ Supporting information

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### 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](#)<sup>[6]</sup>.

### 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 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 overlaid 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 8<sup>th</sup> Environment Action Programme (8<sup>th</sup> EAP). It contributes mainly to the monitoring of the 8<sup>th</sup> 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'<sup>[7][8]</sup>. The European Commission Communication on the 8<sup>th</sup> 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'<sup>[7][8]</sup>.

The establishment of protected areas is a direct response to concerns over biodiversity loss, so an indicator that measures protected area coverage is a valuable indication of commitment to conserving biodiversity and reducing biodiversity loss at a range of levels.

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 and climate value.

The key commitments for nature protection in the EU biodiversity strategy for 2030 are <sup>[1]</sup>:

- "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."

At the global level, new targets for protected areas have recently been adopted as part of the Kunming-Montreal Global biodiversity framework, including a target 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

- [Natura 2000 data - the European network of protected sites](#), European Environment Agency (EEA)
- [Nationally designated areas \(CDDA\)](#), European Environment Agency (EEA)
- [EuroBoundaryMap 2020 \(EBM 2020\)](#), Jan. 2020 (copyrights protected), EuroGeographics

## ▼ Metadata

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### DPSIR

Response

### Topics

# Nature protection and restoration # Biodiversity

### Tags

# protected areas # Birds Directive # 8th EAP # Habitats Directive # SEBI007  
# Emerald network # Natura 2000

### Temporal coverage

2011-2021

### Geographic coverage

Albania	Austria
Belgium	Bosnia and Herzegovina
Bulgaria	Croatia
Cyprus	Czechia
Denmark	Estonia
Finland	France
Germany	Greece
Hungary	Iceland
Ireland	Italy
Kosovo (UNSCR 1244/99)	Latvia
Liechtenstein	Lithuania
Luxembourg	Malta
Montenegro	Netherlands
North Macedonia	Norway

Poland  
Romania  
Slovakia  
Spain  
Switzerland

Portugal  
Serbia  
Slovenia  
Sweden  
Türkiye

### Typology

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

### UN SDGs

Life on land

### Unit of measure

Percentage

### Frequency of dissemination

Once a year

### Contact

[info@eea.europa.eu](mailto:info@eea.europa.eu)

## ▼ References and footnotes

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1. EC, 2021, 'Biodiversity strategy for 2030', *European Commission* ([https://ec.europa.eu/environment/strategy/biodiversity-strategy-2030\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/environment/strategy/biodiversity-strategy-2030_en)) accessed December 22, 2021.  
[a](#) [b](#)
2. EC, 2022, Commission staff working document 'Criteria and guidance for protected areas designations', SWD(2022) 23 final.  
[↵](#)
3. EEA, ed., 2012, *Protected areas in Europe: an overview*, European Environment Agency [u.a.], Copenhagen.  
[↵](#)
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[↵](#)

6. Dudley, 2008, *Guidelines for applying protected area management categories*, International Union for Conservation of Nature, Gland, Switzerland.  
[↵](#)
7. 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.  
[a](#) [b](#)
8. EC, 2022, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the monitoring framework for the 8th Environment Action Programme: measuring progress towards the attainment of the programme's 2030 and 2050 priority objectives, COM (2022) 357 final of 26 July 2022.  
[a](#) [b](#)