

The Natura 2000 protected areas network

## Management effectiveness in the EU's Natura 2000 network of protected areas



The strategic plan of the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) for the period 2011-2020 is coming to an end. During this time, the EU has been delivering on the CBD via its own biodiversity strategy. In preparation of a new global strategic framework, the management effectiveness of European protected areas needs to be improved. The new EU biodiversity strategy for 2030 commits to 'Effectively manage all protected areas, defining clear conservation objectives and measures, and monitoring them appropriately' by 2030 (EC, 2020). This briefing shows that to improve management effectiveness, complete implementation on the EU Birds and Habitats Directives is essential. It also brings together results from a study into options for reporting, collating and assessing protected area management effectiveness with a view to informing the new global strategic framework.

# Key messages

- As designation of the EU's Natura 2000 network of protected areas is progressing, its next major implementation challenge will be to increase the effectiveness of its management. The EU Biodiversity Strategy's commitment to effectively manage all protected areas by 2030 offers momentum to rise to this challenge.
- The EU is committed to assessing the protected area management effectiveness (PAME) of 60 % of its protected area by 2015<sup>[1]</sup>. However, Member States have so far only reported assessments for less than 8 % of protected areas.
- The implementation of many legal requirements under the EU Nature Directives directly or indirectly delivers on what established PAME guidance identifies as critical pre-conditions for effective management. Full and effective implementation and enforcement of the Directives is therefore critical to boost Natura 2000 management effectiveness.
- Making progress on the EU's 2030 commitments will need substantial monitoring and reporting through either an EU-coordinated process or compilation of national reporting.
- Member State authorities and stakeholders could do more to meet the standards set out in EU guidance on management planning, such as setting conservation objectives, establishing conservation measures and integrating dedicated site and other relevant management plans.
- Existing management effectiveness standards are insufficiently known and understood among practitioners. To address this, more targeted capacity building and better EU guidance on managing management effectiveness are needed.
- Member States could better use EU funding to fill the investment gap on Natura 2000 management effectiveness by setting out prioritised action frameworks (PAFs) for Natura 2000 and through programming EU and national funding.

To inform preparation of a new strategic framework, this briefing brings together some of the results from the study developed by the EEA in cooperation with the Institute for European Environmental Policy (IEEP), the UN Environment Programme World Conservation Monitoring Centre (UNEP-

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WCMC) and Trinomics. The study is a preliminary report to inform future, more in-depth analyses of options for reporting, collating and assessing protected area management effectiveness (PAME) more effectively at EU and global levels. It further examines the following:

- information on PAME assessment methods and guidance
- the state of play of Natura 2000 implementation measured against key assessment criteria
- ways in which EU cooperation could increase and improve PAME assessment
- short-term recommendations on how this can be done in practice.

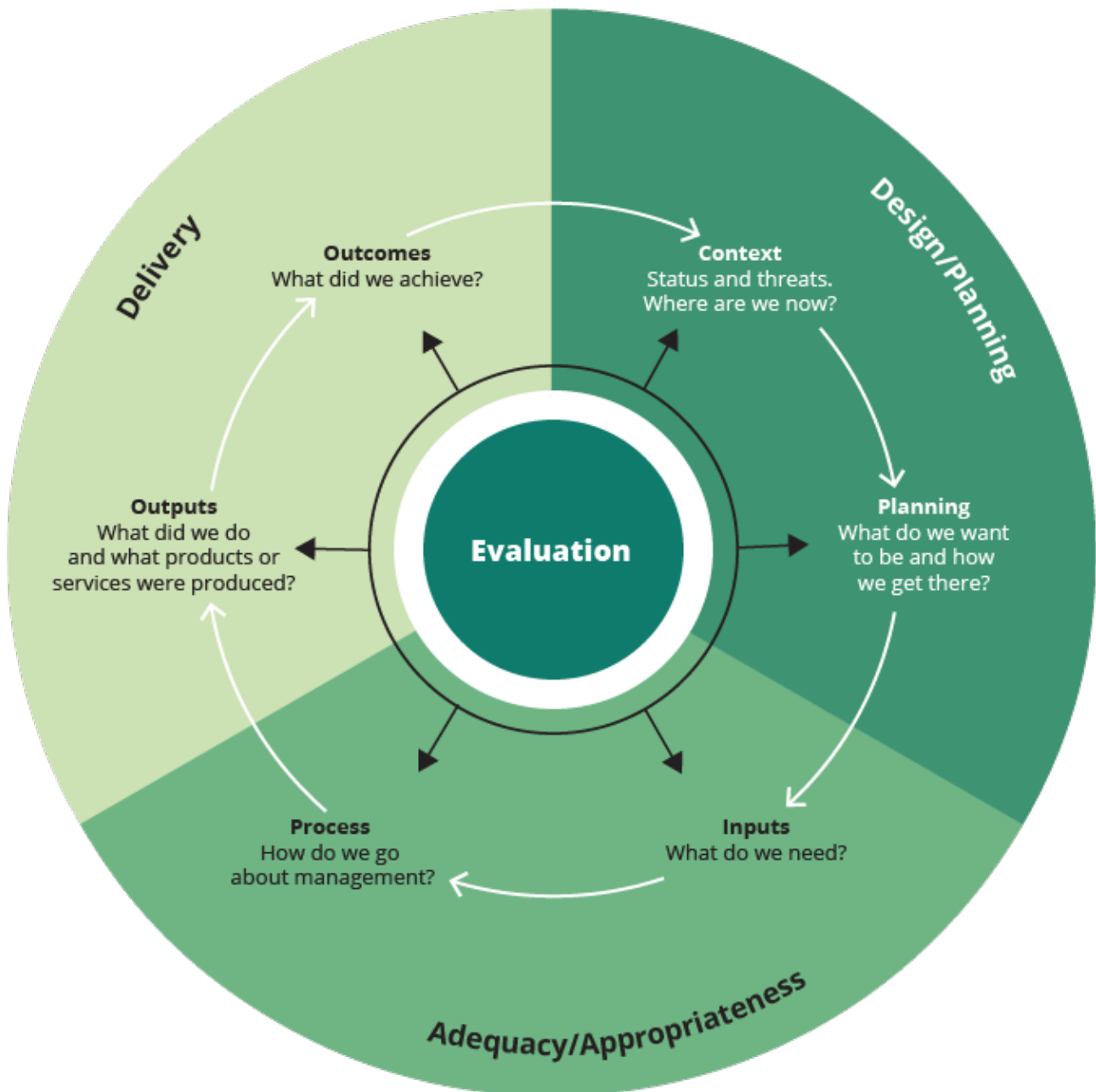
The study consisted of a literature review, a questionnaire among members of the Eionet National Reference Centres for Biological Diversity (NRC BD) and Land Use and Spatial Planning (NRC-LUSP) and country case studies for Finland, France, Ireland, the Netherlands and Slovakia. The study identified key strengths and weaknesses of current management approaches against established guidance on PAME. These findings informed key recommendations on how to further improve Natura 2000 effectiveness in the years to come.

## Framework for assessing management effectiveness of protected areas in the EU

Methodologies for PAME assessments are well established in the EU and follow the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) World Commission on Protected Areas (WCPA) management effectiveness framework (Figure 1)<sup>[2]</sup>. This study demonstrated that most approaches focus on the early stages of the protected area management cycle (e.g. planning) rather than on actual conservation outcomes.

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Figure 1. The IUCN WCPA framework for assessing management effectiveness of protected areas



Source: Hockings et al., 2006.

A range of methodologies are currently used by EU Member States to assess effectiveness. However, only a relatively small share of Natura 2000 sites has been assessed at least once. Fifteen Member States report repeat assessments and usually only for a small number of sites. The EU and

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its Member States, as parties to the CBD, committed to assessing the management effectiveness of 60 % of the total area of protected areas by 2015. The Global Database on Protected Area Management Effectiveness (GD-PAME) reports that only 7.6 % of the recorded protected areas in the EU have been assessed.

There are significant differences in the number of sites assessed between EU Member States. Although the findings show significant underreporting, they suggest that the EU is well off its global target. Meeting that target will require an increased uptake of and reporting on the assessment.

## State of play of management effectiveness of protected areas in the EU

The study confirmed the findings of earlier evaluations that the full and timely implementation of the nature directives would have resulted in more effective management. This includes adherence to standards set out in European Commission guidance, which would have also helped deliver on many of the key PAME criteria. Preliminary reporting under the EU Nature Directives further indicates that none of the five analysed Member States show significant increases in the proportion of habitats and species with a Favourable Conservation Status. It demonstrates the significant improvements in management effectiveness required to capitalise on recent progress made on planning and process. Despite recent efforts to improve monitoring and evaluation of PAME in some Member States, including for Natura 2000 sites, this appears to be at a preliminary stage. A fundamental problem is that site-specific conservation objectives have not been set for some sites and many are insufficiently specific and measurable. Other deficiencies include:

- a lack of identified or established management objectives and measures, including monitoring systems
- gaps in knowledge and monitoring of key conservation values (i.e. the habitats and species for which the site is designated) and threats/pressures
- inadequate investment in the capacity of management authorities and in practical site management.

The study demonstrates that improving standards in site management planning and the implementation and evaluation of these remain a significant challenge for many EU Member States.

As the nature directives are similar to framework directives and are not highly prescriptive, most key PAME criteria are at least partly left to the discretion of competent national or regional authorities and site managers. For some criteria, in relation to governance, transparency and public participation, the nature directives hardly include specific legal requirements. As a result, critical information on Natura 2000 site management, which is important to assess the underlying drivers of conservation success or failure, is currently not reported.

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Even in those Member States that have well-established systems for assessing management effectiveness in Natura 2000, such information is often not available. Two of the countries analysed do not have an overview of the sites that have management plans in place. Questionnaire respondents indicated that a lack of capacity —in terms of both knowledge and staff time — is a key barrier to systematic Natura 2000 management monitoring and assessment. The investment needed to overcome this barrier should therefore be reflected in prioritised action frameworks (PAFs) and integrated into EU and national investment programmes and decisions.

The findings identified different approaches to improving management effectiveness. These had varying levels of ambition, both between and within Member States. Persistent bottlenecks to inform and evaluate effective management design and planning include:

- a lack of knowledge of ecological requirements and pressures affecting habitats and species
- an absence of smart objectives and measures
- a lack of public participation
- poor financial planning.

Only two of the five Member States studied in detail have established management plans for all (France) or nearly all (the Netherlands) Natura 2000 sites in their territory. For two Member States (Finland, Ireland), information on the number of sites with management plans was not readily available. This illustrates a lack of transparency on rudimentary information for assessing management effectiveness. Despite these challenges, the case studies also showed innovative approaches to overcoming them. Examples are the integration of public participation in Finland and France, and successful efforts to increase the effectiveness of agricultural nature management in Ireland and the Netherlands.

All five Member States studied show significant variation in evaluation and assessment of management effectiveness:

- In Finland, a standardised assessment is undertaken for all protected areas by the national agency responsible for management, albeit only once every 6-12 years.
- In France, the site steering committees are responsible for periodic evaluations of management effectiveness but lack the tools to do so, which has recently triggered a national programme to help fill this gap.
- The Netherlands Provinces have largely outsourced management assessment to site managers, agricultural collectives and external consultants as part of the implementation of the Dutch nature subsidy scheme, which allows for annual adjustments.
- Ireland and Slovakia do not have national approaches to the assessment of management effectiveness.

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The findings from the five countries suggest that significant steps will have to be made in tracking management and the assessment of its effectiveness, in particular on process indicators in addition to ecological indicators.

Management measures and their effectiveness are constrained to some extent in most Natura 2000 sites. In particular, most sites are under some form of human use, such as for agriculture, forestry, water resources, fisheries and recreation. Sites can also have other management objectives, for example, flood management. Therefore, although Natura 2000 site management plans are important for such sites and need to take into account other sectoral objectives, plans focused on specific human uses may be of equal or greater importance in practice. This is, for example, the case with forest management plans, fisheries management plans and rural development plans.

Even though site-level management in some countries (the Netherlands and France) is evaluated as sufficient, ecological objectives are not met because of pressures coming from outside the sites, e.g. nitrogen pollution through air and water or human-induced changes to hydrological regimes. Therefore, complementary broad environmental measures across the wider environment remain important to meet conservation objectives, for example through implementation of the Water Framework Directive and National Emission Ceilings Directive.

On-site management cannot deal with all key pressures and threats to Natura 2000 objectives (e.g. pollution and hydrological change). However, improving management effectiveness will also require the implementation of policies critical to ensuring environmental baseline conditions, but this is beyond the scope of this study. Particularly important are the EU Water Framework Directive, Marine Strategy Framework Directive and air policy, and their integration into agriculture and forest policies.

## **Options for better management effectiveness for Natura 2000**

The study compared assessment criteria for the IUCN Green List of Protected and Conserved Areas (GLPCA) against requirements under the nature directives. This shows that there are significant overlaps, in particular in management design and planning. It demonstrates that fuller and more timely implementation of the nature directives would make an important contribution to achieving management effectiveness in Natura 2000 sites. However, the comparison also highlights gaps, for example in requirements for good governance, such as stakeholder participation, and in demonstrating successful conservation outcomes at site level. Greater use of standardised PAME assessment tools, such as the GLPCA, in Natura 2000 sites could therefore provide invaluable insights to enhance the network's effectiveness.

Practitioners who responded to the questionnaire for this study welcome a stronger, common focus on Natura 2000 management effectiveness. They raised concerns over the suitability of current EU reporting tools for capturing management effectiveness at site level and current capacity gaps for

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implementing more systematic and detailed PAME assessments. The questionnaire and case studies identified common challenges to management effectiveness. Based on this, the study investigated which GLPCA indicators would be most relevant to explore in order to better monitor and report on Natura 2000 management effectiveness. These are mostly those assessing:

- governance vitality and capacity to respond adaptively
- the availability of long-term management strategies
- the management of threats
- the measurement and demonstration of the conservation of associated ecosystem services and cultural values.

The GLPCA set of indicators is peer reviewed and provides the most comprehensive and up-to-date approach based on established systems. Applying it systematically at site level would therefore certainly improve insight into Natura 2000 management effectiveness. Of the 50 indicators, 25 do not currently explicitly adhere to the requirements of the nature directives. More importantly, using the GLPCA approach in each Natura 2000 site would require significant resources. Some respondents to the questionnaire indicated that such resources are currently not available for many sites. However, to obtain a better insight on progress in terms of implementation and common barriers to and opportunities for improving effectiveness, the analysis identified eight criteria that are the most relevant to report on. These are outlined in Table 1.



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**Table 1. Proposed GLPCA criteria and indicators for improving measurement of Natura 2000 management effectiveness**

Component/Criterion	Indicator	BHD requirement
<b>Good governance</b> (Vitality and capacity to respond adaptively)	Procedures are in place to ensure that results from monitoring, evaluation and consultation are used to inform management and planning processes, including establishing goals and objectives	Yes
<b>Good governance</b> (Vitality and capacity to respond adaptively)	Planning and decision-making recognise relevant conditions, issues and goals at national and regional scales that affect the protected area	Yes
<b>Effective management</b> (Long-term management strategy)	The site demonstrates that management activities and policies and/or legislation and regulations are being implemented and are consistent with the management plan (or equivalent)	Yes
<b>Effective management</b> (Long-term management strategy)	The site has adequate numbers of appropriately trained staff provided by the responsible entity and properly supervised to implement all aspects of its management plan or equivalent in the long term	No
<b>Effective management</b> (Long-term management strategy)	Financial constraints are not threatening the capacity of management to achieve the site's objectives	No
<b>Effective management</b> (Manage threats)	The site management is implementing a work programme that identifies effective responses to each of the major pressures and threats to target habitat types and species and the ecological coherence of the site, as well as other major site values	Yes
<b>Effective management</b> (Measure success and impact)	A threshold level has been specified for each set of performance measures relating to natural values that, if achieved, demonstrate objectively that the associated major site value is being successfully conserved. Threshold determination can include the assessment of conservation impact based on change in major values over a specified period compared with those anticipated without the protected and conserved area	Yes
<b>Conservation outcomes</b> (Demonstrate conservation of natural values)	The site meets or exceeds (agreed) performance thresholds for the conservation of major natural values	No

**Note:** BHD, Birds and Habitat Directives.

**Source:** Prepared for this study.

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# Potential ways forward to improve management effectiveness in Natura 2000 sites

### Improve strategic enforcement of EU legal requirements

Key EU legal requirements relevant to Natura 2000 effectiveness need more transparent and strategic enforcement. This can, for example, be done through an enhanced environmental implementation review process, with more binding and time-bound commitments. This could be supported by more proactive approaches at national and/or regional levels to speed up implementation and enforcement, for example through national courts and courts of auditors. Examples of requirements are the establishment of conservation objectives (Habitats Directive, Article 4) and conservation measures (Article 6.1) and meeting environmental objectives in water-dependent protected areas (Article 4(c) of the EU Water Framework Directive).

Relevant strategies and investment programming by public authorities at all levels need biodiversity-proofing to prevent perverse incentives to achieving Natura 2000 objectives. Examples of these are the intensification of agriculture and forestry, unsustainable renewable energy development and infrastructure development for urbanisation or transport.

Natura 2000 management requirements should be integrated into other relevant sectoral plans between relevant authorities and stakeholders, for example forest management plans, fisheries management plans and rural development plans.

### Improve implementation, evaluation and reporting

The European Commission and Member States should step up efforts to:

- meet CBD targets for PAME assessment
- annually review progress in the Co-ordination Group on Biodiversity and Nature (CGBN)
- actively encourage and invest in the use of established management effectiveness assessments methods (e.g. with funding from the LIFE programme).

Identifying measures in management plans for all Natura 2000 sites should urgently be prioritised. This includes ensuring more transparent and regular interim evaluation of their implementation, in particular for sites where established management measures do not adhere to the standards set in EU guidance.

The European Commission and Member States should share targeted knowledge on assessing and evaluating management effectiveness that focuses more strongly on conservation outcomes. This could be done through a biogeographical process but it can also be done at a more operational level

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in the regions, perhaps with support of the European Committee of the Regions and networks of local authorities where relevant.

The European Commission and Member States should strengthen EU cooperation on better, earlier, more frequent and bottom-up stakeholder participation in and training on management effectiveness. This can, for example, be done using the EU's Biodiversity Information System for Europe (BISE) and biogeographical seminars. More practical peer-to-peer exchanges between regional authorities and site managers are also an option.

The Commission should explore ways to positively and proactively highlight best practice in improving management effectiveness, for example by introducing a new Natura 2000 Award category for projects that made a large contribution to improving PAME.

The European Commission and Member States should explore improving current Natura 2000 reporting on management effectiveness in a cost-effective way. In particular, this should consider criteria that track the following for each Natura 2000 site:

1. Established conservation objectives have been adopted and for what proportion of features.
2. Management requirements and measures have been identified.
3. Management measures are in place (e.g. under management agreement).
4. Investment needs are met.
5. PAME assessment is undertaken.

This information could be included in the site management section of the standard data form and updated annually by competent authorities.

## **Improve financing**

The European Commission and Member States should fill the investment gap for management to ensure adequate resources are available for planning, processing and delivering as well as for evaluation and assessment. Future templates for the Natura 2000 PAFs could include a funding requirement for assessing management effectiveness. Member States should use available opportunities for integrated funding under the agreed new Multi-annual Financial Framework.

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## Footnotes

1 CBD Decision: COP 10 Decision X/31.

2 The IUCN WCPA broad framework provides a design that can be used to create site-specific and region-specific assessment methodologies: the so-called PAME tools.

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