



EU Biodiversity Strategy: Putting people and nature at the heart of restoration

IEEP's first impressions of the EU's new biodiversity strategy to 2030

With a human-centric approach, the EU's new biodiversity strategy focuses squarely on the societal challenges of fighting and adapting to climate change and improving human health, including protection from future pandemics. During this time of uncertainty, it is refreshing that the European Commission has stood by the vision outlined in its Green Deal communication, write IEEP's biodiversity researchers in response to the announcement of the EU's next biodiversity strategy.

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Authors:

Erik Gerritsen
Lisa Kopsieker
Evelyn Underwood
Graham Tucker

The EU biodiversity strategy to 2030 is an ambitious, constructive and coherent strategy that delivers on the commitment from the EU and its Member States, as parties to the [UN Convention on Biological Diversity](#), to protect the living world and implement national strategies and action plans to achieve it.

To transform words into reality, it will be important to build on existing evidence of effective implementation. This will require more concrete agreements on:

- o measures that will deliver EU-level impacts and meeting their capacity needs;
- o how to further mainstream biodiversity with other policy objectives and the governance arrangements that will ensure delivery.

At first glance: A welcome focus on benefits for society

The new strategy's headline objectives place a much stronger emphasis on the importance of biodiversity for human wellbeing and development. This shifts the focus from averting degradation of ecosystems and the loss of biodiversity towards actual restoration. The strategy focuses squarely on the societal challenges of fighting and adapting to climate change and improving human health, including protection from future pandemics.

These changes correspond to our principal [Think2030](#) recommendation from 2018, when we said that the new biodiversity strategy should better reflect the value of biodiversity and ecosystems to society, to build a movement strong enough to achieve the transformational change required.

The strategy intends to work in tandem with the other key EU Green Deal pillars such as the Climate Law, Circular Economy Action Plan and the Farm to Fork Strategy. In this human-centric approach, it is vital to recognise that without drastic action to reduce the EU's ecological footprint, the strategy's headline commitment to put biodiversity on a path to recovery is highly unlikely to be achieved.

By presenting the Farm to Fork strategy on the same day as the EU biodiversity strategy, the Commission sends a strong political signal to the EU Member States and stakeholders to overcome the silo approaches that frustrated the implementation of previous strategies and action plans.

The Common Agricultural Policy is one of the most important implementation tools to ensure biodiversity delivery within the EU. In the future CAP, Member States should ensure their CAP plans are more aligned with biodiversity priorities than at present.

The Farm to Fork strategy will guide the Member States' implementation decisions and should ensure that the CAP delivers on the identified needs and priorities for biodiversity while encouraging a greater focus on sustainability and parity between objectives on rural land (see IEEP's [early assessment of the Farm to Fork Strategy](#)).

With the biodiversity strategy, the Commission sends a strong political signal to overcome silo approaches

Protected areas: Global leadership and management challenges at home

In line with the ongoing negotiations on a new global deal for nature at the [postponed CBD COP15](#), the EU Strategy commits to increase the EU's protected area network to represent 30% of both land and sea by 2030.

While some may question whether this is sufficient, it is worth remembering that the EU's existing Natura 2000 network already covers 18% of the EU's terrestrial and almost 10% of its marine surfaces. When Member States' nationally designated sites are added, the estimated protected area coverage is 26%.

While the proposed target for the EU may only add 4% to the land under protection, at sea this will be no less than 19%, as the current Natura 2000 marine coverage is only 10%.

Evidence collected by IEEP over many years demonstrates how [marine protected areas make good socio-economic sense](#), and the European Parliament and Council should embrace the Commission's ambition and provide a boost to the blue economy.

Secondly, the strategy commits to significantly increase the share of strictly protected areas from 3% on land and 1% at sea to 10% for both by 2030. This is a welcome proposal since protected areas in the EU currently fail to protect irreplaceable biodiversity, for example, in old-growth forest and cold-water coral reefs.

From a user perspective, however, this proposal can be interpreted as going beyond the EU's current Natura 2000 approach, which recognises that biodiversity protection may in certain cases require the maintenance – or indeed the encouragement – of human activities.

With privately-owned land making up more than half of the terrestrial network, and most of the marine network currently open to fishing, this approach remains critical to reconciling protecting biodiversity with other interests.

IEEP's [work on drivers of EU nature conservation success](#) demonstrates the importance of strong protected area governance that engages landowners and -users. Where such cooperation is in place, measures taken have allowed nature to bounce back, for example, [the recovery of sea turtle populations](#) in Cyprus.

The European Parliament and Council should embrace the Commission's ambition and provide a boost to the blue economy.

Since stricter protection rules may affect some economic interests more strongly than others, clearly communicating and equitably sharing protected area benefits should remain a priority.

A third and key commitment is to effectively manage all protected areas. As our Think2030 assessment identified, the EU still [faces a large implementation gap](#) to effectively manage its Natura 2000 network.

Although in recent years significant progress was made by Member State authorities in management planning, today almost a third of sites still lack a management plan or equivalent. For many sites, defined conservation objectives and measures do not yet meet the agreed EU standards, often because of a lack of basic knowledge on conservation values and needs.

Improving the uptake, quality, and delivery of management plans is what is most urgently needed for existing protected areas to deliver their full potential. For this to work, the Commission and the Member States must work together to ensure sufficient human and financial resources are available to plan, implement, evaluate and enforce local-level conservation efforts.

Restoration plan: Big potential to deliver benefits

The Commission's proposal for a new EU Restoration Plan, with binding targets to restore healthy and resilient ecosystems, promises to significantly improve the condition of ecosystems across the EU.

With restoration needs in urban, forest, agriculture, marine and freshwater environments, it will be important to prioritise on an EU perspective. According to the Commission's [recent guidance on EU-level green and blue infrastructure](#), these are multifunctional, strategic, large-scale projects with an EU impact that contribute to the goals of the EU Nature Directives.

The new Prioritised Action Frameworks (PAFs) present a foundation for prioritisation, identifying the funding needs for the Natura 2000 networks as well as green infrastructure in each Member State. By using the PAFs as a basis for prioritising restoration action, the specific targets will become concrete at EU level.

The new Prioritised Action Frameworks present a foundation for prioritisation

As large parts of Europe [experience exceptional drought](#) for the third consecutive year, while others [recover from historic floods](#), the importance of large-scale forest and wetland restoration, cannot be overstated, given its combined adaptation, mitigation and biodiversity benefits.

The strategy's proposed restoration of 25.000 kilometres of free-flowing rivers by 2030 provides a measurable benefit. The large-scale restoration of key

marine and coastal ecosystems, such as seagrass meadows, shellfish reefs and salt marshes, is another proven no-regret strategy.

Restoration on agricultural land in the EU has proven to be more challenging, and a [recent IEEP evaluation](#) demonstrated how the greening of the Common Agricultural Policy has been implemented with an insufficient ambition to meet biodiversity objectives.

The strategy's commitment to dedicate 10% of farmland to high-diversity landscape features aims to correct this and throw a much-needed lifeline to agricultural biodiversity and the critical services it provides such as pollination and pest control.

However, unlike other farm-related objectives in the Biodiversity Strategy, such as on organic agriculture and pesticides, this target does not feature in the Farm to Fork Strategy. This is a missed opportunity and the Commission should ensure this commitment is implemented in agricultural policy – including in the CAP.

As public money can only be spent once, prioritisation by the Commission and the Member States between – and within – these different pillars of the Restoration Plan will be critical.

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Governance is key: No time for passing the buck

By proposing a new biodiversity governance framework, the new strategy recognises the major implementation problems that have hindered progress under the EU's existing strategy. The EU's outgoing biodiversity strategy had six operational targets and 20 actions, many of which were time-bound and supported by legislation and monitoring systems.

Progress was strongest on the targets that were directly linked to the implementation of existing legislation and weakest on those that were not, notably the ecosystem restoration target. Nature and biodiversity officials met several times a year both at the political and administrative level to discuss progress and challenges were raised as part of the EU's Environmental Implementation Review. However, a weak point has often been the lack of engagement of other ministries at the national level.

Given this, it can be argued that a legally binding approach to the biodiversity governance framework is urgently needed unless Member States and other key stakeholders can show greater intrinsic ownership to deliver on agreed objectives.

Additionally, increasing human and financial capacity at local, Member State and EU-level will be critical for an effective governance framework, alongside more clarity on specific sectoral commitments and integration into international target deliveries.

The Commission's press release on the strategy announces that €20 billion will be unlocked annually to implement the strategy, however in the strategy itself this figure only features as a minimum estimate of needs rather than a secured commitment which will have to be clarified.

Lastly, it will be important to further clarify and coordinate the responsibilities across governance structures and involved authorities in follow-up biodiversity action plans.
