



An emerging conservation approach: Other Effective Area-based Conservation Measures

Increasing the amount of land and marine areas managed in ways that conserve nature is a fundamental response to today's rapid decline in biodiversity.

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The new EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030, a core component of the European Green Deal, commits to protect at least 30% of the EU's land and sea by 2030. This is fully in line with proposals for the post-2020 global biodiversity framework. As part of this ambitious target, the strategy includes contributions from other effective area-based conservation measures (OECMs).

The OECM framework is a novel conservation approach which recognises areas that achieve the long term in-situ conservation of biodiversity outside designated protected areas.

The concept was introduced under Target 11 of the Aichi biodiversity targets for 2020 under the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and OECMs are centrally located within the area-based conservation target of the post-2020 global biodiversity framework targets, currently under negotiation. An official definition was adopted in 2018:

"A geographically defined area other than a Protected Area, which is governed and managed in ways that achieve positive and sustained long-term outcomes for the in-situ conservation of biodiversity, with associated ecosystem functions and services and where applicable, cultural, spiritual, socio-economic, and other locally relevant values."

This includes areas where:

- biodiversity protection is not an objective but is achieved as by-product of other objectives (ancillary conservation),
- biodiversity is a secondary objective (secondary conservation), or
- biodiversity protection is a primary objective, but governing authorities cannot or do not wish to report the site as a protected area (primary conservation).

Whether an area falls into one of these categories and can be recognised as an OECM needs to be determined on a case-by-case basis and assessed at the site level (an IUCN methodology is currently being developed). OECMs can address some of the shortfalls of protected areas and can complement existing networks. This helps the mainstreaming of biodiversity conservation in areas under different uses and is likely to play a particular role in helping to maintain connectivity between protected areas.

How can OECMs help to achieve biodiversity conservation in the EU?

The EU already has a large protected area network, with Natura 2000 covering 18% of the EU territory on land and 8% in the marine realm, along with other nationally designated protected areas covering another 8% of land. Additionally, the EU also has a strategy that promotes an ecological network - green infrastructure – linking up and buffering protected areas. In theory, meeting the 30% target on land requires only another 4% addition.

However, the effectiveness of the Natura 2000 network still leaves a lot to be desired, and many scientists believe that 30% is too low to ensure secure maintenance of biodiversity and other ecosystem services. For example, evidence suggests¹ that there is a strong bias in protection, with an overrepresentation of species with a large distribution range and an underrepresentation of species with a narrow distribution range. In Spain, for instance, the Natura 2000 network fails to protect freshwater biodiversity, with only a small proportion of species adequately covered by the network.²

The Natura 2000 network on its own is not enough to protect the species and habitats listed in the Habitats Directive as most have populations and areas of habitat outside Natura 2000 site boundaries. Dry calcareous grasslands are amongst our most species rich and threatened

¹ Gruber B, Evans D, Henle K, Bauch B, Schmeller D, Dziock F, et al. "Mind the gap!"—How well does Natura 2000 cover species of European interest? *Nature Conservation*. 2012;3:45–62.

² Hermoso V, Filipe AF, Seguardo P, Beja P. Effectiveness of a large reserve network in protecting freshwater biodiversity: a test for the Iberian Peninsula. *Freshwater Biology*. 2015;60:698–710.

habitats, but only around half the remaining area is within Natura 2000 sites³. And there is still a need to improve the management effectiveness within Natura 2000 sites - as demonstrated by a [recent scoping study on management effectiveness in Natura 2000](#) prepared by IEEP, UNEP-WCMC and Trinomics.

Therefore, we need to identify, recognise and support additional contributions that are, and can in the future, deliver effective biodiversity conservation. OECMs are a means by which to bring new or existing areas important for biodiversity into conservation planning and support EU targets for biodiversity. Climate change is increasingly driving species to adapt by shifting their range, and they need to be able to move to new protected or conserved areas, emphasizing the importance of ecological connectivity.

To bring OECMs or other non-traditional conservation tools into the EU context will require a more nuanced approach to land use planning that embraces governance diversity and a wider range of management approaches, so long as they deliver effective biodiversity conservation. The OECM concept is still relatively unknown in EU policy and there is an urgent need to provide insight to guide EU Member States about which areas to prioritize and report as OECMs in National Strategies and Action Plans under the CBD and in implementation of the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030.

Does the EU already have a framework for OECMs in place?

IEEP with UNEP-WCMC and Trinomics carried out a [scoping study commissioned by EEA](#) to review the application of the recently established international OECM guidelines in the EU policy context and to identify priorities for future work to implement and report OECMs in the EU. It looked particularly at the potential overlap between measures under some existing EU Directives and OECMs. The study found that some measures under current directives do establish land and water management regimes that fulfil the criteria of an OECM, but that the relationship is not necessarily simple.

For example, there is potential recognition of OECMs under the Water Framework Directive⁴, the Floods Directive⁵ and the Nitrates Directive⁶. The most likely links are with respect to secondary conservation by maintaining good status, and ancillary conservation in areas managed for other reasons e.g., drinking or bathing water. Actions in response to directives that may

³ https://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/natura2000/management/pdf/EUHabitat_ap6210.pdf

⁴ Creates a regulatory framework for the protection of inland surface waters, transitional waters, coastal waters and groundwater, aiming for good ecological and chemical status. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32000L0060>

⁵ Establishes a framework for the assessment and management of flood risks to reduce the negative consequences of flooding on human health, economic activities, the environment and cultural heritage in the European Union. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:32007L0060>

⁶ Aims to protect water quality across Europe by preventing nitrates from agricultural sources polluting ground and surface waters and by promoting the use of good farming practices. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?qid=1561542776070&uri=CELEX:01991L0676-20081211>

create conditions for OECM recognition include nitrate controls, supplementary measures of pollution control, and ecosystem restoration.

OECMs can also be a valuable contribution to achieving the EU's legally binding commitments to good environmental status of marine waters, for example by creating ecological corridors between Marine Protected Areas where fisheries are restricted. More generally, OECMs can create buffer zones around existing Natura 2000 sites to reduce the impacts of external pressures, for example from intensive agriculture.

Existing mechanisms that fund nature conservation beyond protected areas may be another avenue for OECM recognition, notably agri-environment schemes under the Common Agricultural Policy or voluntary sustainability standards and certification schemes, going beyond existing legal requirements.

However, like protected areas, OECMs are supposed to be in place in perpetuity, so that short-term agreements, like seven-year agri-environment agreements, will not be eligible for recognition. Areas under long term agri-environment contracts might qualify as OECMs because the measures contribute to achieving positive and long-term outcomes for biodiversity conservation, with the associated delivery of ecosystem services. Recognising such areas as OECMs, can help capture their contribution towards achieving biodiversity targets and improve the ecological connectivity of the landscape while acknowledging the important role farmers and other landowners can play in conservation.

Environmental labelling and certification schemes may be another potential avenue for OECM recognition where they require areas of land to be set aside for conservation. Other labels (like the EU Ecolabel and the EU organics logo) can provide added value for farmers to prioritise the improvement of ecosystems, especially in regard to soil, which may be an important contribution to an OECM, if long-term conservation results from the management to achieve the certification requirements.

Opportunities and limitations

Since Canada recognised the first OECM, a military training base in a biodiversity-rich area, many others have been recognised worldwide. Although the true extent of OECMs is unknown, the World Database on OECMs ([WD-OECMs](#)) created in 2019 currently lists 506 different areas. However, the concept has not yet been actively engaged with worldwide, with most recognised OECMs located in North America and North Africa.

Our scoping study on OECMs for the EEA shows that OECMs can support the proposed EU targets for 30% of land and water protected by 2030, the EU restoration plan and aspects of the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 and European Green Deal. They also theoretically provide a way of enlarging the conservation landscape with less opposition than typically generated

by creating a new protected area. OECMs recognise existing good management rather than imposing a new form of management.

Most countries are still wrestling with exactly what 'good management' means. Various EU Directives have the potential to promote land and water management that fulfils the criteria of OECMs and could provide Member States with a shortcut to identifying potential OECMs. While this is definitely a useful option, it is not without complications.

Our analysis in Spain and Finland found that the Water Framework Directive and Floods Directive could both help regulate areas that have the potential to meet the OECM criteria. However, assessment of sites against OECM criteria needs to be on a case-by-case basis. It is unlikely that all sites falling under one directive will meet all criteria of an OECM. The appealing notion that directives can translate into OECMs *en masse* will not work. One reason is that Member States differ in the extent that biodiversity conservation is embedded within the implementation of directives. Nor do we know whether recognising OECMs in areas covered by directives will contribute meaningfully to conservation targets. A comparison of such areas with an objective measure of priority conservation value, such as Key Biodiversity Areas, would help to determine their real value and avoid risking time and money in adding another designation to an area of little conservation value.

A standardised methodology to identify OECMs is being developed by IUCN. It starts with initial screening, then seeks agreement from the owners that their lands and waters be recognised as an OECM, and, if this is successful, includes a rigorous assessment against standardised criteria. Key determinants include the state of knowledge about condition of biodiversity. Some information may be available from existing monitoring of directives but identifying OECMs could still be a huge task. Reaching agreement on recognition could be complicated where there are many owners for instance.

Putting greater emphasis on OECMs is not risk-free. They might be seen as an easy alternative to protected areas and, in practice, lead to weaker conservation. Some current protected areas may actually be closer to OECMs, as shown by our analysis in Bulgaria, and this will cause confusion. There are already signs that some governments might "convert" protected areas to OECMs. While this might make sense in certain circumstances, and in theory should make no change to the biodiversity status, it could also indicate a lessening of emphasis on conservation and is not generally recommended.

Furthermore, the OECM framework is new and has not been tested over time. While protected areas and OECMs are supposed to give equivalent protection to biodiversity, we don't know if this will play out in practice. OECMs should conserve biodiversity in perpetuity and are defined by conservation effectiveness rather than management intent. But it is unclear what happens if an area recognised as a meeting the criteria for an OECM subsequently becomes ineffective at conserving biodiversity. Does it automatically cease to be an OECM? Who decides? While

the framework states that OECMs should have transparent monitoring and reporting systems, are they the responsibility of owners, the government or both?

There is an urgent need to raise awareness about the opportunities and limitations of OECMs as a framework for recognising diverse management strategies that result in conservation outcomes in Europe. This could be achieved through a roadmap of activities, at the EU institutional level, EU-wide level (supported by the European Commission) and national level.

A roadmap might include, for instance:

- A comprehensive analysis of the potential of other EU directives to support OECMs,
- Better guidance to opportunities and limitations of recognising land and water managed under various EU directives as OECMs, and
- Adapting and translating guidelines and methodologies for identifying, recognising, supporting and reporting OECMs.

Getting up to speed on the options now is important for anyone interested in European conservation policy.

Conclusions

The OECM framework provides ample opportunity to promote biodiversity conservation in the EU, can complement existing protected areas across landscapes and seascapes and contribute to achieving ambitious conservation targets. Nevertheless, the concept is still new, especially in the EU, and their role needs to be carefully evaluated.

Although existing policy frameworks and area-based funding tools can be a good starting point to identify potential OECMs, it must be determined whether long-term biodiversity conservation can be guaranteed in selected sites. What does “in perpetuity” mean here? How long will farmers have to commit to particular schemes to qualify for OECM recognition? These issues have still to be debated. Further work is needed to comprehend the potential of OECMs as a conservation framework in the EU and to support Member States in identifying and recognising potential sites. Nevertheless, this is a worthwhile undertaking as lessons from around the globe have already shown the value OECMs can bring to effective area-based conservation.

With the European Green Deal setting a new precedence for the integration of nature conservation and sustainability across sectors, this is an opportune time to explore less traditional avenues of area-based conservation that recognise ongoing efforts from many different sectors and capture their contribution towards reaching biodiversity and climate goals at local, national, EU and global levels.

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