

The EU's proposed 'Fitness Check' on nature legislation – potential impacts on nature conservation and the provision of ecosystem services

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Background

With the EU Commission's initiated Regulatory Fitness and Performance Programme (REFIT), the EU nature legislation will undergo a review starting in 2015 (DG Environment 2014). The so-called 'Fitness Check' of Natura 2000 - namely the Birds (2009/147/EC) and the Habitats (92/43/EEC) Directive - will assess whether the regulatory framework in this policy sector is "fit for purpose." The review will mainly focus on several key points such as:

- the implementation and integration successes and problems,
- the costs of implementation and of non-implementation of the legislation,
- opportunities for improving implementation and reducing administrative burden without compromising the integrity of the purpose of the directives,
- the situation of implementation in different EU countries,
- and the views of key stakeholder groups.

While in general, a review of existing legislation is a useful tool for assessment, in the case of Natura 2000, several key EU members - among them Germany, the Netherlands and the UK - have signaled to show an interest in fundamentally questioning the need for nature conservation regulation on the European policy level at all. Especially given the current situation of the UK's EU membership, Natura 2000 legislation is in the risk of becoming a subject for negotiations to maintain the UK's EU membership.

Natura 2000 is the world's largest network of protected sites and comprises about 20% of the European landmass (Bundesamt für Naturschutz 2014). Hence, these sites provide a huge amount of ecosystem services. Aisde from the provisioning services, cultural ecosystem services such as providing recreation opportunities are an important factor to weigh in. Although the TEEB study is aiming at valuation ecosystem services and their benefits, there are no studies on the recreational value of Natura 2000.

Objectives and Research Questions

As the EU Commission will launch a public Internet consultation and other means of stakeholder involvement (DG Environment 2014b) in early 2015, several research needs can be identified that should be addressed during these consultations. While the nature legislations' benefits for nature conservation are quite clear and obvious, there is little information about the benefits from ecosystem services provided by the Natura 2000 network. Because of its extent across Europe, Natura 2000 sites are very likely to produce a high amount of cultural ecosystem services such as providing for recreational opportunities. Hence, a potential rollback on nature legislation could also potentially harm recreation in EU member states. The relationship between Natura 2000 sites, their management and recreational opportunities is not known so far, requiring scientific studies to produce reliable data.

References

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