



European
Commission



BENCHMARKING REPORT

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Environment

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Table of Contents

1 Executive Summary	3
2 Introduction	4
2.1 Natura 2000 – a policy for people, nature and the economy	4
2.2 The Natura 2000 Award – promoting excellence in nature conservation	5
2.3 Identifying good practices: the Benchmarking Report	6
3 The Natura 2000 Award 2020	8
3.1 Applicant statistics	8
3.2 2020 winners	10
4 Synthesis of good practice	13
4.1 Attracting new actors / involving all stakeholders	13
4.2 Planning sound monitoring from the start	17
4.3 Promoting conceptual and technical innovation	20
4.4 Mobilising a wide range of resources	23
4.5 Knowledge sharing and peer exchange	26
4.6 Perseverance	29
5 Outlook	31
6 References	33

1 Executive Summary

The European Natura 2000 Award was launched by the European Commission in 2013. In spite of the extraordinary richness of Europe's nature, the success of the Natura 2000 Network since its establishment by the Habitats Directive over 20 years ago, and the outstanding work conducted to promote the network's objectives, knowledge and understanding of the network among the European public remains relatively limited. The Award aims to change this. Its objectives are to:

- Raise awareness about the Natura 2000 network among the public;
- Recognise excellence in the promotion of the Natura 2000 network and its objectives;
- Recognise excellence in the management of Natura 2000 sites;
- Encourage networking between stakeholders working in Natura 2000 sites; and
- Provide role models to inspire and promote best practice for nature conservation.

Winners are selected for five categories: Conservation, Socio-Economic Benefits, Communication, Reconciling Interests/Perceptions, and Cross-Border Cooperation and Networking. Eligible applications are evaluated according to the five criteria of effectiveness, originality, durability, cost-benefit and replicability by a team of independent experts, resulting in a shortlist approved by the European Commission. The winners are then chosen by a jury consisting of representatives of EU institutions and different organisations active in the field of nature conservation. As of 2015, a public vote decides the winner of a sixth prize: the European Citizens' Award.

In its fifth edition, 2020, the Natura 2000 Award received 85 applications (79 eligible) from 26 Member States plus the UK. As in previous years, by far the largest number of applications was received under the Conservation category, followed by the Communication category. Applications were received from a wide range of actors including NGOs (the largest number of applications), businesses, land users and national, regional and local authorities.

The aim of the Natura 2000 Award Benchmarking Reports is to contribute to the identification, recognition and promotion of good practice in Natura 2000 areas and to support the exchange of innovative ideas between the applicants who submit applications to the Award. It should also act as inspiration for those who plan to submit applications in the future. It is targeted mainly at the Natura 2000 community, including site managers, staff and volunteers of nature conservation NGOs, representatives of land users active in Natura 2000 sites and other local stakeholders. A certain level of knowledge about Natura 2000 is therefore assumed.

This Benchmarking Report is based on an analysis of successful applications in the fifth edition of the Award, particularly - but not exclusively - the Award winners and finalist applications. The report presents a catalogue structured according to six elements of good practice identified using examples taken from the submitted applications. After each element of good practice, the report outlines recommendations aimed particularly at future applicants.

The report highlights the significant amount of expertise, experience and ingenuity being invested in the network by a diverse community of Natura 2000 actors, in order to jointly preserve and make the most of Europe's impressive natural heritage. As demonstrated by the Award applicants, Natura 2000 is one of the great achievements of the European Union.

2 Introduction

Europe boasts an extraordinarily rich biodiversity. The steep climatic and ecological gradients mean that the continent is home to an exceptionally wide range of ecosystems and - as a consequence - an impressive richness of species and habitats.

However, biodiversity in Europe is threatened. Alarming rates of decline in the condition, number or distribution of many habitats and species are being observed and only slow progress towards halting biodiversity loss and restoring ecosystem has been made (EEA 2020).

Biodiversity is important to Europe's citizens for environmental, social and economic reasons. The economic benefits of the Natura 2000 network, such as ecosystem services, water and climate regulation, ecotourism and fuel, fibre and food, have been calculated as providing benefits in the range of €200-300 billion annually (European Union 2013).

The European public agrees that biodiversity is important to them. The latest Eurobarometer Special Survey shows that 63% of respondents think that our health and well-being are based upon nature and biodiversity and 71% recognise the importance of protected sites for protecting endangered animals and plants (Eurobarometer 2018).

2.1 Natura 2000 – a policy for people, nature and the economy

The Natura 2000 network forms the centrepiece of the European Union's efforts to protect biodiversity. The network of around 27 000 terrestrial and marine sites, covering more than 18% of land areas and about 9% of the surrounding seas, consists of areas designated under the 1979 Birds Directive and the 1992 Habitats Directive protecting the most threatened species and habitats. The establishment of the Natura 2000 network has allowed Member States to work together to conserve biodiversity under one legal, reporting and monitoring framework.

Member States' commitments include reporting every six years on the status of protected species and habitats. The results for the 2013-2018 reporting period show that while progress has been made, biodiversity continues to face significant challenges and threats: 81% of habitats and 63% of species under the EU Habitats Directive have a predominantly unfavourable conservation status. The intensification of agricultural activities and the abandonment of extensive management practices are the most common pressure on habitats and species, together with urbanisation. Forestry activities are the main pressure on species while pollution of air, water and soil (particularly from agricultural activities and urbanisation) affects most habitats. Other significant sources of threats identified include the exploitation of species, invasive alien species, pollution and climate change and the physical alteration of water bodies (EEA 2020).

Although the Habitats and Birds Directives were deemed to be "fit for purpose", as concluded by the examination of their performance against the criteria of effectiveness, efficiency, relevance, coherence and EU added value (Milieu et al, 2016), there are barriers to the effective implementation of the two Directives. These include lack of management plans, lack of operational conservation objectives, poor enforcement in certain Member States and insufficient targeted financing.

Key site-level challenges to Natura 2000 faced by actors and managers of the Natura 2000 network (Garstecki et al, 2014) include:

- Insufficient stakeholder participation in site designation and management;
- Conflicting interests of other sectors;
- Poor conservation status of habitats that depend on traditional agricultural practices;

- Lack of habitat connectivity especially in the context of climate change;
- Lack of strategic, adaptive management planning aimed at favourable conservation status;
- Inconsistent on-the-ground monitoring of conservation status;
- Weak social consensus to support conservation of Natura 2000 sites;
- Lack of resources for effective management of Natura 2000 sites; and
- Marine Natura 2000 network not fully in place.

The European Commission's "Action Plan: for nature, people and the economy" (European Commission 2017) aimed to address these issues. The action plan sets four priority axes to address the obstacles faced in fully implementing the Natura 2000 network. This included improving guidance to Member States, engaging stakeholders, increasing financing and engaging the general public. The Natura 2000 Award is particularly aimed at recognising the activities of stakeholders as well as engaging a wider group including to an extent the general public through encouraging voting for projects through the citizens' award.

The new EU Biodiversity Strategy to 2030 (European Commission 2020) recognises the importance of protected areas for the safeguard of EU's species and habitats and builds on the existing Natura 2000 framework. In particular, it aims to establish a larger EU network of protected areas including strictly protected areas and put in place an EU restoration plan to restore degraded ecosystems. The engagement of stakeholders with an impact on Natura 2000 management as well as the general public, remains a key priority.

2.2 The Natura 2000 Award – promoting excellence in nature conservation

The Natura 2000 Award recognises excellence in the management of Natura 2000 sites, in conservation achievements and other efforts such as communication when directly related to the Natura 2000 conservation objectives. Anyone directly involved in the management of Natura 2000 or associated initiatives can apply. Awards are presented in five categories (Conservation, Communication, Socio-Economic Benefits, Reconciling Interests/Perception and Cross-Border Collaboration and Networking). Finalists are selected through an impartial evaluation of all applications (see the [Award Guidance](#) for more information on the evaluation criteria) and the winners are chosen by a high-level jury. Since 2015, a sixth prize is awarded to the finalist receiving the highest number of votes from the public.

The Natura 2000 Award aims to **raise awareness about Natura 2000** amongst a wider stakeholder group including the general public. The Eurobarometer repeat surveys show that while there has been a decrease in the number of people who have never heard the term "Natura 2000", public understanding across the EU as a whole still remains relatively low. This is however extremely variable between countries. Additionally, even if not familiar with the term "Natura 2000", the public recognises the value of protected sites, with 71% of respondents believing in its importance for protecting endangered animals and plants (Eurobarometer 2018). The public vote in particular aims to build on the generally positive views of protected sites which the public has, and increase the recognition of the term "Natura 2000".

The Award also aims to **recognise excellence in the management and promotion of Natura 2000 and provide role models**. The activities highlighted by the Award, particularly those of the finalists and winners, should demonstrate good practice and allow those working on Natura 2000 sites to learn from one another. The publicising of these activities through the Award should help to highlight good practice; this report also summarises both innovative as well as common aspects between applications.

Linked to the above point, the Award also aims to **encourage networking** between those working on Natura 2000 sites. The Award ceremony itself as well as, for the first time in 2018, a networking event for the finalists prior to the ceremony, ensure that finalists can meet face to face and discuss their activities with one another. This was more challenging for the 2020 Award ceremony which took place during the Covid-19 public health crisis. The finalists were brought together in small online groups before the online ceremony, but face-to-face networking could not take place.

The above objectives also highlight some of the **benefits to those applying for an Award**. In addition to opportunities to network and learn from one another, all finalists are promoted by the European Commission and receive support in promoting their own activities. Winners additionally receive a small financial contribution to support their work, as well as help in organising an event on a Natura 2000 site to which European Commission officials participate and discuss the winners' activities with local decision-makers and stakeholders.

2.3 Identifying good practices: the Benchmarking Report

The Benchmarking Report aims to identify good practice from all the applications received by the Natura 2000 Award, to act as an inspiration for future applicants and anyone working on Natura 2000. It summarises and analyses the experiences described by the applicants and extracts the most useful elements of good practice.

The 2020 Benchmarking Report is based on experiences from the last five editions of the Natura 2000 Award though the catalogue of good practice itself is based on the 2020 edition applications. Reports from the previous Award editions are available here: [2014](#), [2015](#), [2016](#) and [2018](#).

The core part of the Benchmarking Report 2020 is a synthesis of six key elements of good practice. These were derived from a stepwise analysis of the factors that made the successful submissions to the Award scheme stand out during the evaluation process (a detailed methodology was developed and is described in Garstecki et al. (2015)). The most relevant elements have varied from year to year depending on the application type. Not all of these elements of good practice are equally relevant to all Award categories and selection criteria. However, most of them can be regarded as general attributes of good practice in the Natura 2000 context.

The 2020 elements of good practice discussed in Section 5 below are the following:

1. Attracting new actors / involving all stakeholders
2. Planning sound monitoring from the start
3. Promoting conceptual and technical innovation
4. Mobilising a wide range of resources
5. Knowledge sharing and peer exchange
6. Perseverance

Each chapter starts with a short summary of how the respective elements of good practice were relevant to the submissions to the 2020 Award, and what differences there were compared to previous years. Examples from the submissions are given, but they are not exhaustive; indeed, the finalist applications generally demonstrate multiple good practices and some could be said to be good examples for all six elements.

Following the description of each element of good practice, suggestions or recommendations for future applicants are highlighted in a box. This allows applicants to go directly to the recommendations and read the longer text providing examples for the areas which are particularly relevant to their activities.

The report concludes with an Outlook section (Section 5) which addresses the use of the report's findings, and a number of thematic and geographic areas where there may be room for further development in future rounds of the Award.

3 The Natura 2000 Award 2020

3.1 Applicant statistics

The 2020 Natura 2000 Award received 85 applications (compared to 80, 83, 93, and 163 applications respectively in 2018, 2016, 2015 and 2014) from 26 Member States plus the UK (respectively 27, 20, 24 and 26 Member States in 2018, 2016, 2015 and 2014). Figure 1 shows the submitting Member States of applications from 2014 - 2020.

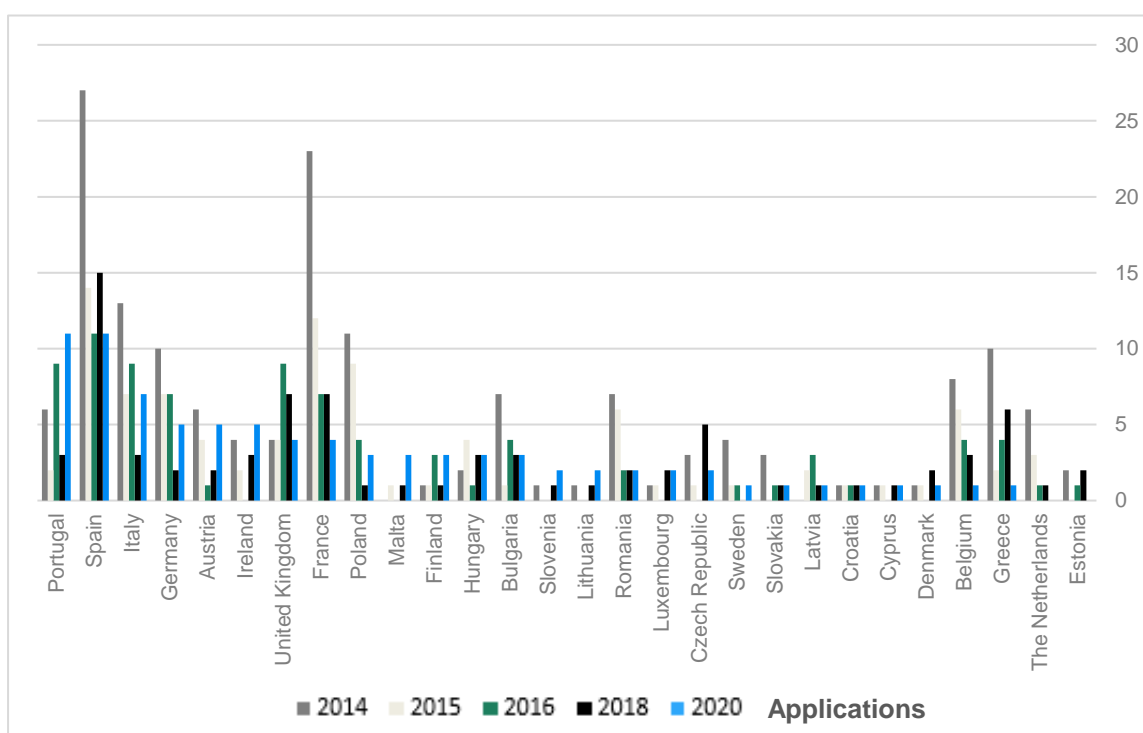


Figure 1. Number of applications per Member State

The relative number of applications reflects awareness raising and awareness about Natura 2000 in the country as well as, to an extent, the size of the country.

With regard to the Award categories, as in previous Award rounds, by far the greatest number of applications was received under the Conservation category, followed by Communication. Reconciling Interests/Perceptions, Cross-Border Cooperation and Networking and Socio-Economic Benefits (Table 1) received fewer applications. While the numbers of applications received remained low in these categories, a sufficient number of high-quality applications was submitted.

Category	2014	2015	2016	2018	2020
Conservation	58	40	32	35	42
Communication	49	27	21	21	15
Reconciling Interests/Perceptions	38	6	12	8	11
Socio-Economic Benefits	8	9	11	11	10
Cross-Border Cooperation and Networking	10	11	7	5	7

Table 1. Number of applications per category

In 2020, as in 2018, 2015 and 2016, applicants were asked to categorise their organisation when registering on the Award website. In every year, environmental NGOs were by far the

biggest group (Fig. 2). National, regional and local authorities are also well represented. This suggests that the Award may be best known amongst these categories of applicants. Fewer applicants identified themselves as resource users such as farmers or hunters. However, it should be noted that the graph only identifies the main applicants. Other actors may be included as partners and may thus be involved in and well aware of the Award. Overall, 36 out of the 85 applications in 2020 listed partners (between 1 to 17). The total number amounted to 156 partners, of which 25 were stated to be joint-lead partners.

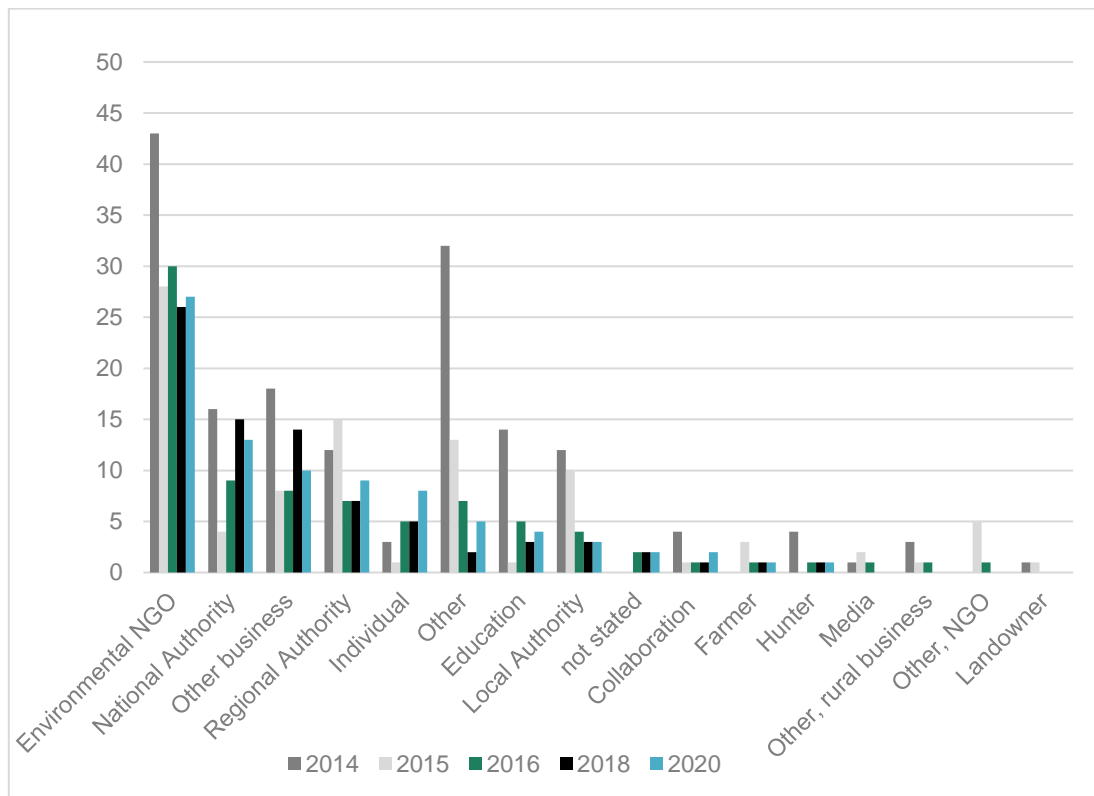


Figure 2. Type of applicant 2014-20. Applicants selected from the categories listed. NB: Other NGO = NGO where environment is not the main focus; Other rural business = not farmer or landowner; Other business = not rural business; Other = range of different applicants not always further defined. In 2014, this information was not included in the application form so results are not directly comparable; applicants were allocated categories by the Award Secretariat.

The overview of actors involved in the applications is similar to and reinforces the general trends identified in previous editions of the awards:

- Diversity:** The diversity of applicants ranged from site administrations through various businesses to art groups. This reflects the wide range of actors and stakeholders who support - in one way or another - the management and promotion of Natura 2000 sites, and highlights once more the considerable social capital that is already invested in this network.
- Important role of NGOs:** The 2020 Award highlighted that, within the wider spectrum of actors, civil society plays an indispensable role for nature conservation and sustainable development of Natura 2000 sites. NGOs often catalyse innovative solutions that are then also taken up by state institutions, and bring together other stakeholders

such as site administrations, land owners, resource users and academic institutions for collaborative conservation initiatives.

- **Importance of consortia:** While each application is submitted by one lead applicant, many involve a wide range of partners. Consortia of different types of institutions (such as site managers and academia, or NGOs and resource users) contributed some of the most innovative applications in all five years of the Award. This may have to do with the fact that entering consortia helped individual actors to overcome narrow perceptions and open their mind to unconventional and more challenging intervention strategies.
- **Emerging actors:** All five editions of the Award highlighted the growing importance of emerging categories of actors. Landowners, natural resource users (e.g., hunters and fishermen), business companies and schools cannot any longer really be considered as emerging actors, even if their representation each year is variable. On the other hand, faith-based organisations, banking institutions, the military, sports clubs and especially artists engaging in Natura 2000 efforts are becoming increasingly important as more unusual applicants.
- **Dedicated funding:** The applications submitted were also diverse in terms of their funding sources. Throughout the five editions, a significant number of them were EU-funded LIFE+/LIFE projects, demonstrating the high importance of this funding programme for management of Natura 2000 sites. However, other donor- and state-funded activities, use of corporate social responsibility (CSR) funding by businesses, and the engagement of volunteers to carry out key activities were also noted.

3.2 2020 winners

The winners of the Natura 2000 Award 2020 are presented briefly below:



Category: [Conservation](#)

The Finnish Ministry of the Environment and the Finnish Environment Institute (SYKE) conducted an extensive marine inventory; the 150,000 spatial observations of habitats and species collected were pivotal to the confirmation of important marine protected areas but also for the designation of new ones and their management.



EAU LA LA !!!
C'EST BEAU LA MER

LES **BEAUX GESTES**
QUI PROTÈGENT

Ar jestroù brav evit an endro

Category: [Communication](#)

Lannion-Trégor Communauté, Guingamp-Paimpol Agglomération and PÉTR du Pays de Guingamp (France) launched a successful and innovative campaign aimed at boaters to raise awareness about good boating practices and the possible environmental consequences of their activities on protected habitats and species.



Category: [Reconciling interests/perceptions](#)

Agentschap voor Natuur en Bos, De Vlaamse Waterweg, Gemeente Kruibeke and vzw Kruibeeks Natuurbehoud (Belgium) created enthusiasm and acceptance for a project involving the expropriation and re-naturalisation of flood-prone land. The project was initially highly criticised by the local population and the municipality. The area is now regarded as a tourist asset, providing additional income and jobs.



Category: [Socio-economic benefits](#)

The Fundación para la Conservación del Quebrantahuesos in Spain created a special certification brand, Pro-Biodiversidad (Pro-Biodiversity), to support the extensive sheep sector, halt rural abandonment and improve conditions for biodiversity, notably scavenger birds. The brand has met great success, with four important commercial agreements signed since 2017.



Category: [Cross-Border Cooperation and Networking](#)

The Nature Conservation Agency of the Czech Republic, with partners in Romania, Austria, Hungary, Slovakia, and Ukraine organised an interdisciplinary cooperation addressing landscape fragmentation in the Carpathian Mountains. They developed common methodologies for monitoring wildlife-related traffic collisions, created safer road and rail transport solutions for wildlife and produced “Guidelines for Wildlife and Traffic in the Carpathians”.



Category: [Citizen Award](#)

The Executive Forest Agency (EFA), the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Forestry, Bulgaria, WWF Bulgaria, the Association of Parks in Bulgaria and the Balkani Wildlife Society helped to reconcile conflicting interests over the designation of forest-related Natura 2000 sites. The final list of sites was agreed among interested stakeholders and it resulted in an additional 109,300 ha of old growth forests being designated for protection and excluded from harvesting.

The winning applications were of high quality and many of them represent several, if not all elements of good practice. In the next section, applications are selected to demonstrate the aspects of good practice.

4 Synthesis of good practice

The catalogue of six key elements of good practice were derived from a stepwise analysis of the factors that made the successful submissions to the Award scheme stand out during the evaluation process (see Garstecki et al. (2015) for the methodology used). The discussion on good practice focuses particularly on the Award winners and finalists; however, other applicants which stood out for particular reasons are also included.

4.1 Attracting new actors / involving all stakeholders

The diversity of actors involved can be a rich source of innovation and resources for the Natura 2000 network and can help build stronger support for the projects and ensure the long-term nature of the results. Engaging with and getting support from local communities is a crucial aspect of making a project successful. In some cases, involving local communities by creating co-ownership contributed to solving local conflicts and reconciling interests. As in previous years, the 2020 Award edition also demonstrated the involvement of a wide variety of stakeholders, some unusual or unexpected, from lawyers, representatives of the judiciary, businesses to sports groups such as divers and boaters. An added value of the Natura 2000 network comes from the ability to bridge the local and EU scales through multiscale coordination. Many applicants demonstrated great efforts in increasing co-operation and communication between actors from different levels from the local to the international. This aspect is crucial in sharing learning between actors engaged in different geographic areas. This can contribute not only to improving the conservation status of species and habitats targeted, but also the range of social groups benefiting from the network.



Figure 3: LIFE+ Scalluvia engages primary school children with educational activities on nature.

- One of the principal reasons for engaging a range of stakeholders is to deal with a specific conflict situation. The winning application of the category Reconciling Interests/ Perceptions [Ten keys to co-ownership for nature projects](#) (Belgium) offers a real life demonstration of how co-ownership and stakeholder engagement can help to reduce even serious conflicts. The activities described are part of the project LIFE+ Scalluvia, the main objective of which was to naturally absorb floodwaters threatening urban areas. The restoration of the natural flood area involved the expropriation of land, creating strong resistance from the local municipality and local inhabitants. In order to overcome this, the project managed to make each stakeholder “an ambassador” of the natural flood area (the Polders) and give a sense of pride about the project to the inhabitants in [ten steps](#). Ambassadors were trained and equipped to speak about the project to wider audiences. Additionally, other groups were targeted through activities such as guided walks. There was a specific focus on activities for children with an educational package that created a lot of enthusiasm: in 2016 alone, there

were 1,300 students involved in beekeeping and art activities to raise awareness about the potential of the Polders. The strong support achieved from the municipality and local inhabitants offers a promising future for the continuation and development of the area, beyond the project's official end, with the municipality's ambition to create a "park board" with project partners and local stakeholders to coordinate socio-economic activities. The winner aims to scale up the activities by promoting the findings on how to engage all stakeholders and foster co-ownership.

- Many applications placed the involvement of a wide range of actors from the local communities at the heart of their activities. The finalist [Quinta do Pisão I Nature Park](#) (Portugal), restores abandoned agricultural and forest land into a large nature park, aiming at attracting a wide variety of local stakeholders and raise awareness about the site's importance. As a municipal environment company responsible for waste and urban green spaces management, Cascais Ambiente is not a traditional applicant. A variety of activities for education and recreation were opened up to the public: for example, "pick your own" fruit; sale of park-produced lamb and honey; nature-themed guided tours and workshops (bird watching, mushroom and plant identification), etc. The outdoor and nature-based activities (averaging 250 events per year) involved more than 1,750 visitors per year. The park runs a free educational programme, with a "forest school" project, and involves people with mental disabilities and elderly people in craft-making to be sold in the visitor's centre.
- Restrictions on traditional management methods are another key source of conflict faced during the establishment and management of Natura 2000 sites and engaging farming interests was again a focus for many of the 2020 applicants. The finalist [Collaboration Agreements in Natura 2000: Farmers as main actors in management](#) (Spain) directly involved the landowners and farmers in the management of the Natura 2000 sites by developing an original collaboration agreement model of grants that made landowners and farmers directly responsible for the implementation of mutually-agreed conservation activities.
- Engaging appropriate stakeholders from as early as possible in the activities is also important in a conflict reduction strategy. The finalist [Restoring active raised bogs in the Natura 2000 network](#) (Ireland) involved a wide range of local people in the project design to make sure restoration efforts can be driven forward locally in the long term. Local communities helped establish plans for the future of bogs after restoration and develop amenities including nature trails and boardwalks across sections of raised bog around the restored bogs in order to generate a socio-economic spin-off. An original "Living Bog" school programme brought miniature bogs to schools to demonstrate their ecological value. In four years, no fewer than 200 schools have been involved. Further actors were reached through a highly effective social media campaign. The Living Bog attracted rapidly over 10,400 likes on Facebook and 2,500 on Twitter. Involving stakeholders directly in the project partnership is another approach. [Restoration of Tyruliai bog as a part of the initiative of the re-wetting of Lithuanian peatlands](#) (Lithuania) tackling a similar topic did just this and brought together traditional conservation actors with a peat moss extraction company in the partnership.
- The finalist [Diving for Conservation](#) (Germany), also included in previous Benchmarking Reports, brings in a more unusual group of actors by directly involving recreational divers in lake monitoring activities, therefore reducing conflict with conservationists.

Scuba divers receive training in botanical and ecological topics and are thus able to evaluate independently the water conditions and conservation state of the lake they dive in. This collaboration demonstrates mutual benefits in extending monitoring of German lakes through citizen science and enriches the experience of recreational divers, giving them a stronger purpose. The German Divers Federation even introduced a course on “Diving for Conversation” which is available throughout the country and helps to cement further the relationship between scuba divers and conservationists.

- Engaging new actors can help to tackle a topic from a new direction. Addressing the difficult subject of environmental crime, the application [Reconciling interests/perceptions within the LIFE Natura Themis Project](#) (Greece) was able to target a different non-traditional stakeholder group. Despite an appropriate environmental legislative background and existing legal tools, conflicts and misunderstanding between different stakeholders and administrators affects the effectiveness of the implementation of environmental legislation, in particular pertaining to Natura 2000. The project established two Environmental Law Observatories, organised four training seminars, five workshops, two national and international conferences and created an application to provide in depth information on all aspects of environmental degradation to both lawyers and the representatives of the judiciary, prosecutors, public bodies/services with investigating authorities, as well as regional authorities. The actions initiated a change in attitude regarding recognition, recording and prevention of violations of environmental legislation and environmental crime.
- Multi-scale and international work is also important in engaging a range of actors. The finalist [Enhancing landscape connectivity for brown bear & wolf through a regional network of Natura 2000 sites](#) (United Kingdom and Romania) aims at increasing ecological connectivity over a 150km long corridor, encompassing 17 different Natura 2000 sites and spanning eight countries. On a national to international level, the project maintains close links with the Romanian government and an operational protocol provided a common framework across the country’s statutory agencies. At the local level, the project has been actively engaging thousands of stakeholders (including rangers, foresters, hunters, wildlife specialists, local communities and national authorities) in workshops, training courses and public events to build capacity and knowledge for what is potentially a very conflictual subject. The finalist [LENA - Local Economy and Nature Conservation in the Danube region](#) (Bulgaria, Germany, Croatia, Hungary, Romania, Slovenia) also included significant multiscale stakeholder involvement efforts with over 1,100 small and medium-sized enterprises participating. The project conducted educational programmes, business support activities for breeders, certifications for fishermen and local fish markets, and policy workshops with local and national authorities. A total of 225 local and national authorities were involved in policy workshops and analyses. In addition, the project reached out to the general public. Around 280,000 tourists and locals from the Natura 2000 sites were made aware of the activities and the importance of the sites over the course of the project activities.

Attracting new actors / involving all stakeholders - Recommendations for future applicants

The Natura 2000 network offers great potential of exploring a variety of strategies and tools to engage stakeholders. Involving a range of actors in the Natura 2000 network can be challenging, but several strategies have proven successful:

- Conservation projects can think “out of the box” in order to ensure that new types of target groups that are not traditionally associated with such projects are reached, ideally through tailor-made measures. Artists, law enforcement staff, military, private businesses in the energy, finance, production sectors, clergy, small enterprises ... all can become potentially valuable allies if approached appropriately.
- Whether targeting a range of stakeholder groups or just one, ensuring that messages and activities are targeted to relevant publics, is vital. When trying to reach a broad public, many applications target schoolchildren through educational programmes. This is an important target group but it is essential that such activities have a clear aim (purely educative, changing viewpoints, using the children as a conduit to other actors, etc.). It is also important that measurement of the situation before and afterwards be included, in order to measure the effectiveness of the measures.
- A variety of communication tools, activities and communication pathways can be used to engage local communities. Tools included in this year’s applications included outdoor and nature-based activities, awareness raising activities, education programmes, various kinds of social media, websites, etc. Successful applications targeted and adapted these tools well to suit various end groups.
- When the local socio-economic context is not taken into account, local communities often perceive restrictions in Natura 2000 sites as unjust, which may hinder the success of a project. Giving space to local communities to give their perspective on some of the aspects of a project definitely increases the chances they will support it. A step further would be to create co-ownership of the project with local communities via the co-design of projects and co-development and implementation of measures.
- Another way to engage local stakeholders is by identifying win-win situations, for example, activities to benefit both the natural and cultural values of a site and combining resources to carry out the activities. Such win-win activities can include: payments in return for ecosystem services, citizen science activities, etc.

For very large-scale, multi-national projects, experience has shown that it is important to involve partners that are well-connected in their own country. Large scale cooperation can be made possible by:

- Carrying out different types of activities at various scales, without neglecting the local level.
- Creating a united methodological framework across countries.
- Considering conflict resolution and facilitation at different scales and involving different actors. Conflicts can apply between different administrative actors as well as local stakeholders.

4.2 Planning sound monitoring from the start

Monitoring project activities is essential to better understand outcomes. The 2020 Award includes many applications that put monitoring activities at the heart of their projects. Monitoring can allow accessing precise information on project activities and environment variables and facilitate adaptation where necessary. Monitoring is also a way of measuring the performance of a conservation activity over time. Monitoring can take many forms: high tech monitoring, ecological monitoring, agronomic monitoring or even genetic monitoring. Many applications demonstrated innovative approaches to monitoring activities, not only by adapting technical tools to local contexts, but also by favouring collaboration with local communities and unusual stakeholders. Engaging stakeholders in monitoring can be effective in terms of changing viewpoints and building trust. For some projects, the success of a project also relies



Figure 4: Setting up a complex set of monitoring measures and two socio-economic studies have allowed the effective restoration of bird habitat population and habitat in a former wastewater basin in Slovenia.

on the monitoring of its social and economic impacts. Some projects combine this approach with a sound analysis of the baseline ecological and socio-economic situation. This way, adapted strategies can be designed and valuable data gathered to measure qualitative and quantitative contributions of a project precisely.

Monitoring is also essential for measuring the impact of communication measures. In 2020 and in all previous rounds of the Award, this has been a shortcoming in many communication applications. Many communication projects do not include a study of the baseline situation, or post-project surveys to assess how the communication measures may have affected the target group(s) knowledge or acceptance of the topics that were at the heart of the communication efforts.

- The conservation efforts of the winner of the conservation category: [Using underwater inventories for conservation of Marine areas in Finland](#) were supported by the high-tech monitoring scheme of the project. The collection of data was carried out through various methods: scuba diving, video methods, benthic sampling, nets, echo sounding and remote sensing. Using state of the art statistical methods, field data is combined with environmental variables data and information on human activities at sea to produce spatial distribution models for functionally important and threatened species and habitats. Since the project start in 2004, the monitoring activities have included a total of 150,000 spatial observations on marine habitats and species and more than 100 species distribution models have been created. This work has allowed the description of around 200 “EMMAs” - Ecologically Significant Marine Areas and the extension of the Natura 2000 network. It also has direct management implications, i.e., the planning of sustainable use of marine areas and the elaboration of more precise national conservation planning in Finland's marine region.

- The application [Vânători-Neamt Nature Park-The Bison Land](#) (Romania), carrying out a bison reintroduction programme since 2012, demonstrates the importance of a range of biological and genetic monitoring methods to support reintroduction efforts. The project is monitoring the free herds' demographic performance (direct observations), the genetic health of the bison (DNA sampling), as well as measuring behavioural (direct observations and GPS collars) and ecological parameters (maps and databases). Through this, the project calculated the number of individuals necessary to ensure a likelihood of survival greater than 95% in a period of 100 years. These monitoring efforts enabled the project to measure precisely the successes of reintroduction. In the assessment period 2014-2019, the project met the criteria by reaching demographic rates similar to natural control (the herd went from 11 individuals to 45 in 2019, almost reaching the 50 individuals considered the first step to a stable population), and achieved good integration of the individuals with the local bison communities.
- The finalist [From wastewater basins to nature reserve](#) (Slovenia) has been able to measure its habitat restoration efforts for the wetland bird populations and through a complex set of monitoring measures combining both ecological and social monitoring. A functional habitat management system was set up, comprising water level and grazing regulations and the effects on the habitats were monitored. At the same time the project also monitored viewpoints of the local community. A socio-economic study was also carried out at the beginning and at the end of the project to assess improvement of the public's knowledge of the Natura 2000 network and assess the benefits of the project's activities for the local communities. Similarly, the winner of the category Reconciling Interests/Perceptions [Ten keys to co-ownership for nature projects](#) (Belgium) was able to assess how views on the activities had changed. Between 2003 and 2010, 365 weekly protests were held against the project. The project carried out interviews of 175 local residents on their opinion about the project in 2016 and discovered that 93% of respondents considered that the area had improved.
- Some projects go beyond asking for opinions from stakeholders and involve them directly in the monitoring. This can help address conflicts and increase belief in the outcomes. The winner of the European Citizens' Award [Partnership for protection of Bulgarian Old Growth Forests in Natura 2000](#) (Bulgaria) was able to overcome conflicts with private forest owners over the designation of Natura 2000 sites thanks to such an approach. The Executive Forest Agency in partnership with WWF Bulgaria, the Association of Parks in Bulgaria and the Balkani Wildlife Society carried out extensive surveys and GIS mapping to draw up an inventory of old growth forests in state-owned forest habitats within Natura 2000. Involving stakeholders in the evaluation of this information was the first step to begin the process of exchange and discussions to agree on a list of sites.
- The finalist [Sustainable management of the farmed habitats of the Aran Island](#) (Ireland) shows that integrating stakeholders interests in monitoring can also be a good approach. In this case, agricultural monitoring was paired with ecological, economic and social monitoring. The project aims at curbing the decline in farming and grazing on the Aran Islands, which has resulted in changes in landscape from encroaching scrub and a loss of grassland habitat and a reduction in species diversity. The project set up a simple yet efficient monitoring system to assess the conservation status of

grazed habitats (scoring from 1 to 5). Farmers understand their score and the work required to improve it. In the long-term, the system is designed to enable landowners to self-assess their holdings and improve their management. In addition, the project is collecting precise data on the plots (value of the grasslands, protein levels, fibre levels and mineral analysis and yields throughout the year) to help implement the most appropriate agricultural practices. The project is also using drone technology to better design farm plans with photo imagery. Finally, the project conducted a socio-economic survey to monitor the relationship between tourism and farming on the island confirming the importance of grazing to maintain cultural landscapes and supporting tourism.

The winner of the category Socio-Economic Benefits [Pro-diversity: shepherds as bio-diversity conservators in Natura 2000](#) (Spain) also considered social and economic impacts of the project, by carrying out a thorough baseline situation analysis prior to the beginning of the project and by sticking to a systemised work protocol during the whole project. The project aims at promoting Natura 2000 as an opportunity for rural development and is using monitoring to assess the economic and social benefits for local stakeholders. The project started by conducting a sound analysis of sheep farming activities and of the situation of sheep farmers in the project region. From this baseline reference situation, the project has been able to measure qualitative and quantitative improvements in terms of profitability, number of producers involved, degree of interest from local stakeholders, etc.

The winner of the Communication category [Eau la la!!! Eco-tips for sea and shore!](#) is a rare example of a communication project which thoroughly assessed the impact of its communication measures based on the baseline situation. The project carried out a campaign raising the awareness of boaters on the environmental impacts of their activities. Prior to the campaign, the project carried out a field survey to assess boaters' knowledge of the good practices and regulations for their activity in the marine environment. After the campaign, a second survey assessed the effectiveness of the campaign. The survey revealed 85% of boaters committed to improve their practices on at least one of the six campaign themes. The survey also allowed the identification of a "word of mouth" effect, since 12% of boaters contacted for the survey had heard about the campaign.

Planning sound monitoring from the start - Recommendations for future applicants

The types of monitoring required for a project depend on its aims. While in some cases sophisticated techniques are required, relatively simple measurements can in numerous cases show a project's effects. Whatever the level of monitoring approach chosen, this should ideally be identified at the very beginning of the project; it should also involve setting clear and measurable indicators, commensurate to the project's objectives and to the available resources.

Even when the main focus of a project is on the conservation value of a site and its conservation objectives, the importance of social and economic monitoring should not be underestimated. It can be particularly interesting to demonstrate co-benefits for biodiversity conservation and rural development for example. Such parallel social and economic benefits increase the added value of a project and, in general, make it more acceptable among stakeholders; they also tend to make the project's results more durable in the long-term.

They also allow showcasing the win-win possibilities of conservation projects, making the overall acceptance of the Natura 2000 network much wider.

For all monitoring schemes, a baseline analysis of the biological and socio-economic situation prior to the beginning of the project is important. But monitoring should be continuous to allow adaptation of practices in case of need.

Monitoring should take into account the interests of stakeholders. If a scheme is being put in place, the project manager should consider what information is of greatest interest to those involved. It may be relatively simple to introduce for example agronomic or economic criteria to help meet their needs.

Communication efforts should not limit the monitoring to the size of the audience reached, or number of events undertaken. Though this type of information has certain merit, it has relatively limited potential when trying to assess the impacts of communication actions on knowledge, perceptions or attitude *vis à vis* the topic that was the subject of the communication actions. Communication efforts must also try to systematically integrate monitoring that records on one hand the baseline situation (at the start of the project) and on the other the changes in the target group(s) knowledge of the communication subjects or acceptance of the Natura 2000 network (at the end of the project). Without such monitoring, it is not possible to measure the effectiveness of communication actions. Monitoring of communication measures can involve tools such as initial and final surveys, participatory appraisal methods, questionnaires, games, etc. The tools to be used are to be defined by the type of target groups.

Citizen science and stakeholder involvement in monitoring / self-assessment has significant potential. This can increase sample size and make monitoring activities more viable in the long-term. It can also help with establishing functional partnerships and can even be the best way to ease tensions and solve conflicts.

4.3 Promoting conceptual and technical innovation

One of the aims of the Natura 2000 Award is to showcase technical and conceptual innovation activities. In the 2020 Award round, a number of applications distinguished themselves through their artistic originality and the new communication methods used. This helped to reach non-traditional stakeholders on nature and biodiversity and a broader public. The Natura 2000 Network has great potential to promote biodiversity while providing livelihood and financial revenues to local communities. Some applications demonstrated this potential by designing innovative ways of linking conservation to rural development. Other projects developed innovative methodologies in their conservation and restoration activities.



Figure 5: In Slovenia, the mapping of ecosystem services in collaboration with local stakeholders is promoting biodiversity conservation while identifying opportunities for economic development.

- The winner of the communication category [Eau la la!!! Eco-tips for sea and shore](#) (France) is a communication project with a strong concept and clear messaging. The project clearly defined its target group and with the help of a catchy slogan and strong visual identity managed to raise awareness about the potential harmful impacts of boaters on Natura 2000 sites and species. The project defined six main topics of action and designed its communication accordingly, with educative tools ([Good practices guidelines – FR](#)). With the variety of its communication methods and within a few months, the project raised the awareness of 600 people with the campaign, conducted 338 individual interviews and got 32 boating associations involved. Post-campaign surveys showed that 85% of the boaters involved were keen to improve their practices in relation to at least one of the six themes of the campaign.

Some projects used highly creative means to reach new audiences. The finalist [Aralar, The land where the world has a place](#) (Spain) used the medium of cinema to raise awareness about species conservation issues, with a particular focus on the endangered Bearded Vulture and Red kite. The powerful aesthetic qualities of the documentary give resonance to the transmission of the natural value of the sites and the objectives defended by Natura 2000 to a wider general public. Working on a smaller scale, the application [Puppets for Nature - Creative Nature Trails](#) (Hungary) used puppetry and other school activities to capture the attention of 5-8 year old children in an accessible, non-patronising manner with an aim to change negative perceptions on insects and improve nature consciousness and responsibility. Training for teachers was provided so that the methods could be used beyond the life of the project. Between 2017 and 2019, the project reached 1,500 children and trained 100 teachers. Interviews with children and teachers proved that the participants developed a positive attitude towards the project's target species: insects(97% of participants), spiders (74%) and snakes (72%).

- Certain applications were innovative in the manner they integrated ecological with economic needs. The finalist [ECO KARST - For Nature and For People](#) (Slovenia) developed innovative tools to promote biodiversity conservation while improving the livelihood of local communities. In seven protected areas, the project mapped the ecosystem services present and then, in close cooperation with local stakeholders, developed Biodiversity Investment Opportunities (BIO) maps. These maps allowed the preparation of Local Action Plans that combine conservation guidelines, with the needs and potentials for local, sustainable, and nature-friendly economic development. Further, the BIO maps and local action plans were used to identify, recognise, and reward the existing and potential Pro-Biodiversity Businesses (PBBs) in the protected areas.
- Likewise, [Natura 2000 Life Experiences](#) (Portugal) is another interesting example of how biodiversity objectives can go hand in hand with support to local businesses. EDP Portugal, the major national energy provider, manages a communication platform of commercial establishments that use this platform to promote and make available their products and services to EDP customers. The initiative takes the form of a contest, in which customers fill in a questionnaire about one of the selected Natura 2000 sites in Portugal. The winners of the contest get one of the 30 package tours organised by a local tourism promoter to discover the site in question, with a focus on nature tourism

experience. The initiative is thus promoting the socio-economic benefits of Natura 2000 sites for both local businesses and tourists in an original way.

- Also addressing tourism, the application [Our Journey to Sustainable Management in European NATURA 2000 sites](#) (Ireland, Finland, United Kingdom) found solutions to address the negative impacts of unregulated tourism in sensitive project sites. Through transnational cooperation and knowledge transfer between partner regions, new practical solutions were designed: a visitor strategy and access to training for the staff responsible for path management, visitor surveys, capacity-building seminars, local management plans, tourism impact research, recommendations for path construction, etc. Particularly innovative was an interactive 3D application, designed by the project to highlight sensitive habitats. A map displaying the imagery of project sites allows users to navigate them and a mapping app using 3D GIS technology highlights the sensitivities of each sites and maps the pathways across sites. These tools enabled increased audience reach via social media sharing and facilitated access to information. The finalist [Restore Berlengas Islands ecosystem to protect seabirds and native plants](#) (Portugal) also presents some technical innovations in terms of visitor management. The project developed a Visitor Barometer providing information on the number of visitors on the Island and their distribution with the use of counters, automatic cameras and surveys. The visitation monitoring efforts supported the decision-making process in relation to the visitation management measures.
- In terms of innovation in habitat restoration techniques, finalist LIFE project [Lille Vildmose: A bog restoration project for public and peatland](#) (Denmark), also described in last year's Benchmarking Report, included numerous elements of technical originality. The efforts to restore bog degraded by agriculture and peat extraction are innovative in scale (covering one of the largest lowland bogs in Europe) and in some of the experimental tree clearance methods used. The methods included manual clearing of tree growth twice a year in combination with raising water level and managing herbivore grazing. The manual clearing is intended to be temporary, until deer and elk populations have reached a certain size in the site. Proving successful, the method has been used here for the first time and since expanded out to other sites internationally.

Promoting conceptual and technical innovation - Recommendations for future applicants

While many conservation approaches have been tried and tested and are well understood, innovation is still needed in terms of technical approaches especially in the case of habitat restoration and species' protection.

Innovation, however, is also needed in ways of reaching and involving people and specific target groups. This is particularly important when trying to make Natura 2000 inclusive and increasing its wider appeal.

For communication initiatives in particular, innovation can be as simple as the development of a catchy slogan, the creation of a novel graphic layout for the communication material, or the use of different communication means. The 2020 edition highlights a number of applicants innovative in their ways and means of communication, particularly in using the arts to reach new audiences.

Innovative approaches can also be used to highlight the links between economic development and conservation and show that co-benefits are possible. This can be achieved through the inclusion of and collaboration with new actors, as discussed under Chapter 4.1. Identifying with such new actors' original common goals that go beyond the pure conservation goals, can be a type of conceptual innovation. The development of new participatory approaches can be considered as a means of promoting socio-economic benefits related to Natura 2000 sites.

Involving multi-disciplinary teams in the project planning, implementation and assessment is a good guarantee of ensuring that innovative approaches are identified, designed and implemented.

Relevant recommendations for promoting conceptual and technical innovation can also be found under Chapter 4.5 - Knowledge sharing and peer exchange.

4.4 Mobilising a wide range of resources

The 2020 Award edition shows once again the number of different ways to mobilise resources for carrying out activities in Natura 2000 sites. Many interesting projects benefited from an initial support from LIFE funds. Other applications managed to secure long term funding with the support of Rural Development Programme measures (CAP funding). Other sources of funding included business activities and contribution from volunteers.



Figure 6: Thanks to CAP funding, Lithuanian farmers receive payments for the protection and restoration of aquatic warbler habitat.

- Several projects distinguished themselves by their efforts in assuring the financial durability of a project over time. The winning Reconciling Interests/ Perceptions application [Ten keys to co-ownership for nature projects](#) (Belgium) was financed through LIFE but also put in place, an especially clear, well-defined after-LIFE plan. The municipality and the local nature association, official partners of the project, recognising the value of the area, will continue to carry out project activities using their own financing. Other stakeholders will carry on or take over the responsibility for some of the project's activities: the Nature & Forest Agency is responsible for nature management, the company W&Z maintains hydraulic engineering structures, the fishermen want to take care of the maintenance and social supervision of the fishing spots, the guides have organised themselves professionally, etc. Adding to that, businesses were created around the project, including a local company that specialised in offering recreational packages in the project area.
- Similarly the finalist [Water for Wetlands, Wetlands for Life](#) (Slovakia) also managed to assure financial durability after LIFE. The project, carried out by BirdLife Slovakia used LIFE financing between 2012 and 2018, to restore wetland sites and improve the water regime in the 20 project sites. In 2019, one year after the end of the project, wetland

restoration activities continued to be carried out with significant support from 137 voluntary donors, following a fund-raising campaign that will be repeated in the following years. The project was also designed to be efficient and financially sustainable: the solutions chosen require limited staffing and volunteers. Volunteer camps help bring together volunteers for longer-term actions and one-off activities. Other projects making good use of volunteer activities included the finalist [Diving for conservation](#) (Germany) where volunteer divers carry out botanical and ecological surveys in lakes as part of their sporting activities.

- The finalist application [Sustainable management of the farmed habitats of the Aran Islands](#) (Ireland) also benefited from an initial support from LIFE funds (AranLIFE). The project is now expanding under the lead of Caomhnú Árann for the period 2019-2021 to include more farmers and expand the area of priority habitats by integrating measures into the national agri-environment programme. In addition, the project is currently examining the potential of the sale of Aran seeds from the islands' high priority and species-rich grasslands in providing additional revenues, considering the promising market potential of visiting tourists on the island. The finalist [New farming opportunity benefitting birds, people and climate](#) (Lithuania) is another good example of securing long-term funding, thanks to the EU Rural Development Programme. With LIFE funds, the project tested various measures to restore and maintain aquatic warbler habitat which have now been included in the national agri-environmental programme.
- Accessing revenues from a range of funding programmes can help to assure the long-term sustainability of projects. The finalist [Network of Natura 2000 stations in Thuringia](#) (Germany), operated by a Thuringia regional authority, included securing sustainable and variable sources of long-term funding for the set-up and management of its network of Natura 2000 stations in the project planning. In three years (2016-2019), 12 stations and one centre of excellence were built. The main financial resources of the project are funds from a variable mix of state and EU funds (including the European agricultural fund for rural development (EAFRD) and the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF)). The application [Carpathia, Europe's wilderness reserve](#) (Romania) also demonstrates a good mobilisation of various sources of funding mainly from private sources. Various private foundations support the project's ambition to create a world-class wilderness reserve in the Southern Romanian Carpathians.
- More broadly, ensuring that the nature protection activities themselves generate revenues can help sustain them in the long-run. The finalist [Quinta do Pisão Nature Park](#) (Portugal) mobilised different types of revenues. Initial support comes from the park's Biodiversity Action Plan budget of €250,000 a year, financed by the state. The park also generates revenues from the sale of local products (honey, jam, handmade products) in the park's shop, in four visitors' centres and at the local tourist office. Besides, the park sells its production of vegetables (1.6 tons in 2018). These revenues account for a contribution of €80,000 per year, i.e., 32% of the total annual budget of the project.
- For others, conservation activities have been built around a successful business. The conservation activities of the finalist application [Promoting nature conservation while producing world quality wines](#) (Portugal) are supported by the business of the finalist's

wine estate Duorum Vinhos, S.A. The wine estate decided to reconcile the production of high-quality wines with the conservation of rare birds within its 150 ha terraced vineyard. With the revenues from the selling of wine, the project has been able to secure a sensitive area for the nesting of protected birds and carry out a number of conservation actions including creation of grasslands, riparian buffer zones, patches of native woodlands as well as hedgerow and embankment management. Another project including farmers in the design was the winner of the Socioeconomic Benefits category, [Pro-Biodiversidad: Shepherds as biodiversity conservators in Natura 2000](#) (Spain) which established a brand to promote meat from sheep produced on Natura 2000 sites. The project solidified the business model based on the brand by signing agreements with Paradores de Turismo (an important chain of high-quality hotels in Spain) as well as supermarket chains, in order to commercialise the brand's products. The direct economic benefits for farmers and shepherds helped engage them in long-term site management.

Mobilising a wide range of resources - Recommendations for future applicants

Many applications featured in the Natura 2000 Award are initially supported by LIFE funds. However, the question of the continuation of the projects' activities after LIFE is important to consider for applicants. Successful applications often demonstrated the capacity for long-term financing, anticipated the "after LIFE" right from the start and considered other sources of funding.

One option for broader role out for land management activities is the EU Rural Development Programme, used by many projects involving agricultural actors and habitats where agricultural activities are pivotal to biodiversity conservation. Other EU funds can also apply to certain measures in Natura 2000, notably the Interreg Programme. Resources with information on [financing for Natura 2000](#) can be found on the EC's website.

Other applications secured long-term funding by getting support from multiple sources (national, EU level or various private sources). Volunteers continue to play an important part in implementation and continuation of activities, especially for NGOs.

Certain applications managed to develop activities that led to good levels of self-financing for a number of their activities. Although not often demonstrated, some Award finalists and winners have approached the issue from the opposite perspective - integrating Natura 2000 management into an already-existing successful business model. Branding of products stemming from extensive farming/livestock activities within Natura 2000 sites is starting to be recognised as an excellent means to achieve win-win strategies: agricultural stakeholders can obtain new niche markets and thus increase their revenues while implementing practices that are compatible with or even boost biodiversity conservation. Socially and environmentally responsible consumer demand being on the rise in the EU, the provision of products that meet the requirements of such clientele is a very promising path.

The involvement of the private business sector can also be very promising in the mobilisation of a wide range of resources. Private businesses with direct stakes in the targeted Natura 2000 sites can be excellent allies not only in terms of better acceptance of the Natura 2000 network, but also as long-term investment partners. Larger companies in general can rely on their Corporate Social Responsibility vision and funds to ensure collaboration schemes for initiatives linked to Natura 2000.

4.5 Knowledge sharing and peer exchange

Facilitating communication and exchange between peers is important in order to understand better how certain good practices have been put in place in a particular location and whether they are applicable elsewhere. Many projects also explored the potential of a variety of communication tools and media to share knowledge and propose interactive formats to a wider audience. Effective knowledge sharing and peer-to-peer exchange on the local to international level, are not only crucial for the success initiatives related to Natura 2000 sites, but can enable the transfer of results to other areas. For that reason, it is important to highlight the efforts of projects that aim at increasing cooperation and networking between partners.



Figure 7: The LIFE funded project Magredi Grasslands used a great variety of communication materials and awareness raising activities for the restoration of the last dry grasslands of the Friuli Plain (Italy).

- The winner of the Citizens' Award [Partnership for protection of Bulgarian Old Growth Forests in Natura 2000](#) (Bulgaria) organised a debate to address the concerns raised by both forest owners and managers, and nature conservationists over the management of forests in newly designated Natura 2000 sites. Through a participative approach, the project enabled NGOs to provide constructive criticism and to verify the quality of selected forest sub-compartments notably through field research and a publicly available GIS Platform visualising the selected Natura 2000 sites. Despite initial conflicts between forestry enterprises and environmental organisations, the project's participatory approach and outreach efforts enabled the definition of a final list of old growth forest sites, subject to special protection. The application ["La Noue Rouge", ecological restoration of an agricultural wetland](#) (France) similarly demonstrated significant consultation work (discussions, meetings, field work) with local farmers, elected officials and all local organisations for deciding the technical aspects of conservation works in the site's wetlands.
- To address the issue of landscape fragmentation, the winner of the Cross-Border Cooperation and Networking category [Joint efforts to develop safe and wildlife-friendly transportation networks in the Carpathians](#) (Czech Republic, Austria, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia, Ukraine) organised an immense cross-border cooperation and networking system. The project brought together a large number of partners from six different countries, representing different sectors and various types of institutions (public authorities, scientific institutions, NGOs, private businesses, international organisations) from local to transnational levels. A total of 458 organisations were contacted and directly involved during the different stages of the project. The international collaboration between experts was also a key aspect of the project and took the form of joint fieldwork and data collection, exchange, sharing and dissemination of information and

the drawing up of final outputs together. The most important output of the collaboration is the preparation of a set of guidelines “[Wildlife and Traffic in the Carpathians – EN](#)“, that will be used as integrated processes and policies on protection of landscape connectivity for wildlife required by all countries in the project region. To maintain communication between partners in the long term, the project set up an online Carpathian Countries Integrated Biodiversity Information System to share further information and disseminate final outputs to relevant stakeholders.

- The finalist [LIFE Magredi Grasslands](#) (Italy) has put awareness raising and knowledge exchange at the heart of its efforts for conservation and restoration of the last dry grasslands (the so-called “Magredi”) of the Friuli plain. The project produced a number of communication materials, many of which aimed at local stakeholders: two information publications, a manual for the recovery and management of the land, a brochure on the results of LIFE, a flyer on incentives for stable grasslands and a website that achieved 300,000 hits. The project carried out public awareness through three workshops on sustainable grassland management, 115 information boards sited locally, guided visits and discussion meetings involving 4,000 people. A partnership with schools was also established, involving more than 1,130 pupils. Other communication materials included films and documentaries broadcast on the national channel Rai that allowed the outstanding outreach of around 2 million citizens. The project’s intensive communication efforts contributed to improve general perceptions of the Magredi grasslands, highlighting the value of its rich biodiversity.

The finalist [The world upside down: knowing and preserving bats](#) (Portugal) is dedicated to spreading awareness about bat conservation for school-age audience and makes full potential of a variety of communication tools. The project published a children’s book that tells the adventures of a scientist bat; developed travelling exhibitions, some of which were visited by 7,000 students from 17 schools; set up a national contest for a stop motion video; and organised scientific field trips. To target a wider audience, an internet portal collecting bat-related scientific information was created. The portal allows access to images from a Cave Bat Observatory equipped with video surveillance system. The project also hosted “Bat Nights” (nocturnal bat observation visits) across the country, in which participants learn about the characteristics of the bats, their lifestyle and importance for the ecological equilibrium of the region. The project organised a total of 150 Bat Nights, involving more than 3,000 participants in various parts of the country.

- The project [Danube Volunteers Day - jointly for our Danube natural heritage](#) (Austria, Bulgaria, Germany, Croatia, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia) successfully organised outreach activities across all the Danube countries for a clean-up day of riparian habitats. Over 2,700 working volunteer hours were put in to improve habitat conditions in 21 Natura 2000 sites. This initiative is building up on the achievements of the DANUBEPARKS, the Danube River Network of Protected Areas. DANUBEPARKS is operating since 2007 through a Danube-wide conservation platform with a strong element of peer-to-peer exchange enabling continuous transnational cooperation, development and implementation of joint conservation strategies, coherent management practices and a common corporate identity of Danube River Protected Areas. Enabling peer-to-peer exchange was also one of the main aims of the finalist application [Reinforcing the roles of remote sensing in Natura 2000 monitoring](#) (Spain) transferred the use of

remote sensing technologies to managers of natural areas. The project has invited professionals from various conservation fields to workshops and meetings to introduce them to the technology's application in Natura 2000 areas and overcome scepticism. In 2017, the project published a book to further communicate and transfer the remote sensing technology. In two years, the book has been downloaded more than 9,980 times.

- The finalist [Natura 2000-bringing studies and people together for the benefit of nature](#) (Germany) has been able to reach a wide range of actors around the common goal of natural habitat improvement. Young people carry out much of the project work, with supervision from the University of Applied Sciences Weihenstephan Triesdorf. The students gather data on species and habitats in the “Hoch-spessart” Natura 2000 site through field work and with support from experts, and propose solutions on how to improve the management of Natura 2000 habitats. Their management proposals are communicated via presentations to various decision-makers (mayors, municipal and city councils, etc.) and via media (press and radio). The aim is to target a wide audience: the general public, as well as forest authorities, municipal forest enterprises, nature conservation authorities and nature conservation associations. To reach this aim, the project organised a one-off Natura 2000 festival that generated great interest. These knowledge-sharing efforts managed to directly reach a total of over 1,500 people between 2012 and 2019.

Knowledge sharing and peer exchange - Recommendations for future applicants

Exchanging experiences and know-how is a central element of making Natura 2000-related initiatives successful. Such processes also ensure that there is a more efficient use of human and financial resources - as the familiar idiom says, “there is no need to re-invent the wheel”. Whenever relevant experience is available, it is in everybody's interest to share and build upon it.

Such exchanges can imply communicating about project activities to a wider audience, facilitating coordination between partners or peers, but also making the promotion of results or data to enable transfer to other areas. Ways of doing so can include the following:

- Organise - from a project's outset - a specially dedicated platform for exchanges with key stakeholders or other interest groups.
- Use a variety of communication materials each focused on specific target groups to maximise knowledge-sharing. Available online technologies make knowledge-sharing even more easy both logistically and in terms of resources, and should be exploited as much as possible.
- Organise activities aiming at facilitating peer-to-peer exchange on a specific topic (workshops, meetings, etc.). Learning from peers and their experiences can be particularly effective.
- When new experience has been produced within the context of a project, ensure that it is translated into an output (e.g., guidelines) that can then be shared with the online community, for example by not only adding the output on the project partner's website, but also by communicating its links to other existing regional/national/EU platforms. If relevant thematic platforms are not available at local or national level,

creating such platforms with peer organisations/bodies and or competent authorities can be an excellent initiative.

- Whenever possible, if outputs with new know-how have been produced, their availability in widely used languages can help the know-how's better dissemination at EU level.

4.6 Perseverance

The Natura 2000 Award recognises the benefits of long-term commitment for the protection and conservation of species and habitats. The 2020 examples show the importance of establishing successful durable cooperation between partners to limit conflicts and encourage synergies. Highlighting perseverance efforts also demonstrates that enabling species and habitats recovery and protection is not an overnight process, and requires sustained commitments.

- The finalist [Cooperation across seas: Roseate Tern colony networking 2016-2019](#) (Ireland), also highlighted in the 2018 Benchmarking Report, represents a long-term commitment by an NGO towards a specific species' recovery – the roseate tern (*Sterna dougalli*). The tern conservation action was initiated in 1989, following designation of the Rockabill island as an SPA, and is led by BirdWatch Ireland in partnership with the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and the North Wales Wildlife Trust since 1997, and with Bretagne Vivante since 2005. In addition, the project



Figure 8: Long term NGO commitment and cooperation has allowed the Roseate Tern population to recover effectively in Ireland.

works along with the Irish National Parks and Wildlife Service. The key staff from different organisations working on Roseate Tern colonies are now in close contact, with more united management work and consistent methodologies. Collaboration efforts already proved efficient in increasing the number of Roseate Tern pairs from 152 in 1989 to 1,597 in 2017. In addition, recent visits have shown that the two French Roseate colonies are stronger and two new pairs of Roseate nesting in Anglesey (Wales) have been identified.

The Foundation Conservation Carpathia (FCC) also demonstrates a long-term commitment in its effort to create wilderness reserves and secure areas of forests and alpine grasslands. The foundation has been working on the project [Carpathia, Europe's wilderness reserve](#) (Romania) since 2009. The project has been able to purchase over 13,000 ha and manages a total of almost 21,000 ha dedicated to full wildlife protection. Partnership with hunting associations has allowed the signature of long-term concessions of 24,000 ha of hunting-free areas. FCC has a long-term relationship with private foundations, which not only gives financial stability to the project but also better support for the project's activities. The engagement in the area over years has allowed the building of trust to tackle the delicate issue of coexistence between

local people and large carnivores (prevention measures to livestock owners, compensation, etc).

The application [Vânători-Neamț Nature Park-The Bison Land](#) (Romania) has been carrying out bison reintroduction efforts in the Vanatori Neamt Nature Park since 2012. The project has been carefully monitoring genetic and population parameters which enabled the release of a total of 21 individuals. The project has also worked on raising the awareness of the general public about bison conservation, through press articles, activities, conferences, result communication, the creation of a local Action Group, etc. The efforts to develop cooperation at national and international level-with a different entities in Romania (WWF Romania, Foundation Conservation Carpathia) and abroad (Rewilding Europe, European Bison Conservation Centre, Aspinall Foundation) further strengthened the project and its durability.

The application [The world upside down: knowing and preserving bats](#) (Portugal) has been raising awareness and changing perceptions on the conservation of bats in the Alviela cave system in Portugal since 2011. The Alviela Living Science Centre developed content and different actions that reached almost 50,000 people in Portugal. The project focuses a lot of its actions on educating young people about bats, with the first school programmes starting in the first year of the project. The durability of the project was strengthened by the development of a national network of Living science centres, which allowed the dissemination of the project nationwide.

Perseverance - Recommendations for future applicants

By definition, initiatives aimed at improving conservation status in Natura 2000 sites are long-term endeavours. And in order for such endeavours to be successful in the long-run, implementing organisations must ensure that their initiatives are founded on a healthy and robust set of criteria. Those involve most of the topics discussed above in the catalogue of good practices.

To maintain protection and conservation commitments over time, it is essential to ensure project financing in the long term. Adequate monitoring is also needed to make sure conservation and protection actions stay on the right track.

Also crucial and demonstrated by the examples highlighted in this report is building a strong relationship with partners, as well as trust with involved stakeholders over time.

Above all, however, there is one distinct feature that is associated with perseverance, and this does not come out of any guideline or catalogue: a deep and honest concern for nature conservation; this feature characterises a good part of the Natura 2000 Award applicants and their staff.

5 Outlook

The Natura 2000 Award is now an established event and can be said to sample a significant range of different activities taking place in Natura 2000 sites across all Member States. Five hundred and four applications (including a few repetitions each year) have been submitted in total since its establishment. These range from individuals building sustainable businesses in Natura 2000 areas to multi-million euro projects which aim to restore vast areas of degraded habitat through technical interventions. On one level, such diverse activities cannot be compared. The evaluation process of the Award, however, serves to highlight where innovative ideas have been developed, effective and efficient project management processes followed and information well-shared. This provides extremely useful learning material for all those working on Natura 2000 sites.

A few points drawn out from the Benchmarking Reports to date are highlighted below.

- Applications have been received from all Member States but still cannot be said to be **balanced between Member States, categories and stakeholders**. This is inevitable and not a problem in itself. Future applicants are, however, invited to carefully consider how they present activities which potentially fall under several Award categories. In the 2020 round, there were again many applications which could have been submitted under several categories. Highlighting how activities have brought about socio-economic benefits or have helped to solve conflicts could improve the chances of an application being successful. Applicants should consider how links can be made with efforts to protect cultural heritage and to improve health and well-being of people living in or near Natura 2000 sites. Relatively few applications so far have made these connections in a meaningful way.
- The Natura 2000 Award aims to raise awareness about the Natura 2000 network. It is therefore of high importance that applicants make **a clear link between the actions and results to the targeted Natura 2000 sites**. Applicants' work often focuses on Natura 2000 sites which are also nationally protected; in many such cases, the fact that the site is also designated according to European criteria may be unclear in the descriptions of their activities to the public. The European importance of the site should be explicitly promoted in all actions that are presented in the Award. Applicants must also clearly describe the direct benefit of their actions for the Natura 2000 network.
- Several of this year's Award applications focused on the combination of **social and cultural values of a Natura 2000 site** to local communities as well as associated economic benefits. There is greater potential for more applications in this regard. A significant number of applications are providing ecosystem services, especially by engaging farmers and landowners. Applications which demonstrate innovative ways to pay for ecosystem services would be of interest to a wide range of Natura 2000 actors. Applications could also bring forward additional secondary benefits linked to key environmental challenges, such as climate change.
- The impact of the **LIFE financial instrument** is once again confirmed by this year's applications. The number of finalists and winners receiving LIFE funding is encouraging in demonstrating how effective these projects are. Nonetheless, applications which are funded in other ways including much smaller, local projects would be most welcome in order to demonstrate how everyone can contribute to the protection and management of the Natura 2000 network.
- There were several applications which were **resubmitted several years** in a row and some which were submitted in three out of four Award editions. This is encouraged by

the Award as long as there is a clear improvement / development in the application compared to previous submissions, and if a certain evolution in achievements over the years is evident in the application. Feedback on a specific application can be obtained from the Award Secretariat and applicants should also make reference to this report in order to learn from the good practice of others.

The catalogue provided in this report aims to provide inspiration for those working on Natura 2000 sites in general as well as for those interested in applying for a Natura 2000 Award. In most cases, good practice cannot be directly transferred from one site to another but will need adaptation according to the physical and socio-economic conditions of the site. These examples should inspire Natura 2000 actors to find solutions that work in their particular context addressing the site-specific issues they are dealing with.

The Natura 2000 Award continues to be an excellent means for promoting activities related to Natura 2000. Sharing good practice through an Award application benefits both applicants' own activities (through the increased attention they receive) and other Natura 2000 actors (by inspiring them with new ideas from other applicants). This applies not just to the winners and finalists but also to every applicant whose achievements are described on the Award website.

It is only by working together, sharing our successes and challenges and acknowledging our strengths that we can reach our common goal of protecting the planet's largest network of protected areas. All Natura 2000 actors engaged in promoting and managing Natura 2000 are encouraged to engage and join the "Award network" by submitting an application.

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