EUROPEAN
NATURA 2000

NATURA 2000
AWARD
2022

BENCHMARKING REPORT

Authors: Katrina Marsden, Jakob Hartmann, Mariella Fourli, Catherine Stoneman

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Environment

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1 Executive Summary

The European Natura 2000 Award was launched by the European Commission in 2013. Although European citizens recognise the importance and richness of EU nature, there is potential to increase the public understanding of the Natura 2000 network itself. The Award was developed to contribute to 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.

In the 2022 edition, winners are selected for five categories: Communication, Conservation on land, Marine conservation, Socio-economic benefits, and Cross-border cooperation. The categories Conservation on land and Marine conservation were newly introduced in this edition, dividing the Conservation category of previous editions into two more specific areas. This year's Socio-economic benefits category also includes the aims of the previous Reconciling interest/perceptions category. 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 category 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 6th edition, 2022, the Natura 2000 Award received 40 applications (all eligible) from 12 Member States. This year the largest number of applications was received under the Conservation on Land category (13) followed by the Communication category (7). The remaining categories were equally split with 5 applications each[1]. Applications were received from a range of actors including NGOs (the largest number of applications), governmental authorities, businesses and other organisations.

The aim of the Natura 2000 Award Benchmarking Report 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 stakeholders involved in the conservation and management of Natura 2000 sites. 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 6th 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.

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[1] After the movement of a few applications to more appropriate categories during the evaluation process.

2 Introduction

Europe boasts an extraordinarily rich biodiversity. Europe's 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. Furthermore, the wide range of actors and stakeholders who support - in one way or another - the management and promotion of Natura 2000 sites highlights the considerable social capital that is already invested in this network.

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, 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. These issues were addressed in the European Commission's "Action Plan: for nature, people and the economy" (European Commission 2017) including actions to engage stakeholders and the general public. The Natura 2000 Award is particularly aimed at supporting these aims, including to an extent the general public, by 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 and sets the target of protecting 30% of EU land and sea by 2030, including strictly protected areas; it also aims to put in place an EU nature restoration plan to restore degraded ecosystems. The newly proposed EU

restoration law lays out a legally binding framework for achieving restoration targets in EU member states. 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 key efforts such as communication, stakeholder involvement and networking when directly related to the Natura 2000 conservation objectives. Anyone directly involved in the management of Natura 2000 or associated initiatives can apply. 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 and Networking event ensure that finalists can meet face to face and discuss their activities with one another.

Applicants **benefit from applying for an Award** by having their activities promoted on the Award website and through the newsletter. In addition, finalists and winners are supported in networking, awareness raising and peer-to-peer learning. In addition to opportunities to network and learn from one another, all finalists are promoted by the European Commission at the ceremony, on the Award website and newsletter, and on social media. Winners additionally receive a small financial contribution to support their work, as well as help in organising an event on a Natura 2000 site in which European Commission officials participate and promote 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 2022 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 2022 edition applications. Benchmarking Reports from the previous Award editions are available here: 2014, 2015, 2016, 2018 and 2020.

The core of the Benchmarking Report 2022 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 applications received. 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 2022 elements of good practice discussed in Section 4 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 2022 Award, and what differences there were compared to previous editions. 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 2022

In its 6th edition, the Natura 2000 Award continued to sample a significant range of different aims, activities, approaches and actors in Natura 2000 sites across all EU Member States. Five hundred and forty-four applications (including a few repetitions each year) have been submitted in total since the Award's establishment. These range from local awareness raising projects in Natura 2000 areas to sweeping cross border, multi-stage conservation projects which aim to restore endangered species and habitats through technical interventions. Such diverse activities cannot be compared like for like and the evaluation process of the Award primarily serves to highlight where innovative ideas have been developed, effective and efficient project management processes have been followed, and information has been well-shared. This provides extremely useful learning material for all those working on Natura 2000 sites.

3.1 Applicant Statistics

The Natura 2000 Award received 40 applications from 12 EU member states in the 6th edition (compared to 163 in 2014, 93 in 2015 , 83 in 2016, 80 in 2018, and 85 in 2020). Figure 1 below shows the comparison between the five years and per Member State.
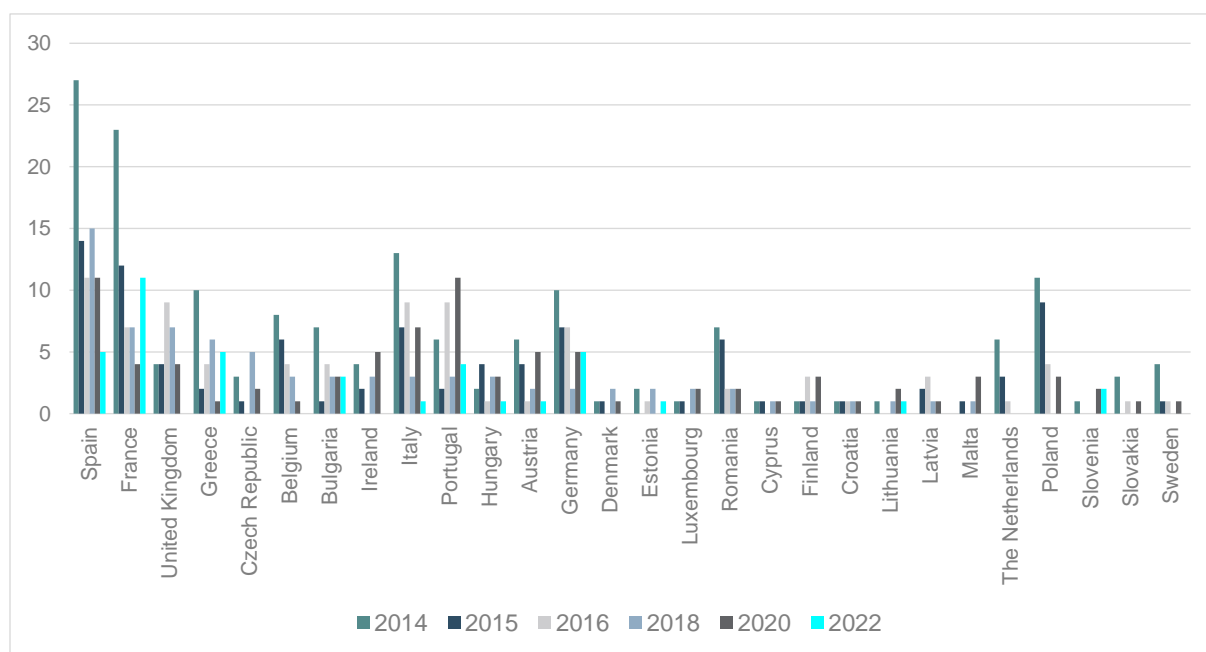
Figure 1: Number of applications per year per country

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.

In the 6th edition, the category 'Conservation' was divided into 'Conservation on land' and 'Marine conservation', and the category Reconciling interests/perceptions also included the previous editions' Socio-economic benefits category. Applications were divided unevenly amongst the Award categories with the Conservation on land and Communication categories being the most popular. The table below compares the figures from 2014 to 2022.

Table 1: Categories chosen (all applications including ineligible)

Category	2014	2015	2016	2018	2020	2022

Conservation (2014-2020)	58	40	32	35	42	
Conservation on land						13
Marine conservation						5
Communication	49	27	21	21	15	7
Socio-economic benefits	8	9	11	11	10	5
Reconciling interests and perceptions (2014 – 2020)	38	6	12	8	11	
Cross-border cooperation and networking	10	11	7	5	7	5

In 2022, as in previous years, applicants were asked to categorise their organisation when registering on the Award website. Environmental NGOs have consistently been one of the most common applicant groups over the last five editions of the Award (Fig. 2). This trend continued in the 6th edition, with local authorities as the second largest applicant group. National and regional authorities are also well represented. This suggests that the Award may be best known amongst these categories of applicants. This year there were no main applicants that identified themselves as resource users, such as farmers or hunters. 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.
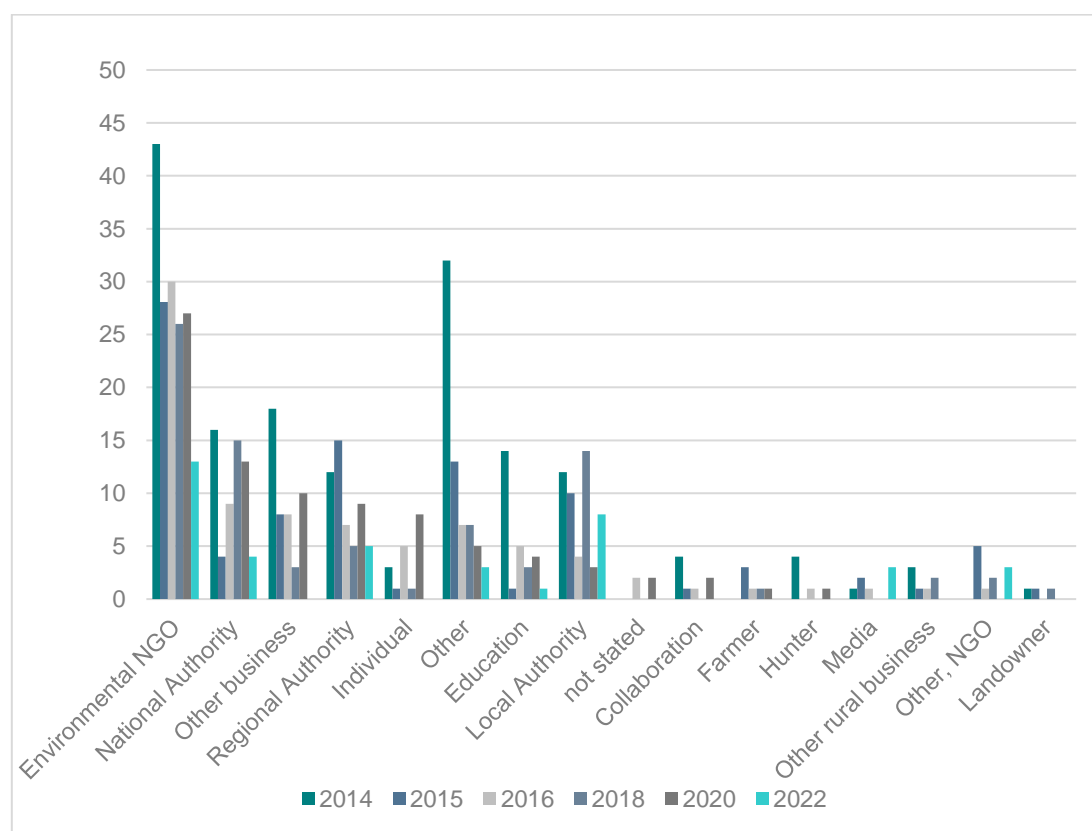
Figure 2: Applicant type

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 2022 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 six years of the Award. The process of joining a consortium with actors from different interest groups may help to reconcile interests and bring a range of actors with varying viewpoints together.

- **Emerging actors**: All six 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 six 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 2022 Winners

Natura 2000 in Bulgaria: new horizons

(Green Balkans – NGO Ivan Georgiev)

Category: Communication

Green Balkans raised awareness for Bulgaria's Natura 2000 network by producing audio, visual and written content which was distributed through online streams, daily and weekly newsletters and a YouTube channel. The project also highlighted flagship species and habitats. The project reached an estimated 4.5 million people in Bulgaria.

Adaptation of Eleonora's falcon to climate change

(Christina Kassara | University of Patras)

Category: Conservation on land

Led by the University of Patras in Greece, this application covered a range of actions aimed to support the breeding population of Eleonora's falcon. The actions included a rat eradication programme to prevent egg predation, installing artificial nests for optimal egg temperature regulation, and ensuring food sources from passerine birds by planting fruit trees, bushes and cereals to increase stopover times.

Fishermen and seabirds, allies for the sea

(Elisabete Silva – SPEA)

Category: Marine conservation

SPEA - Sociedade Portuguesa para o Estudo das Aves developed mitigation measures to address the threats to seabirds posed by commercial fishing nets or hooks. The project worked closely with local fishermen to develop a "scary bird decoy" to deter sea birds from fishing vessels.

Social inclusion and managing invasive alien species

(SEO / BirdLife)

Category: Socio-economic benefits

Led by the AMICA association, this project took a novel approach to eradicating invasive pampas grass from coastal Natura 2000 sites in Spain. By employing 22 people with disabilities, the project addressed the serious difficulties faced by people

This simple device effectively reduced the number of birds that were caught as by-catch.

Evaluate the dark side with the CaveLife app

(Peter Hofmann)

Category: Cross-border cooperation

The German Speleological Federation developed the CaveLife smart phone app which allows amateur cavers to contribute to the assessment of underground habitats and species by uploading data to a centralised database. This data can then be used by conservation authorities to make more informed decisions in their work.

with disabilities in entering the labour market, while also making strides in conservation efforts.

Flora—Empowering Conservation Entrepreneurs in Austria

(Blühendes Österreich – Marian)

Citizens' Award

Blühendes Österreich and Birdlife Austria secured long term management of high nature value farmland in Natura 2000 sites in Austria through the creation of specially-created partnerships with NGOs, communities and farmers. Over seven years, FLORA supported 28 nature conservation projects, resulting in the enlargement and improvement of 19 protected habitat types and hundreds of species.

The winning applications were of high quality and many of them represent several, if not all elements of good practice. However, the high quality was not limited to the winning applications. In the next section, applications from the 2022 edition 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 and participants / involving all stakeholders

The 2022 award saw a wide range of different types of applicants, with stakeholders and actors including private companies, NGOs, municipal authorities, conservation entrepreneurs and even media companies. The diversity of actors involved in Natura 2000 projects is an important contributing factor to the network's continued relevance and success. Furthermore, the pool of actors involved in the network grows every year, bringing fresh approaches and ensuring long-term success across small- and large-scale projects. In addition to the benefits to conservation, the involvement of varied participants means that projects can have wide-reaching social and economic benefits too.

- When it comes to awareness raising for the Natura 2000 network, working with new actors is a valuable means to reaching a wide audience. The successful partnership of the environmental NGO, Green Balkans, with three media partners (AD Darik, AD Economedia and BG TOP MUSIC EOOD BG TOP (HOBBY TV)) is a testament to this fact. Their *Communication* winning application Natura 2000 Bulgaria: New Horizons sought to raise awareness for the Natura 2000 network in Bulgaria through national events, audio and video productions, articles and webinars. Their efforts reached an estimated 4.5 million people, a staggering number considering this makes up roughly 62% of the population. Incorporating imagery of iconic key species, the project informed the public of the challenges faced by the nation's Natura 2000 network, and fostered a renewed national consciousness of the value of nature. This project was made possible by funding from LIFE and received the *2022 Natura 2000 Communication Award* for its accomplishments.

- Outreach does not however have to reach millions of people to have a significant impact. Engaging local stakeholders is a vital part of nature conservation, and educating young people about the value of conservation and protection can have long-lasting positive outcomes for the Nature 2000 network. The finalist We are ON the network (Natura 2000) project in Portugal sought to achieve just that. Its organisation of environmental education sessions for 3 500 Portuguese students, aimed to generate knowledge and excitement about the diversity and richness of Natura 2000 on the Portuguese mainland. The activities were tailored to various age groups and several hands-on science communication projects were developed in collaboration with the students. Indicative of the increased awareness results is the fact that after the project 43% of the students would like to know more about the Natura 2000 network in Portugal, and 35% would like to visit the sites.
  Another project that engaged young actors in its conservation activities was the application Restoration of an alluvial wetland as part of a multi-partner project from France. Students from an agricultural high school participated in willow tree planting activities and were taught about the environmental issues present in the region and the conservation work taking place on the Natura 2000 site. Such hands-on activities are instrumental in inspiring the next generation of conservationists and ensuring the success of the Natura 2000 network for the coming decades.

- Attracting new participants to conservation work can have significant social benefits, in addition to the environmental benefits. The Spanish winner of the *Socio-economic benefits* award category: <u>Social inclusion and managing invasive alien species,</u> has worked to alleviate the difficulties faced by people with disabilities when entering the labour market by creating 22 full time conservation field work positions. The LIFE-funded project aimed to eradicate the alien invasive pampas grass species from coastal Natura 2000 sites and replant native species. The project also had 40 volunteers with disabilities, which encouraged capacity building amongst the participants and demonstrated the impact they could have in conservation projects.

Figure 3: Workers removing invasive pampas grass in Cantabria's coastal Natura 2000 sites for the winning application Social inclusion and managing invasive alien species (SEO/Birdlife)

- In previous editions, applications from unexpected or non-traditional actors included lawyers and sports groups such as divers and boaters. These applications showed that conservation efforts are not limited to NGOs and government bodies and that the benefits of a healthy Natura 2000 network are valued beyond its environmental status. This year, two cave-based applications stood out. The German *Cross-border cooperation* winner <u>Evaluate the dark side with the CaveLife app</u> involved cavers in collecting valuable data in habitats which are otherwise seldom studied due to their inaccessibility.

  The finalist <u>Postojna Cave – Baby dragon guardians</u> application from Slovenia stood out as its main actor is a public limited company that manages the Postojna Cave Natura 2000 site. The site is home to the Olm (*Proteus anguinusor*) or blind cave salamander, which is endangered and faces degradation of its habitat due to agriculture and water treatment activities in the area. The Postojna Cave management company has implemented measures to raise awareness for this species and the negative impacts that groundwater pollution has on its habitats. It has also successfully created an artificial breeding environment where, in 2016, 21 five-year-old olms have been bred. This success received a great deal of media attention as the breeding of Olm's has never been observed before. Further efforts of the Postojna Cave management company have also led to a reduction the amount of fertiliser used by agriculture in the area, and stricter monitoring of the local sewage plant, to reduce polluting run-off in the caves. This project is evidence that a non-traditional actor such as a public limited company can significantly contribute to conservation efforts in the Natura 2000 network.

- Stakeholder involvement in conservation projects is vital, especially when the conservation project overlaps with the livelihoods of stakeholders. In the case of the winning *Marine Conservation* application <u>Fishermen and seabirds, allies for the sea</u> from Portugal, stakeholders were essential to trial and refine conservation measures to achieve the conservation goals. The project, with funding from the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF), sought to develop measures to reduce the number of seabirds that are caught in commercial fishing equipment, especially endangered species. This poses a significant threat to birds, and costs fishermen time and money. Any measures to mitigate this would therefore have benefits for both. Through working directly with fishermen, the project found that a device, dubbed the "scary bird decoy", was particularly effective at reducing the risk of birds being caught. Being easy to use and repair, and inexpensive to produce, the device was adopted by all the fishermen that participated in the trials and work is being done to expand its use further. A key outcome of this project is that the critically endangered species, the Balearic shearwater, is now far less threatened by fishing equipment. Furthermore, rather than impeding the livelihoods of fishermen the project actually reduced the negative impacts that bird by catch has for them.

  Another application that demonstrated excellent engagement of resource-users was the application from France <u>La charte Natura 2000: a tool for involving stakeholders in a Natura</u>

2000 site. This project, with the help of EAFRD funding, created a charter which encourages good practices in the contractual management at Natura 2000 sites in France, and offers memberships based on validation of these good practices. This approach is based on participatory principles, and involves all stakeholders from elected officials, farmers, foresters, hunters, fishermen, landowners, associations, users and experts.

• In addition to applications from non-traditional actors, the Award Secretariat is pleased to highlight applications that exhibit a unique mix of partners. Conservation work often depends on the actions of multiple people; projects with mixed partnerships thrive as a result of the inputs from varying fields of expertise. The successes of the Greek *Conservation on Land* winner Adaptation of Eleonora's falcon to climate change highlight this fact. The project, which was supported by LIFE funding, is the result of a partnership between a university, an NGO and a private consultancy, and comprised of three measures to improve the habitat of the Eleanora's falcon in Greece. The first measure consisted of a rat eradication campaign to reduce the impact of rat predation on the eggs of the Eleanora's falcon. The project successfully eradicated rats in 700 hectares of breeding habitats. The second measure addressed the falcon's high vulnerability to climate change by installing 1 000 artificial nests which provide thermoregulation to the eggs laid inside to combat loss to rising temperatures. Finally, the project purchased land and planted fruit trees to attract passerines and consolidate the food sources of the Eleanora's falcon. This three-pronged holistic approach to falcon conservation is undoubtably a result of the combined expertise of the three partners. Thanks to their efforts the breeding success of the Eleanora's falcon has risen by an astounding 42%.

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:

• Collaborations between conservation / environmental actors and media companies have proven to yield exemplary results in communications projects. By enlisting the reach and technical expertise of media companies, conservation campaigns can mainstream their message to reach a broader public. Furthermore, the communications know-how inherent in media companies can contribute to creating an impactful campaign. Extrapolating outwards, collaborations with non-conservation professionals brings in new skill sets which can potentially professionalise certain aspects of conservation actors' work and lead to innovative approaches to problems.

• Conservation projects should strive to have social and economic benefits wherever possible. By involving new actors, conservation projects can address social issues and achieve conservation goals simultaneously (in this edition, for example by involving people with learning difficulties in conservation work). The possibility of initiating these kinds of collaboration may not always be immediately obvious. Future applicants are encouraged to look for synergies with non-traditional partners and to look for ways to broaden the impact of their conservation projects, in the surrounding local area.

• Involving local stakeholders is key to developing viable and effective conservation programmes. Local stakeholders can offer immense place-specific knowledge which allows for guided and well-informed conservation action and a more holistic approach in the long-term. Furthermore, early involvement is likely to reduce conflict as local stakeholders are involved in the decision-making process and can help avoid unintended negative consequences of conservation work.

4.2 Planning sound monitoring from the start

The value of sound monitoring for conservation projects cannot be understated, as it allows assessment of performance over time and helps inform decision making further down the road. Adapting monitoring techniques to the social, spatial and temporal context of a project allows actors to better understand the impacts of measures taken and adapt them accordingly. In the previous edition, applications illustrated sound monitoring in various forms from analysis of genetic data to GIS data and even stakeholder knowledge of good practices. However, sound monitoring schemes should not only be reserved for conservation projects. Applications in all Award categories can be strengthened by the inclusion of well-developed monitoring system.

This edition, a *Communication* project stood out for its forward-thinking review system which will assess the effectiveness of its communications efforts for years to come. In the conservation field, applications dealt with bird conservation and monitored the outcomes with a variety of techniques including habitat tree mapping, bird survival and return rate after translocation, and population monitoring through monthly counting. Another project used a mix of qualitative and quantitative monitoring techniques to assess the effectiveness of bird deterrents on commercial fishing vessels to reduce bird by catch. Other projects implemented monitoring programmes to determine conservation status of sites and habitats.

- The finalist application in the *Conservation on land* category <u>Ville oak forests - for nature and people</u>, from Germany, is a great example of how sound multi-dimensional monitoring techniques can be used to evaluate the impacts of conservation actions. The project implemented a range of measures to restore effective management of oak-hornbeam forests in Germany, which are home to several endangered bird species including the middle-spotted woodpecker, black woodpecker and great crested newt. The measures included strictly protecting 10% of forest area; identifying and preserving 12 400 trees
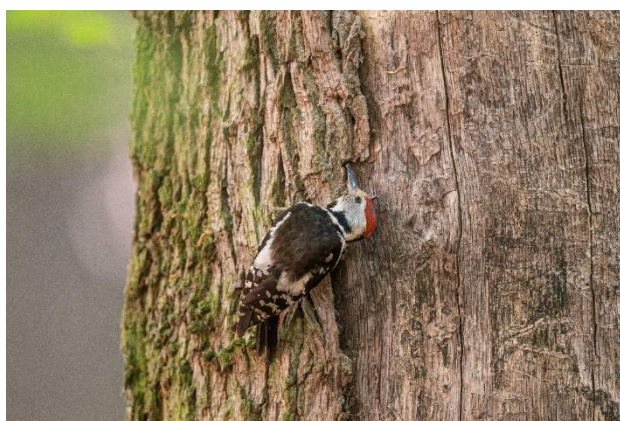

Figure 4: An endangered middle spotted woodpecker in the Ville oak forest (Klaus Striepen | Wald und Holz NRW)

  that serve as habitats for the endangered bird species; restoring natural hydrological conditions; converting large areas from commercial wood production back to oak hornbeam forest; and building ponds which serve as habitats for the great crested newt. For each of these measures, action-specific monitoring such as repeated mapping of habitat trees, measuring impact on soil moisture and vegetation, monitoring tree planting success and bird population development, were implemented. This monitoring will also continue after the project has been completed. The action-specific monitoring ensures that the implemented actions will continue to be effective, and helps inform any action that may need to be implemented in the future.

- Sound monitoring is especially important when testing new or less well-developed approaches to conservation, as was done in the Lithuanian finalist application <u>Saving Europe's rarest song bird through translocation</u>. This LIFE project aimed to strengthen the breeding population of the aquatic warbler, whose population has seen a significant decline globally and risks extinction. With only 100 breeding pairs in Europe, and its habitat threatened by traditional management and wetland draining, the goal of the project was to relocate nestlings from a stable population sourced in neighbouring countries to strengthen the breeding population at a Natura 2000 site in Lithuania. This method is considered the last resort in many cases and yet the results of the project's efforts exceeded all expectations. The project monitored the birds that were released for survival rate, and crucially, their return rate to the release site following winter migration. The results showed a 99% survival rate, and that 14-22% of the released birds returned to the new site, thus indicating that this method was successful and could be replicated in other countries.

Another example of how monitoring can be useful to developing conservation methods comes from the Bulgarian finalist application Protecting pelicans in the Lower Danube. This project, which also received funding from LIFE, based all its conservation actions around its own monitoring of pelicans in the Lower Danube basin. Monthly counts of the pelicans in the basin started after the end of a previous basin restoration project but found that none of the birds attempted to breed. In response, the project created artificial nesting sites for pelicans. Through trial and error, the team created numerous versions of the nesting sites before they were finally used by the pelicans. Later in the project another element was trialled, which consisted of decoy pelicans to make the nesting sites more attractive. Throughout this process, the activities of the pelicans were monitored from predefined vantage points to see if the platforms would be used for breeding. Given the success of the breeding platforms, the project will continue to monitor their condition with the expectation that they will have to be replaced every 7-8 years. The project will also continue its observational monitoring of the pelican population.

- Monitoring within a project often takes various forms, and applies both qualitative to quantitative methods. A winner that combined sound qualitative and quantitative monitoring was the winning Fishermen and seabirds, allies for the sea application in its development of measures to reduce risks of seabirds being caught in fishing equipment. The project quantitatively monitored the reductions in sea birds being caught in fishing gear, and also received qualitative feedback from the fishermen applying the measures which confirmed the results. The mixed methods monitoring painted a more holistic picture of what effect the measures were having.

- Data collection methods vary significantly, and innovative use of existing infrastructure can support applicant's efforts. A great example of this is the Italian applicant Surveillance of the conservation status of *Tursiops truncatus* in the Tuscan Archipelago. This applicant used fixed transects and ferry boats to carry out monitoring over a large area following a systematic research protocol over two five or six-year periods (2008-2012; 2013-2018) in order to evaluate the conservation status of the common bottlenose dolphin. The impressive temporal extent of the monitoring allowed the team to asses trends in dolphin population abundance, density, range, and more. The team concluded that the Natura 2000 waters are of great importance to the dolphins, and will continue monitoring these waters over the coming years.
  Another project covering a similarly wide area, albeit on land, was the application The Spanish Imperial Eagle thrives in protected and increasingly connected areas in Madrid. This application from Spain mapped habitat conservation status of forest area over five years, to allow better evaluation of the trends taking place. The project also monitored threatened flagship species such as the Iberian imperial eagle, using radio tracking and nest counting, in order to better understand behaviour patterns and migration routes. The results of the monitoring have allowed the project to implement targeted actions to better the conservation status of both habitats and species.

- Sound monitoring is however not only necessary in conservation projects, but also very relevant for projects focused on communication. A great example of an application that implemented a sound monitoring regime in a communications project comes from the finalist A local Natura 2000 coordinators' network in France. To ensure the longevity and effectiveness of the exhibitions organised in this project, the applicant set up an annual evaluation based on three indicators. The indicators included (1) the number of bookings for the exhibitions, (2) the number of reprints and/or creation of additional exhibition elements, and (3) feedback through a questionnaire from Natura 2000 network facilitators and organisations hosting the exhibition. The results of this annual evaluation are to be reviewed every three years and any necessary changes implemented. The exhibitions are also designed from the outset to maintain relevance over time, through inclusion of, for example, statistical data and date specific information. The strong monitoring framework and value placed on relevance over time make this application stand out.

Planning sound monitoring from the start - Recommendations for future applicants

Monitoring for projects on Natura 2000 sites does not just involve counting the number of protected species or habitat monitoring. While this remains essential, if the projects have other goals, these must also be measurable.

- Indicators chosen for monitoring should be Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Timely. Ideally data should be measured quantitatively so that changes can clearly be seen. However, quantitative data is not available for all measures (especially those related to social or cultural impacts of projects). In the absence of quantitative data, qualitative data is also acceptable. A combination of both will often improve a monitoring scheme and allow the measurement of aspects that would otherwise be ignored.

- Dividing indicators into Inputs, Outputs, Outcomes, Impact and Results may help to clarify what is measurable and what can only be estimated. This should help distinguish long term goals from shorter term outputs.

- The baselines situation should be described as accurately as possible from a number of different perspectives. While conservation goals are often the priority, in the case that a project also has social impacts or relies on stakeholders or target audiences to achieve its aims, these aspects must also be measured.

4.3 Promoting conceptual and technical innovation

Nature is in constant flux and so, likewise, conservation of the Natura 2000 network benefits from a continuous stream of conceptual and technical innovation. This year the Award received several applications that developed technically innovative approaches to bird and fish conservation, such as relocation methods of small song birds, and the implementation of patent pending fish ladders. Other applications created conceptually innovative communication strategies which helped reach a wider audience. One of these applications developed and published several retrospectives on a monthly basis, while another developed a phone app to directly communicate with the members of the public who frequented a protected area. Innovation was also evident in the Socio-economics benefits category, with one project developing a new assessment methodology for monitoring the effects of eco-tourism packages in the Mediterranean.

- The finalist application <u>Saving Europe's rarest songbird through translocation,</u> as recognised in the previous section, worked to increase the population of breeding pairs of the aquatic warbler in Lithuania. This LIFE project, in addition to its sound monitoring programme, is notable for its innovative use of bird translocation. This hands-on method involves moving nestlings from one breeding site to another, with the hopes of increasing the population size at the new site. This method had never been used for the aquatic warbler, and the team expected to test and refine the method. As the aquatic warbler is a migratory bird, the success of the method is measured by how many of

Figure 5: A tagged aquatic warbler part of the novel bird translocation effort of the Saving Europe's rarest songbird through translocation project (Žymantas Morkvėnas)

the nestlings return to the new site after winter migration, and the team hoped for at least one nestling to return. After the winter, the project recorded an astounding 22.5% return rate, exceeding expectations and indicating that the innovative translocation method had been effective. The success of this new strategy can help other projects around the world achieve similar results.

Another project that applied an innovative approach to bird conservation is the application <u>Vulture-tracking as a hands-on tool for wildlife conservation in the Balkans.</u> This LIFE project monitored Cinereous and Griffon vultures across the borders of Greece and Bulgaria. The project used telemetry data from vultures tagged with transmitters to map the movement of the birds and quickly identify poisoning incidents as well as other causes of death. This data allowed local authorities in each country to intervene quickly to address poisoning threats, and provided basis for opinions submitted to relevant authorities on the threat of windfarms in Natura 2000 sites to vultures. This example illustrates how innovative data collection can help cross border cooperation and lead to more effective decision making.

Another application that was innovative in its approach to species conservation was the application <u>A new town hall open to the public and... to bats!</u>. This project developed techniques that allowed a bat colony to coinhabit an old building which was being renovated to house the Cassagnoles municipality town hall in France. The project is an inspirational example of co-existence between humans and nature.

- This edition, two projects stood out for their application of innovative approaches to migratory fish conservation. Fish migration routes up river are frequently blocked by dams, which necessitates the building of fish ladders or similar infrastructure to allow fish to pass. While many examples of this exist, the finalist application <u>Protecting migratory fish in Spain and Portugal</u> tailored a patent-pending fish ladder system on the Miño river. These ladders were designed to

be modular and detachable. The ladders made 44 km of the Miño river accessible to migratory fish species and improved the conservation status of 9027 hectares of river habitat. The project also developed better river management standards and fishing regulations to ensure the long-term recovery of the Miño river watershed and its migratory fish inhabitants. This example goes to show that even established conservation practices can benefit from innovation.

The second interesting example of migratory fish conservation comes from the finalist application Improving the Pärnu river basin for its migratory fish from Estonia. This application stood out due to the immense scale of the project, and the effectiveness of its achievements. Rather than building fish ladders to reconnect 3300 km of the Pärnu river basin, the project instead removed the two large dams and a further seven fish barriers that were blocking fish migration. This highly innovative approach reframes conservation by placing nature's needs over human infrastructure. In order to remove these damns, Estonia's environmental ministry bought the dams from private owners. This simplified the decision to demolish the dams completely rather than installing other fish pass systems. This approach also proved to have benefits for the other species besides migratory fish as the demolition created a semi artificial rapid habitat. The reconnection of the river basin has unlocked the production potential of between 45000 to 58000 young fish a year and is seen as an excellent example of de-damming projects in Europe.

- While science communication can be challenging, informing the public of work undertaken in the Natura 2000 network can foster appreciation and respect for the conservation efforts and lead the public to be more mindful when interacting with the network. In Normandy, France, the Natura 2000 network is relatively unknown to the public, despite making up 7% of the region's area. To inform the public about the activities in the network, the finalist A Natura 2000 retrospective in Normandy came up with an innovative communication approach. The communication consisted of retrospectives in a calendar format, with 3 to 4 topics per month. These retrospectives detailed the major activities carried out over the Natura 2000 sites in an accessible way, with the target to reach a broad audience and local stakeholders. Using imagery of key recognisable species, the retrospectives generated knowledge exchange between stakeholders, and presented the vast Normandy Natura 2000 network as a cohesive whole. This project illustrates the role innovative communications strategies can play in improving the accessibility of conservation work.

  Another interesting communications finalist is the French Nav&Co: a phone app on marine environments for boater's application. Human recreational activities in protected areas often threaten animals and plants as there is insufficient knowledge of the relevant protection regulations. To combat this, this LIFE project created a phone app which provided French boaters with information over marine biodiversity and habitats in a user friendly and visually appealing format. The information is superimposed on nautical maps and uses the boaters' phone location. The app is free to use and has immense educational value. The adoption of the app has been a success with 7000 people having downloaded it and providing positive feedback, illustrating that this communications approach is valuable. The app will be rolled out nationally in France in 2023.

  Like the Nav&Co app, the Marine Analyst platform developed by the French Marine protected bulletin(s) application aims to enhance access to marine data. This information is also displayed over maps and uses an innovative web-based data mining platform which compiles and displays marine data across the Natur1a 2000 network. The data is homogenised to provide marine protected area managers with comparable and reproducible information at an EU scale. The platform aims to be a one stop shop for site data to facilitate management in marine protected areas.

- This edition, one application particularly stood out for its innovative socio-economic achievements. The finalist application Promoting ecotourism in Mediterranean protected areas developed ecotourism alternatives to mass tourism in the Mediterranean. This Interreg-funded project with partners from Italy, France, Croatia, Greece, Spain and Albania developed the MEET Standard, which is an assessment methodology that can be used to monitor the positive and negative socio-economic impacts of ecotourism packages. According to the applicants, there is no other tool like it and it has immense potential for improving the sustainability and quality of the ecotourism packages. These improvements will translate into higher market value

of the ecotourism packages as tourists are becoming increasingly ecologically minded. The socio-economic assessment tool will be built into an online platform which will be useful to ensure the replicability of assessments across all tourism packages. To ensure long term success, the project is also setting up Local Ecotourism Clusters, a Regional Ecotourism Consortium, and the Mediterranean Ecotourism Consortium. So far, 100 service providers have improved the sustainability of their tourism products because of the packages created by the project.

Promoting conceptual and technical innovation - Recommendations for future applicants

While many conservation approaches have been tried and tested and are well understood, innovation is often needed to tailor to methods for site or purpose specific needs.

- Innovation can be fostered by the involvement of non-traditional stakeholders who can provide new perspectives on how to address the problem at hand. The involvement of media companies in a communications application this year proved highly effective in broadening outreach as the new partners brought to the table expertise and technical infrastructure which would otherwise have been lacking.

- Technical innovation is often necessary to adapt methods to site specific uses. Site specific adaptation often involves optimisation of existing methods and applicants are encouraged to work on finding the most efficient means to achieve their goals. Sometimes the best method hasn't been developed yet and the optimisation process may lead applicants to it.

- Applications this edition demonstrated that tailor-made apps are an immensely valuable tool for projects in the Natura 2000 network. These apps can serve as a technically and financially inexpensive means through which to involve the public. The involvement of citizen scientists, for example, can be made possible thanks to publicly available apps, as demonstrated by the Cave-life application.

4.4 Mobilising a wide range of resources

This edition, many applications mobilised a wide range of resources to achieve their conservation goals. Whether it was funding, communications resources, or even in the case of one application this year, legal support, employing a range of resources is often necessary to ensure the long-term success of projects on the Natura 2000 network. As in previous years, many applications in this edition benefited from initial support from LIFE, as well as EAFRD and Interreg funds. Aside from financial support, applications employed the help of volunteers and citizen scientists to achieve their conservation goals.

- The Citizens Award winner <u>FLORA: Empowering Conservation Entrepreneurs in Austria</u> is highlighted for its impressive resource mobilisation to protect priority habitats such as grasslands and meadows in Austria. The project was partially funded through the EAFRD, and raised money from various other sources including municipalities, companies and own resources. With its funds, the project is financially and technically supporting 28 conservation projects over seven years, and achieved its aim of securing long term management of high nature value farmland in Natura 2000 sites in Austria. The technical support provided ranged from conservation advice, to press and media work, to evaluating outcomes and

Figure 6: Young conservation entrepreneurs participating in the protection of priority grassland habitats (Blühendes Österreich -Marian)

leveraging other public and private partners. The time frame and scale of the assistance provided highlights the impressive resource mobilisation that was undertaken by the project. The application also included support in fundraising and third-party funding, which helps the projects it financed to be viable in the long term.

- As previously mentioned in the *Attracting new actors and participants / involving all stakeholders* section, the winner <u>New horizons for Natura 2000 in Bulgaria</u> is notable for its use of a unique range of communication resources to achieve its aims. The LIFE project produced a range of audio and video media as well as articles and webinars, in order to spread awareness of the Natura 2000 network in Bulgaria. The content was distributed through online livestreams, daily and weekly newspapers, and even a YouTube channel. The staggering number of viewers that were reached is indicative of the success of the versatile communication approach. It demonstrates that, particularly in communication, mobilising a wide range of resources can be a highly effective means of disseminating information.
Another project that should be noted for its mobilisation of communication resources is the <u>Promoting Natura 2000 - Ranger as a mediator between nature, authority and citizen</u> application from Germany. This EAFRD funded project is recognised for its efforts in bringing the public, land owners and tenants closer to the local Natura 2000 sites. The project employed rangers to act as ambassadors for the sites, who served as intermediaries to quickly resolve any conflicts that arose with stakeholders as a result of conservation actions. These rangers also guided tours, canoe outings and bike trips, and erected information boards in the Natura 2000 sites to communicate their value. The project also notably mobilised online resources to educate the public by developing a website with up-to-date information on events, management activities and news, The website also features information on habitats, plants and species in the sites.

- The mobilisation of legal resources in the Natura 2000 network is necessary sometimes to reduce threats to protected species. In its work to guarantee the successful reintroduction of brown bears, the Spanish application <u>Enhancement and conservation of the brown bear in the Pyrenees</u> is a great example of how legal resources can be used in conservation work. The

reintroduction of brown bears in the Pyrenees has proven to be challenging as conflicts between bears and humans have led to a resurgence of anti-bear sentiment in local communities. In 2020, after the death of a bear named Cachou under suspicious circumstances, the project employed lawyers to seek legal action over the suspected poisoning of the protected animal. The criminal investigation into Cachou's death was the first of its kind in Spain and drew a great deal of media attention. It demonstrates that conservation work may benefit from legal resources, where appropriate, to achieve specific aims. In addition to its legal campaigning, the project had developed workshops and expositions to educate the public about the bears to help improve local perceptions about bear reintroductions in the area.

- This edition, several applications enlisted citizen scientists to help them achieve their conservation goals. Citizen scientists are members of the public who contribute to conservation efforts as it overlaps with hobbies and leisure activities. A great example of how mobilising citizens can be useful for conservation efforts comes from the finalist application RECONNECT for marine protected areas. This project, with partners in Bulgaria, Cyprus and Greece, trained citizen scuba divers in a monitoring protocol, which allowed for a continuous, time-series monitoring of habitat types. Divers were also trained in the removal of invasive fish species. This mobilisation of citizens to actively participate in conservation action had direct positive benefits for the project area and coincided with the interests of patrons who enjoyed diving at the Natura 2000 site.
Another example of a similar nature comes from the *Cross-border cooperation winner* Evaluate the dark side with the CaveLife app. This project, with funding from Interreg, developed a phone app which allows amateur cavers to collect and upload data on protected cave habitats and cave-dwelling bat species to a centralised database. This information can then be used to develop more informed site management. The app facilitates in situ data collection and allows citizen scientists all over Europe to contribute with data on their local cave systems, which can then be used by conservation authorities. While currently only available in German, French and English versions are being developed to widen the scope of the project. The amazing 230 000 records that have been recorded over 12 000 sites illustrate the value citizen scientists can bring to conservation projects.

- Applications this year also engaged volunteers to assist on Natura 2000 projects. The benefit of employing volunteers in conservation projects is often synergetic, with volunteers learning a great deal about the Natura 2000 network as well as developing hands on experience, and conservation projects having the resources to achieve their aims. An example of this comes from the finalist Protecting the Mediterranean loggerhead sea turtle. This application has been working with volunteers for over 30 years to protect loggerhead sea turtles' nests on the coast of Greece. The project has had over 500 volunteers over the years, who have been involved in recording nests, quantifying threats, and taking preventative measures to protect newly hatched turtles. The impressive scale of the volunteer programme has allowed the project to implement labour intensive field work in a highly cost-effective manner.

Mobilising a wide range of resources - Recommendations for future applicants

While monetary resources are necessary for all projects, applicants from this edition demonstrated that making use of a wide range of resources can help develop highly successful projects.

- Citizen science is an excellent tool for win-win situations: Natura 2000 managers get much needed data, while the public gets more recognition for the value of its leisure activities and Natura 2000 becomes better known in wider public.

- Beyond citizen science, active involvement of the public in conservation projects, such as through volunteering programmes, can be another highly cost-effective source of support, and allows members of the public to have hands-on experience in projects that are valuable to them. Volunteering programmes have proven to facilitate a long-life span for projects in the Natura 2000 network.

- Willingness to identify and mobilise new types of resources is highly encouraged. The employment of legal resources by an applicant in this edition to fortify the conservation of bears in Spain, as well as a partnership with media companies in a communications project in Bulgaria, illustrated that seeking new resources can significantly strengthen achievements.

- EU funds such as LIFE remain an important funding source and the European Agricultural Rural Development Fund is often used. Other sources such as INTERREG are less commonly employed but are also very appropriate funding sources for Natura 2000 activities.

4.5 Knowledge sharing and peer exchange

Knowledge exchange in conservation allows good practices to be shared between projects, actors and sites. Sharing these good practices allows the results of one project to be achieved by other projects, and thereby to build a stronger and more effective Natura 2000 network. This principle does not just apply to technical conservation practices, but also to good practices in communication and outreach. Knowledge sharing with a wider audience is important as it helps engage the public in conservation work, and projects with strong communication aspects are also recognised in this section. Whether it be communication strategies or technical know-how, almost half of all the applications in the 2022 edition demonstrated excellent knowledge sharing and peer exchange. Additionally, many projects engaged in knowledge sharing across local, national and international scales, which broadens the reach of the Natura 2000 network.

- A prime example of knowledge sharing across borders is exhibited by the finalist application RECONNECT for marine protected areas. This Interreg project created a transnational network of marine governmental and non-governmental organisations which are involved in management of marine Natura 2000 sites. The goal of this network is to share best practices in marine management and develop decision making process tools, to be applied at three Natura 2000 sites across Greece, Cyprus and Bulgaria. The benefits of such a knowledge-sharing network are that site managers can work together to create more efficient and accurate management methods. In the case of this project, the methodologies ranged from highly technical ecological and genetic means of biodiversity identification and conservation status assessment to more community-based approaches such as involving citizen scientists in the removal of invasive fish

Figure 7: The CaveLife app being used in the field to add species to a shared database (Peter Hofmann)

species. The information generated through this project is available for free online, which further solidifies this project as an example of outstanding knowledge sharing and peer exchange.

- Coordination and peer exchange between Natura 2000 sites in the same country can also have significant conservation benefits for species and habitats that span over multiple sites. In France, the finalist application A local Natura 2000 coordinators' network in France developed a network of 32 site coordinators who define the most relevant common projects for the network and cooperate to develop synergetic management plans. This effort entails sharing knowledge between sites and allows coordinators to identify common needs across the sites. The network identified communication about the country's Natura 2000 network as a whole as an overarching need, and as a result, developed an exhibition which show-cased biodiversity protection across the sites, and promoted the connections between plants and animal species in relation to human activities. The network will continue to work together to achieve common goals and strengthen France's Natura 2000 network. Another example of effective knowledge exchange comes from the project Life+ Alliance for Nardus grasslands: Success through consistent cooperation! This application from Germany, which received funding from LIFE and the EAFRD, hosted technical exchanges of best practices developed by the project, through on-site visits and workshops. These activities have helped share the knowledge created by the project and aid in the conservation of similar sites.

- This year, two applications developed phone apps to facilitate knowledge sharing and peer exchange with the public for the benefit of conservation work. The phone apps respectively simplified conservation communication and the involvement of citizen scientists in achieving
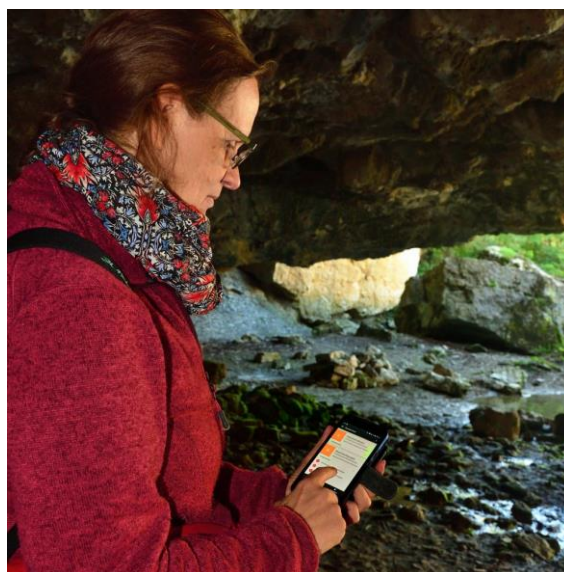
conservation aims. The first was the finalist <u>Nav&Co: a phone app on marine environments for boater's</u> project developed a mobile app which notifies boaters off the coast of France when they enter marine protected areas. This project, which is described in more detail in the *Promoting innovation* chapter, illustrates how knowledge sharing through phone apps can reach a broad yet targeted audience, and can simply conservation efforts. The second example comes from the winner <u>Evaluate the dark side with the CaveLife app</u>. The practice of cave monitoring and underground habitat conservation in Europe is currently limited by the number of professional experts available. In order to address this issue, the project application developed an app which allows amateur cave enthusiasts and experts to record data about caves they are familiar with in a standardised format to a central database. This data can then be used by nature conservation authorities, allowing them to make more informed decisions and providing them with a range of data which would otherwise not be available. The app already has 230 000 records in over 12 000 sites, and is used by hundreds of speleologists who have been trained how to use the app through EU-wide workshops. This app demonstrates that peer exchange is not limited to conservationists, but that the public can play an active role in conservation efforts. It is evident that the CaveLife and the Nav&Co app are examples of innovative knowledge sharing and peer exchange with a wider audience.

- This edition also received applications which employed more traditional means of knowledge sharing and peer exchange. The application <u>Restoration and Management of Coastal Dunes—Guincho/Cresmina dune-field</u>, undertook a vast range of actions to conserve a dune field on the Portuguese coast, including installing fencing, signage and controlling invasive plant species. The project is however highlighted here for its knowledge sharing and exchange with the public as well as other actors. In order to communicate with the public, the project established an interpretation centre which houses an exhibition explaining the value of the dune field and offers guided tours and activities with volunteers. The educational effect of this exhibition is intended to reduce the negative impacts of leisure activities on the dune field. The project also organised several peer exchanges events with universities and NGOs in order to share the lessons learnt from the project. These events consisted of training sessions in best practices, and even study visits to the dune field to teach students more about the function and benefits of the site. These activities are great examples of how knowledge sharing, and peer exchange can mitigate negative effects in a conservation area, as well as share the good practices developed.

Knowledge sharing and peer exchange - Recommendations for future applicants

Facilitating communication with the public, and exchange between peers and projects is valuable for sharing good practices and for their implementation.

- From a project's outset - a dedicated platform for exchanges with key stakeholders or other interest groups, which may include technical exchanges, site visits or other can be very helpful. Exchange of know-how which is "built-into" the core of the project has far greater value than implementing sporadic technical exchanges to meet relevant requirements.

- The promotion of results or data through inter-professional, inter-site and / or international exchange can help to transfer benefits to other areas through lessons learnt.

- One good approach is to make knowledge accessible and enjoyable to the public through innovative platforms. Phone applications have proven successful due to their low cost, wide reach and the possibility to tailor functions.

- Citizen science stands out as an excellent tool for knowledge exchange with the members of the public most closely involved with a Natura site. Information can be disseminated to help reduce impacts of leisure activities, and members of the public can contribute actively to conservation efforts. Good exchange also

lowers the risk of conflicts as well as promoting better knowledge of and acceptance of Natura 2000 among a wider public.

4.6 Perseverance

A long-term commitment is often necessary to achieve conservation goals, and this commitment requires perseverance. The Awards celebrate applications that, through their long-standing commitments, have persevered for the benefit of the Natura 2000 network. This year, four applications stood out for their long-term commitment to their conservation aims. These applications addressed a range of topics from enhancing the largest population of loggerhead turtles in the Mediterranean, to restoring a river ecosystem, to conservation of brown bears in the Pyrenes and reintroducing vultures to Natura 2000 sites in Bulgaria.

- Of the applications received in this edition, the application with the longest running activities and an outstanding example of the perseverance criterion is the finalist Protecting the Mediterranean loggerhead sea turtle. This applicant has been systematically protecting loggerhead turtles' nests in Greece from threats such as trampling, attacks by dogs and foxes, and tide inundation since 1992. Furthermore, efforts are made to protect baby turtles from disorientation from light sources to increase their chances of reaching the water. Since it takes 14-16 years for logger head turtles to reach sexual maturity, the results of the conservation efforts which were first introduced in 1992 could only truly be appreciated in 2006, 14 years after the start of the efforts. The results were worth the wait, with a reported 144% increase in nests and breeding female loggerhead turtles since the turtles reached sexual maturity in 2006. It requires a great deal of patience and perseverance to work on these time scales, and for that this applicant is notable. Another application which stood out for its long-term commitment was the Enhancement and conservation of the brown bear in the Pyrenees. This project's applicant has worked for 25 years to ensure the successful reintroduction of brown bears in the Pyrenees. The dedication to the work has had significant positive effects as the population of brown bears has steadily increased over the project's lifetime.

- For over a decade the finalist Reintroducing iconic vultures in Bulgaria application has worked to restore the Griffon and Cinereous vulture populations in the country. Due to habitat degradation and deliberate poisoning the populations of both birds had significantly declined, with the Cinereous vulture considered extinct. With financial support mainly from LIFE, the project undertook a reintroduction programme, developed an anti-poisoning communication campaign and an early warning system, built artificial nests, reduced risks of electrocution on power lines, and encouraged local involvement through awareness raising. The successful establishment of 11 new Griffon vulture colonies with a combined 150 breeding pairs, and the successful reintroduction of the Cinereous vulture after being declared extinct 36 years earlier, highlight the value of perseverance in conservation work.

Figure 8: Dalmatian Pelicans on a breeding platform set up by the finalist project Protecting pelicans in the Lower Danube at the Martvo Marsh (Svilen Cheshmedzhiev - BSPB)

- Another Bulgarian finalist which is an excellent example of perseverance is the Protecting pelicans in the Lower Danube application. This application which included activities from a project, in recent years with financial support from LIFE, which has worked for the last 10 years to protect pelicans in the Lower Danube river basin. The project has created natural and artificial breeding habitats for the rare Dalmatian pelican (*Pelecanus crispus*) whose population in Bulgaria was not secure, having been restricted to a single lake due to floodplain destruction. The activities of the project included restoring the Lower Danube wetland ecosystem and creating artificial breeding sites for the pelicans. After four years of work, the project recorded

its first breeding pair in the project area in 2016. In 2019 the scope of the project was expanded and the pelican population has seen a doubling in breeding pairs. The new breeding pairs are spread over several colonies and the pelican population is now regarded as stable. These results highlight the fact that while conservation takes time, the rewards are worth it.

Perseverance - Recommendations for future applicants

Time and resources are key indicators of perseverance, and successful projects are able to maintain protection and conservation commitments over time with the resources available.

- Projects that work with limited resources and are able to achieve results despite the challenges. NGOs have often proven to make these kinds of projects work, as illustrated by the projects highlighted in this year's edition,

- Perseverance is related to financial resilience: long-term presence means that one is able to adjust scope and volume of activities based on available funds which is something that fluctuates over time. As mentioned in previous sections, working extensively with volunteers may allow applicants to be more resilient in the long term.

5 Outlook

The catalogue of applications 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 and address the site-specific issues they are dealing with.

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 or stakeholders**. This is inevitable and not a problem as such. However, it is a point that applicants could use to their advantage – applications from less well-represented Member States, applications to the "smaller" categories (Socio-economic benefits, Cross-border cooperation, Marine conservation), or applications from less usual applicants, would have a comparative advantage. Applicants could "think outside the box" when considering which aspects of their activities could be the focus of an application, and under which category it should be submitted. For example, a project that appears to be a classic conservation project may turn out to be a highly successful socio-economic benefits application, or to have stand-out communications achievements if the activities in these categories are more innovative. In the 2022 round, there were many applications that could have been submitted under several categories and careful thought about the choice from the start can result in a better-written and more successful application.

- Applicants should also include all actors or stakeholders involved in the implementation of their activities. A range of partners illustrates good cooperation and outreach. Further, the inclusion of unusual partners is always an advantage as it is still relatively uncommon in the Award. Though the majority of the applications are submitted by professional conservation bodies, **applications from non-conservation professionals and groups** are encouraged, whether they are large private entities or small stakeholder groups. Applications for these actors contribute to confirming the diversity of the Natura 2000 network.

- Some of this edition's most successful Award applications focused on the **social and cultural values of a Natura 2000 site** to local communities as well as associated **economic benefits**. Demonstrating how activities have brought about socio-economic benefits or have helped to solve conflicts could improve the chances of an application being successful. A significant number of applications have focused on 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. Applicants could also 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. Applications could also bring forward additional secondary benefits linked to key environmental challenges, such as climate change. Relatively few applications so far have made these connections in a meaningful way. While there is no category specifically for such aspects, including them in an application would be an advantage in the evaluation process.

- 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 undertaken and the impact (results) on the targeted Natura 2000 site(s)**. Applicants' work often focuses on Natura 2000 sites which are also nationally protected; in these cases, the fact that the site is also designated according to European criteria should be made clear in the descriptions of their activities to the public in case they are submitting an Award application. 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 when writing their application.

- The value of the **LIFE financial instrument** was reiterated in this edition's applications. The effectiveness of LIFE projects is clearly reflected in the number of finalists and winners receiving

LIFE funding. Nonetheless, applications that are funded in other ways including 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. This year several smaller applications proved this point. Other EU funding sources such as the EAFRD and INTERREG are also appropriate for activities related to Natura 2000.

- **National managing authorities** have a role to play in promoting Natura 2000 and more specifically in encouraging potentially interesting applicants to apply for an Award and thus represent the activities carried out in their country. While some countries consistently submit many applications, in others very few are received despite interesting activities being carried out. A good example of a member state particularly active in this respect is France where Aten, the Natura 2000 network[2], supports exchange on Natura 2000 and the national Natura 2000 prize has a similar aim to the European Award. This year, a local network of Natura 2000 actors was a finalist application.

The Natura 2000 Award continues to be an excellent means for promoting activities related to Natura 2000. Sharing good practice through an application to the Award 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 to every applicant whose achievements is 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 applying to the next edition.

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[2] Aten was also a Natura 2000 Award finalist in 2016 https://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/natura2000/awards/previous-editions/2016-edition/finalists/projects/2144.html

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