EU4GREEN

THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE EU NATURE DIRECTIVES: A MANUAL FOR THE WESTERN BALKANS

EU4Green: Support the implementation of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans

Work Package WP1-16: Integrated Management of Floodplains in Protected Areas

Deliverable WP1-16_Del-2 Guidance document on EU Nature Directives Implementation for the Western Balkans

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CONTENT

ABBREVIATIONS AND GLOSSARY

Term/abbreviation	Explanation
AA	Appropriate Assessment (see chapter 3.5.3)
Biogeographical regions	Geographical regions of the EU, characterised by their vegetation, climate and ecology. For more information, see chapter 2.4.
Birds Directive, BD	Directive 2009/147/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 30 November 2009 on the conservation of wild birds (2009/147/EC _ ex 79/409)
CBD	Convention on Biological Diversity
CJEU	Court of Justice of the European Union
Degree of Conservation	Localised equivalent of the Conservation Status of a species or habitat type
EC	European Commission
ETC BE	European Topic Center Biodiversity and Ecosystems
EU	European Union
Favourable Reference Value, FRV incl. FRA, FRP, FRR	Favourable Reference Values are thresholds used to determine if a species' or habitat type's Conservation Status (CS) can be considered as 'FV Favourable'. Applied for Favourable Reference Area (FRA), Favourable Reference Population (FRP) and Favourable Reference Range (FRR). For more information, see chapter 3.3.2.2.
(Favourable) Conservation Status	(Favourable) Conservation Status of a species or habitat type. The Conservation Status is only considered as 'FV Favourable' when all four parameters specified in chapter 2.3 The Favourable Conservation Status are met, or three are met and one is unknown. Otherwise, the Conservation Status can be classified as 'U1 Unfavourable-Inadequate' and 'U2 Unfavourable-Bad'
FV Favourable	See (F)CS and FRV
GAWB	Green Agenda for the Western Balkans
GIS	Geographic Information System
Habitats Directive, HD	Council Directive 92/43/EEC of 21 May 1992 on the conservation of natural habitats and of wild fauna and flora (92/43/EEC)
IAS	Invasive Alien Species

IBA	Important Bird Area
Marine regions	Geographic areas of the seas surrounding Europe, of high relevance to the EU in the context of the Marine Strategy Framework Directive, but also the Habitats Directive. For more information, see chapter 2.4.
Nature Restoration Regulation, NRR	Regulation (EU) 2024/1991 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 June 2024 on nature restoration and amending Regulation (EU) 2022/869 (Text with EEA relevance)
pSCI	Proposed Site of Community Importance to the Natura 2000 network based on the Habitats Directive, not yet confirmed or designated. For more information, see chapter 3.4.1.1.
RCC	Regional Cooperation Council
SAC	Special Area of Conservation, designated under the Habitats Directive and part of the Natura 2000 network. For more information, see chapter 3.4.1.3.
SAP	Species Action Plan
SCI	Site of Community Importance, part of the Natura 2000 network based on the Habitats Directive but not yet designated as protected area. For more information, see chapter 3.4.1.2.
SDF	Standard Data Form
Site-specific conservation objectives, SSCOs	Conservation objectives of a Natura 2000 site. For more information, see chapter 3.5.1.
SPA	Special Protected Area, designated under the Birds Directive and part of the Natura 2000 network. For more information, see chapter 3.4.2.
Target features	Species and habitat types protected by the Birds and Habitats Directive
U1 Unfavourable-Inadequate	See (F)CS
U2 Unfavourable-Bad	See (F)CS
WB6	Western Balkans Six (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo[1], Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia)

[1] This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and it is in line with UNSCR 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Nature protection acquis in the EU

The Western Balkans are an internationally recognized biodiversity hotspot. Their pristine forests, mountain ranges, lakes, rivers and wetlands, extensively farmed agricultural lands and marine treasures of the Adriatic Sea, with their unique species richness and habitat variety, are main assets of the region. However, these biodiversity assets face growing threats from anthropogenic pressures such as land-use changes, climate change, pollution, invasive species, and governance challenges. Efforts to counter biodiversity loss are underway at many levels. The Green Agenda for the Western Balkans (GAWB) and the related Sofia (2020) and Brdo (2021) Declarations provide key momentum. The EU Green Deal and its accompanying Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 offer overarching strategic guidance to EU Member States and serve as benchmark for countries seeking EU membership. This provides a historic window of opportunity for sustainable development.

Biodiversity protection and conservation represent an intrinsic part of EU environment policy and are codified in the *acquis communautaire* in form of several directives and regulations. With respect to this guidance paper, the EU Nature Directives are of the utmost importance. They aim to conserve biodiversity and protect natural habitats and species across the EU, with the overall objective to maintain, or restore, them to a Favourable Conservation Status (FCS). The sustainable use of natural resources and the prevention of habitat destruction are also included. All Member States are legally bound to transpose, implement and enforce its two key directives, the Birds Directive and the Habitats Directive.

While being a strong tool for nature conservation in the EU, experience has shown that the implementation by Member States is highly difficult due to the complexity of both directives. Precise transposition and implementation are required, although the Nature Directives leave some flexibility for interpretation. Yet, inaccurate transposition and implementation often lead to non-compliance with certain articles and many reported breaches and infringements being referred to the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU). In consequence, the Nature Directives are considered as two of the most difficult pieces of EU acquis.

1.2. Relevance for the Western Balkans

There is general agreement that the Western Balkans (WB6) are part of the European family. The EU is fully committed to the EU integration of the Western Balkans, which is a strategic objective uniting the whole region and the EU[2]. It is therefore clear that the EU will accompany all six potential accession candidates in the region on their path towards the EU. The WB6 – Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo[1], Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia – are in different stages of the accession process. A prerequisite is that they bring

[2] European External Action Service (EEAS), 2025. The EU and the Western Balkans: towards a common future. Strategic Communications. [Last access: 04/11/2025] Available at: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-and-western-balkans-towards-common-future_en

their national legislation in line with the *acquis communautaire,* so that the aims and objectives of EU law are codified in national laws. Transposition and implementation are complex issues, but however difficult it might be, it is one of basic pre-accession obligations of every Candidate economy. The laws on nature protection are directly affected, but other sectoral laws must equally be harmonised, including the introduction of the Appropriate Assessment (Art. 6.3 and 6.4 of the Habitats Directive) in all governmental and public sector documents, considering the SEA Directive 2001/42/EC (Strategic Environmental Assessment) and the EIA Directive 2011/92/EU (Environmental Impact Assessment).

The WB6 strive to implement the EU Nature Directives. The transposition of the Nature Directives is quite advanced in the region, but implementation and enforcement are partially weak due to several obstacles. It is important to note that the implementation is not limited to establishing Natura 2000 sites, for which first proposals are developed in several countries, but also include the management of these sites, establishing a monitoring on national level and introducing strict species protection. Until now, most of supporting activities funded by the EU and other international donors focused exclusively on Natura 2000 and related activities; the other duties have been paid little or no attention so far.

Successful and complete implementation will support and enhance the ongoing conservation efforts of both the WB6 and the EU, providing new opportunities for conserving the protected species and habitat types. In addition, the establishment of the Natura 2000 network in the WB6 will increase the protected area surface on the entire continent. Currently, EU legislation protects over 27,000 Natura sites, encompassing 18.6 % of the EU territory and 9 % of its surrounding maritime zones[3].

On the other hand, the Nature Directives set out a holistic, consistent and effective approach to nature conservation. Best practice examples from existing Member States are readily available. The Nature Directives provide substantial contributions to tackling key pressures and threats to biodiversity, which are also affecting the WB6. Within the EU, the directives increased stakeholder awareness and engagement, knowledge of the targeted species and habitat types, and funding for nature[4]. All these effects would most definitely contribute to safeguarding the precious biodiversity of the WB6.

This also applies to the most recent addition to the EU Nature Directives, the Nature Restoration Regulation (NRR). The NRR was approved in June 2024 and is a key element of the EU Biodiversity Strategy. It sets binding targets to restore degraded ecosystems, particularly those with high relevance to climate protection and disaster risk reduction, and it aims to halt species extinction and promote healthy ecosystems. It complements the EU Nature Directives as it provides a concise timeline for reaching its targets.

[3] European Environment Agency, 2018. Natura 2000 Barometer. Dashboard. Last modified on 04 Apr 2025. [Last access: 04/11/2025] Available at: https://www.eea.europa.eu/en/analysis/maps-and-charts/natura-2000-barometer-dashboards

[4] European Commission, 2016. Fitness Check of the EU Nature Legislation (Birds and Habitats Directive). Commission Staff Working Document. SWD(2016) 472 final. [Last access: 04/11/2025]. Available at: https://circabc.europa.eu/ui/group/3f466d71-92a7-49eb-9c63-6cb0fadf29dc/library/b5ef63e5-8649-48b4-9f3b-53f15ffc5708/

1.3. Aim and use of this document

The purpose of this document is to provide detailed information about the structure and content of the Directives and step-by step guidance for the full implementation of the Habitats and Birds Directives. Particularly synergies between separate steps and provisions within the Nature Directives are highlighted. Thereby, this document is intended to support employees of competent authorities, nature protection agencies, NGOs, consultants and biologists working in the field of nature conservation in implementing the Nature Directives. It aims to foster a deep understanding of the EU Nature Directives and their requirements.

The document is organised in three parts: The first part (chapter 2) provides an in-depth introduction to the Nature Directives, including their objectives, their implementation logic and the scales on which they act. The second part (chapter 3) includes an implementation checklist and leads through all interconnected steps and general duties laid out by the Nature Directives, also providing recommendations tailored to the WB6 and best practice examples. The third part (chapter 4) summarises key levers to facilitate the implementation of the EU Nature Directives.

The document does not provide information about the resources and time needed for implementation and enforcement. Furthermore, it does not analyse the status in each of the WB6 economies, specifically. A next step would be to assess the implementation checklist against the developments in each economy, and to elaborate national roadmaps towards the full implementation of the Nature Directives, ideally with support from EU Member States who provide knowledge on the required resources.

The EU Nature Directives are an excellent example of a more united and sustainable Europe that delivers tangible benefits for both current and future generations. Nature conservation must play a fundamental role in this endeavour.

2. OVERVIEW AND KEY CONCEPTS OF THE EU NATURE DIRECTIVES

2.1. Origins and key legislation

The EU's efforts to conserve nature and protect biodiversity are anchored in three central and elaborate legislative instruments: the Birds Directive, the Habitats Directive (jointly referred to as the EU Nature Directives), and the Nature Restoration Regulation (NRR). Together, they form a comprehensive, interdependent protection regime, and are implemented across all Member States.

The oldest nature law of the EU, and one of its first pieces of environmental legislation, is the **Birds Directive.** Adopted in 1979 (and updated in 2009), it aims to **conserve all naturally occurring, wild bird species**. It regulates the protection, management, control and exploitation of their populations within the European territory of the EU Member States. It covers all reproductive stages (birds, nests, eggs) and their habitats, with a particular focus on endangered and migratory species. The Member States are obliged to maintain or restore populations at an ecologically, scientifically and culturally appropriate level, which can be called a Favourable Conservation Status (FCS)[5]. However, economic and recreational requirements are also taken into account.

The **Habitats Directive** was adopted in 1992. It focuses on the **protection of natural habitats and of wild flora and fauna** (other than birds). Unlike the Birds Directive, it does not protect all species and habitats, but rather a comprehensive list of **habitat types and species** of so-called Community interest. The primary goal is to maintain or restore, at favourable conservation status, these habitat types and species. The **Natura 2000 network of protected areas** is its most famous instrument. The network is composed of Special Areas of Conservation (SAC) designated under the Habitats Directive and includes the Special Protection Areas (SPA) designated under the Birds Directive. The selection of the areas has to be **based on purely scientific criteria**[6] in order to create a coherent European ecological network of protected areas, which enables the habitats and species to be maintained or restored at a FCS. The management of the protected areas is governed by provisions to avoid any deterioration of the target features as well as to improve the situation, according to the appointed objectives.

Beyond the Natura 2000 network, a strict species protection regime has to be established for all bird species and for species of Community interest under the Habitats Directive to avoid any deliberate capture, killing or disturbance. **Monitoring and reporting** are also essential parts of the EU Nature Directives, as only through accurate, reasonable and regular monitoring, declines in biodiversity can be detected and acted upon. Every six years,

[5] Whereas the term 'favourable conservation status' is not mentioned explicitly in the Birds Directive (it was introduced in 1992 in the Habitats Directive), it is implicit from the requirements of Article 2 of the Directive.

[6] The CJEU has stated in several rulings (e.g. C-371/98) that Member States may not take account of economic, social and cultural requirements, when selecting sites to be proposed as eligible for identification as sites of Community importance.

Member States must report on the conservation status of all relevant habitat types and species.

The **Nature Restoration Regulation (NRR)**, enforced in 2024, fills the gaps in the EU Nature Directives by setting legally binding restoration targets and an ambitious timeline, as well as extending nature protection beyond protected areas.

Beyond the Nature Directives and the NRR, nature conservation is also guided by **other relevant legislative instruments** like the Strategic Environmental Assessment Directive, the Environmental Impact Assessment Directive, the Water Framework Directive, the Marine Strategy Framework Directive or the Invasive Alien Species Regulation. On a strategic level, the **EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030** aims to put Europe's biodiversity on the path to recovery by 2030, for the benefit of people and the planet.

2.2. Species and habitat types protected or regulated by the EU Nature Directives

The **species and natural habitat types of Community interest** are defined by the annexes of the Habitats Directive and were selected based on defined criteria (**Table 1**), with regard to the territory of the EU.

Table 1: Characteristics of habitat types and species of Community interest.

Habitat types	Species
• …are in danger of disappearing in their natural range in the EU[7], and/or • …have small natural range (either due to previous regression or naturally), and/or • …have outstanding, typical characteristics in one or more of the EU's nine biogeographical regions.	• …are endangered (except the species natural range only marginally overlaps with the territory of the EU and is not endangered in the remaining western palearctic region) [7], and/or • …are vulnerable and likely to become endangered in the near future, and/or • …are rare and therefore naturally at higher risk of extinction, and/or • …are endemic and require particular attention due to their specific habitat or the potential effects of exploitation.

The Habitats Directive requires **site and/or species protection** for habitat types and species of Community interest and **regulates activities** such as hunting.

[7] These are classified as priority natural habitat types and priority species, as they are in danger of disappearance. Both priority species and habitat types are noted with an asterisk (*) and receive priority treatment in several aspects of the Habitats Directive.

Annexes to the directive indicate, which species or habitat type is subject to which of these regulations:

- Annex I lists about 230 habitat types of Community interest. All of these require the designation of Natura 2000 sites.
- Annex II encompasses 1,050[8] animal and plant taxa of Community interest, for which Natura 2000 sites need to be designated. Species in this annex may also be subject to Annex IV.
- Annex IV lists about abut 1075 animal and plant taxa of Community interest in need of strict protection. For example, it is prohibited to deliberately capture, kill or disturb them.
- Annex V lists about 140 animal and plant taxa of Community interest whose taking in the wild and exploitation may be subject to management measures. Removal from the wild and exploitation must be compatible with a Favourable Conservation Status and managed accordingly by the Member States.

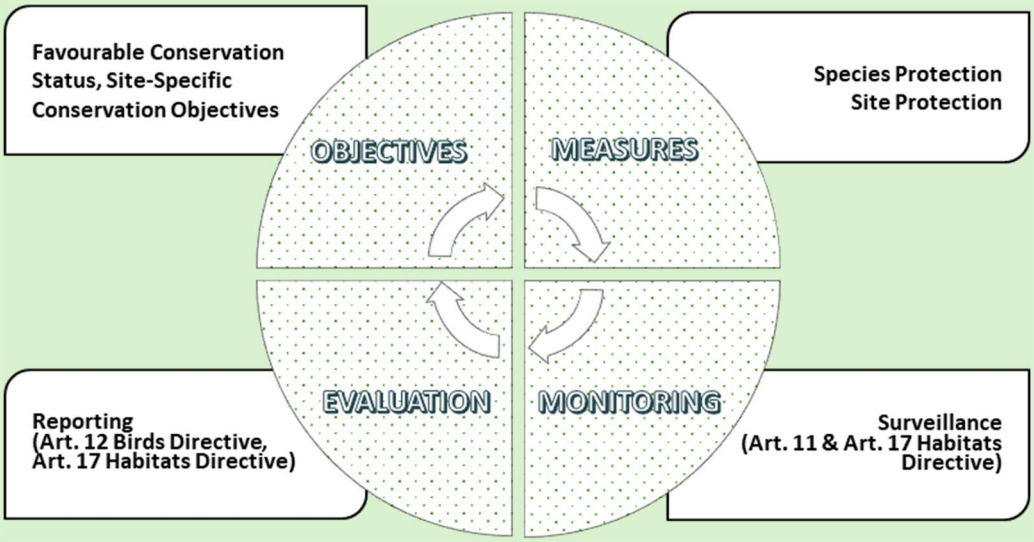
The Birds Directive is more inclusive as it protects **all naturally occurring, wild bird species**, including all reproductive stages and habitats. However, further species are associated with specific management requirements or options:

- Annex I encompasses about 200 bird taxa that require protection of their habitats in specially designated sites, which become part of the Natura 2000 network.
- Annex II lists 31 bird taxa in its part A that may be hunted in the entire territory of the EU and additional 63 bird taxa in part B that may be hunted only in the indicated Member States.
- Annex III: Bird species for which the sale (incl. the transport, keeping and offering of live or dead birds) is not prohibited, provided they have been legally killed, captured or acquired. For species in Part B, consultation with the EC is necessary and further restrictions may apply.

[8] European Commission, 2005. Assessment, monitoring and reporting of conservation status. Note to the Habitats Committee DocHab-04-03/03 rev.3. [Last access: 07/01/2026] Available at: https://circabc.europa.eu/sd/a/83bc5fcd-7118-4912-a4dc-fce4c00e2512/DocHab-04-03-03%20rev3.doc

Infobox 1 – The logic of EU Nature Conservation

The EU Nature Directives foresee an entire set of measures for the protection of the targeted species and habitat types. They form **a repeating cycle of activities:**



Clear and measurable **objectives** are required, with the overarching objective always being the *Favourable Conservation Status*. Species and site protection are the **measures** to reach the objective. Surveillance is necessary to measure the success of these measures, which is achieved through coordinated **monitoring**. Every six years, the Member States **report** the current *Conservation Status* and the measures taken within the last reporting period to the EC. The EC then evaluates the developments at biogeographical and EU levels. The next six-year-cycle then builds upon the achievements of the last one.

In parallel, a similar cycle is also carried out within each protected area of the Natura 2000 network. For each site and each species and habitat type, site-specific conservation objectives are defined. They are implemented through targeted conservation measures, which aim to improve the condition of the species/habitat type. Their condition within a Natura 2000 site ought to be regularly assessed and reported to the EC through updating the *Standard Data Form* of the Natura 2000 site.

Reporting results are published by the European Commission, which provides web tools for viewing the results of Art. 12 reporting (https://nature-art12.eionet.europa.eu/) and Art. 17 reporting (https://nature-art17.eionet.europa.eu/). Aggregated data sets have open access, and the Standard Data Forms are publicly available, too. Exceptions are made for sensitive target features, e.g. species which might be affected by illegal hunting.

2.3. The Favourable Conservation Status: overall objective of the EU Nature Directives

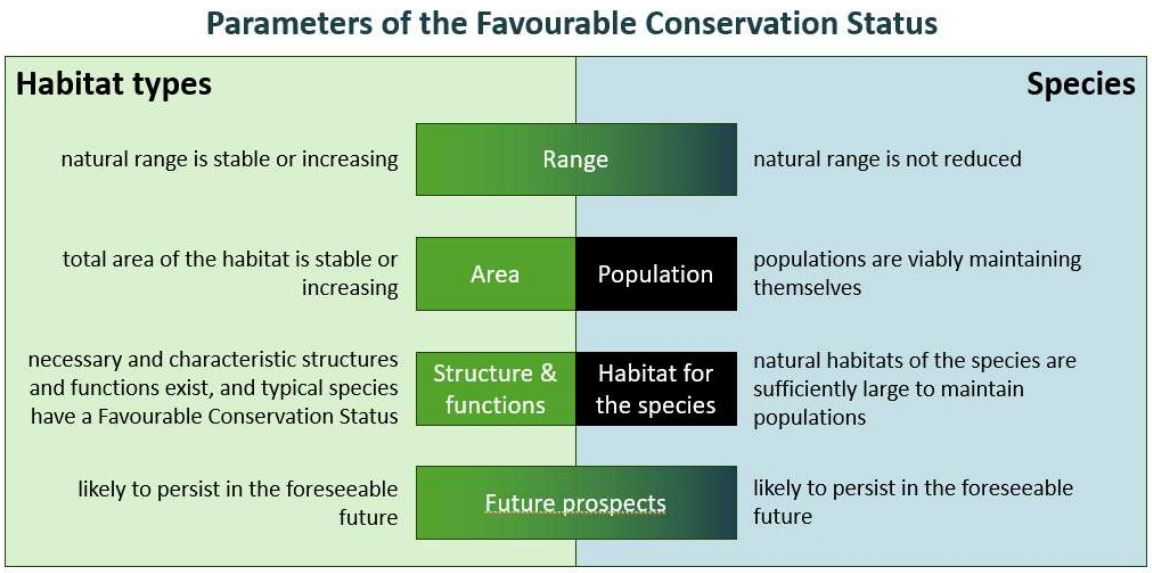
The overall objective of the EU Nature Directives is the ***Favourable Conservation Status (FCS)***, precisely described in the Habitats Directive:

> "The aim of this Directive shall be to contribute towards **ensuring biodiversity through the conservation of natural habitats and of wild fauna and flora** in the European territory of the Member States to which the Treaty applies. Measures taken pursuant to this Directive shall be designed to **maintain or restore, at favourable conservation status, natural habitats and species of wild fauna and flora of Community interest**. Measures taken pursuant to this Directive shall take account of economic, social and cultural requirements and regional and local characteristics." – EU Habitats Directive, Article 2

The most important thing is to maintain or restore the FCS for the habitat types and species of Community interest. But what exactly is a (*Favourable*) *Conservation Status*? In simple wording, it can be described as a situation where a habitat type or species is prospering (in both quality and quantity), with good prospects to do so in the future as well[8].

Every six years, **Member States must report the conservation status** of their Habitats Directives' habitat types and species to the EC (see **Infobox 1**). This assessment is based on four parameters, which differ between species and habitat types, and which are derived from the definition of the FCS in the Habitats Directive (**Figure 1**). For the Conservation Status to be favourable, all four parameters must be satisfactory (or three satisfactory and one unknown).

Figure 1: The four parameters for assessing the Conservation Status (middle) are based on the definition of the Favourable Conservation Status of a habitat type (left) or species (right) of Community interest in the Habitats Directive.



For the Birds Directive, the overall objective is:

> "Member States shall take the requisite measures to **maintain the population** of the species referred to in Article 1 [Note: the populations of all wild bird species] **at a level which corresponds** in **particular to ecological, scientific and cultural requirements**, while taking account of economic and recreational requirements, **or to adapt the population of these species to that level**." – EU Birds Directive, Article 2

When compared directly to the Habitats Directive, the Birds Directive does not apply only to selected species and habitats but applies to the populations of all wild bird species. Although the law itself lacks a precise definition of the level corresponding to the ecological, scientific and cultural requirements of the species, **implementation of and reporting under the Birds Directive also draws upon the concept of the Favourable Conservation Status** for species, as defined in the Habitats Directive. Therefore, the Favourable Conservation Status is aspired for all target features (species and habitats) protected by both Directives. Nevertheless, reporting of the status of bird species, which has been aligned with the Habitats Directive in terms of the six years period, follows a different methodology: only the range of the bird species and their population size and trends are assessed for the evaluation of the effectiveness of the Directive's measures.

2.4. Across spatial scales: From local condition to Favourable Conservation Status

In the EU, nature conservation operates across interconnected spatial scales, with broader targets informing more specific local-level actions and vice versa. From local to global, the levels include:

- **Occurrence level**: An occurrence of a habitat type is one homogenous, continuous patch of a habitat of Community interest. Occurrences of a species are spatially delineated as (occupied or unoccupied) habitats of the species. At this level, concrete measures for maintenance or restoration are carried out. The condition at the occurrence level influences all higher levels.
- **Site level**: Natura 2000 sites ought to be located at the most relevant occurrences and usually protect several species and habitat types simultaneously. At this level, the site-specific conservation objectives (SSCOs, chapter 3.5.1), which set out the contribution a particular site towards achieving and maintaining the FCS on a higher level, are defined and evaluated.
- **National level with biogeographical/marine regions**: While the Birds Directive relates to the entire national territory, the Habitats Directive's FCS is assessed, evaluated and reported for each biogeographical and marine region within a state's territory, separately. Europe has eleven biogeographical (terrestrial) regions (Figure 3). These distinct geographical regions are characterised by their

typical geology, climate and vegetation. Although many species and habitat types can be found in multiple regions, they are likely to face more similar conditions within a biogeographical region. The seas surrounding Europe are divided into marine regions and sub-regions (Figure 4).

- **European Union level**: The overarching goal of the Nature Directives are to achieve and maintain a Favourable Conservation Status of all species and habitat types of Community importance.

Figure 2 illustrates the national level, the biogeographic regions and the site level for a fictional EU Member State, for an exemplary species or habitat type. A significant fraction of all occurrences, including the most relevant ones, need to be covered by the Natura 2000 network. Yet there can be occurrences outside of the network, too. Actual distribution data, as well as the existing Natura 2000 network, can be explored via the Natura 2000 Viewer[9].

Figure 2: Illustration of a fictional nation with two biogeographical regions (light green) for an exemplary species or habitat type. Together, both biogeographical regions hold twelve sites where the exemplary species occurs. Some of them are in excellent condition (A, hatched in green), others are in good (B, hatched in yellow) or even degraded (C, hatched in red) condition. The most relevant sites are designated as Natura 2000 sites (dashed black line), so the Natura 2000 network includes seven Natura 2000 sites.

[9] Available at https://natura2000.eea.europa.eu/

Figure 3: Each of Europe's biogeographical regions is characterised by its distinct geology, climate and vegetation. Nine of them are present in EU territories and highly relevant geographical units for the implementation of the Nature Directives.

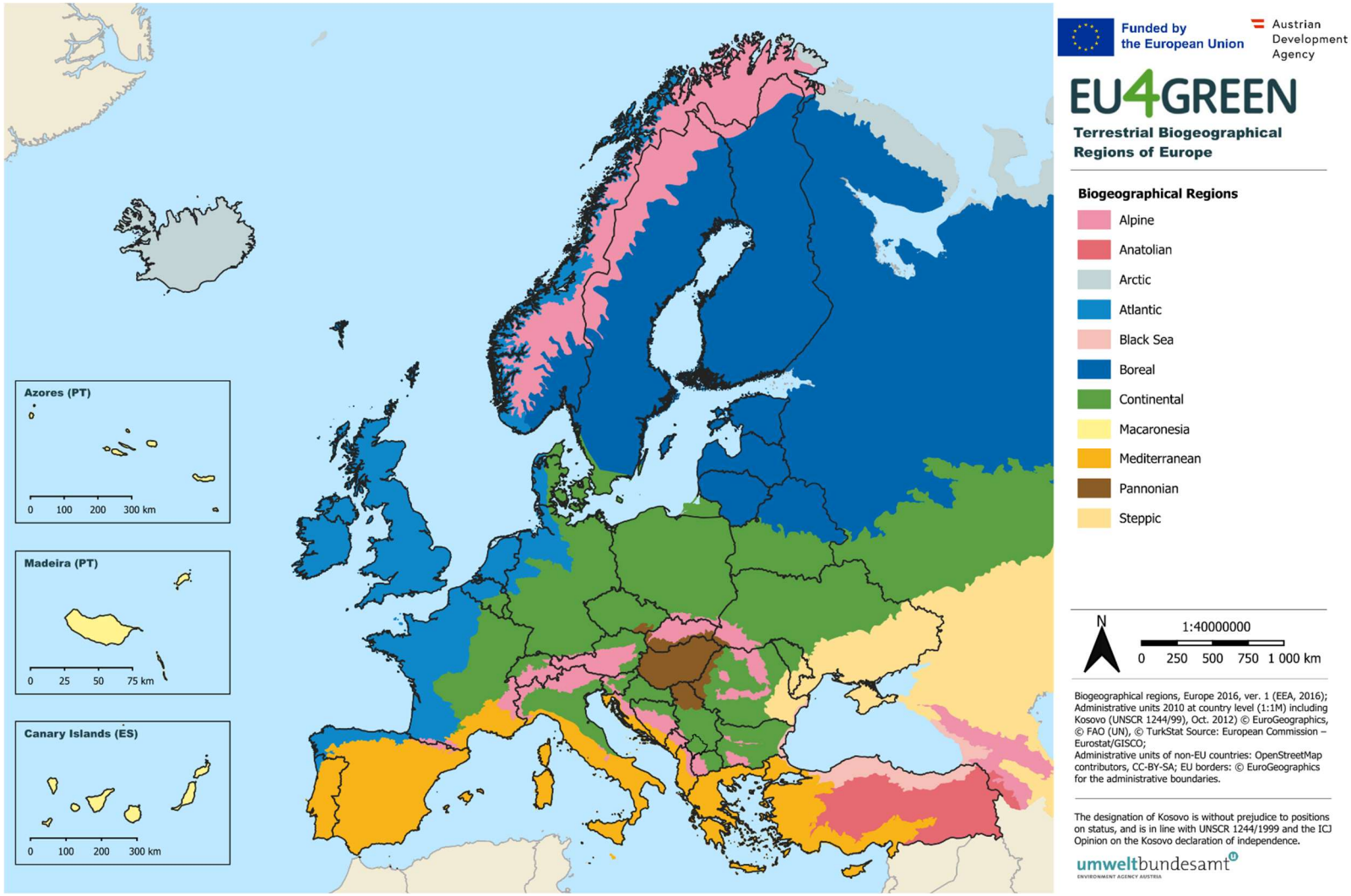
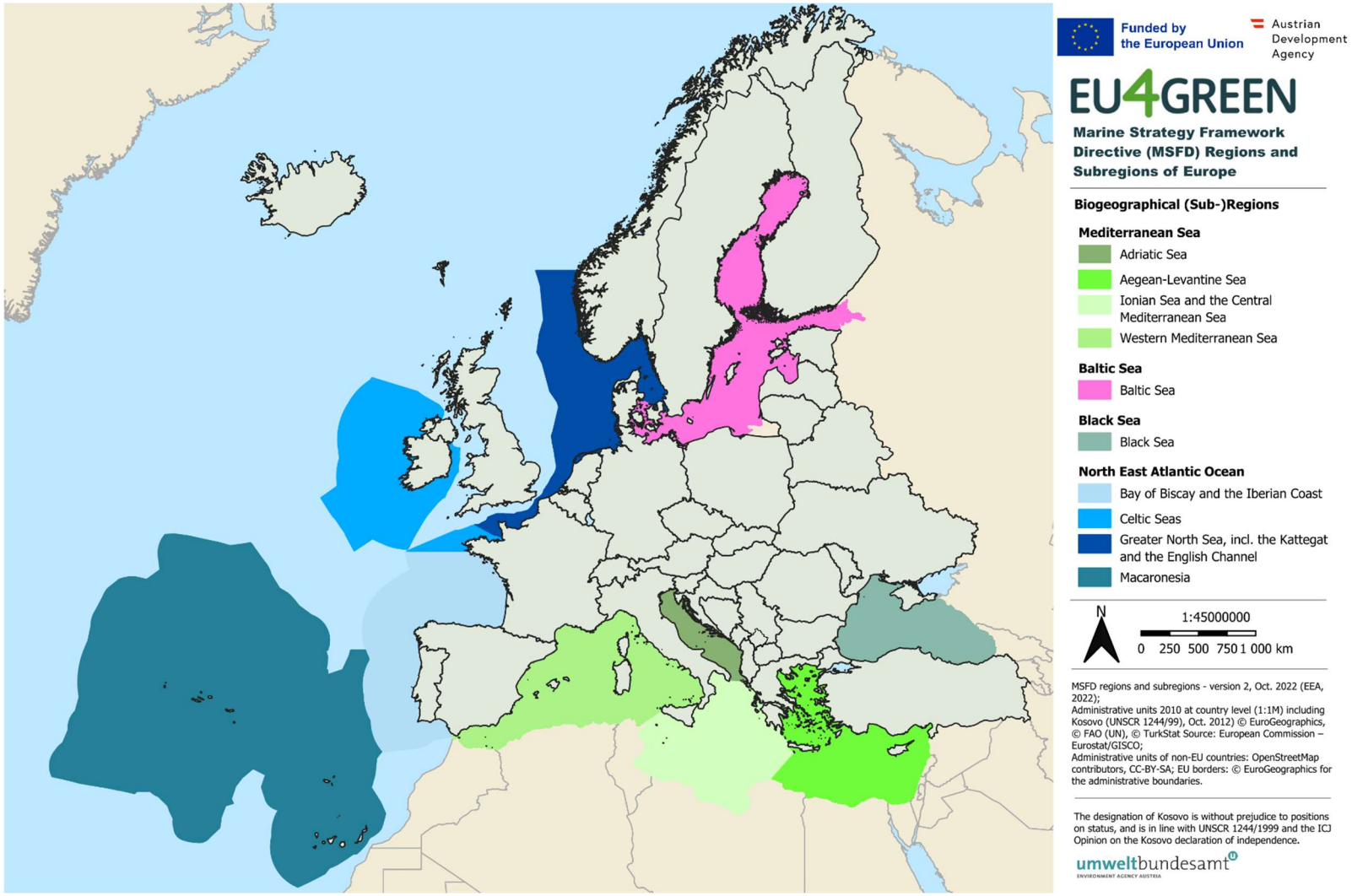


Figure 4: The marine (sub-)regions are the equivalent of the biogeographical regions of the terrestrial realm. They are defined by the Marine Strategy Framework Directive. The Habitats Directive groups them into five regions, as the Macaronesian Sea is decoupled from the Atlantic.



Ultimately, all action is governed by the whereabouts of the species and habitat types. Their occurrences define where surveillance through mapping and monitoring needs to take place, and where species and site protection is carried out. Therefore, the **implementation of the EU Nature Directives requires profound knowledge of the spatial distribution and condition of species and habitat types** within each Member State.

2.5. The future of EU Nature Protection: how the NRR complements the Nature Directives

The Nature Directives have two main pillars: conservation through protected areas, i.e. the Natura 2000 network, and strict species protection. But there is a lack in progress towards achieving the FCS for the species and habitat types of community interest, and the Nature Directives do not specify concrete deadlines. This gap is targeted through the recently adopted Nature Restoration Regulation (NRR), particularly through its Article 4. It foresees the restoration of terrestrial, coastal and freshwater ecosystems and their habitat types to a[10]Member States are required to[11]

- Put in place measures to improve the habitat types' area in not good condition to good condition: 30 % of the area in not good condition by 2030, 60 % by 2040 and 90 % by 2050.
- Re-establish additional occurrences of the listed habitat types to reach their Favourable Reference Area: 30 % of the needed area by 2030, 60 % by 2040, and 100 % by 2050.
- Continuously improve the quantity and quality of the habitats of the species of Community interest in terrestrial, coastal and freshwater ecosystems, until sufficient levels are reached.

With these goals, the Nature Restoration Regulation is intended to bring ambition and new momentum to the implementation of the Nature Directives.

The regulation also includes a wide range of additional provisions that address diverse natural and human-influenced ecosystems. For example, they set specific goals for improving conditions for pollinating insects and strengthen river connectivity. They also introduce new reporting parameters, like the Grassland Butterfly Index or the Woodland Bird Index, which provide valuable indicators of ecosystem health but fall outside the scope of this document.

[11] IUCN European Regional Office, 2024. EU Nature Restoration Regulation IUCN Briefing. [Last access: 25/11/2025] Available at: https://iucn.org/sites/default/files/2024-08/iucn-briefing-eu-nature-restoration-regulation-final-1.pdf

3. IMPLEMENTATION GUIDE TO THE EU NATURE DIRECTIVES

3.1. Implementation checklist

The implementation checklist (**Table 2**) is aimed at identifying the status and potential gaps in the implementation of the Nature Directives.

Table 2: Implementation checklist of the Nature Directives, following the structure of the implementation guide. The timeframe indicates if the activity is meant to be concluded before or after accession (however, also activities that are concluded post-accession may require preparatory activities before the accession). BD = Birds Directive, HD = Habitats Directive.

Part A: Legal and institutional alignment		
Pre-accession	BD, HD	Conduct a structured assessment of national legislation on nature protection and relevant sectoral legislation to identify the necessary amendments to fully transpose the EU Nature legislation (Directives and Regulation).
Pre-accession	BD, HD	Undergo the necessary process for amendments of national legislation to fully transpose the EU Nature legislation (Directives and Regulation).
Pre-accession	BD, HD	Assess the institutional framework to identify any lack of resources (staffing, budgeting, technical) for a sound implementation of the EU Nature Directives.
Pre-accession	BD, HD	Plan the necessary improvement of the national capacities and budgeting of the competent authorities.
Pre-accession	BD, HD	Implement a training programme for raising the skills of the staff of the competent authorities to comply with the provisions of the Nature Directives and the most relevant rulings of the Court of Justice of the European Union.
Part B: Data acquisition		
Pre-accession	BD, HD	Prepare reference lists: Identify the bird species of Annex I BD and regularly occurring migratory bird species present in your economy, and the species of Annexes II, IV and V and habitat types of Annex I of HD for each biogeographical / marine region in your economy.
Pre-accession	HD, BD	Identify proposals for species and habitats to be amended to the Annexes of the Birds and Habitats Directive once your economy will enter the EU.
Pre-accession	HD	Elaborate a national interpretation manual for the identification of Annex I habitat types with reference to the national vegetation classification system, and descriptions of the Annex II species and their habitats.

Pre-accession	BD, HD	Elaborate a national methodology for assessing the condition of habitat types and of habitats for the species under the BD and HD (e.g. indicators, threshold values).
Pre-accession	BD, HD	Establish profound knowledge on the distribution, quantities (area of the habitat types and, as far as possible, of the habitats for the species and of the population of the species) and qualities (condition of habitat types and of habitats for the species) of target features on national and biogeographical level through compilation of existing data and additional mapping activities.
Pre-accession	BD, HD	Establish a powerful geo-database for storing and managing the distribution data together with the condition of the target features.
Part C: Establishing the Natura 2000 network		
Pre-accession	BD	Prepare a national methodology for the selection of the most suitable territories in number and size as special protection areas for the conservation of the relevant bird species.
Pre-accession	BD, HD	Apply the national methodology (BD) and of the Annex III criteria (HD) for the selection of candidate Natura 2000 sites.
Pre-accession	BD, HD	Prepare the Standard Data Form (SDF) information for the candidate Natura 2000 sites (proposed Sites of Community Importance pSCIs and SPAs).
Post-accession	BD, HD	Submit the list of pSCIs and SPAs together with the SDF information to the European Commission.
Post-accession (max. 6 years)	BD, HD	Designate the Spatial Protection Areas (SPAs) and the Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) together with the elaborated SSCOs and conservation measures.
Part D: Managing Natura 2000 sites		
Pre-accession	BD, HD	Prepare for institutional and technical capacities to implement the appropriate assessment regime under Art. 6/3 HD.
Post-accession	BD, HD	Elaborate a methodology for developing Site-specific conservation objectives (SSCOs) based on the assessed conservation status of habitat types and species (see below).
Post-accession	BD, HD	Elaborate site-specific conservation objectives (SSCOs) for all target features in the Natura 2000 sites.
Post-accession	BD, HD	Elaborate the necessary conservation measures based on the identified SSCOs.
Post-accession	BD, HD	Build up structures and resources for the implementation and monitoring of the conservation measures.
Post-accession	BD, HD	Implement the system for Natura 2000 management (conservation measures, non-deterioration measures, appropriate assessment).
Part E: Monitoring and reporting		
Pre-accession	HD	Elaborate a concept on the methodology for the monitoring of important parameters (size of local populations, area and

		condition of polygons of habitats for the species or of habitat types) to assess the conservation status of species and habitat types on the Reference list.
Pre-accession	HD	Develop a methodology for identification of Favourable Reference Values for the range and area of habitat types and for the range and population of species in biogeographical regions.
Pre-accession	BD, HD	Elaborate a monitoring programme which provides all data necessary for reporting all bird species in the economy's territory and the Annex I habitat types and Annex II, IV and V species HD in the biogeographical regions.
Pre-accession	BD, HD	Establish an information system for the surveillance of the taking of wild birds under Annex II BD and of species under Annex V HD.
Post-accession	BD, HD	Assess the status of species and habitats in accordance with the Art. 17 methodology HD and of bird species in accordance with the Art. 12 BD methodology.
Part F: Species protection and enforcement		
Post-accession	BD, HD	Implement a strict protection regime for all bird species and for all occurring Annex IV species.
Post-accession	BD, HD	Implement an administrative procedure for the authorisation of activities harming protected species in accordance to Art. 9 BD and Art. 16 HD.

3.2. Part A: Legal and institutional alignment

3.2.1. Transposition into national law

Contrary to EU Regulations, which have direct legal force, EU Directives **must be transposed into national law by each Member State.** Therefore, the Member States must adapt or renew their existing laws to meet the goals of the Directives. In this task, some flexibility is granted, e.g. in wording. However, faithful transposition is particularly important as the management of the common heritage is entrusted to the Member States in their respective territories. Consequently, the provisions need to be transposed in a clear, precise manner and the complete application of the Directive must be reached (see C-6/04 par 25 ff.).

Transposition into national law requires action by **legislative bodies on national or subnational level**, and it can take a substantial amount of time to assess, amend, update or renew national laws. Not only **laws on nature protection** (incl. by-laws or subnational laws) are affected, but also **harmonization with sectoral legislation** on topics such as planning and development, forestry, hunting or fishery needs to be considered. A detailed assessment on national legislation helps to avoid gaps and ensure full compliance with EU acquis.

3.2.2. Designation of competent authorities

For the implementation of the EU Nature Directives, several prerequisites must be in place. Besides the transposition of relevant EU documents, appropriate institutional structures are essential. The **designation of sufficiently staffed and trained competent authorities with clear distribution of responsibilities, coordination and cooperation mechanisms** must be in place. This must be ensured already early in the process, and it is crucial and highly beneficial to already consider all aspects of implementation (Natura 2000 establishment, monitoring and species protection). Setting up the Natura 2000 network is a demanding task, and an efficient institutional framework is a precondition for effective policy development and implementation.

Financial and human resources and capacities must be in place and efficient coordination between all involved parties and related stakeholders is essential, both on central and local level. **Not enough institutional capacity** is the most evident constraint for the implementation of the EU acquis in the field of nature protection in the WB6. Together with **limited funding, these are the underlying causes for endangering biodiversity.**

3.2.3. Infringement processes and rulings of the Court of Justice of the European Union

For newly acceding countries, implementation starts from their date of accession, without any transition periods. If a Member State fails to transpose a Directive correctly or within the deadlines outlined by the EU, and if the provisions within the Directive are sufficiently clear

and unconditional, the EU acquis takes precedence over national law. Based on this **supremacy of EU law**, individuals can invoke them in front of national courts. Inadequate legal implementation can lead to a formal infringement procedure against a Member State, which can be kicked off either by a complaint of any natural or legal person of the EU or by the European Commission as 'Guardian of the Treaties'. The procedure starts with a letter of formal notice and may escalate to a reasoned opinion (a formal request to comply with EU law). For the first, the Member State has to reply quickly with arguments proofing its compliance, for the latter, it has to react with an action to ensure legal compliance with EU law. If the matter cannot be resolved, the EC can refer the case to the **Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU)**. This court, seated in Luxembourg, constitutes the judicial authority of the EU and ensures that the interpretation and application of EU law is made transparent, observed by all Member States and applied uniformly across the EU. If the CJEU finds a breach and the Member State still fails to act, financial penalties (a lump sum and/or daily fines) may be imposed.

Several EU Member States faced major problems with the correct transposition, which led to **many infringements being referred to the CJEU in the context of the EU Nature Directives**[12]. Many CJEU rulings had impacts on how the Nature Directive are implemented, e.g. by adding provisions to the identification and protection of sites. Additionally, the CJEU can give an interpretation of European Union law in a **preliminary ruling** on request of a court or a tribunal of a member state. The CJEU hands down its decision to the referring court. This court but also all other European courts and authorities have to implement the ruling. All CJEU rulings are found online[13] and have a unique identification number.

Recommendations for the WB6:

- Mobilizing all available resources, clarifying roles and coordination mechanisms, and increasing administrative capacities is essential for correct transposition and implementation of the Nature Directives.
- Professional and targeted training helps to increase the expertise of staff. High turnover of staff causes problems; appropriate selection of participants is needed to ensure the sustainability of training.
- National experts should familiarize themselves with the most important CJEU judgements, as the likelihood of making a mistake during transposition and implementation of the provisions is high.

[12] TUCKER, G., 2023. Nature Conservation in Europe. Approaches and Lessons. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. ISBN 9781108654647. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108654647
[13] Available at: http://curia.europa.eu

3.3. Part B: Data acquisition

The implementation of the Nature Directive is, on many levels, a data-intensive task. Thoroughly preparing the required data is essential for all subsequent steps in site and species protection. While building on existing information is essential, targeted fieldwork is almost inevitable. This chapter outlines the most important data required for the implementation of the EU Nature Directives, thereby enabling efficient data acquisition.

3.3.1. Reference lists

As a starting point, Candidate Countries need to obtain a full **overview of the species and habitat types relevant to the Nature Directive and that occur naturally within their territory**. This includes compiling **reference lists** for:

- **All wild bird species with an emphasis on Birds Directive Annex I Bird Species and all regularly occurring migratory bird species**, as they require species and site protection, as well as monitoring under Art. 12
- **Habitats Directive Annex I habitat types**, as they require designation of Natura 2000 sites and monitoring under Art. 11
- **Habitats Directive Annex II species**, as they require designation of Natura 2000 sites and monitoring under Art. 11
- **Habitats Directive Annex IV species**, as they require strict protection
- **Habitats Directive Annex V species**, whose taking in the wild and exploitation require surveillance and management measures.

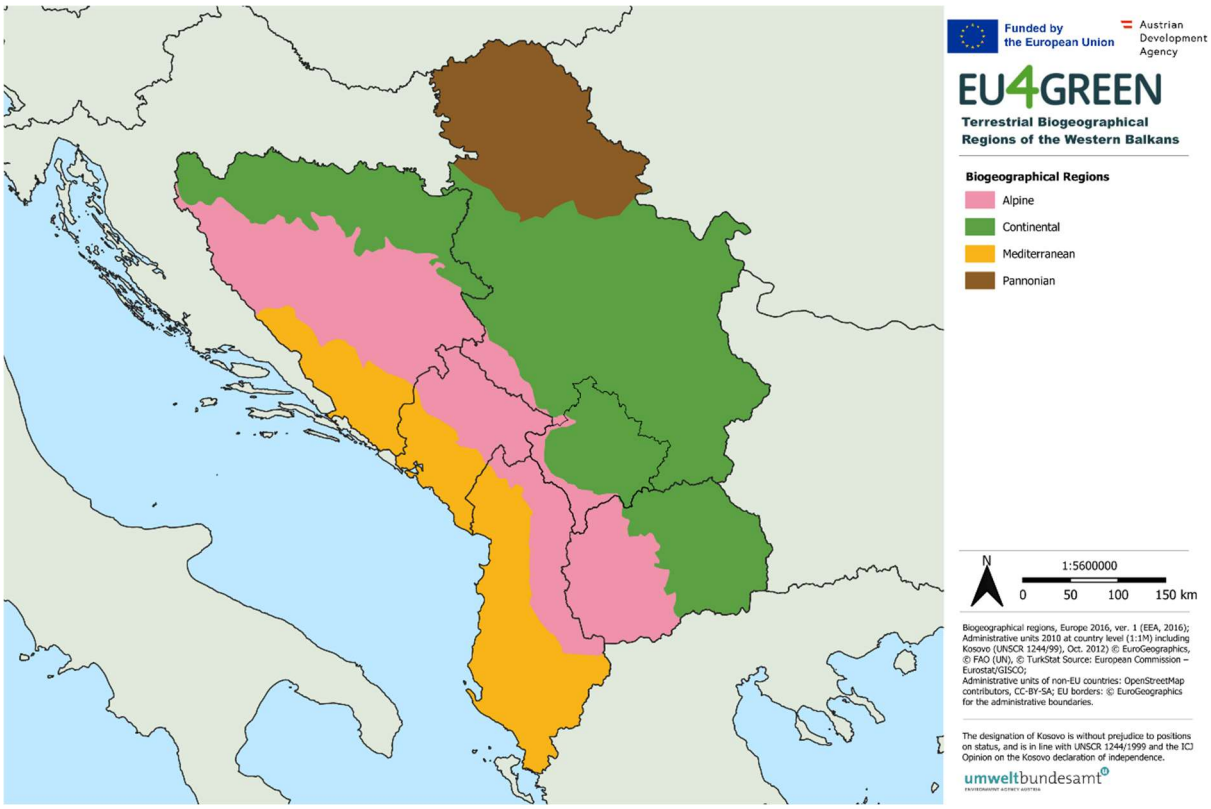
To compile the reference lists, available information must first be collected and reviewed. Sources for **desktop research** might include the following data, if available: habitat and species databases, published scientific papers, technical reports that fall under the remit of national authorities, outputs of specific projects, information from NGOs, etc. Experience shows that a lot of data exist, but are scattered among scientific and technical publications, records of individual scientists, and university and museum collections. Sources of existing ornithological data include scientific literature, breeding bird atlases and other nationwide inventories of breeding, wintering and/or migrating birds, as well as national and international databases such as BirdLife International, eBird, Avibas, and others.

It is crucial to identify the key data holders within the economy, establish strong relationships to enable data sharing, and involve relevant stakeholders through information sessions, training, and other project activities. Actively engaging stakeholders throughout the project lifecycle is a key to (but not a guarantee of) success. Data holders are usually reluctant to share data and information, either at all or for free. Cooperation between neighbouring countries within the same biogeographic/marine region can be beneficial.

For Annex I habitat types and Annex II species, it is highly recommended to draft **separate lists for each marine and biogeographical region**. Since the definition of the biogeographical regions (Figure 5) takes place on a coarser scale, adjustments can be proposed to the EC, but the final delineation should be set early in the process. Accession candidates also have the

opportunity to consult with the European Commission on **additions to the annexes of the Habitats Directive**. Amendments are subject to strict rules applied by the EC, so the process is highly complex and time-consuming. However, only accession candidates can propose further habitat types/species (mostly target features whose main distribution overlaps with the candidate economy but less so with existing EU Member States).

Figure 5: Biogeographical regions defined at the European level by the European Environment Agency (latest version, 2016), applied to the WB6. Since the definition of the biogeographical regions takes place on a coarser scale, adjustments can be proposed.



Furthermore, the habitat types listed in the Habitats Directive are broad and complex, so they can vary significantly in how they appear across Europe. The EC provides an Interpretation Manual on Annex I habitat types on the EU level. To ensure consistency of all subsequent activities and avoid discrepancies, it is highly recommended to elaborate a **national interpretation manual for the identification of Annex I habitat types** with reference to the national vegetation classification system. This may include crosswalks of the official interpretation manual of the Habitats Directive, as well as existing interpretation manuals on national level.

For species on the other hand, a precise **description of the species and their habitats** should be prepared, before mapping the species and their habitats in the field. When delineating the species' habitats the most important areas for reproduction, feeding, resting, or hibernation should be considered. Where possible, habitats should be described using the terminology of habitat types and/or biotope types so that they can be identified. This step is important to enable the spatial delineation of the habitat of the species in the field.

For birds, the national reference list includes bird species from Annex I of the Birds Directive as well as regularly occurring migratory birds (for site selection) and all bird species in the wild (for species protection). Delineation of habitats for birds is not a requirement of the Birds Directive but can be helpful to record during fieldwork from a scientific point of view.

Recommendations for the WB6:

- As mentioned above, availability and access to data is a challenge, and the lack of a unified habitat and species database is the main weakness in all countries. It is recommended to develop special protocols for data sharing between the public authorities and data holders and establish close cooperation between public authorities and local experts for species and habitat types. It is also recommended that any international research implemented in the economy should be observed.
- Reference Lists are important documents for all implementation steps and should be consulted with professionals and relevant stakeholders. As the knowledge on Annex II species in WB6 may be incomplete, Reference Lists remain 'open' until the date of accession (and can be changed even later if new species are discovered).
- If new species or habitat types of Community interest are to be proposed, a brief justification of their importance in the context of EU biodiversity should be prepared and further discussed with EEA and/or EC.
- Adjustments of the boundaries of biogeographical regions should be considered in terms of accurateness and practicality.

3.3.2. Data required for the Habitats Directive

Accession candidates require profound knowledge on the distribution, quantities (area of the habitat types and, as far as possible, of the habitats for the species, population sizes of the species) and qualities (condition of habitat types and of habitats for the species) of the species and habitats of Community interest, at both the national and biogeographical levels. This data may, in parts, be acquired through compilation of existing data, but additional mapping activities will be required to gather specific information. It is strongly advised to develop a precise national methodology for gathering the required data, which already considers information needed later in the process, e.g. Art. 11 monitoring and Art. 17 reporting, to secure efficient progress. The following chapter provides an overview of these data needs.

3.3.2.1. Data on occurrence level

Ideally, the following information would be available for each occurrence of a habitat type:

- Delineation of the habitat type occurrence: spatial delineation of the occurrence enables calculation of its overall area. Delineation should be carried out in a way that ensures that the entire polygon has the same (good or not-good) condition (see below).
- Local condition of the habitat type: the qualitative characteristics, which define the local condition of the habitat type, are tied to its physical structures, ecological functions, species composition, landscape configuration and impacts (natural or from human activity).

For species, the following information is required to precisely map an occurrence:

- Delineation of a particular habitat for the species: as for habitat types, spatial delineation of the habitat for the species enables calculation of the overall area of habitat occupied. Delineation should be carried out in a way that ensures that the entire polygon has the same (good or not-good) condition (see below).
- Population of the species: Local population size (for highly dynamic species, it might be necessary to specify a minimum and maximum value), measured either in individuals or any other suitable population unit (e.g. m^2 of coverage of a moss species, inhabited tree trunks of dead wood beetles) within the delineated area of the species' habitat.
- Condition of the habitat of the species: Qualitative characteristics of the habitat for the species with a focus on vital habitat elements. This includes natural or anthropogenic impacts that shape the local condition.

While quantitative parameters (population of the species, area of the habitats) usually compromise one or more indicators, qualitative characteristics (condition of habitat type, condition of the habitat of the species) often encompass several indicators. For the latter, aggregation of indicators is required to reach a conclusive assessment (good or not-good).

It is important to understand that while the required parameters (e.g. population size, condition of habitat type) are the same for all species/for all habitat types, the indicators and the fieldwork methodology should be tailored to the target feature. Put simply, methodologies, spatial and temporal scales for determining population size will differ between large carnivores and orchids, and indicators for the habitat type's condition will not be identical for forests and fens. Some indicators will apply only to a single species or habitat type. The main goal is to record the ecological condition of the target features as precisely as possible, while applying the general methodology. Particularly for habitat types, the EU provides in-depth technical guidelines on assessing and monitoring their condition[14], giving concrete recommendations on qualitative characteristics for each group of habitat types and on how to aggregate these different characteristics to determine if a certain occurrence is in good or not-good condition. For species, several Member States developed and published their guidelines[15].

In practice, the extent to which this information is readily available for the occurrences of target features varies greatly between Member States. For rare species and habitat types, with a low number of occurrences, it is highly recommended to map all occurrences and gather all data listed above. For more frequent target features, stratified sampling can give an overall picture for the biogeographical region and for the assessment of the conservation status (described in detail in chapter 3.6). Natura 2000 site selection mainly relies on the identification of important regions that host a significant amount of a target feature, and subsequent, detailed mapping within these sites (described in detail in chapters 3.4 and 3.5).

Recommendations for the WB6:

- Developing a national methodology includes adapting it to each species and habitat type on the reference lists. This requires profound knowledge on the ecology of a species/habitat type, existing fieldwork standards, and close cooperation with scientific experts who hold this knowledge. Nevertheless, these experts require in-depth training on the underlying logic of the quantitative and qualitative characteristics, and the parameters which need to be derived for all species/all habitat types.
- The topic is highly complex, and the national methodology needs to account for it. The risk of 'sunken costs' is particularly high if the information gathered through fieldwork is incomplete. It is therefore highly advisable to allocate sufficient resources to this task, and to seek assistance from experts who are well-acquainted with mapping species and habitat types of Community interest.

[14] Available at: https://biodiversity.europa.eu/europes-biodiversity/habitats/technical-guidelines-for-assessing-and-monitoring-the-condition-of-annex-i-habitat-types

[15] E.g. BfN and BLAK, 2017. Bewertungsschemata für die Bewertung des Erhaltungsgrades von Arten und Lebensraumtypen als Grundlage für ein bundesweites FFH-Monitoring. Teil I: Arten nach Anhang II und IV der FFH-Richtlinie. BfN-Skripten 480. Bonn: Bundesamt für Naturschutz. Available at: https://www.bfn.de/sites/default/files/BfN/service/Dokumente/skripten/skript480.pdf

3.3.2.2. Data required for biogeographical/marine regions of the national territory

Once information on the occurrence level is available in sufficient detail, the necessary data for the national level and for biogeographical/marine regions can be easily derived. Firstly, these data provide an excellent basis for the identification of Natura 2000 sites (see chapter 3.4). Secondly, also the four assessment parameters of the Conservation Status (**Table 3**) can mostly be aggregated, calculated or extrapolated from the information on the occurrences. When it comes to distribution maps of species and habitat types, complementary data e.g. from citizen science platforms or from other sources is often indispensable to cover the whole range of distribution. For widespread target features it is very likely not feasible to conduct fieldwork on the level described above. Nevertheless, it is recommended to undertake a more or less complete inventory of all target features in the beginning, which will be the basis for the selection of representative monitoring samples and for a regular update of the distribution maps, which have to be provided every six years for Article 17 reports.

Table 3: Assessment parameters of the Conservation Status as reported under Art. 17.

Habitat types	Species
• **Range**: the outer limits of the overall distribution of the habitat type at the biogeographical region of the Member State territory (km^2). • **Area**: total surface currently covered by the habitat type (km^2) at biogeographical level. • **Structure and functions**: condition of the habitat type in terms of its quality (km^2 of area in good, not-good and unknown condition). • **Future prospects**: Estimate of the future status and trend of the habitat type's parameters (Range, Area and Structure & Functions) in 12 years' time.	• **Range**: the outer limits of the distribution of the species at the biogeographical region in the Member State territory (km^2). • **Population**: total number of individuals or other population units at biogeographical level. • **Habitat for the species**: assessment of sufficiency of quantity and quality of occupied habitat of the species. If the occupied habitat is not sufficient, the availability of unoccupied habitat of suitable quality has to be assessed. • **Future prospects**: Estimate of the future status and trend of the species' parameters (Range, Population and Habitat for the species) in 12 years' time.

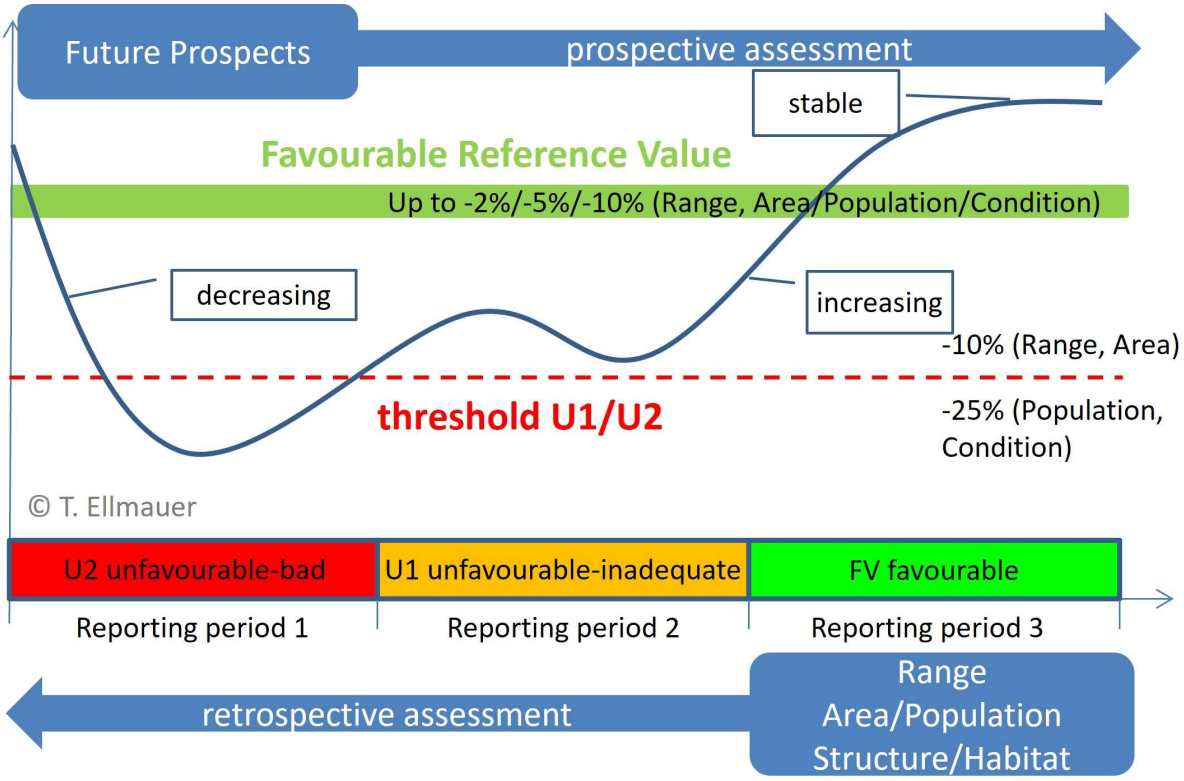
For the assessment of a Conservation Status parameter, the current status needs to be compared to a Favourable Reference Value (FRV), which is the quantitative benchmark used to determine whether the parameter of a target feature is in a Favourable Conservation Status (FCS). The FRVs therefore mark the minimum value of the FCS, and act as objective reference points in the Article 17 reports.

The FRVs for the parameters *Range*, *Area* and *Population* need to be developed by each Member State, applying the following principles: FRVs should be based on ecological and biological considerations, using the best available scientific knowledge, to secure the long-term survival of species, considering the precautionary principle. FRVs should also be larger than the minimum viable population. As these values should not fall below the values when the Habitats Directive entered into force in the respective Member State, the **accession year is a highly relevant baseline for FRVs**. Importantly, FRVs do not automatically correspond to a given maximum, whether historical or potential (e.g. carrying capacity), but instead define

the minimum of a situation that is necessary to ensure long-term viability. FRVs can be expressed as an exact value or relative to the current situation.

Once the FRV is set, the current status of a parameter can be easily assessed against it (Figure 6). The current status and the FRV, together with the short-term trend of the last two reporting periods (12 years), determine the assessment of the parameter in the categories *FV – Favourable*, *U1 – Unfavourable-inadequate* and *U2 – Unfavourable-bad*.

Figure 6: Methodology for assessing a Conservation Status parameter using current status, Favourable Reference Value (FRV) and short-term trend. The combination of those criteria defines the status as follows: FV – current status at or beyond FRV *and* trend is stable or increasing; U1 – current status below FRV but not smaller than a set threshold *or* short-term trend slightly decreasing (not more than 1 % per year or 12 % in 12 years); U2 – current status below a defined threshold under FRV *or* short-term trend largely declining (>1% per year or 12% in 12 years).



Some Member States have developed standardised methodologies for setting reproducible and traceable FRVs.[16]

While the FRVs for *Range*, *Area* and *Population* are specific to the target feature and the biogeographical area of the economy, the FRV for *Structure and function* is universal: The

[16] Further reading on the topic:
BONELLI, S., F. Barbero, A. Zampollo, C. Cerrato, P. Genovesi and V. La Morgia, 2021. Scaling-up targets for a threatened butterfly: A

NRR makes the recommendation of the Art. 17 methodology that the parameter is FV, if 90% of the area is in good condition, legally binding. The parameter *Habitat for the species* lacks a strict requirement for quantitative and qualitative assessment through any FRV, however, it should be sufficiently large, thereby indirectly asking for a reference for 'sufficiency', like a FRV. As a general guidance, the 90 % goal for the *Structure and functions* parameter could be applied to the quality of the *Habitat for the species parameter*, too. The remaining parameter, *Future prospects*, is an extrapolation of the situation of the other Conservation Status parameters in terms of future trend, future status and relation to the FRV in 12 years' time. It is mostly based on expert judgement, using information on pressures, threats and conservation measures. In practice, reporting under the Habitats Directive involves additional details (see chapter 3.6), but the key element is the Conservation Status assessment as outlined above, and the national methodology should account for these requirements.

Recommendations for the WB6:

- The accession year is a highly relevant baseline for FRVs, since it is not necessary for the FRVs to exceed this status, if a target feature was able to survive in the long term at that time. For target features where the status of a Conservation Status parameter was sufficient in the year of accession, considerations regarding the deduction of a FRV become obsolete. Therefore, it is highly recommended for the WB6 to complete their fieldwork activities for their target features before accession.

method to define Favourable Reference Values. In: Ecological Indicators. 133, 108356. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecolind.2021.108356

BIJLSMA, R.J., E. AGRILLO, F. ATTORRE, L. BOITANI, A. BRUNNER, P. EVANS, R. FOPPEN, S. GUBBAY, J.A.M. JANSSEN, A. VAN KLEUNEN, W. LANGHOUT, R. NOORDHUIS, M. PACIFICI, I. RAMÍREZ, C. RONDININI, M. VAN ROOMEN, H. SIEPEL and H.V. WINTER, 2019. Defining and applying the concept of Favourable Reference Values for species and habitats under the EU Birds and Habitats Directive. Examples of setting favourable reference values. Wageningen: Wageningen Environmental Research, Report 2928. Available at: https://doi.org/10.18174/468534

DG Environment, 2017. Reporting under Article 17 of the Habitats Directive. Explanatory notes and guidelines for the period 2013-2018. Brussels: DG Environment. Available at: https://circabc.europa.eu/sd/a/d0eb5cef-a216-4cad-8e77-6e4839a5471d/Reporting%20guidelines%20Article%2017%20final%20May%202017.pdf

3.3.3. Data required for the Birds Directive

After carrying out the initial desktop research to compile available information, additional field inventories will likely be necessary to identify the most important areas of the Beneficiary for the species of the Reference List. For each species, it is necessary to know where the most relevant occurrences in terms of population or breeding pair numbers are located. Additionally, candidate countries will be required to identify relevant breeding, moulting, wintering or resting areas for migratory species.

Sampling requires species-specific methodologies and protocols, although certain species groups can be targeted together. Standard methods are area counts, point and line counts, detailed to the species (group) at hand. Bird surveys are primarily carried out as sampling, not as total surveys.

Data required for Art. 12 reporting includes the distribution of the bird species, population numbers (breeding pairs or individuals) and short-term trends of the population. Trend information needs the implementation of new or the use of existing monitoring programs. Other than the Art. 17 report of Habitats Directive, Art. 12 report of Birds Directive neither uses FRVs nor information on parameters such as *Habitat for the species* or *Future Prospects*. Nevertheless, it is also advisable to develop an understanding of the quantity and quality of the bird species habitats, as well as reference values for the population, in order to set clear targets for management objectives. In addition to the requirements of the EU Nature Directives, the Nature Restoration Regulation requires improvements of the habitats for bird species, and such data will be needed for the implementation of the Regulation.

Recommendations for the WB6:

- To address significant knowledge gaps, as frequently found in the WB6, it is best to conduct regular fieldwork over several years, to obtain population trend estimates.
- Fieldwork may also assess the quantity and quality of the species' habitat, as well as its population numbers. This also helps with the development of SSCOs later in the process (see chapter 3.5.1) and with the implementation of the Nature Restoration Regulation.
- The knowledge on bird distribution and populations as well as the percentage of surveyed territory is particularly high in Western European countries with a long tradition of bird surveys and high capacities. Based on examples from Central Europe and particularly WB6 neighbours (i.e. Czech, Slovak, Slovenian, and Croatian examples), the minimum requirement is to cover at least 10 % of the territory by surveys. This usually means multiple years of fieldwork by skilled staff to thoroughly understand bird distribution and population sizes.

3.3.4. Development of a GIS database

To store and manage the data outlined above, it is necessary to establish a powerful GIS database, either separately for the Birds and the Habitats Directive, or jointly. In any case, the database(s) should allow to integrate, or reflect, data from structured monitoring and from scientific resources (which might have different data structures).

The GIS database will require continuous updating as knowledge grows and new monitoring and reporting cycles emerge. Therefore, continuous maintenance of the database is crucial and needs to be secured through continuously educating sufficient new staff on how to manage GIS data. Similarly, it is crucial to ensure continuous data back-ups given the vast amount and value of the knowledge the database contains.

The following specifications apply to the GIS database:

- The database should allow to manage both **points and polygons of occurrences**.
- The database also needs to **support spatial generalisation of data**. Ultimately, the data is reported in 10 x 10 km ETRS 89 grid cells in LAEA projection (EPSG:3035). However, data should be recorded and kept with the best possible accuracy.
- Production of **distribution maps should be automated**.
- Over time, the database will also need to record changes in occurrences. Some might improve in quality or increase in size, while others might decrease or deteriorate. These changes need to be traceable. Also records of previous and historical occurrences should be kept.

Since the database should compile all available data from different sources, collaboration and continuous dataflows should be established with institutions and experts who generate data on target features. The dataflow should not be unidirectional, as data providers should benefit from the data base as well.

Recommendations for the WB6:

- The database should be governed by skilled staff from the nature protection sector and a clear distribution of responsibilities, e.g. strict rules for data entering, their verification and use both by nature conservancy and third parties.
- When establishing the database, it is recommended to consider the FAIR data principles (Findable – Accessible – Interoperable – Repeatable). Data sharing should be considered early on in the process and implemented consistently to make the process transparent and verifiable. This would significantly improve the situation on data availability.

- Collaboration and coordination with other databases and data holders should be established to ensure a continuous dataflow.

3.3.5. Fieldwork

Commencing fieldwork requires a few further preparation activities, both technically and administratively.

From a technical perspective, the national methodology for mapping and assessing the condition of the target features might require the development of the necessary methodologies. Guidance is needed particularly for the interpretation of the habitat types and the habitats for the species, for the methodology of recording populations, for the delineation of polygons and for the assessment of the condition. Field mappers have to be equipped with precise mapping instructions, field protocols, and (digital) mapping equipment (e.g. tablets and appropriate software).

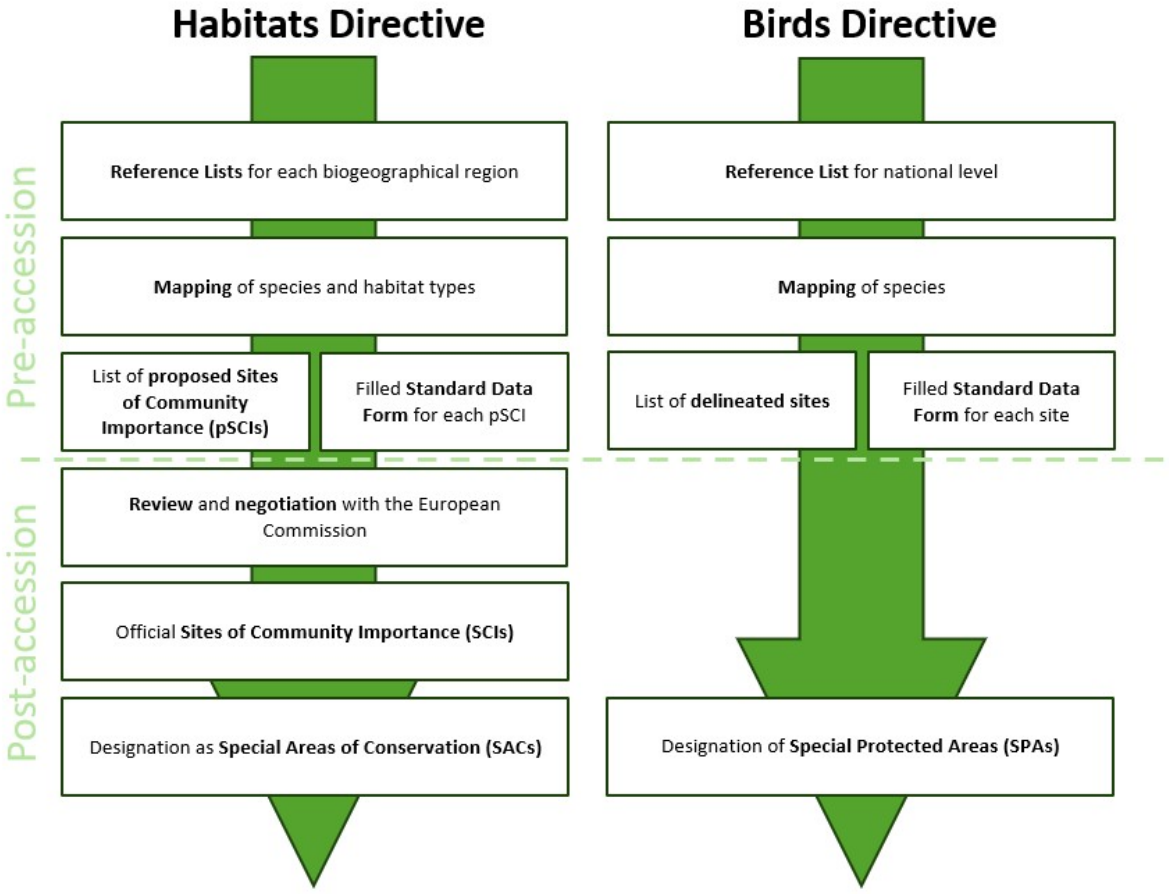
Administratively, it is necessary to calculate the required fieldwork effort and budget, and secure funding accordingly. Due to the large degree of specialisation, a large team of experts for the species and habitat types will be required for fieldwork, who require training, coordination, contracting and quality assurance. Nevertheless, gathering the experience and building this network will facilitate later monitoring activities.

3.4. Part C: Establishing the Natura 2000 network

Natura 2000 is a coherent network of protected areas in the EU. It is a key instrument of EU nature conservation, originating from the Emerald network, which was established in 1989 under the Berne Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats. Emerald sites serve as a precursor for Natura 2000 in EU accession countries, since they are compatible. Natura 2000 establishes **precise and legally binding requirements** for Member States **regarding designation and management**.

The protected areas under both Nature Directives together form the Natura 2000 network, but their designation processes differ (**Figure 7**). The Birds Directive foresees the designation of Special Protected Areas (SPAs), located appropriately to conserve the most suitable and relevant territories of the species listed in Annex I and of regularly occurring migratory species. For the latter, the breeding, moulting, wintering and staging sites along their migration routes shall be particularly integrated in the Natura 2000 network. The Habitats Directive requires the designation of Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) for habitat types of Annex I and species of Annex II of the Habitats Directive. SACs are intended to support the maintenance or restoration of a Favourable Conservation Status of the concerned habitat types and species and are selected in consultation with the EC through a multi-step process.

Figure 7: Designation process of Natura 2000 sites under the Nature Directives.



3.4.1. Designation process under the Habitats Directive

3.4.1.1. Preparing the national list of proposed Sites of Community Importance

Candidate Countries are obligated to compile a **national list of proposed Sites of Community Importance (pSCIs)**. The relative importance of each pSCI is assessed through the **criteria defined in Annex III** of the Habitats Directive. This includes how much of the national surface area of a habitat type or of the population of a species is covered by the site, the representativity of the occurrence, and the Degree of Conservation. The application of the selection criteria requires various data for all target features of the Reference Lists.

For the establishment of pSCIs, identification of sites starts from the overall distribution of the species or habitat types. The identification of sites needs to be based on the criteria in Annex III of the Habitats Directive. So far, two different strategies can be applied, with one distinctive advantage to each of them. One option is to focus on the best occurrences of all species and habitat types in the economy for pSCI selection, this places the focus on the maintenance of an already favourable conservations status through the protection of the current status. The other is to draw a representative set, both spatially and in terms of good and not-good condition, thus covering both the best occurrences but also occurrences with a potential for restoring a currently unfavourable conservation status towards favourable status. The latter approach also leaves room for an improvement of the overall Conservation Status of a target feature through conservation measures within the Natura 2000 sites.

Generally, **the rarer (and more threatened) the target feature is, the bigger proportion of its overall occurrence should be included in the Natura 2000 network**, while for more abundant ones a lower proportion is sufficient. The CJEU has ruled in several cases that EU Member States are obliged to produce an exhaustive list of proposed sites following scientific criteria without regard to economic, social or cultural considerations (C-371/98 par. 22). The pSCIs must provide a homogeneous and representative geographical coverage, reflecting the ecological or genetic variety of the target feature in the economy. The list of sites must cover all habitat types and species occurring in the economy (see C-220/99 par 25).

For each pSCI, a wide range of information is **transmitted to the European Commission** through the **Standard Data Forms (SDFs;** see **Infobox 4**), which include the name, location, spatial extent and the condition of each species/habitat type present and are accompanied by a map of the site's boundaries. A separate SDF is required for each pSCI. The most important part of the SDFs is the chapter on ecological information, which lists the target features in the site together with the Annex III criteria assessments. In the last updated version of the SDF[17], the criterion ***Degree of Conservation***, which has three potential grades (*A – excellent conservation*, *B – good conservation*, or *C – reduced conservation*), has also to be translated into the condition (good, not-good), as used for the assessment of Conservation Status parameter *Structure and functions*. Upon acceptance by the EC, SDFs

[17] C/2023/8623: Commission Implementing Decision (EU) 2023/2806 of 15 December 2023 concerning a site information format for Natura 2000 sties. Official Jounal of the European Union. Available at: http://data.europa.eu/eli/dec_impl/2023/2806/oj

should be updated at least every six years, as the EC uses the SDFs to review the contribution of Natura 2000 towards the FCS.

Infobox 4 – Standard Data Forms for Natura 2000 sites

The Standard Data Form (SDF; C/2023/8623) contains six main sections with multiple fields. Most sections are filled once for the entire site, like the site location, description and management. However, the ecological information needs to be filled for every habitat type and species, which is occurring in the site. The ecological information includes an assessment of the Annex III criteria, particularly the representativity and relative surface for habitat types the relative coverage of the population for species., The Degree of Conservation has to be evaluated for both, species and habitat types.

Section	Requirement
1. Site identification	Required for each site
2. Site area and location	
3. Ecological information	
3.1 Habitat types	Required for each Annex I habitat type present within the site
3.1.a Essential information	
3.1.b Site assessment & Degree of Conservation	
3.2 Species	Required for each bird species relevant for Article 4(1) and 4(2) of the Birds Directive and each Annex II species of the Habitats Directive present within the site
3.2.a Essential information	
3.2.b Site assessment & Degree of Conservation	
3.3 Other species	Optional
Site description	Required for each site
Site management	
Geospatial representation	

Recommendations for the WB6:

- For general criteria for the site selection, the EU document 'Criteria for assessing national lists of pSCIs at biogeographical level'[18] should be consulted. For filling the SDFs, the Commission provides extensive background information in the explanatory notes (C/2023/8623).
- It is recommended to develop a method for identifying an exhaustive list of pSCIs that represent the full distribution and ecological or genetic diversity of the target features, to best support maintaining or restoring their FCS.
- It is advisable to elaborate guidelines for the delineation of the pSCI boundaries and provide training workshops to the staff in charge of selection and delineation.[19]

[18] DG Environment, 1997. Criteria for assessing national lists of pSCIs at biogeographical level. Brussels: DG Environment, Hab. 97/2 rev. 4 18/11/97. Available at: https://www.eionet.europa.eu/etcs/etc-be/activities/hab_97_2_criter_en.pdf

[19] E.g. Hošek M. and J. Dušek, 2016. Methodological guidelines for Natura 2000 sites selection (proposed Sites of Community Importance) in Serbia. [Last access: 30/09/2025] Available at: 10.13140/RG.2.2.31479.47524

3.4.1.2. From pSCIs to SCIs: Review by the EC

After accession, for a pSCIs to become a Site of Community Importance (SCI), it must be accepted and published by the EC on the Community list. In preparation, the **EEA reviews the list of pSCIs in the context of the biogeographical regions** and the EC together with the concerned (new) Member States consults on the site selection. The evaluation focuses mainly on the completeness of the network, not on the particular sites. It evaluates the coverage of the target features (percentage of surface area or population covered by the proposed sites), the coverage of the geographical distribution and the ecological and genetic diversity. For assessing the sufficiency of the Natura 2000 network, the EC has used two coverage thresholds for a preliminary decision of the sufficiency of site proposals: if more than 60 % of a habitat type or species is covered, it can be assumed that the target feature is sufficiently covered, whereas a coverage of less than 20 % might be insufficient. Nevertheless, for rare or highly endangered target features it might be necessary that the coverage exceeds the 60% threshold and for abundant and not threatened target features, the coverage can even less than 20%.

In the negotiations amongst the EC, the Member States and the EEA there is room for good scientific arguments underpinned by data. A potential setting for such discussions is a so-called **biogeographical seminar**. These seminars are specific to a particular biogeographical region and involve the official bodies of the EC and all Member States of the respective biogeographical area, as well as scientists, independent experts, and NGOs.

If the Member State is to propose new pSCIs, the steps are repeated until consensus is reached, and the amount and extent of SCIs is set.

Recommendations for the WB6:

- Paying attention to the previous recommendations highly facilitates this important step.
- Mock-up sessions of biogeographical seminars, as well as attendance of biogeographical seminars as observers, can help to prepare for defending the selected network.

3.4.1.3. Declaration as Special Area of Conservation

As a last step, the SCIs accepted by the EC are **designated as protected areas through national legal acts**, thereby reaching the status as **Special Area of Conservation** (SAC). The designation and determination of conservation priorities must be carried out as soon as possible and in any event within six years at most from the moment when a SCI has been selected (C-116/22 par. 106). The determination of site-specific conservation objectives

(SSCOs) is a necessary prerequisite for the SAC designation, since SSCOs are necessary for the purpose of setting the conservation priorities and must therefore precede their setting (C-849/19 par. 50, 53). The directive obliges Member States to grant the SAC a legal protection status suitable for ensuring the required protection regime, particularly the avoidance of the deterioration of the target features Art. 6 par. 2HD). The boundaries of the site must be delineated with unquestionable binding force (C415/01, par. 22).3.2.3

The provisions of the designation need to enable proper management of the Natura 2000 site (see chapter 3.5). Importantly, SCIs immediately become subject to some of these protective legal obligations, even if they are not (yet) designated by the Member States, to avoid jeopardizing of the selection and designation process. This includes the prevention of deterioration and the Appropriate Assessment (see chapter 3.5.3).

3.4.2. Designation process under the Birds Directive

Unlike Natura 2000 sites designated under the Habitats Directive, the protected areas associated with the Birds Directive are called **Special Protected Areas** (SPAs). Based on several rulings of the CJEU, the selection of SPAs needs to be based exclusively on scientific, up-to-date ornithological data, and additional economic, social, cultural or recreational criteria are not permitted in the selection process. Data on the occurrence of species must be recent (Natura 2000 reflects the current state, not the historical one), both quantitative and qualitative, and come from reliable sources.

BirdLife's standardised and global process of identifying Important Bird Areas (IBAs) was particularly adapted to the EU through sub-regional criteria (C criteria), which reflect the requirements of the Birds Directive. According to several rulings of the CJEU starting with C-3/96, IBAs can be used as a reference for the identification of SPAs. SPAs should cover the most suitable territories in number and size, for all species on the Reference List. Not only species occurrences but also trends and variations in populations should be considered. Particularly in the context of migratory birds, Member States should consider:

- Breeding, moulting and wintering areas of migratory species
- Staging posts along their migration routes
- Internationally important wetlands such as Ramsar sites

As a rule of thumb, at least the five most important areas of a species in a country ought to be selected. If an area clearly has to be classified as SPA but a Member State failed to do so, it still has to comply with the strict protection regime under Art. 4(4). At the end of the process, a formal designation of the protected areas is needed. Through the provision of Art. 7 HD, SPAs become an integral part of the Natura 2000 network. Finally, an SDF is required for each site (see **Infobox 4**).

Recommendations for the WB6:

- BirdLife Partners typically play a vital role in the process of SPA identification, since they normally own good scientific data which they use for IBA selection. It is highly recommended to adhere to the IBA selection criteria.

3.5. Part D: Managing Natura 2000 sites

The **designation as Natura 2000 site is not necessarily equivalent to a strict protection regime**. Natura 2000 sites can be, for example, sustainably farmed[20], as long as this does not compromise the conservation of all target features or adversely affect the integrity of the site. The protection regime for all Natura 2000 sites is mainly governed by Article 6 HD (since Art. 7 HD makes the preventive and compensatory measures regulated under Art. 6 (2), (3) and (4) obligatory also for sites designated under the BD). For conservation measures, Art. 6 (1) is only applicable for SACs, since the equivalent Art. 4 (1) BD keeps its relevance for SPAs. In this regard, it is useful to refer to numerous guidelines that have been developed on the EU level[21] and on national level, e.g. for Montenegro[22], Slovenia[23] and Croatia[24].

According to the Habitats Directive, the **management of Natura 2000 sites should be established gradually**. pSCIs listed in the national list submitted to the EC should be protected so that the Member States do 'not authorize interventions which incur the risk of seriously compromising the ecological characteristics of those sites' (CJEU Case C-244/05 Commission *v* Germany). Once the list of pSCI has been adopted by the EC, thus becoming the 'Community list of SCIs', HD Articles 6 (2) – 6 (4) already apply to those sites (see HD Art. 4 (5)). The provisions of Art 6 (1) apply to the site as soon as the SCI has been designated as a SAC (max. 6 years after SCI approval) and it is necessary to establish the Site-specific Conservation Objectives (SSCOs) and conservation measures during the period between adoption as SCI and designation as SAC[25].

3.5.1. Site-specific Conservation Objectives

Prior to the designation of Natura 2000 sites (SACs and SPAs) the elaboration of **Site-specific Conservation Objectives** (SSCOs) is a mandatory step, since they are necessary for the

[20] European Union, 2018. Managing farmland in Natura 2000. Case Studies. Technical Report. Luxembourg: Publication Office of the European Union. [Last access: 15/10/2025] Available at: https://op.europa.eu/mt/publication-detail/-/publication/9a406f60-be3c-11e9-9d01-01aa75ed71a1

[21] DG Environment, n.d. Managing and protecting Natura 2000 sites. European Commission. [Last access: 30/09/2025] Available at: http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/natura2000/management/index_en.htm

[22] Stanciu, E. 2019. Guidelines for the management of Natura 2000 sites. Podgorica: Ministry of Sustainable Development and Tourism and Agency for Environmental and Nature Protection. [Last access: 30/09/2025] Available at: https://propark.ro/en/publicatii/natura-2000-management-guidelines-for-montenegro-608/download.html

[23] Ministry of the Environment and Spatial Planning, 2024. Natura 2000 Management Programme. Ljubljana: Ministry of the Environment and Spatial Planning. [Last access: 30/09/2025]. Available at: https://natura2000.gov.si/en/natura-2000/natura-2000-in-slovenia/natura-2000-management-programme/

[24] Ministry of Environment and Energy and Croatian Agency for Environment and Nature, 2018. Protected areas and/or Natura 2000 sites management planning guidelines. Version 1.0. Translation in English. Zagreb: UNDP. [Last access: 30/09/2025] Available at: https://ceeto-network.eu/content/protected_areas_and_natura_2000_sites_management_planning_guidelines.pdf

[25] European Commission, 2023. Commission note on conservation measures in Natura 2000 sites. [Last access: 15/10/2025] Available at: https://circabc.europa.eu/ui/group/3f466d71-92a7-49eb-9c63-6cb0fadf29dc/library/da138066-6136-4dec-9f98-07ed00e64231/details

purpose of setting conservation priorities (CJEU Case C-849/19, par. 53). SSCOs make sure that a particular **Natura 2000 site contributes to achieving the FCS of the present species and habitat types in the best possible way**[26]. In that context, SSCOs should consider the latest results of the Article 17 reports and in particular the identified FRVs, since they define the distance to the FCS. If the conservation status is unfavourable, SSCOs can define the contribution of a Natura 2000 site towards the FCS best, if they quantify the amount of improvement (e.g. restoration of habitat area, improvement of habitat condition, increase of population numbers) in a site to achieve the FRV on biogeographical level. If a target feature is already in favourable conservation status on biogeographical level, the associated SSCOs mainly have to ensure that this state is maintained. According to the EC[26] and several rulings of the CJEU[27], SSCOs should…

- …be precise and specific to each particular target feature present at the site,
- …be formulated in quantitative and measurable terms, if justified in specific cases (CJEU 116/22 par. 116),
- …be **reportable**, enabling **monitoring** and allowing for **verification** of the appropriateness of the measures that are applied based on the SSCOs,
- …be **realistic**, i.e. aligned with an appropriate timeframe and resources,
- …comprehensively **define** the **desired condition or state** of the species and habitat present on the site, including the ecological characteristics of the target feature,
- …must have regard to information based on a **scientific examination**, like Annex III criteria when the site was proposed, and
- …follow a **consistent approach**, so that the structure, attributes and targets are similar across sites.

SSCOs form the baseline for the development of conservation measures (see chapter 3.5.2) and serve as benchmark for the Appropriate Assessment (chapter 3.5.3).

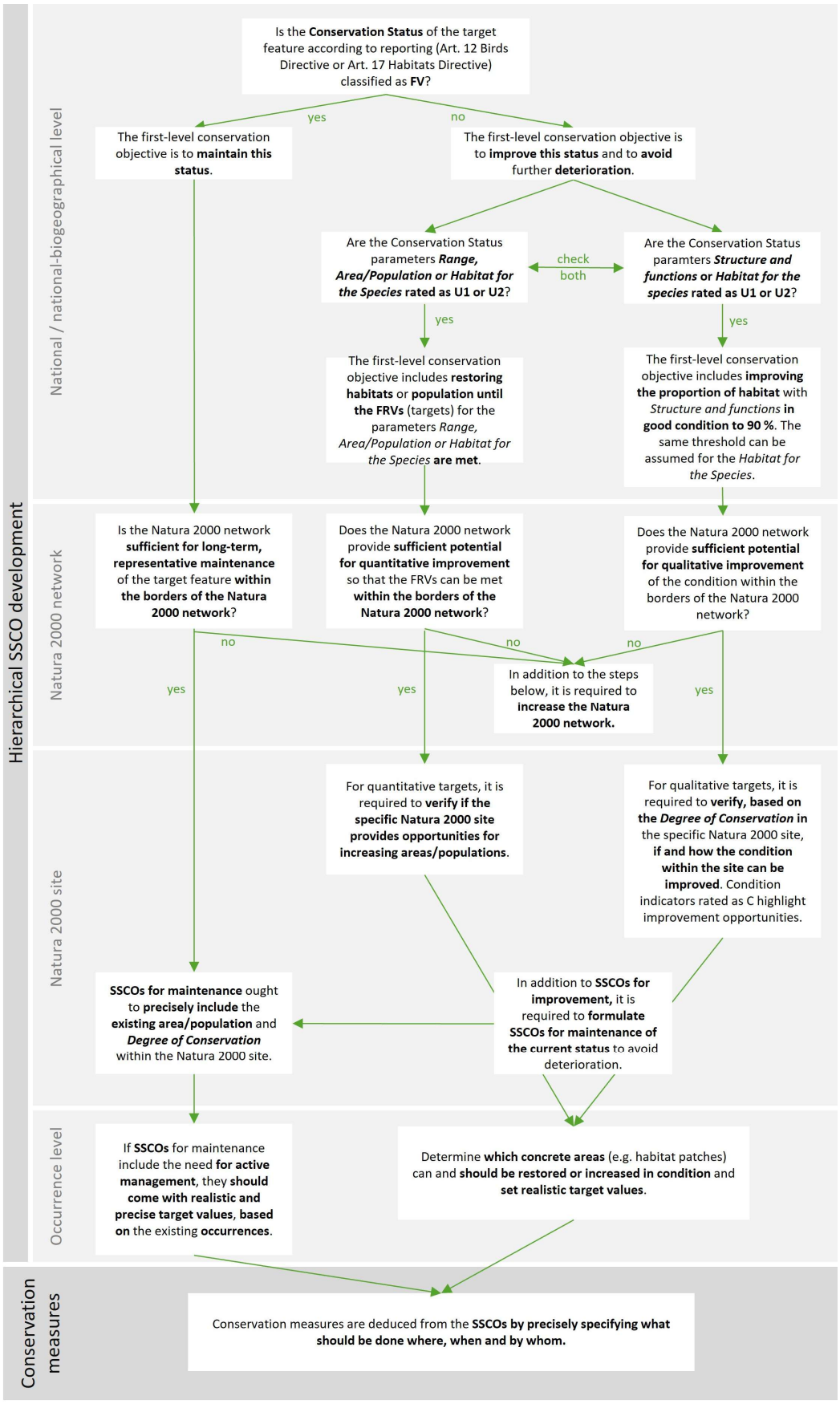
Given the need for a consistent approach and the detailed provisions of the EC and of CJEU rulings, it is advisable to develop and apply a methodology for SSCO development rather than allowing for different approaches between Natura 2000 sites. The subsequently described methodology is a best practice example, incorporating all provisions of the EC and the CJEU. This approach follows a flowchart with guiding questions through four hierarchical levels and leads to the development of conservation measures (Figure 8). For each species or habitat type in a particular Natura 2000 site, the SSCOs determine the contribution that the site makes to the overall Conservation Status of the target feature. Therefore, the Conservation Status on biogeographical level and the Favourable Reference Values (see chapter 3.3.2.2) are the main source of information for the first level of SSCO development. The second-level conservation objectives relate to the overall coverage of the target feature by the Natura 2000 network (see also chapter 3.4.1). The third level enables the

[26] European Commission, 2024. Commission Note on Setting Conservation Objectives for Natura 2000 Sites. [Last access: 15/10/2025] Available at: https://circabc.europa.eu/ui/group/3f466d71-92a7-49eb-9c63-6cb0fadf29dc/library/4f06f774-df20-4269-9e49-1a79a95fa040/details

[27] C-116/22, C-849/19, C-241/08, C-66/23

development of conservation objectives for the Natura 2000 site based on the Degree of Conservation (given in the SDF; see chapter 3.4.1.12.4 and **Infobox 4**), and the fourth level provides clarification on precise, achievable and measurable targets, which in turn are the basis for formulating conservation measures.

Figure 8: Flow chart of the hierarchical approach to SSCO development.



SSCOs can be divided into maintenance objectives and improvement objectives. While target features in a Favourable Conservation Status mostly require maintenance, target features with a degraded Conservation Status will require both maintenance and improvement.

This guidance assumes that all information – the Conservation Status, all its parameters, the overall coverage of the target feature by the Natura 2000 network and the Degree of Conservation at the Natura 2000 sites – is readily available. In case some of the knowledge is still missing, the deduction of SSCOs should follow the precautionary principle. If the Conservation Status is XX - unknown, the first-level conservation objective on biogeographical level should be to avoid any deterioration and improve data availability in order to enable an assessment. If the Degree of Conservation is unknown, the SSCOs should foresee the maintenance of the current status and to systematically map the target feature's condition in the Natura 2000 site to provide the necessary knowledge in due time.

Recommendations for the WB6:

- The EU provides in-depth guidance on the development of SSCOs, with which the responsible staff should familiarise themselves.
- SSCOs should not be confused with conservation measures. While they specify the goal and priorities, the exact locations and schedule of activities are defined by the conservation measures.
- If the SSCOs for a Natura 2000 site are not yet defined, or not defined in sufficient detail, the minimum objective is the non-deterioration principle of Art. 6 (2) HD. In the absence of SSCOs, no development projects affecting the Natura 2000 site can be permitted. Therefore, SSCOs should be precisely in line with the provisions stipulated by the EC and the CJEU rulings. Although no Natura 2000 sites have been officially proposed in the WB6 yet, it is advisable to start preparing for SSCO development soon to ensure a sufficient time frame for this process.
- SSCOs should consider the Conservation Status assessment on biogeographical level, with special regard to the FRVs.
- It is advisable to develop and apply a methodology for SSCOs that ensures the full application of the given provisions. Examples of SSCOs and conservation measures are found in **Infobox 5**.

Infobox 5 – Examples of Site-specific Conservation Objectives and conservation measures

Site-specific Conservation Objectives (SSCOs) and conservation measures are required for each target feature in each Natura 2000 site. SSCOs are usually formulated as several short and precise sentences. If the target feature is in a Favourable Conservation Status, the SSCOs primarily focus on the maintenance of this status, if the target feature is not in a bad condition on the site level. In case the Conservation Status is Unfavourable, SSCOs should explore the potential of improvement in the site. The conservation measures are deduced based on the SSCOs.

The following exemplary SSCOs and conservation measures were developed for habitat type 32A0 Tufa cascades of karstic rivers of the Dinaric Alps at an EU4Green pilot site along the Una river in Bosnia and Herzegovina[28].

First level objective (based on Conservation Status assessment of 32A0 on a biogeographical level)

32A0	Area	Structure & Functions
Status	38.5 ha	38.4 ha in good condition 0.1 ha in not-good condition
FRV	11-25 % < FRA	90% of the area in good condition
Target	45.3 ha	40.77 ha in good condition
Distance to target	6.8 ha	2.37 ha increase in good condition

Third level objective (based on mapping and assessment of 32A0)

SSCO for pilot site	**Measures for pilot site**
Maintenance of 1.2 ha of habitat type 32A0.	Strong protection regime that prohibits destroying existing occurrences, reinforced in the field by rangers.
Maintenance of 0.7 ha of habitat type 32A0 in excellent condition (grade A).	
Improvement of 0.5 ha of habitat type 32A0 from good condition (grade B) to excellent condition (grade A).	Reduction of negative impacts from trampling by putting up information boards that prohibit trampling close to the affected areas.
Improvement of water quality of the Una river at the pilot site.	Implementation of sewage water treatment before it enters the Una river.
	Reduction of input of fertilisers and pesticides from agricultural areas into the Una river by establishing buffer zones.

[28] Environment Agency Austria, 2026. Project Summary for Una National Park, Bosnia and Herzegovina (WP1-16_Del-1). HUCHLER, K., FUCHS, S. and M. SUANJAK. EU4Green project, Biodiversity. Available on https://eu4green.eu/library/ in the 'Deliverables' section.

3.5.2. Conservation measures for Natura 2000 sites

Conservation measures are the **actual mechanisms and actions that are based on the SSCOs** and put in place for a Natura 2000 site[25]. Since conservation measures may consider economic, social and cultural needs as well as regional and local characteristics (Art. 2 HD), they can be tailored to the specific economic context of the site to address the SSCO.

Consequently, it is recommended to deduce a set of possible measures for each SSCO, adding **sufficient and precise information on the method, responsibility, location and timing** of interventions (or non-intervention). Like SSCOs, conservation measures should be based on precise ecological information on the species and habitat types, their local condition, and the adverse pressures and threats affecting them[29]. They should be realistic and quantifiable. Some measures might be essential, while others might be alternatives to one another. The priority and importance of measures for a Natura 2000 site should be specified. Conservation measures can also be accompanied by a work plan or integrated into **management plans** (see **Infobox 6**). Measures can be statuary (legal requirements permitting, restricting or prohibiting activities), administrative (regulating the authorization and implementation of measures) or contractual (involving agreements between site management and landowners or users).

Conservation measures should be **evaluated regarding their effectiveness**. Every six years, Member States must report on the conservation measures taken and their impact on the conservation status of the target features in the Art. 17 report. Conservation measures can be revised, if new relevant knowledge emerges, or if there are changes in the status of habitat types and species.

Particularly in the WB6, many future Natura 2000 sites and their characteristic species and habitat types will **depend on traditional rural management**. However, societal changes can lead to a decline in the appeal of traditional land management practices among rural population. Sooner or later, a system of incentives/compensation payments will have to be developed to maintain the traditional character of the landscape.

Recommendations for the WB6:

- An early decision on the authority responsible for the implementation of measures at each Natura 2000 sites helps to ensure that the management measures are deduced in a realistic manner.
- Active conservation measures, compensation payments, maintenance, and surveillance require adequate financial and human resources, which need to be secured in due time. Both ecological knowledge and good management skills are essential for successful development and implementation. Capacity building for the staff of future Natura 2000 sites and relevant stakeholders is highly encouraged.

[29] Particularly for birds, action plans developed by BirdLife International can be an important source of information.

- Local stakeholders should be identified and consulted as early as possible during the process to gain support and ensure coordination. Resolving conflicts of interest successfully requires time and resources. Support can be increased through participation and targeted communication and awareness raising activities.
- If Natura 2000 sites overlap with other protected areas (like national parks), precise management arrangements are required.

Infobox 6 – Turning conservation measures into management plans

If need be, Member States can integrate conservation measures into management plans, an option which is widely used across the EU. Management plans can target either an individual Natura 2000 site, or groups of sites. They compile the Site-specific Conservation Objectives (SSCOs) and management measures for each habitat type and species, and support site management. If publicly available, they enhance transparency of the applied approaches.

Some Member States also integrate the management plans into broader development plans that cover the Natura 2000 site and its surroundings, or group them into sectoral management plans.

If a newly established Natura 2000 site overlaps with an existing protected area that already has a management plan in place, the plan will likely need to be updated to include the SSCOs and conservation measures.

Further reading: European Commission, 2023[25].

3.5.3. Appropriate Assessment

The obligations of the EU Nature Directives regarding the Natura 2000 network also affect various other sectors of national law. Particularly the obligation to carry out an **Appropriate Assessment (AA)** for any plan or project has profound consequences. The **AA applies to all plans** – land use plans or sectoral strategic / activity plans – **and all projects that (directly or indirectly) affect a Natura 2000 site**, unless they are related to the administration (which means the conservation) of the site. The requirement to carry out an AA originates from Article 6 (3) of the Habitats Directive. The **AA is a mechanism to ensure the protection of Natura 2000 sites from harmful human activities.** An AA is triggered, if a plan or project, alone or together with other plans and projects, is likely to have significant adverse effects on a Natura 2000 site. The AA will then assess the effects on the conservation objectives of the site.

If the AA finds that the **integrity of a Natura 2000 site will be affected, the national authorities must not agree to the development proposal.** Importantly, not only projects within the borders of the site must be screened, but also projects beyond the borders that are likely to have significant effects on the site must undergo an AA (CJEU Case C-98/03, Commission v. Germany).

AAs are carried out through subsequent steps (European Commission, 2022; Figure 9):

- **Step 1: Screening** determines whether a plan or project may have significant effects on the Natura 2000 site concerned. If such effects cannot be excluded with certainty, a detailed assessment must be made. At this stage, measures intended to avoid or reduce the harmful effects of a plan or project on the site (mitigation measures) must not be taken into account (CJEU C-323/17, par. 40).
  Step 2: The AA is a detailed assessment of the implications of the plan or project on the SSCOs. The assessment must be based on the best scientific knowledge available and take cumulative effects into account. This is also the stage where mitigation measures can be identified and assessed. If a plan or project might harm the integrity of the site despite all identified mitigation measures, the authorities are required to prohibit it.

The AA has a certain logic in the methodology, which should be followed[30]. At the first stage, the plan or project and its possible effects including cumulative impacts of other plans or projects should be described. Based on the identified project effects, the cumulated project effect ranges will determine the project effect area. This effect area, which should be delineated following the precautionary principle, can be overlaid with the Natura 2000 sites in the region, resulting in the potential area of interference. Field investigations of the potentially affected target features and their conditions can be focussed on the interference area. It must be stressed that field investigation should not only record the target features occurrences but also areas which might be necessary for the achievement of SSCOs. Based on

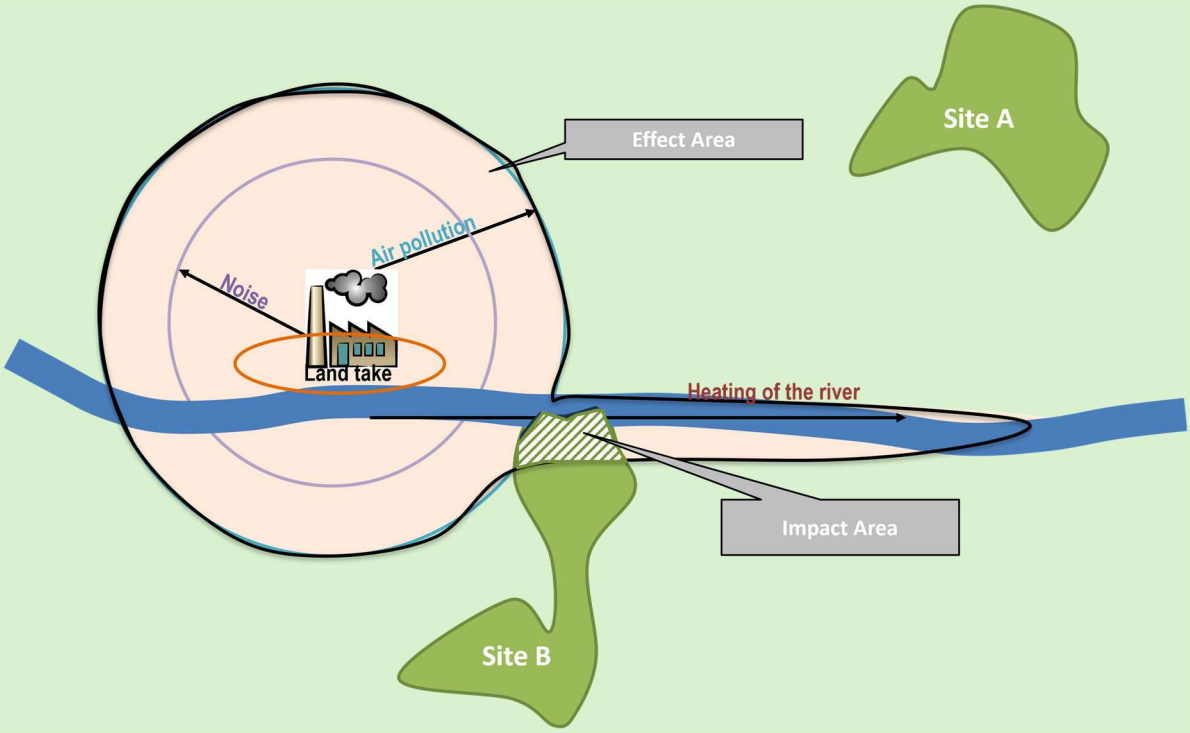
[30] Roth, P.; Ellmauer, T. & Bernotat, D. 2016: Manual for Ecological Network Impact Assessment (ENIA). Croatian Agency for Environment and Nature & Umweltbundesamt .Twinning Light project: EU HR/2011/IB/EN/02 TWL.

the field investigations, project effects can be assessed in terms of their negative impacts on target features and SSCOs.

When deciding on the admissibility of a plan or project the competent authority must consider the findings of the assessment and ascertain that the plan or project will not adversely affect the integrity of the site. Other than the assessment of the implication of the plan/project on the SSCOs, which can be conducted even by a consultant, the competent authority is solely responsibility for concluding on the effect on the integrity of the site. The integrity of a site relates to the site´s conservation objectives, its key natural features as well as its ecological structure and function. However, if there is no impact on the site´s conservation objectives, there will be no adverse effect on the site.

Infobox 7 – Potential project effect area and the area impacting Natura 2000 sites

Overlapping the ranges of all possible project effects (like land take, noise and air pollution) allows the project's effect area to be identified. The intersection of the project's effect area with the Natura 2000 sites in the region (Sites A and B) shows that there is an impact area with Site B only, and no impact at all for Site A.



In exceptional circumstances, a negative decision of an AA can be overruled by the derogation regime under Art. 6 (4). Authorisation for plans or projects may be granted even if the preceding AA has identified that they will adversely affect the integrity of the site, provided that there are no better, less impactful, alternative solutions; the development is imperative for reasons of overriding public interest; and the negative impacts can be offset by the implementation of compensation measures. Consequently, the derogation regime has to be implemented in the following steps:

- **Step 1: The assessment of alternatives:** The competent authority has to ensure that all feasible alternatives have been properly considered. If an alternative that will not adversely affect the integrity of the site can be identified, authorisation can be granted under Art. 6 (3). If no such alternative exists, the alternative with the least impact has to be chosen for the next steps.
- **Step 2: Imperative reasons of overriding public interest:** In order to justify the implementation of a plan or project that would have an adverse effect on a site, the interest must be 'public', 'overriding' and 'imperative'. While investors may be private, the interest in implementing such projects must be public. Projects that serve solely private purposes are not eligible for the derogation procedure. The project must so important that its societal value outweighs its ecological value and is of overriding interest. Additionally, there must be good reasoning to justify why the project cannot be postponed.
- **Step 3: Compensation measures** aim to replace the target features of the affected site with identical target features of the same or even greater size/population. This can be achieved through restoration within or outside a Natura 2000 site or by designating a new Natura 2000 site in an area, where the relevant target features occur.
- **Step 4: Involvement of the EC:** As for non-priority target features, the MS only has to inform the EC on the implementation of the compensatory measures. However, if priority target features are concerned, the MS must ask for the EC for an opinion on the justification of the imperative reasons of overriding public interest.

The AA is a complex process, and several guidance papers are available[31,32], also on specific topics such as (renewable) energy infrastructure[33].

Recommendations for the WB6:

- Ensure full and precise transposition of Article 6(3) and 6(4) into national legislation.
- Develop measurable site-specific conservation objectives which can be easily assessed in the process.

[31] European Commission, 2022. Guidance document on assessment of plans and projects in relation to Natura 2000 sites – A summary. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. [Last access: 15/10/2025] Available at: https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/a3a639e3-b943-11ec-b6f4-01aa75ed71a1/language-en

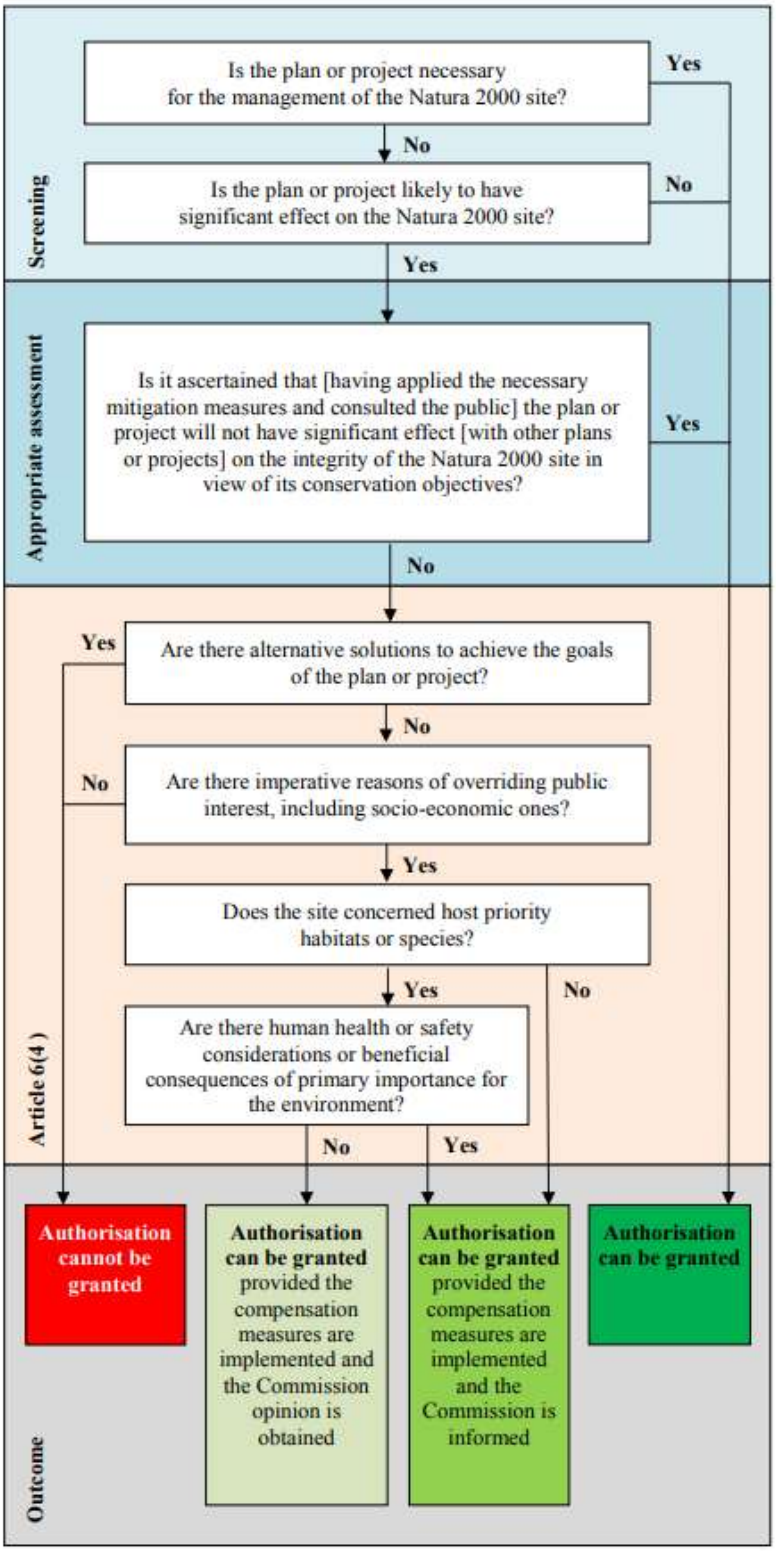
[32] C/2021/6913. Commission notice Assessment of plans and projects in relation to Natura 2000 sites – Methodological guidance on the provisions of Article 6(3) and (4) of the Habitats Directive 92/43/EEC. OJ C 437, 28.10.2021 [Last access: 15/10/2025] Available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=oj:JOC_2021_437_R_0001

[33] European Union, 2018. Guidance document on the requirements for hydropower in relation to EU nature legislation – A summary. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. [Last access: 15/10/2025] Available at: https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/b0279310-a5b4-11e8-99ee-01aa75ed71a1

European Union, 2018. Energy transmission infrastructure and EU nature legislation – A summary – Guidance document. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. [Last access: 15/10/2025] Available at: https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/6746fb2d-bd48-11e8-99ee-01aa75ed71a1

- Apply a precautionary and structured AA methodology with clear duties and responsibilities for all involved parties, like applicants, experts conducting the assessment studies and administrative bodies deciding on the authorisation.
- Strengthen institutional clarity and capacity, ensuring that competent authorities retain full responsibility for conclusions on site integrity, supported by clear guidance and sector-specific tools (e.g. for energy and infrastructure).
- Integrate Natura 2000 considerations early in planning processes, improving cross-sectoral coordination so that spatial planning, water management and infrastructure development systematically address AA requirements from the outset.
- Apply the derogation procedure strictly and sequentially, requiring thorough assessment of alternatives, proper justification of imperative reasons of overriding public interest and ecologically sound compensation measures before approval of damaging projects.

Figure 9: Flow chart of the Appropriate Assessment (AA). Source: European Commission, 2022[31].



3.6. Part E: Monitoring and reporting

3.6.1. Monitoring and reporting under the Habitats Directive

The EU Habitats Directives obliges the Member States to carry out a **systematic and regular monitoring** of the habitat types and species of Community interest to track and assess their conservation status. The most relevant articles are:

- **Article 11:** Member States are required to undertake surveillance (i.e. continuous monitoring) of the conservation status of the habitat types and species of Community interest across their territory.
- **Article 17:** Every six years, Member States report the monitoring results to the EC, with the EC precisely defining the structure and format of the report. The report also must be accessible by the public. It also includes information on the Natura 2000 network and the success of conservation measures (see chapter 3.5.2) as well as reintroductions of Annex IV species.
- Additionally, Member States also provide information on species protection such as taking and exploiting of Annex V species and incidental capture and killing of Annex IV species (see chapter 3.7.1) to the EC.

Monitoring and reporting are crucial components in the cycle of activities foreseen by the logic of the EU Nature Directives (**Infobox 1**). While monitoring under Article 11 of the Habitats Directive aims to uncover changes in conservation status, **reporting allows for transparent evaluation of the results**. Where necessary, the evaluation should be followed up by an adaptation of conservation measures for species and sites. To foster a better understanding of the provisions, it is recommended to first understand the reporting obligations, as the general assumption is that monitoring provides the data for this purpose.

3.6.1.1. Article 17: Reporting of the Conservation Status

Member States are obliged to **report** on the **Conservation Status of species and habitat types of Community interest**, separately **for each biogeographical region**. In general, the EC provides a wide range of reference documents and guiding materials for each reporting period through the EIONET Central Data Repository[34], with the **Explanatory Notes as central document** that provides necessary definitions.

The report is structured around the same four **standard parameters that define the (Favourable) Conservation Status** for species and habitat types (detailed explanations in chapters 2.3) and builds upon the data requirements outlined in chapter 3.3.2. Multiple indicators are required for reporting them (see **Table 4** for species and **Table 5** for habitat

[34] For the period 2019-2024, these documents can be accessed here: European Environment Agency, n.d. Reference portal for reporting under Article 17 of the Habitats Directive. EIONET Central Data Repository. Last modified 18/03/2025. [Last access: 27/10/2025] Available at: https://cdr.eionet.europa.eu/help/habitats_art17

types). Some of the indicators are strictly quantitative, while others are qualitative assessments. Several are paired with information on the method used for gathering the data or on the reasons behind changes. **Distribution maps** and the **Favourable Reference Values** (FRVs) for Range, Area and Population need to be included in the report as well.

Table 4: Data-driven indicators reported for species under the Art. 17 reporting for the period 2019-2024. In addition, information on the methods used for deriving the indicator values is requested. Source: European Environment Agency[34].

Parameter	Relevant indicators	Data type
Range	Surface area (outer limits of species distribution)	Quantitative (km^2)
	Short-term trend direction over 12 years	Qualitative (stable, increasing, decreasing, uncertain, unknown)
	Long-term trend direction over 24 years (optional)	Qualitative (stable, increasing, decreasing, uncertain, unknown)
	Favourable reference range (FRR)	Quantitative (km^2) or through relation to current range (range 2-10% smaller than FRR, range 11-50% smaller than FRR, range 51-100% smaller than FRR)
Population	Population size	Quantitative as single value and/or as an interval with min. and max. value, given in one of many available standardised reporting units, e.g. number of individuals, number of map 1x1 km grid cells, average number of flowering specimens per m^2, etc.
	Short-term trend direction over 12 years	Qualitative (stable, increasing, decreasing, uncertain, unknown)
	Long-term trend direction over 24 years (optional)	Qualitative (stable, increasing, decreasing, uncertain, unknown)
	Favourable reference population (FRP)	Quantitative in the same unit as population size or through relation to current population (population 5-25% smaller than FRP, population 26-50% smaller than FRP, population 51-100% smaller than FRP)
Habitat for the species	Sufficiency assessment of area and quality of occupied habitat	Answered with yes, no or unknown; if occupied habitat is not sufficient, also the quality of unoccupied habitat needs to be assessed
	Short-term trend direction over 12 years	Qualitative (stable, increasing, decreasing, uncertain, unknown), considering both area and quality
	Long-term trend direction over 24 years (optional)	Qualitative (stable, increasing, decreasing, uncertain, unknown), considering both area and quality
Future prospects	For each of the parameters above	Qualitative (good, poor, bad, unknown)

Along with the indicators, Member States also report the **main pressures and threats**, for which the EC provides a standardised list. Pressures are already acting during the current reporting period and affect the long-term viability of a species or habitat type, while threats are factors expected to act in the foreseeable future (next two reporting periods). Member States select the 20 most relevant pressures and threats for each species/habitat type in each biogeographical region and rank them according to their impact. For each pressure/threat, the timing, scope and influence must be indicated.

Table 5: Data-driven indicators reported for habitat types under the Art. 17 reporting for the period 2019-2024. In addition, information on the methods used for deriving the indicator values is requested. Source: European Environment Agency[34].

Parameter	Relevant indicators	Data type
Range	Surface area (outer limits of habitat distribution)	Quantitative (km^2)
	Short-term trend direction over 12 years	Qualitative (stable, increasing, decreasing, uncertain, unknown)
	Long-term trend direction over 24 years (optional)	Qualitative (stable, increasing, decreasing, uncertain, unknown)
	Favourable reference range (FRR)	Quantitative (km^2) or through relation to current range (range 2-10% smaller than FRR, range 11-50% smaller than FRR, range 51-100% smaller than FRR)
Area covered by habitat	Surface area (currently occupied by the habitat)	Quantitative (km^2)
	Short-term trend direction over 12 years	Qualitative (stable, increasing, decreasing, uncertain, unknown)
	Long-term trend direction over 24 years (optional)	Qualitative (stable, increasing, decreasing, uncertain, unknown)
	Favourable reference area (FRA)	Quantitative (km^2) or through relation to current area (area 2-10% smaller than FRA, area 11-25% smaller than FRA, area 26-50% smaller than FRA, area 51-100% smaller than FRA)
Structure and functions	Condition of habitat	Quantitative (km^2) for area in good condition, area in not-good condition and area where condition is unknown
	Short-term trend direction over 12 years	Qualitative (stable, increasing, decreasing, uncertain, unknown)
	Typical species	List of typical species which are good indicators of favourable habitat quality
Future prospects	For each of the parameters above	Qualitative (good, poor, bad, unknown)

Additionally, the **conservation measures for the target features** require reporting, also indicating whether the measures were carried out inside and/or outside of Natura 2000 sites, what fraction of the species' or habitat type's occurrences is impacted by these measures, and if there was a response to these measures. The EC provides a standardised list of measures, which are also matched with pressures that they address. The report also contains a section on reintroductions of Annex IV species (species in need of strict protection), including the location, number of reintroduced individuals and reintroduction success.

Based on the provided data, each of the four standard parameters is assessed as '*FV = Favourable*', '*U1 = Unfavourable-inadequate*', '*U2 = Unfavourable-bad*' or '*XX – unknown*', applying the assessment criteria of the EC (**Table 6**, see also detailed description in chapter 3.3.2.2). Then, the **overall assessment of the Conservation Status** depends on the assessments of the four parameters:

- **Favourable Conservation Status**: four parameters are FV, or three parameters are FV and one is XX.
- **Unfavourable-inadequate Conservation Status**: one or more parameters rated as U1, but no U2.

- **Unfavourable-bad Conservation Status**: one or more parameters rated as U2.
- **Unknown Conservation Status**: two or more parameters rated as XX combined with FV or all XX.

Ultimately, also the **trend in Conservation Status** needs assessment, which is based on the short-term trends of the parameters and categorised as improving, deteriorating, stable or unknown. The Explanatory Notes provide more information on how the trends of the parameters can be combined.

Table 6: Assessment criteria for the parameters pf the Conservation Status. The assessment is guided by the definitions for the categories '*FV – Favourable*' and '*U2 – Unfavourable-bad*', while '*U1 – Unfavourable-inadequate*' includes all options between FV and U2. '*XX – Unknown*' is only applied in case of insufficient reliable information.

Parameter	FV	U1	U2	XX
Range (species and habitat types)	Short-term trend is stable or increasing, and surface area is larger than favourable reference range.	Any other combination than for FV and U2.	A large decline equivalent to a loss of > 1 % per year, or surface area > 10 % below favourable reference range.	No or insufficient reliable information available.
Area (habitat types)	Short-term trend is stable or increasing, area covered by the habitat is not smaller than favourable reference area, and no significant changes in distribution pattern within the range.		A large decrease equivalent to a loss of > 1 % per year, or major losses in distribution pattern within range, or area covered by habitat > 10 % below favourable reference area.	
Population (species)	Population size is not smaller than favourable reference population, and age structure, mortality and reproduction are not deviating from normal.		A large decline equivalent to a loss of > 1 % per year, or population size is > 25 %below favourable reference population, or reproduction, mortality and age structure are markedly different from normal.	
Structure and functions (habitat types)	Structure and functions are in good condition, and there are no significant deteriorations/pressures.		> 25 % of the area is unfavourable (not-good).	
Habitat for the species (species)	Area of the habitat is sufficiently large and stable or increasing, and habitat quality is suitable for long-term survival.		The area of habitat is clearly not sufficiently large for long-term survival, or habitat quality is bad, clearly not allowing for long-term survival.	
Future prospects (habitat types)	No significant impact from threats to habitat is expected and long-term viability is ensured.		Severe impacts from pressures and threats to the habitat are expected, prospects for future area bad and long-term viability is not ensured.	
Future prospects (species)	Main pressures and threats are not significant and species will remain viable in the long-term.		Severe influence of pressures and threats to the species, prospects for future are very bad and long-term viability is at risk.	

3.6.1.2. Article 11: Monitoring species and habitat types of Community interest

The Member States have **substantial freedom in setting up their monitoring system**, but the general demand is that monitoring needs to provide **sufficient and reliable data for Article 17 reporting**. Furthermore, it needs to be effective enough to detect, at minimum, a **change of > 1 % per year** (equalling > 6 % per reporting period or >12% for assessing the short-term trend) in each parameter.

For each Annex I habitat type and Annex II, IV and V species, monitoring under Article 11 is intended to provide information on **changes in quantity and quality of the target features** through providing the following information:

- **Delineation of existing and diminished occurrences of the target feature,** either by complete census (for rare target features) or statistically robust sampling
    - provides information where the target feature occurs
    - forms the basis for generating distribution maps (in 10x10 km grid)
- needed for calculating the parameters Range, Area and Habitat for the Species, including their trends
- For species: **Population size** at each occurrence
    - as single value or as interval with a minimum and maximum value
    - ideally through complete survey or statistically robust estimate, can also be derived from extrapolation or expert opinion
    - with information on trend, either from previous monitoring cycles or from expert knowledge
- Assessment of the **condition of the delineated habitat types and habitats for the species**, particularly
- Structure and functions for habitat types (quantity in good, not-good condition)
- Habitat for the species (condition of occupied/unoccupied) habitat
- Knowledge on the **threats and pressures** that impact the long-term viability of the target feature, in consideration of its ecological requirements

Recommendations for the WB6:

- A solid understanding of which parameters and indicators require reporting is essential for the successful implementation of a monitoring system that is fit for purpose. Training and knowledge management for staff in charge of developing the monitoring system is strongly advised.
- Monitoring requires substantial fieldwork and is both labour- and cost-intensive, making it essential to design an efficient and synergistic monitoring system. Considering the data required for monitoring and reporting already in the initial strategy for data acquisition (chapter 3.3) helps maximise synergies and increase efficiency. If this is overlooked, more additional

fieldwork is often needed later to fill knowledge gaps. This duplicated effort can be avoided, if experts are enabled to capture the full set of necessary data from the outset. Candidate economies should therefore aim to secure the required resources to familiarise themselves with the data requirements for monitoring and reporting early in the implementation process, even if monitoring activities only begin at a later stage.

3.6.1.3. Methodological considerations for initiating a monitoring system

Member States design their own monitoring systems, thereby incorporating the provisions set out by the Habitats Directive. There are a wide range of different approaches, each of them having strong implications for the effort needed. During the initiating phase, a wide range of methodological considerations need to be taken, some on programme level, others relate to the **fieldwork methodology used for each single species and habitat type**. This sets monitoring under the Habitats Directive apart from other monitoring schemes that apply a completely standardised fieldwork methodology in all localities. It is required to record the parameters listed above for species and habitat types, but the way they are retrieved may vary substantially between target features. As an example: For each species, it is necessary to estimate its population size. But how population size is estimated best varies greatly between species and species groups. It is imperative that the **fieldwork methodology needs to be closely aligned with scientific best practice**.

The following conceptual decisions are taken on the level of the entire monitoring:

- Monitoring needs to target a **representative fraction** of all occurrences of a target feature. For rare species and habitat types, this likely means monitoring all occurrences. For frequent species and habitat types, it may be appropriate to randomly draw a representative sample.
- Sampling can be done either **paired or randomly**. Paired sampling is carried out in the same localities each reporting period, thereby providing a time series of the same localities. For random sampling, the monitoring can target different localities each monitoring cycle. However, **random sampling requires higher number of sampling sites** to achieve the same level of statistical significance.

These **conceptual questions highly affect the number of required samples, effort and costs**. It is strongly encouraged to collaborate with **statistical experts**, estimating the **statistical power under different assumptions**. For monitoring under the Habitats Directive, a change of > 1 % per year or 6 % per reporting period needs to be detectable. Also, the statistical tests to calculate the probability of change should be decided upon.

Another issue for clarification is the definition of the ‘occurrence’, which will be monitored. Since the delineation of one occurrence of a habitat for a species but also sometimes of a simple habitat type is not always a simple task, it is recommended to opt for standardized sample units (e.g. 1x1 km grids), where all occurrences within will be delineated. This sample

units can be a standard for all target features. Within this sample units, smaller sample plots can be chosen for mapping of detailed indicators.

Then, there are questions which need to be **decided for each single target feature**, including:

- Which fieldwork methodology should be used for sampling and during which time of the year?
- What fraction of occurrences should be monitored?
- How are habitat types and species' habitats spatially delineated?
- Which indicators will be recorded in the sample plots?
- What is the minimum frequency of recording necessary? This factor is strongly determined by the variability or fluctuation of the target feature. While highly stable populations/habitat types may be sufficiently sampled once every second reporting cycle, dynamic and highly fluctuating populations/habitat types may even require a sampling twice each reporting year.

For answering these questions, **close collaboration with experts on the species and habitat types** is required. Yet, these experts should have sufficient understanding of the general provisions of monitoring under the Habitats Directive (e.g. the parameters of the Conservation Status, the use of Favourable Reference Values, etc.). Answering these conceptual questions also requires well-founded knowledge on where each target feature occurs. If there are severe **knowledge gaps**, an **initiating inventory** of the target feature is needed prior to starting the monitoring activities. This can be coupled with mapping activities for the Natura 2000 network. However, it is highly recommended to align the parameters recorded during fieldwork already with the provisions for Article 11 monitoring and Article 17 reporting, thereby not only recording quantities but also qualitative aspects (e.g. indicators related to structure and function of habitat types or habitat condition for species).

Fieldwork activities should be **highly standardised to ensure comparability between different sites, reporting cycles and experts carrying out fieldwork**. This particularly affects the more **qualitative parameters**, such as habitat condition. Quantitative parameters are easier to standardise. Qualitative assessment in categories requires precise and detailed definition of the categories.

The methodology – both on programme level and for each single target feature – requires **clear documentation**. It is advised to draft a **written concept for the monitoring programme** and a **written field guide for each target feature**, except already produced in the context of chapter 3.3.2. Such documents are **available from EU Member States**, although mostly not translated into English, and could act as inspiration or guidance.

Recommendations for the WB6:

- Several Member States increased the number of species and habitat types that are surveyed in the field over time. It is more advisable to focus on building a solid methodology that can then remain unchanged over several monitoring cycles and reporting periods, than to quickly establish a programme that needs several methodological updates, thereby disenabling long-term comparability.
- The methods available for monitoring biodiversity are constantly evolving. Novel technologies like for example remote sensing, metabarcoding of eDNA and use of automated recording devices are gaining in popularity. They promise to reduce the human resources needed for carrying out field surveys. However, they usually come at a higher initiating cost. Considering the inclusion of novel technologies is encouraged, but only when standardisation in the context of long-term monitoring activities is secured.
- Citizen Science can support the monitoring activities, particularly for distribution patterns of charismatic and distinctive species. However, quality assurance should be considered and information campaigns planned.
- There are certain overlaps between the Habitats Directive and other reporting obligations in the field of nature conservation. This applies for example to the Birds Directive, as certain habitat types are crucial habitat for certain bird species. Also, the Invasive Alien Species (IAS) Regulation provides synergies: i) IAS are a considerable threat to species protected by the Habitats Directive, ii) IAS registered during fieldwork for the Habitats Directive should be registered systematically, and iii) some Invasive Alien Species can also be registered through Citizen Scientists, thereby increasing the usefulness of information campaigns. Further synergies can be found the Water Framework Directive, the Marine Strategy Framework Directive, and assessments for forestry and agriculture.
- Cross-border cooperation is highly important to jointly protect shared ecosystems, habitats and species. Several biodiversity hotspots occur in regions fragmented by political borders but require coordinated management. Cooperation in establishing the monitoring under the Habitats Directive – aligning methodological decisions as well as data infrastructure – would highly increase comparability of data and facilitate working towards joint goals. The time window for initiating such a cooperation is limited, because once monitoring programmes are established, harmonisation becomes much more challenging.
- The fieldwork methodology needs to be reflected in the GIS database (chapter 3.3.4). Data records in the field may happen manually on paper, then a data entry form should be developed. However, GIS software can also be used on tablets, which avoids efforts for digitizing manually recorded data.

3.6.1.4. State of nature in the EU report

Based on the information reported by all Member States, the **European Environment Agency aggregates data** from the Member States **to an assessment of the conservation status of target features on EU biogeographical level.** These aggregated data together with a Red List assessment of Bird species built upon Art. 12 BD reports, the EEA develops the State of nature in the EU report on behalf of the EC[35]. It includes the Member States' results as well as assessments at **EU level and the level of biogeographical and marine regions**. It identifies successes and shortcomings, key pressures and threats. The status of the Natura 2000 network and its contribution to achieving Favourable Conservation Statuses is highlighted, and information on current conservation measures and required restoration is included as well. It provides well-founded information and concise key takeaways on the state of nature for **policy- and decision-makers** (both on EU and on Member State level), **NGOs, scientists and the general public**.

3.6.2. Monitoring and reporting under the Birds Directive

The Birds Directive does not provide an explicit requirement for surveillance or monitoring of bird populations. Article 10 encourages Member States to conduct research and any work required as a basis for protection, management and use of populations of bird species. Article 2 requires the Member States to maintain the populations at a level which corresponds to ecological, scientific and cultural requirements and Article 12 to report every three years on the progress made with the implementation of the Birds Directive. Furthermore, Articles 6 and 7 oblige Member States to regularly verify if the conditions for hunting Annex II species and for authorising the use of Annex III species are fulfilled.

In preparation of the report in 2013, the reporting obligation under the Birds Directive was aligned to that of the Habitats Directive, mainly in terms of the reporting period, which was extended to a six-year period. The reporting methodology for the Birds Directive, nevertheless, differs considerably from that of the Habitats Directive. The Article 12 report contains information on **status and trends of bird populations and on the breeding distribution and its trend**. As for the Habitats Directive, the EC provides reference documents and guiding materials for each reporting period through the EIONET Central Data Repository[36], with the **Explanatory Notes** as central document that provides necessary definitions.

[35] Latest report at time of publishing: European Environment Agency, 2020. State of nature in the EU. Results from reporting under the nature directives 2013-2018. EEA Report No 10/2020. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. ISBN 978-92-9480-260-6. doi: 10.2800/705440

[36] For the period 2019-2024, these documents can be accessed here: European Environment Agency, n.d. Reference portal for reporting under Article 11 of the Birds Directive. EIONET Central Data Repository. Last modified 25/05/2023. [Last access: 26/11/2025] Available at: https://cdr.eionet.europa.eu/help/birds_art12

The following parameters need to be reported for all bird species / subspecies occurring in the Member State's territory, according to the standardised checklist for bird species:

- **Season**: Season, in which most of the data were collected (breeding, winter or passage). Most data is reported for breeding, however, for some species reporting for wintering season should be considered.
- **Population size**: Size is given in a unit which is eligible for the species (e.g. breeding pairs, individuals, calling males,…) and reported as single best value and/or with a minimum and maximum number. Also includes the method used for deriving the population size (e.g. complete survey or a statistically robust estimate, extrapolation, expert opinion,…), sources and (if applicable) reasons for change compared to the previous reporting period.
- **Population trend**: Reported separately as short-term trend (last 12 years) and long-term trend (since ca. 1980). Classified as stable, fluctuating, increasing, decreasing, uncertain or unknown. Given as change percentage (as best single value and/or as minimum and maximum value). Also includes the method used and sources.
- **Breeding distribution map and size**: Map (with raster cells of 10 x 10 km size and standardised metadata). Size (km^2) of the entire breeding distribution. Also includes information of the species is considered sensitive (i.e. the map should not be published), information on the year or period when the distribution was determined, and the method used and sources.
- **Breeding distribution trend**: Reported separately as short-term trend (last 12 years) and long-term trend (since ca. 1980). Given as change percentage (as best single value and/or as minimum and maximum value). Also includes the method used and sources.
- **Main pressures and threats**: List of max. 20 pressures, using a standardised code-list. For each of these pressures, timing (past, ongoing, future), scope (amount of affected population), influence (high, medium, low) and location need to be specified. Also invasive alien species that act as a pressure should be named, and used methods and sources stated.
- **Conservation measures**: Status of measures (needed and/or taken). Scope, main purpose, location and response of/to taken measures. List of max. 20 main conservation measures, using a standardised code-list.
- **Natura 2000 coverage**: Population size within SPAs given in a unit which is eligible for the species (e.g. breeding pairs, individuals, calling males,…) and reported as single best value and/or with a minimum and maximum number. Also includes the method used for deriving the population size inside the Natura 2000 network, sources, and short-term trend.
- **Progress in work** related to international Species Action Plans, Management Plans and Brief Management Statements. For species where such plans exist, these should be assessed regarding their effectiveness, i.e. whether the species'

national status is improving/moving towards the plan's objective(s), or whether it is remaining unchanged or even deteriorating.

- **Information on hunted species**: For species that are nationally hunted, statistics regarding the extracted individuals and used methods need to be reported.

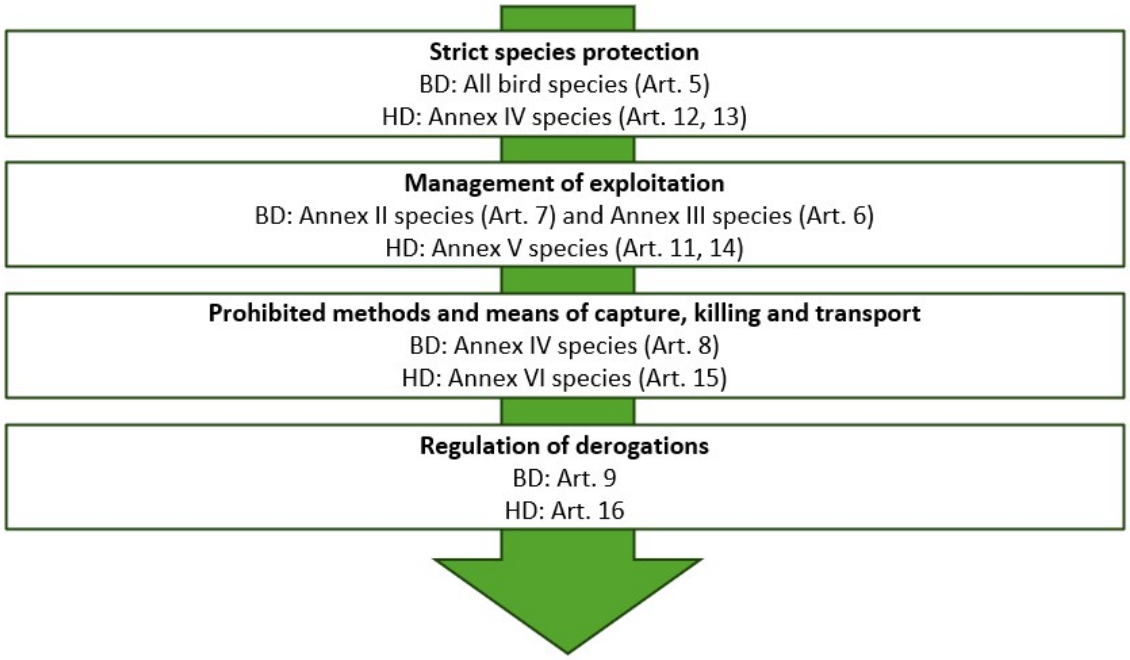
In comparison to the Article 17 report of the Habitats Directive, the Birds Directive report does not include parameters like *Range*, *Habitat for the species* or *Future prospects* and does not use the **comparison of the status to reference values.** The main result of the Birds report is the population trend; there is **no overall assessment of a conservation status**. The population status on EU level is aggregated from the data reported by the Member States and builds the basis for the Red List of European Birds[37].

[37] BirdLife International, 2022. European Red List of Birds 2021. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. Available at: https://www.birdlife.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/BirdLife-European-Red-List-of-Birds-2021.pdf.pdf

3.7. Part F: Species protection and enforcement

Candidate countries usually focus on legal transposition and establishment of the Natura 2000 network, and some already prepare for monitoring and reporting. However, the species protection schemes are often neglected or deprioritised. Yet both Nature Directives call for species protection measures (Figure 10).

Figure 10: Strict species protection under the Birds and Habitats Directives, with links to relevant annexes and articles.



3.7.1. Species protection under the Habitats Directive

The Habitats Directive asks Member States to **establish and implement a strict protection regime for selected species**. The relevant species are grouped into three annexes:

- **Annex IV** lists species for which a strict protection regime must be applied across their entire natural range within the EU, both within and outside of Natura 2000 sites. It includes plant species as well as certain mammals, invertebrates, fish, amphibians and reptiles. Prominent examples are: European otter (*Lutra lutra*), Pond bat (*Myotis dasycneme*), Iberian lynx (*Lynx pardinus*), Alpine ibex (*Capra ibex*), Mediterranean monk seal (*Monachus monachus*), and many species of orchids and other protected plants.
- For the species of **Annex V** Member States must ensure that their exploitation and taking in the wild is compatible with maintaining them in a Favourable Conservation Status. Regulated harvesting, collection, and use of these species

is allowed, if it does not threaten their survival or ecological balance. It aims to balance conservation efforts with sustainable use of species.

- Furthermore, the Nature 2000 sites, inter alia designated for species listed in **Annex II**, require management in accordance with the ecological needs of the species (see chapter 3.5.1).

In addition, **Annex VI** is relevant for the species protection framework as it lists prohibited methods and means of capture and killing, as well as prohibited modes of transport.

Guidance on the requested measures is given by Articles 12 – 16[38]. They collectively reinforce the strict protection regime for certain species, emphasizing conservation and combating illegal activities affecting protected species and their habitats:

- **Article 12** prohibits the deliberate killing or capture of Annex IV animal species. Also, deliberate disturbance, deliberate destruction or taking of eggs from the wild and the (deliberate or not deliberate) deterioration or destruction of breeding sites or resting places is forbidden, as are the keeping of, or trading with, the protected species. If a project could potentially harm breeding sites or resting places, measures can be applied to ensure the continued ecological functionality of those sites (CEF-measures), to prevent a breach of that prohibition. Such measures aim to minimise or eliminate the negative effects or actively improve a certain breeding site or resting place and prevent a reduction or loss of ecological functionality.
- **Article 13** establishes a protection scheme for the Annex IV plant species. More precisely, it forbids the deliberate picking, collecting, cutting, uprooting or destruction of such plants in their natural range in the wild and the keeping or trading of protected species.
- **Article 14** provides for measures governing the taking and use of flora and fauna which are listed in Annex V of the Directive.
- **Article 15** contains provisions on the capture and transport of species listed in Annexes IV and V. A slightly less stringent protection regime applies to flora and fauna listed in Annex V. Control measures are imposed in the event of taking and exploiting, such as prohibiting indiscriminate means that could cause the local disappearance of, or serious disturbance to, populations of such species.
- **Article 16** sets out the circumstances in which a Member State may derogate from the strict protection provisions. Unlike the Birds Directive, the Habitats Directive allows for more extensive derogations. A derogation is permitted if one of the elements laid down in Article 16 (1) (a - e) applies. The authorisation process under Art. 16 has similar components as the derogation system for

[38] Particularly for animal species see also: C(2021)7301. Commission notice. Guidance document on the strict protection of animal species of Community interest under the Habitats Directive. [Last access: 22/10/2025] Available at: https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/a17dbc76-2b51-11ec-bd8e-01aa75ed71a1/language-en

Natura 2000 sites under Art. 6 (4). Article 16 establishes three tests: (1) It has to be demonstrated that at least one of the prohibitions under Art. 12 will be violated. (2) It must be proven that there is no other satisfactory alternative that would not infringe the prohibitions. (3) Assurance is needed that the derogation is not detrimental to maintaining populations at a favourable conservation status. Once, all the three tests have been met, the derogation can only be granted, if imperative reasons of overriding public interest including those, explicitly quoted under Art. 16, can be demonstrated for the project. Member States report on these derogations to the EC every two years through a reporting tool called HaBiDeS+[39]. In this context, according to Article 17 of the Habitats Directive, Member States draw up a report on the progress made with the implementation of the Habitats Directive every six years.

3.7.2. EU Species Action Plans for selected species

In 2008, the EC began to support the development **of Species Action Plans** (SAPs) for selected species listed in the Habitats Directive. These plans are intended to be used as a **tool for identifying and prioritizing measures** to restore the population of these species across their range within the EU. They provide information about the status, ecology, threats and current conservation measures for each species and list key actions to improve their conservation status in Europe. Each Plan is the result of an **extensive process of consultation** with individual experts in Europe.

Preparing a SAP is a structured process that requires several steps to develop goals and objectives, conservation measures, as well as monitoring and evaluation provisions. Its development foresees the involvement of stakeholders and communities. Funding and resources should be clarified, and long-term sustainability guaranteed. In 2023, Turkey prepared a *Species Action Plan Preparation Guide*[40] with a species action plan format, which can be used as an example.

However, SAPs are not legally binding and do not impose additional obligations on Member States beyond those set out in the Habitats Directive. They only help Member States to conserve the listed species.

[39] European Commission, 2015. User Manual. How to use HaBiDeS+ reporting tool & deliver derogation reports through Reportnet. Version 1.4 from 23/06/2023. [Last access: 22/10/2025] Available at: https://circabc.europa.eu/ui/group/173a90fc-40bf-492d-a3a9-df99c4aa8807/library/cfc38522-bd5e-4237-af4b-37928504ee87/details

[40] Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, 2023. Species Action Plan Preparation Guide. Preparation, Implementation and Monitoring of Species Action Plans for Endangered Species in Türkiye within the Concept of a New Methodology. Ankara: Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry. [Last access: 22/10/2025]. Available at: 10.13140/RG.2.2.29095.61608

3.7.3. Species protection under the Birds Directive

The Birds Directive regulates the protection of all naturally occurring bird species in the wild state and the prohibition of harm through Articles 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9. Since all birds are strictly protected, it is necessary to identify those birds, which are exempt from this protection regime. Thus, Annex II of Birds Directive lists species which are subject to hunting. In 2023 the EC published an updated document on '*Hunting under the Birds Directive*'[41] (available in several languages). This document contains an analysis of the relevant articles of the Birds Directive and provides clear **guidance on how Member States should incorporate the Directive's principles into their national hunting regulations**. The most relevant aspects are summarised below.

Article 5 establishes the general system of bird protection for all bird species, especially during breeding, resting and wintering seasons. Member States are asked to **prohibit deliberate killing or capture** by any method, deliberate destruction of, or **damage to**, bird **nests and eggs** or removal of their nests, taking eggs from the wild and keeping them (even if empty), **deliberate disturbance** of birds particularly during the period of breeding and rearing, and **keeping birds of species whose hunting and capture is prohibited**.

As these obligations are very strict, **Article 9** allows, under certain conditions, for **derogations** – legal exceptions – that enable Member States to temporarily or specifically deviate from the strict protection regime. These derogations are generally **permitted only under strict criteria**, similar to those under Art. 16 of Habitats Directive and must adhere to specific procedures. Derogations can be granted only in the absence of other satisfactory solutions (alternatives) in case of serious damage to agricultural or other economic interests, the protection of public health or safety, the prevention of serious damage to flora or fauna and for research, breeding, or reintroduction purposes with appropriate authorization. Each derogation must specify the species which are subject to the derogation; the means, arrangements or methods authorised for capture or killing; the conditions of risk and the circumstances of time and place under which such derogations may be granted; the authority empowered to declare that the required conditions are met and to decide which means, arrangements or methods may be used, within what limits and by whom; and the controls which will be carried out. Derogations must be time-limited, necessary, proportionate and authorized by national authorities and, in some cases, notified to the EC.

Article 6 to 8 of the Birds Directive provide information for the **protection of species and specimens in the form of hunting and trade rules**, including special conservation measures, permitted exceptions, as well as permits and authorization. Article 6 bans the sale, transport for sale, keeping for sale, offering for sale of live or dead birds (also recognizable parts or derivatives) of all bird species. At the same time there is an agreement that this ban does not apply to selected species listed in Annex III, provided that the birds have been legally killed or captured or otherwise legally acquired. Annex III has two parts. Part A lists species for which the trading ban does not apply across the entire EU. In part B, there are country-specific lists of such birds. Article 6 also describes the complex procedure for Member States

[41] European Commission (2023). Guidance document on hunting under Council Directive 79/409/EEC on the conservation of wild birds "The Birds Directive". [Last access: 27/10/2025] Available at: https://circabc.europa.eu/ui/group/3f466d71-92a7-49eb-9c63-6cb0fadf29dc/library/4b5dffd4-369c-4c4b-a249-625adc2a7545

to apply for such country-specific species lists, and the ecological conditions that must be met for putting individual species on these lists.

Despite the strict provisions for protection, the Birds Directive recognises the legitimacy of hunting wild birds as a form of sustainable use. It therefore **allows the hunting of 82 huntable species listed in Annex II**, provided this is done in a **sustainable manner** that does not jeopardise their survival.

Member States are required to send all relevant information on the practical application of their hunting regulations to the EC. The Birds Directive originally stipulated that Member States should provide these reports every three years. The reporting period has recently been aligned with that of the Habitats Directive (Art. 17 of the Habitats Directive).

Recommendations for the WB6:

- Provisions of Article 5-9 require precise, literal transposition into national law; any attempt to create alternative wording could make the law incompatible with the Directive's requirements and lead to infringement proceedings.
- As regards the transposition of Annex III into national law, species listed in part A must be included into national law before accession. No other species may be added unless the negotiations with the EC result in an agreement on the inclusion of additional species into part B of the Annex.

4. OUTLOOK AND KEY LEVERS TO FACILITATE IMPLEMENTATION

The transposition and implementation of the EU Nature Directives differ across the Western Balkans, and **each economy faces its own specific challenges** related to nature conservation, environmental protection and broader socio-economic aspects. Therefore, each situation requires specific assessment. However, **several obstacles and difficulties are common across the region** and, in some cases, mirror those experienced in EU Member States. At the same time, **implementation of the directives can be significantly accelerated by addressing these issues**.

Political support

A key challenge at both regional and national levels is the limited prioritisation of long-term environmental goals in politics. Short-term political considerations often take precedence a comprehensive vision for integrated environmental policies and sustainable development. Although conservation commitments are enshrined in national legislation, progress towards their implementation is often slow. Biodiversity conservation is not yet among the primary policy priorities for the governments in the WB6, and levels of political engagement on these issues vary. The region is undergoing political transitions, with a trend toward stronger centralization of governance emerging. These dynamics can influence the pace of reform and the implementation of commitments outlined in the strategic accession documents. Particularly the **implementation of the Nature Directives relies heavily on dedicated political commitment**.

Legal transposition

Currently, limited horizontal integration of environmental and climate change policies can be observed, along with an incomplete harmonisation of environmental legislation with EU standards. Therefore, a**dvancing the transposition of the EU environmental acquis remains a key priority**. Comprehensive legal reforms are required to ensure consistency and effective application, particularly with regard to secondary legislation and implementing by-laws.

Institutional and administrative set-up

Central administrative institutions, including ministries/institutions responsible for nature conservation, are established across the WB6. While the institutional frameworks exist, technical and managerial capacity at central and local levels remains limited. These capacity gaps, along with the need for more specialised education and training on the EU directives, often result in a shift towards procedural activities at the expense of outcome-oriented ones. Similar issues arise within enforcement institutions responsible for ensuring compliance. **Strengthening institutional capacities, expertise, and enforcement mechanisms** remains essential.

Data availability and sharing

The EU Nature Directives set high requirements for the quality and availability of scientific knowledge on target species and habitat types, including up-to-date information on their distribution and condition. A lack of such data represents a key challenge for effective implementation. Particularly in the WB6, data are often incomplete, outdated, or

inconsistent, partly due to limited capacity or the underperformance of relevant expert institutions. At the same time, there is a significant unused potential within state universities, museums, NGOs and other initiatives. **Strengthening collaboration** with these actors – **through improved intersectoral coordination, adequate funding, and increased demand from responsible ministries** – could greatly **enhance the knowledge base for implementing the Nature Directives**. However, targeted mapping and monitoring will be required, too.

Furthermore, **establishing clear policies on data access, management and sharing**, aligned with EU standards, would support transparency and coherence. A potential starting point is to systematically publish all outcomes and results of EU-funded projects on official platforms. Investing in functional digital infrastructure, such as interoperable biodiversity databases, holds the potential to drastically advance information exchange.

Cooperation and collaboration

Divergent national priorities, such as prioritising economic development over nature conservation, can sometimes result in differing policy approaches and fewer opportunities for cooperation. This challenges transboundary conservation, as many ecosystems and species cross national borders and require coordinated management efforts. Differences in legal frameworks, institutional capacities, and strategic priorities may hinder the development and implementation of joint initiatives.

Strengthening regional coordination mechanisms is therefore essential. **Support for regional platforms and networks, as well as more active participation in regional initiatives** – such as those facilitated by the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) – could significantly reinforce the region's collective progress towards EU integration.

Stakeholder involvement

Although stakeholder involvement is often foreseen in policy papers, strategies and projects, it often remains limited. Conservation initiatives are impeded by limited awareness among policy makers, local societies and actors in the private sector. **Substantially increased stakeholder involvement helps to foster support, promote bottom-up approaches, and contribute to a better understanding of biodiversity issues**. This is particularly important when it comes to planning, establishing and managing Natura 2000 sites.

Financial capacity

Generally, there is a continued need for **dedicated national funding to support the implementation and enforcement of the Nature Directives**. A study from 2016 on Natura 2000 financing in the EU indicated that during the 2007-2013 period only 9-19% of required costs were covered through EU co-financing[4], underscoring the importance of securing substantial national co-funding. Additional resources are needed for monitoring, reporting and targeted species protection measures.

The WB6 economies face considerable fiscal constraints, and the financial resources available for biodiversity conservation remain limited. Nevertheless, **opportunities for mobilising funds** do exist, particularly where there is **political commitment and a proactive approach**. While international projects provide valuable support, reliance on external funding alone is not sustainable. Ensuring that such projects contribute to strengthening

institutional capacities and knowledge transfer, particularly within competent authorities, enhances long-term national ownership. Furthermore, improving the **absorption capacity for EU funds** could significantly increase resources available for conservation activities.

Balancing economic development with environmental protection remains an ongoing challenge. While land-use conflicts and unsustainable foreign investment projects, such as hydropower or construction developments that neglect environmental impacts, can generate short-term benefits, they pose long-term risks to environmental, social, and economic stability, if not properly assessed. To safeguard biodiversity and support resilient, inclusive development across the region, it is essential to **promote sustainable investment practices** and ensure that economic growth aligns with environmental objectives.

Technical capacity for developing synergistic processes

One reason why the Nature Directives are considered such complex pieces of legislation is the large number of different provisions they impose. It is imperative to acknowledge the sheer multitude of aspects that must be taken into consideration. Yet there are opportunities for methodological choices that drastically increase efficiency. This requires both a thorough **understanding of all the technological requirements of the Nature Directives** as well as a **good grasp of the methods available for acquiring the necessary knowledge**.

So far, **most WB6 economies focus on the early steps of implementation**: legal and institutional alignment, mapping species and habitat types of Community interest and selecting potential Natura 2000 sites. However, information on what is required later in the process, for example, for managing Natura 2000 sites or for monitoring and reporting, is less readily available. This poses the risk to miss **potential synergies in implementation**. As an example, mapping species and habitat types to select Natura 2000 sites can provide crucial (and expensive) baseline data for their monitoring at a later stage, but only if the monitoring requirements are considered when defining which information needs to be recorded.

Since the Nature Directives give **Member States considerable autonomy** in selecting methodologies, they possess significant knowledge of different ways to implement certain aspects of the directives. **Exchanging information** on this matter could help the WB6 select what fits their needs from what is already available, thus avoiding the need to learn through trial and error.

In this sense, the purpose of this manual is to support the WB6 in implementing the EU Nature Directives by providing in-depth information on the different aspects and how they are interlinked, as well as highlighting recommendations, synergies and best practices.