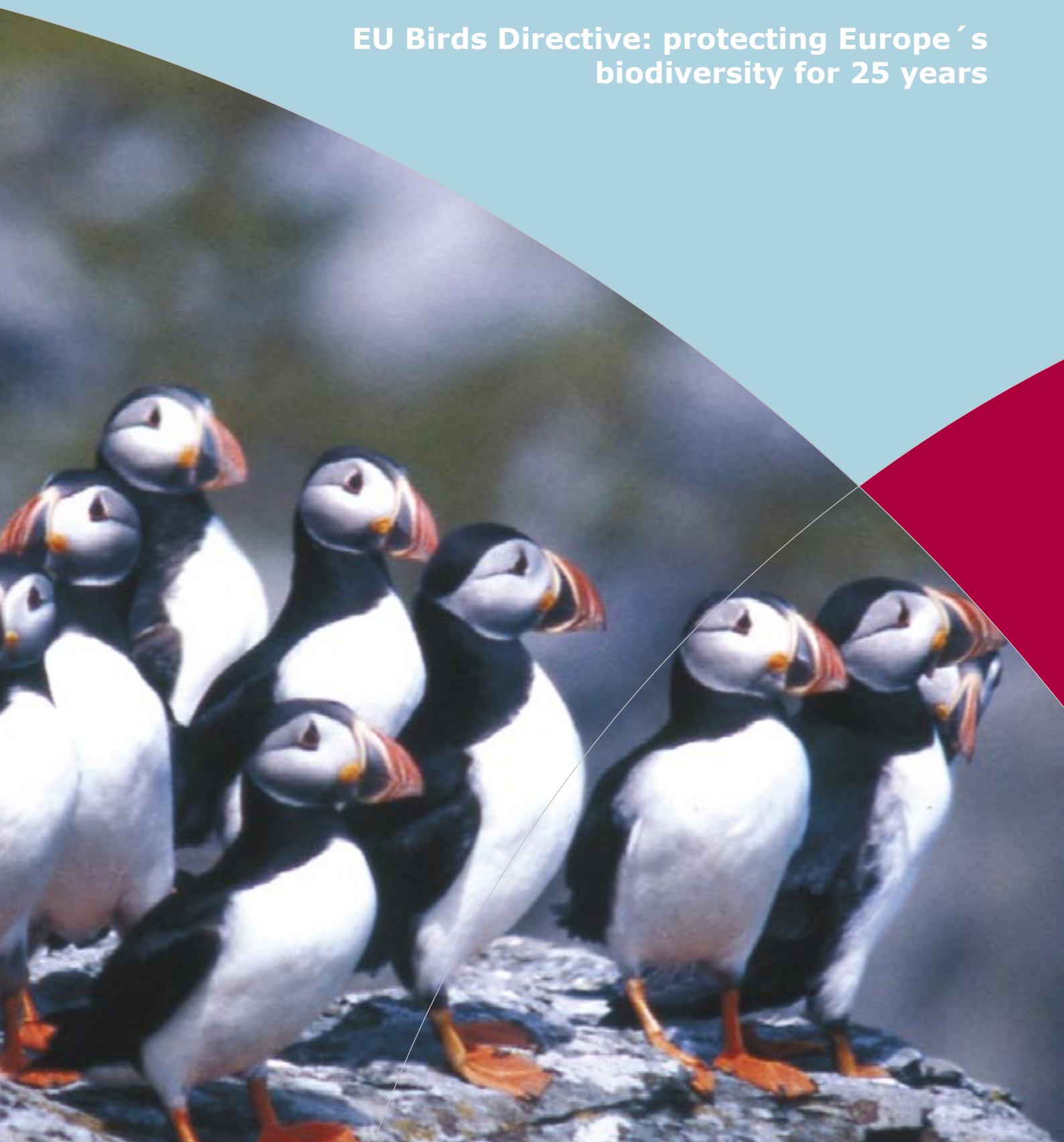


The network of Special Protection Areas

EU Birds Directive: protecting Europe's biodiversity for 25 years



EU Birds Directive

Over the past 25 years Special Protection Areas have been designated through the Birds Directive in the 15 pre-2004 Member States (EU-15) and are now being designated in the 10 new Member States. However, pressures continue to increase and, although there are success stories, many bird species are in decline. More action will be required in the coming years, across all Member States, to implement the Directive, reduce threats and improve protection to ensure a sustainable future for all Europe's wild birds.

Birds in the cradle of EU nature protection policy

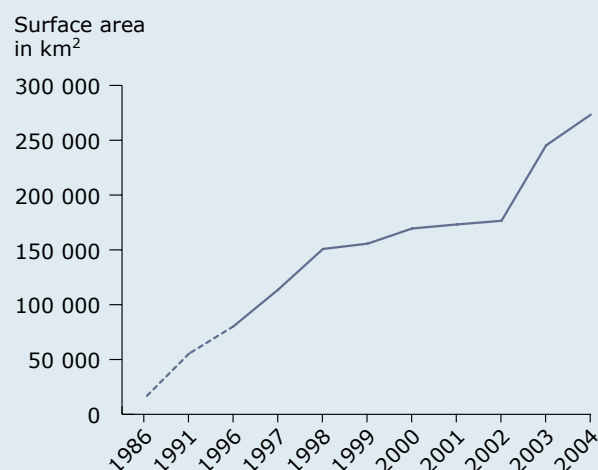
The decline in bird populations was recognised some time ago as an indication of serious threat to Europe's environment and natural heritage. Council Directive 79/409/EEC on the conservation of wild birds (the Birds Directive) was adopted in April 1979 as the first piece of EU nature policy legislation for the protection and management of all wild bird species occurring naturally in Europe.

The Birds Directive provides a general protection regime for all bird species and also sets provisions for protecting and managing Special Protection Areas for rare, threatened and migratory bird species. These areas are now being included in the EU Natura 2000 network of designated

areas, together with those proposed under the framework of the Habitats Directive (92/43/EEC, adopted in 1992).

To establish the Special Protection Areas (SPAs), the Birds Directive requires EU Member States to classify the most suitable areas for endangered and vulnerable bird species listed in Annex I of the Directive (181 species for EU-15) and to take similar measures for migratory bird species, particularly with regard to wetlands of international importance. The focus on wetlands also helps the EU to fulfil its obligations to the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands.

Progress in Special Protection Area classification on land (EU-15)



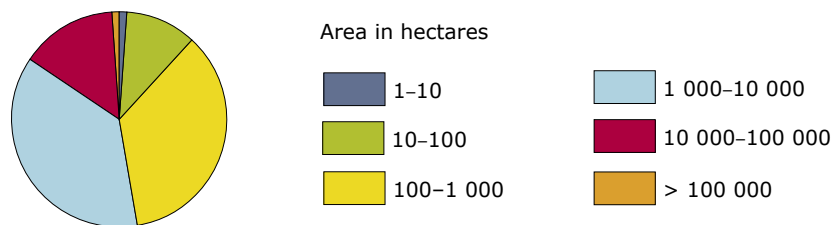
EU Birds Directive

Current status of the Special Protection Area network

Most Member States have been active in fulfilling the obligations of the Birds Directive to establish Special Protection Areas. The network in EU-15 includes 3 639 sites covering a surface area of nearly 280 500 km² — almost 8 % of the land territory. However, the percentage of national territory that has been

designated varies widely from less than 2 % in France to over 15 % in Spain. As regards size, about one-third of the designated areas range from 100–1 000 ha, and about the same proportion from 1 000–10 000 ha. A few (40) are very large (> 100 000 ha).

Distribution in size of SPAs (EU-15)

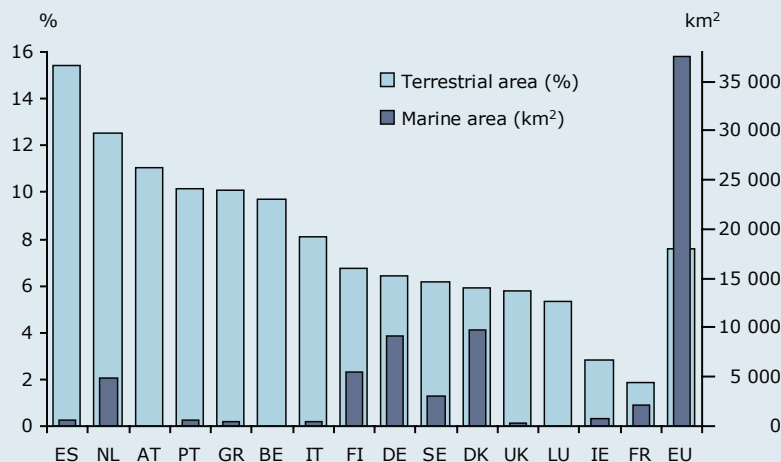


Five of the EU-15 Member States have established Special Protection Areas in over 10 % of their land area. In addition, some Member States have designated substantial parts of their marine coastal waters. Differences between countries partly reflect their overall responsibilities for different threatened bird species as well as for wetlands and other habitats important for migratory species. A precise target for the implementation of the Directive in terms of number of sites

and area to be designated remains to be developed.

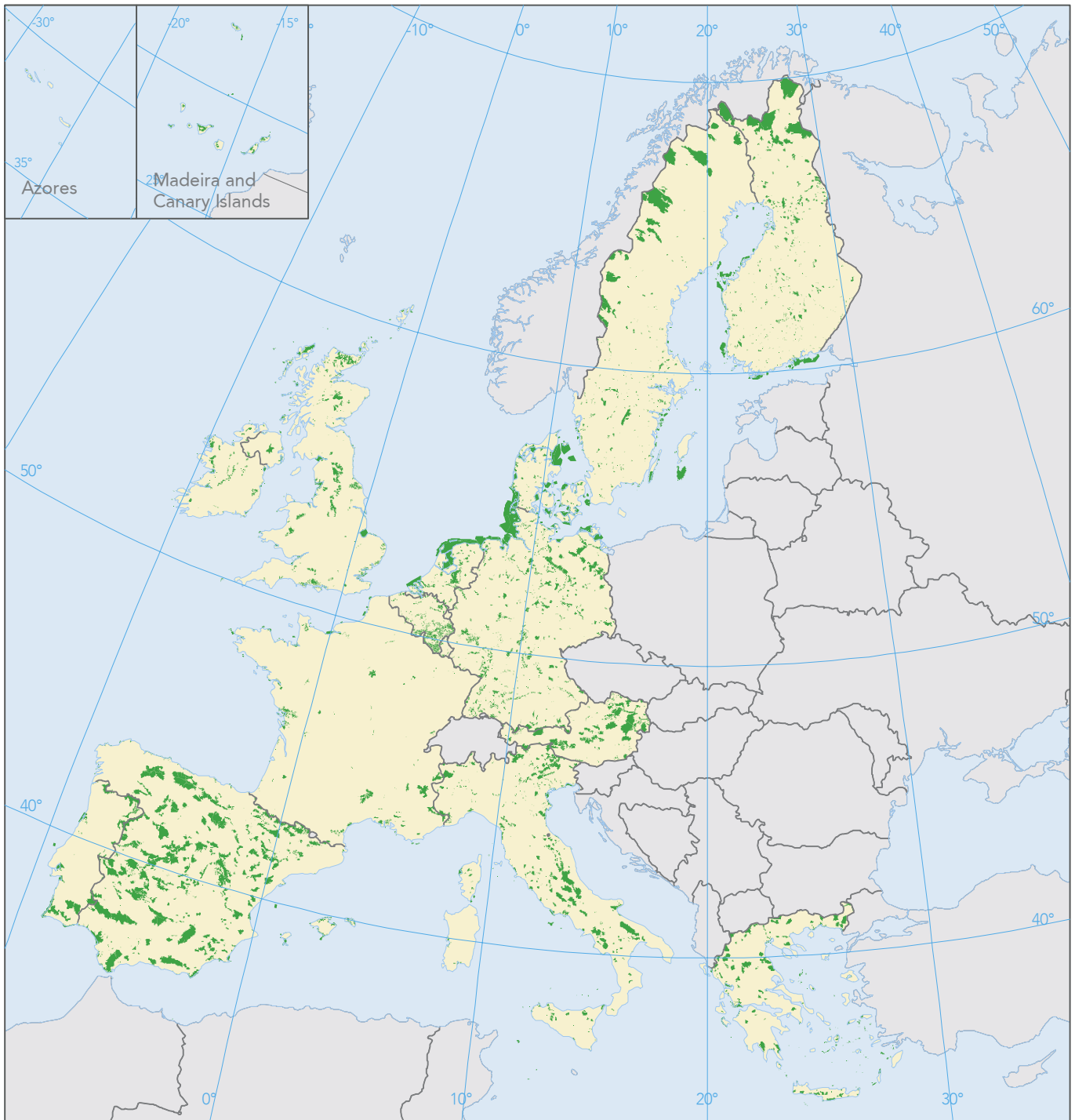
The EU Natura 2000 network includes marine areas. However, in total a relatively low surface area of marine Special Protection Areas is in place (ca. 14 % of the total SPA area) since Member States only relatively recently became active in establishing them in marine offshore waters and precise guidelines are still under development.

Special Protection Areas for birds (EU-15)



EU Birds Directive

Distribution of Special Protection Areas (SPAs) in EU-15 established under the Birds Directive



EU Birds Directive

A success story of the Birds Directive



The great bustard (*Otis tarda*) is a rare bird in Europe, having one western population on the Iberian peninsula and another in central-eastern Europe. Bustards inhabit dry grasslands and low-intensity arable landscapes. Disturbance from humans must be avoided if breeding is to be successful. The species has been declining due to habitat loss as a result of intensification of agriculture (including the development of irrigation schemes), afforestation, road-building, established power-lines, creation of fences etc.

Great bustards, being a spectacular species, have long attracted the attention of conservationists. However, to maintain viable populations of this large bird requires extensive areas of suitable farmland, such as the Portuguese and Spanish pseudo-steppe areas. Such high-nature-value farming systems can only be maintained via a combination of targeted agri-environment schemes and appropriate agricultural policy support. Recognising these requirements has been central to the development of Special Protection Areas for the great bustard.

In Portugal, the Castro Verde is the most important area for pseudo-steppe fauna, including the great bustard. Establishing a Special Protection Area of 80 000 ha in 1999 reinforced agri-environmental measures introduced in the mid 1990s. At the same time, a project funded under the EU Life Programme enabled the acquisition of land where special management rules were introduced by the local authorities in cooperation with conservation organisations. In Castro Verde, in contrast to the general development in Portugal, the bustard population increased from about 600 birds in 1995 to about 1 000 birds by spring 2004. This example, and similar experiences from Spain (e.g. Villafáfila SPA, Zamora), shows that measures implemented under the framework of the Birds Directive have contributed to halting the decline of bustards in the Iberian Peninsula. Similar progress has been achieved in Austria and Germany.

Many farmland birds are in need of more comprehensive environmental actions



The skylark (*Aluda arvensis*) serves as a representative of widespread European species that today encounter problems in intensively used landscapes. Skylarks are adapted to open, mostly arable landscapes but have declined strongly in western Europe due mainly to intensified agricultural practices. If similar intensive management of arable crops becomes widespread in eastern Europe there is likely to be a similar decline in the 10 new Member States and candidate countries.

In order for the Birds Directive's objectives for farmland species to be achieved it will be necessary to make full use of the increasing opportunities that are being presented for nature-friendly farming under the reform of the Common Agricultural Policy. This will require maintaining low-input farming systems as well as supporting biodiversity-friendly farming in the wider agricultural and rural policy.

EU Birds Directive

The protection of some birds is more problematic

As fish-eaters, cormorants (*Phalacrocorax carbo*) have long been in conflict with maritime communities and in the past were persecuted almost to extinction in many areas.

After a period of low numbers, the cormorant population in Europe has now increased significantly and is today one of the most debated and controversial bird species in Europe. Protection — including the obligations set by the Birds Directive — is considered to be one of the key factors behind the recent increase. As a result, the species is no longer considered to be threatened and has been removed recently from Annex I of the Birds Directive (as this

focuses on habitat protection for rare and endangered species).

Cormorants present a complex mixture of biological, social, cultural and economic issues to be addressed by participatory management approaches, research and education. This is because in certain situations cormorants consume large amounts of fish (with impacts on fish stocks and fisheries); in other situations some people believe them to consume large amounts of fish with little evidence, or that there are too many birds, and even that they are gloomy and ugly (and hence do not merit protection).



EU Birds Directive

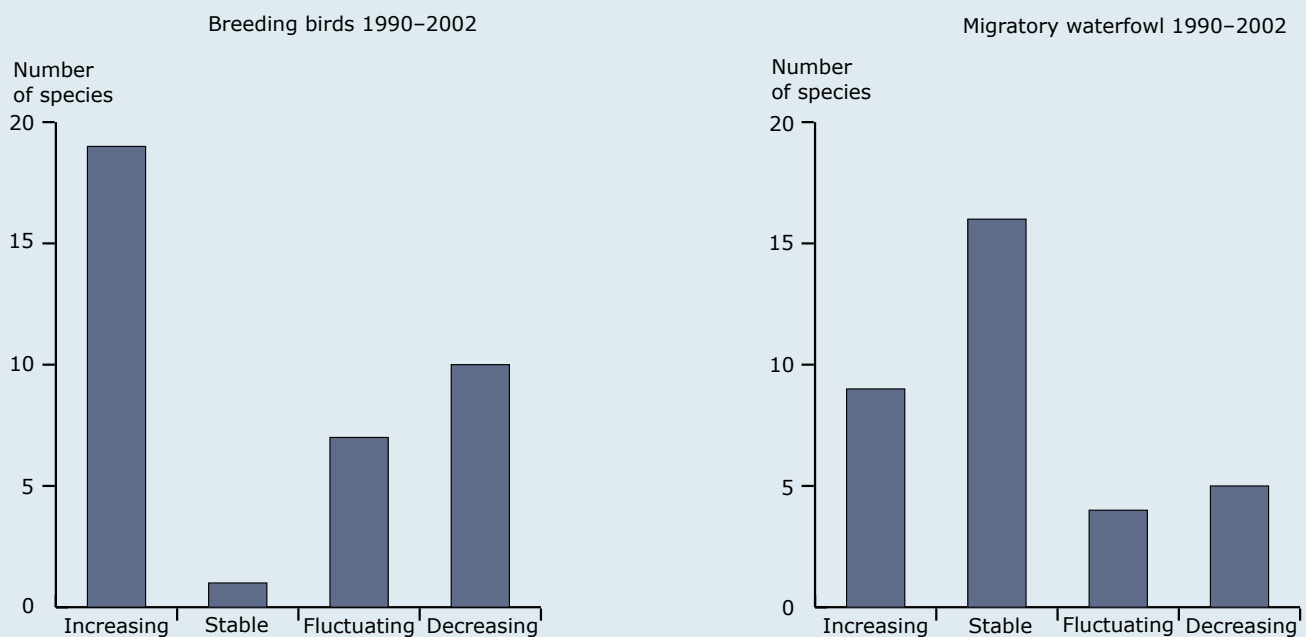
The need to establish monitoring mechanisms

An efficient strategic management of the Natura 2000 network requires sufficient monitoring data to enable the assessment of the conservation status of species of concern and the ecological conditions of key habitats.

Monitoring is also needed to track progress in and around individual sites. In line with the requirements of the Habitats Directive, Member States must for each Special Protection Area establish conservation measures corresponding to the ecological requirements of the bird species present. Furthermore, any action likely to have significant effects must be assessed and, if necessary, compensatory measures must be taken.

In a wider perspective it has been agreed within the Convention on Biological Diversity that data reflecting the status and trends of the various components of biological diversity should be collected to assess progress towards halting the loss of biodiversity. In Europe efforts are under way to establish a coherent monitoring activity focussing on a defined set of headline indicators. A significant element of this activity will be monitoring to assess conservation status in the Natura 2000 network. It can be expected that much more information will become available in the coming years to track progress in the protection and sustainability of Europe's wild birds.

Trends of breeding birds and migratory waterfowl in Dutch Special Protection Areas



Source: Dutch centre for field ornithology (SOVON) and Statistics Netherlands (CBS).

This brochure has been elaborated by the European Environment Agency and its Topic Centre on Nature Protection and Biodiversity. The overview of the Special Protection Areas is based upon data transmitted by EU Member States under Article 4 of the Birds Directive. The map has been compiled with technical support from the Spatial Applications Division Leuven, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven. It should be noted that the data refers to Member States before the accession of 10 new Member States in 2004 (EU-15).

Valuable comments to the text were received from the following experts: David N. Carss, Susana Dias, Torsten Larsson, Michael O'Briain and Pedro Rocha.

Photos by Michael O'Briain (puffins, *Fratercula arctica*, cover), Jesus Palacio/Junta de Castilla y León (great bustard), Chris Gomersall/RSPB (skylark) and Gordon McInnes/EEA (cormorant).

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