

# Natural Opportunities

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**The Natura 2000 network is a lifeline for many of Poland's key natural resources; however, its introduction requires a sensitive dialogue between local authorities and communities**

Intensive economic development across EU countries has led to the loss of many ecosystems, which has significantly reduced biological diversity. As such, it is essential to work towards preserving our natural heritage, and prevent its further damage. This was the key concept behind the creation of the Natura 2000 ecological network, currently encompassing a fifth of the EU territory. The legal basis is provided by two pieces of legislation: the Habitats Directive, and the Birds Directive. They provide for the creation of a system of areas linked by ecological corridors, together forming a comprehensive ecological network.

As an EU member, Poland is required to mark regions to be designated as ecological networks, as well as creating legislation for their protection. There are currently 959 Natura 2000 regions in Poland, covering over 20% of the country's land. The network brings greater effectiveness to conservation activities in Poland, as EU directives constitute "hard" law and as such they must be adhered to under the penalty of financial sanctions.

**Difficulties and errors**

The Natura 2000 program has been enthusiastically received by Poland's ecologists. However, local authorities are proving less

keen, as they believe the program's rules and regulations hinder regional economic development. Natura 2000 is also frequently seen as imposing limits on land that can be used for development.

Natura 2000's introduction unfortunately involved numerous mistakes, which continue to contribute to a critical attitude of local authorities to this environmental program. The most serious error was a lack of consultation with land managers, and an arbitrary marking of areas covered by Natura 2000. Various social and economic issues resulting from the inclusion of specific regions in the program, raised by local authorities, have frequently gone ignored, since the boundaries were set out purely for scientific reasons. Reviews carried out by Poland's Supreme Audit Office in 2008, regarding the effectiveness of introducing the Natura 2000 network, found the legislation regulating its operation to be inconsistent and imprecise, while the process of designating areas was found to be unreliable, given that it frequently relied on out of date, incomplete, and even incorrect data. The inspections also confirmed that the views of local authorities have largely gone ignored. Additionally, the land management system was found to be inefficient and ineffective with a lack of clearly defined responsibilities for individual administrative organs, frequent organizational changes at the Ministry of the Environment (in particular among people directly involved with the Natura 2000 program), and weak vertical and horizontal communication. The costs of the implementation and functioning of the network had also not been estimated.

Since there were severe delays in setting up the boundaries of the network in Poland, bringing a threat of EU sanctions, new organizational structures managing the processes of environmental protection were founded: the General Directorate for Environmental Protection (GDEP), together with its sixteen Regional Directorates, which were tasked with accelerating the process.



**In order to minimize the controversy surrounding the Natura 2000 program, its aims, benefits, and concerns should have been more carefully explained to local communities**

Natura 2000 is clearly an essential conservation program; however, in order to minimize controversy, it was important to explain its aims, benefits and concerns to local communities, a process that was overlooked while the program was initially being introduced. These flaws in the public relations process have contributed to the negative perception of the program.

### **Too much of a good thing**

In its directives, the EU does not impose or suggest solutions or ways of managing the Natura 2000 network. It simply requires countries to assess the effects of introducing the program by checking on the condition of habitats and species in the given region. By being relatively non-specific about many issues, it has made it possible for member states to interpret directives in ways that best suit them, and opened the field for numerous national initiatives.

Unfortunately for Poland, it chose an overly ambitious and broad range of activities. Natura 2000 was implemented as a system independent of the environmental programs already in place. A large part of the country is covered by national parks, state-owned forests, and landscape parks. The GDEP has imposed new tasks connected with the Natura 2000 program while not assigning any additional funds, and the relationships between the institutions are unfortunately not very transparent.

The GDEP and its regional offices have around 1200 employees, and they were founded as though no environmental regulation was previously in place. Not all EU countries have chosen to form such expensive structures for managing and monitoring the network. In the majority of cases, these tasks have been assigned to existing institutions. In Poland, 430 Conservation Task Plans (CTPs) will be created by 2013, forming the basis of the activities proposed for individual Natura 2000 regions, with a further 537 CTPs projected after 2013. There is no good justification for such a complex and costly process, in particular since the introduction of CTPs is not obligatory in the EU. Some member states have only used the system to cover certain habitats, or – as in Austria’s case – they have created them for entire regions covering dozens of individual areas, which reduces planning costs while making them more comprehensive and flexible.

Another problem with Poland’s approach has been the weak consolidation between environmental and socioeconomic aims. The perception of CTPs by local authorities is notable; 51% of 231 local-level officials surveyed believe that they limit investment in the region, 37% see them as an additional burden, and 26% perceive them as a source of potential conflict. Just 3% of local authorities believe CTPs to be positive.

In Poland, the Natura 2000 network has been directed towards environmental protec-

## The Natura 2000 European ecological network in Poland

Natura 2000



As an EU member, Poland is required to mark regions to be covered by an ecological network

tion in a narrow sense, not including sustainable regional development which would preserve the optimal balance between economic, social and environmental development. Conflicts of interest frequently arise from a lack of funding for conservation activities and costs borne by institutions directly involved in the process. This is why regions covered by Natura 2000 require environmental subsidies of 200 zlotys per hectare of protected land. Poland has seriously underestimated the costs involved in the implementation of the Natura 2000 program; it forecast that the cost of managing the regions would come to 14 euro per hectare (in contrast, Cyprus' estimate was 900 euro). The estimated average cost in the EU is around 63 euro per hectare.

The EU predicts that maintaining the Natura 2000 program in its present condition will cost member states around 6 billion euro per year. Unfortunately, the funds put aside for the purpose come to just a quarter of that amount. The key issue is not just funding of monitoring and managing the network, even though these are the only funds projected in Poland, but also compensation for people inhabiting conservation areas, since they are largely responsible for their environmental condition.

### Between ecologists and local communities

The predominant attitude of ecologists is an uncompromising belief that natural resources

are invaluable and non-renewable. In contrast, local authorities assessing the effects of Natura 2000 on the local economy find it hard to abstract away from their own socioeconomic problems. However, the magnitude of such problems may prove small in comparison with the problems that could arise if we take environmental conservation too lightly.

Striving for compromise is an essential condition of the coexistence of environmental, economic and social aims that are relatively free of conflict. There can be no doubt that the natural environment must be protected; however, each situation should be considered on its own merit, avoiding generalizations wherever possible. Only a sober, factual discussion will make it possible to step away from extreme approaches presented both by certain ecologists and representatives of local authorities. Life in any community creates conflict; on top of individual interests, there is also the public interest, which frequently justifies far-reaching restrictions. However, the question arises: why should these limitations concern only rural communities, often characterized by low incomes? Shouldn't the costs of protecting regions covered by the Natura 2000 program be borne equally by all taxpayers? Perhaps such an approach would make it easier to raise funds to compensate for profits lost by local authorities and businesses whose operation has been significantly restricted by the program?

### Opportunities for development

Polish legislation stipulates that since every investment, regardless of its size, may have a negative impact on the regions covered by Natura 2000, prospective investors are obliged to present evaluations of their development project's environmental impact. A well-prepared assessment must be based on an in-depth scientific analysis, which bears further costs and requires time waiting for a decision. Local officials, in turn, feel that such procedures are off-putting for investors, who prefer to choose regions that are not covered by such restrictions.

However, the regulations – regarded by certain investors as constraining – should be seen from the perspective of protecting unique regions. Natural environmental resources may also count in favor of the attractiveness of a given region. This does not mean that criticism from local communities should be ignored in the hope that with time they will simply get used to new regulations and restrictions. This is why it is necessary to adjust the rushed-through environmental legislation, and support local authorities in the development of mechanisms protecting areas within the network from excessive marginalization. The proposed development of tourism within Natura 2000 regions is unlikely to be sufficient to satisfy ambitions of local communities.

### In harmony with Natura 2000

Poland's natural environment is highly diverse. Many regions are home to precious rural environments and unique ecosystems. Their conservation is an important task for local communities; however, local authorities and land owners are frequently purely driven by profit. The foundation of the Natura 2000 program is an opportunity to create new approaches to the issue of conservation. Local authorities need help in developing standards of cooperation between investors, administrators, ecologists, and local communities. This is absolutely essential in the implementation of regulations forming part of the Natura 2000 program, which are frequently difficult to reconcile with the faster economic growth demanded by local authorities. What can we do so that Natura 2000 is not too great a barrier to development?

Finding answers to these questions is extremely important, since many of the ac-

tivities aiming to protect the environment need to be implemented on a local level. Demonstrating that it is possible to live in harmony with Natura 2000 will require financial as well as practical input. Even though local authorities are able to seek compensation from several funds, the resources are undoubtedly insufficient and dispersed. As a result, local authorities have prepared a bill on ecological subsidies for each hectare of land under conservation. They are aware that decisions regarding the Natura 2000 project will not be reversed, and as such boycotting the legislation is out of the question. However, without general approval from local authorities, it is hard to regard the idea as a success.

Alongside implementing the latest form of environmental protection, the GDEP should also support local authorities in their steps towards sustainable development. It is essential to change our approach to problems brought by the operation of the Natura 2000 network in all the programs and strategies of rural development. The systems must be supported by constant monitoring conducted by scientific centers, studying real phenomena rather than using old records that do not take into account environmental factors in the form of the Natura 2000 program. ■

#### Further reading:

Kłodziński M., Bołtmiuk A. (2011). *Natura 2000 jako czynnik zrównoważonego rozwoju obszarów wiejskich regionu Zielonych Płuc Polski* [Natura 2000 as a Factor in Sustainable Development of Rural Areas in the "Poland's Green Lungs" Region]. IRWiR PAN, Warsaw.

**Poland's natural environment is highly diverse. Unique ecosystems are preserved in many regions, such as the Biebrza National Park**

