

Sharing the Earth



Professor Gromadzki uses his ornithological experience to evaluate prospective Protected Areas in Poland

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Humans are not the owners of the Earth. Rather, we can call ourselves the keepers of the planet. Such global management requires special tools – the “Natura 2000” is a good example

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, author of *The Little Prince*, described our planet as a home for human beings. We can all agree with such a statement. But doubts arise when we ask: “Only for human beings?” Putting aside the whole variety of possible answers to this question, we can agree that we are certainly the most important residents of our planet, that is to say, its keepers.

Environmental managers

Implementing this “managerial” approach requires special tools. A lot of attention has recently been drawn by the idea of sustainable development. This concept encompasses two

principles: firstly, that the development of human societies is necessary, and secondly, that this development should not cause irreversible damage to ecosystems. It also incorporates the necessity of preserving biodiversity, i.e. the whole richness of the life which surrounds us.

Practical attempts at implementing this concept include two directives of the European Community. The first one, adopted in 1979, is called the *Directive on the Conservation of Wild Birds* (79/409/EEC), usually referred to as the “Birds Directive.” The second, adopted in 1992, is the *Directive on the Conservation of Natural Habitats and of Wild Flora and Fauna* (92/62/EEC), also called the “Habitat Directive.” Both these directives are in force in all Member States, requiring them to identify the most suitable territories for the protection of European wildlife diversity. Member States are thus required to identify two kinds of areas:

- Special Protection Areas (SPAs), under the Birds Directive, to protect birds, and
- Sites of Community Importance (SCIs), future Special Areas of Conservation (SACs), under the Habitat Directive, to protect habitats, plant species and animal species other than birds.

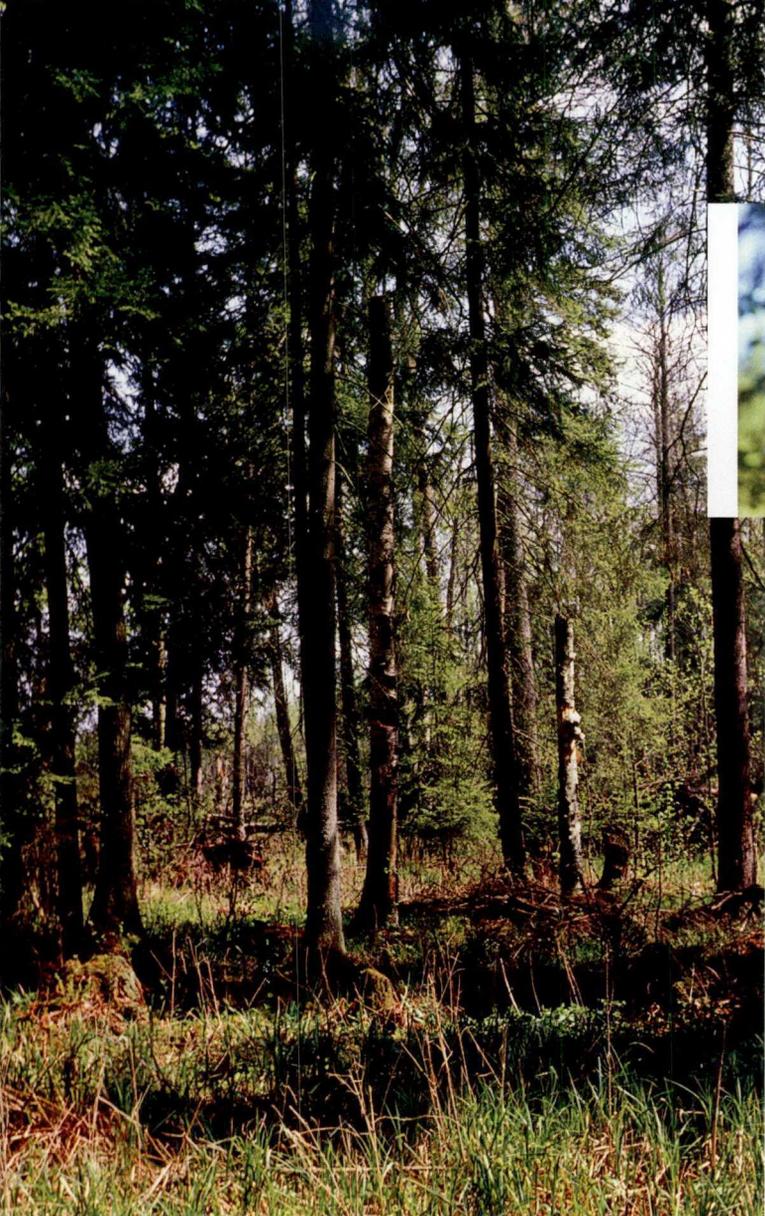


A. Sikora

The goosander (*Mergus merganser*) settles on lakes and rivers surrounded by old forests. This is because these ducks prefer to nest in burrows and tree cavities. The Pasłęka river (right) in NE Poland fulfills these conditions – it is home to at least 1% of all Polish goosanders



A. Sikora



J. Gromadzka

Tengmalm's owl (*Aegolius funerus*) is one of 159 bird species used to evaluate prospective Special Protection Areas. This owl can be found for example in Skaliska Forest (left) in NE Poland

Scientific preparations for NATURA 2000 were carried out by two Institutes of the Polish Academy of Sciences: the Institute of Nature Protection and the Institute for Ornithology. The Institute of Nature Protection has concentrated on the SAC network, with the Institute for Ornithology focusing on the SPA network. Although both institutes have worked in close cooperation, here I will only concentrate on the work done by the Institute for Ornithology under the Birds Directive.

One might ask why birds have been chosen as a separate subject in identifying areas for special protection. In short, the reasons behind such a decision include:

- some features of birds' biology, particularly their migration abilities,
- the vast knowledge we possess about birds – vaster than about any other animal group (knowledge that has been gathered not only by professional ornithologists, but also by amateur bird-watchers),
- the fact that coordinated international activities for bird protection have existed since the early 20th century,
- bird inventories (including distribution and number) have already been carried out and described in most European countries,
- important bird areas have been classified and described for all of Europe since the late 1970s.

In fact, the Birds Directive focuses on the protection of all bird species occurring in European Community (now European Union) countries, but particular attention has been paid to species that are close to extinction, vulnerable and rare, which are listed in Annex I of the Directive, and to all migrating species not mentioned in Annex I. Protection requirements for all species important for the EU are formulated according to their general numbers, e.g. according to the numbers of the national breeding

The European Commission has proceeded against Member States for the insufficient designation of such areas.

The SPA network and the SAC network are together known as "NATURA 2000." It should be underlined, however, that these two forms of protection will not replace national systems of protected areas (national parks, nature reserves, landscape parks), but will create a complementary system. It is also crucial that NATURA areas will not be excluded from the economy; environmental protection and economic activities will take equal priority in these areas.

The Polish NATURA

Poland, being an accession country, has been obliged to establish a national NATURA 2000 network. The SPA network must be ready by May 1, 2004, while the SAC network will be implemented later on. The administrative procedures of NATURA 2000 have been coordinated by the Environment Ministry, and will not be discussed in this article.

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Environmental protection



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population, or the size of the migratory flyway population, or the wintering population numbers, *etc.*

Birdwatching for 15 years

The Institute for Ornithology has been carrying out an ornithological evaluation of the whole country since the early 1990s. In doing so it has cooperated with the BirdLife International organization and with the Polish Society for the Protection of Birds. This work has led to the selection of Polish Important Bird Areas (IBAs) of national and international importance, published in 1994 and 2000 and recorded in the Institute's databases. These data constituted the starting point for a new evaluation of bird areas undertaken by the Institute in 2002. The main goal of this work was to create a proposal for the Polish SPA network, which will become part of the European NATURA 2000 network after accession.

The new evaluation was carried out using the principles and criteria applied in all EU countries. The fundamental task for the Institute for Ornithology was to create a new database including all possible information available about the occurrence and numbers of over 150 bird species in selected areas throughout the country. Unpublished data originated partly from the Institute's own previously-conducted programs, and was partly supplied by regional nature conservation officers and professional ornithologists - but the majority was enthusiastically provided by volunteer bird watchers. The data collected was used to assess the impor-

tance of the areas under consideration on an European scale. The distribution of breeding birds in Poland was evaluated based on the database of the Polish Ornithological Atlas, developed by the Ornithological Station in 1986-93. The data in the base was supplemented with data obtained from all the individuals and institutions cooperating within the NATURA 2000 project.

Value the valleys!

After all the available data was analyzed, 138 terrestrial areas were identified and selected across Poland, as the most suitable zones for the bird species listed in Annex I (Article 4.1 of the Birds Directive) and for regularly occurring migratory species (Article 4.2). These areas cover about 15% of the country's area. Three offshore areas were additionally distinguished. The SPA database is prepared in Microsoft Access, and includes extremely vast information about selected areas, habitats and bird species. The borders of the classified areas were also delimited on topographic maps. According to EU procedures, this is required to facilitate discussion and confirmation by state and local administration, and by managers of state-owned areas.

The list of terrestrial SPAs includes the valleys of the two largest Polish rivers - the Wisła (Vistula) river and the Odra river, as well as

The Ural owl (*Strix uralensis*) is quite rare in Poland. But visitors to the Bieszczady Mountains in the SE of the country may be lucky enough to see one of over one hundred couples nesting there

the valleys of some smaller rivers: the Biebrza, Narew, Warta, Bug, Barycz, Pilica, Pasłęka and some others which are very important areas for breeding, migrating and wintering birds. The list also includes some large woodland areas like the Białowieża Forest, Knyszyńska Forest, Augustowska Forest, Tuchola Forest and Notecka Forest, which are inhabited by big birds of prey and other rare and vulnerable bird species. Also listed are vast mountain areas and areas of an agricultural profile, which serve as breeding sites for 25% of the world's population of the well-known White Stork – a species still quite common

Time of our scientific expertise has come to the end. The future of Special Protection Areas in Poland has moved into the sphere of political decisions

in Poland, but rare or absent in other European countries. Offshore Baltic areas being proposed for protection under NATURA 2000 include Polish coastal waters and waters belonging to the Polish economic zone. These are areas of special importance for migrating and wintering water birds, originating from Scandinavia and the Arctic latitudes of northern Russia.

The proposed list of SPAs for Poland has been made as accurate as possible in a very short time, using the criteria of evaluation employed by all EU countries. The list is not yet complete. It is assumed that the national list will be changed when necessary: some new areas important for birds may appear, while others may lose their attractiveness for birds. But the role of the Institute for Ornithology is finished for the time being, and the SPA approval process has moved into the sphere of political decisions.

National Center for Biodiversity?

As an indirect result of the preparation of the Polish NATURA 2000 network, both the Institute for Ornithology and the Institute of Nature Protection have become convinced that our country has insufficient information at its disposal about the distribution of areas covered by natural habitats and the distribution and number of national flora and fauna. Exact data are only available for relatively few bird species, and very often mainly thanks to the unselfish work of volunteer bird-watchers. Why is this so? Undoubtedly due to a lack of funds for exploring local flora and

fauna reserves, as well as due to our country's scientific policy (both past and present), which does not support or even disregards long-term physiographic studies. How can we manage species without sufficient knowledge of their number and distribution? Should we expect that most data of this kind will be exclusively gathered by volunteers, and stored in dozens of personal databases or scattered among personal notebooks? Or should we expect the problem to be solved by non-governmental organizations, supported by foreign funds?

It is absolutely necessary for a national center to be organized, as in other EU countries, to be mainly responsible for taking inventory of and documenting biodiversity in Poland.

Poland's natural environment is very rich compared to other European countries, and many habitats, animal and plant species are still in good condition here due to the economy's underdeveloped state in the past. At this historical moment when Poland is becoming one of the EU countries, it is very important to properly manage all national resources, one of the greatest of which is the Polish natural environment.

Further reading:

- Liro A., Dyduch-Falniowska A. (1999). *NATURA 2000. Europejska sieć ekologiczna*. Warszawa.
- Makomaska-Juchiewicz M., Tworek S. (eds.) (2003). *Ekologiczna sieć NATURA 2000 – problem czy szansa*. Kraków.
- www.europa.eu.int/comm/environment/news/natura/

Lesser spotted eagle (*Aquila pomarina*), the bird of prey, is very scarce breeder in Poland. It settles on the tree-tops in forests and goes hunting over marshes, wet meadows, or rural areas. Birdwatchers in Borecka Forest (NE Poland) may spy about 20 pairs of these beautiful predators



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