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The EU road towards healthy wetlands

Environmental policy analysis and recommendations to the EU

Europe's biodiversity continues to decline. This also concerns wetland ecosystems: **80 percent of European wetlands have been lost in the last 100 years.** Throughout most of human civilisation, wetlands have been considered 'unproductive land' and were drained for agricultural purposes and urbanisation. As a consequence, wetlands, including bogs, mires and fens, are now among the most degraded ecosystems in Europe. They are essential in tackling the triple crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution – if managed well. Without existing EU legislation, member countries would be further away from reaching the 2030 climate and biodiversity targets. Nevertheless, there is a need for more effective measures to achieve wetland restoration, both at EU and national level. As part of **REWET**, IUCN NL conducted an analysis of and developed recommendations for EU environmental policy related to wetland restoration.

RECOGNITION AT INTERNATIONAL LEVEL

The importance of wetlands has been widely recognised across various global frameworks, conventions and initiatives, such as the UN CBD, UNFCCC and the Ramsar Convention. Additionally, global organisations, including IUCN, emphasise the significance of nature-based solutions, with a specific focus on the restoration of wetlands as a crucial effort in climate mitigation and adaptation.

Global commitments to safeguarding biodiversity and preserving water sources align closely with European Union policies, notably the Green Deal and the Habitats and Birds Directives, which serve as cornerstones in establishing environmental standards across Europe. Around 80% of national environmental and nature legislation within member states derives from EU law, yet the degree of implementation varies among these states.

WHY ARE WETLANDS IMPORTANT?

Wetlands play a pivotal role in sustaining life on Earth. Covering only 6% of the Earth's surface, they are among the world's most valuable ecosystems. Wetlands provide important ecosystem services, ranging from freshwater supply, food and building materials and biodiversity, to flood control, groundwater recharge and carbon sequestration. 40% of all plant and animal species live or breed in wetlands and 300 million to 400 million people **depend on wetlands**. But these indispensable ecosystems are threatened by pollution, climate change, dams, agriculture and aquaculture and human development. It is estimated that 64% of the world's wetlands have been lost since the 1900s due to urbanisation.

- [Read more about the pivotal role of wetlands >>](#)

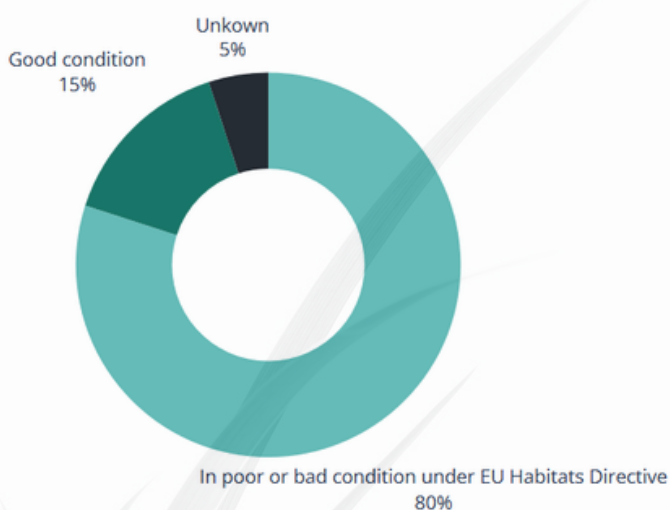
EXISTING EU LEGISLATION

The European Green Deal, launched in 2019, presents a roadmap towards achieving climate neutrality by 2050. This comprehensive package includes essential policies and legislation concerning climate, biodiversity, soil and sustainable food systems, holding the potential to transform wetland management policies and practices across the EU member states.

The EU Green Deal policy package aims to improve environmental policies in the EU, but there are still significant hurdles related to policy coherence and implementation in the member states. Financial incentives offered through several EU CAP subsidies are for example seen as major obstacle for the effective conservation and/or restoration of European wetlands because carbon credit funding for wetland restoration cannot outcompete the CAP subsidies offered to the landowner.

While companies recognise the potential for contributing to nature restoration, their production and supply chains frequently result in a substantial environmental footprint. The pursuit of maximising profits often takes precedence over prioritizing sound environmental stewardship. Without adequate engagement from private actors, the effectiveness of EU Green Deal policies is jeopardised.

Conservation status EU habitats



Rounded figures. Source: European Environment Agency

SHAPING EFFECTIVE ENVIRONMENTAL NORMS AND STANDARDS

The policy analysis of REWET underscores the importance of translating global policies into national legislation and local actions to restore healthy wetlands for the generations to come. Political will, financial resources, local and regional stakeholder involvement and policy coherence at various government levels, and across all sectors, are critical enabling factors for successful wetland restoration.

However, political will is often linked to short-term (economic) interests, of which the EU Nature Restoration Law now seems to have borne the brunt.

- [REWET called for an important role of peatlands in the Nature Restoration Law >>](#)

Despite the rise of several global initiatives over the past few years, there is still a huge issue with allocating finance for wetland conservation, restoration and sustainable use to achieve the 2030 climate and biodiversity targets of the UNFCCC and UN CBD, respectively.

Investments in nature-based solutions must at least **triple in real terms by 2030** and increase four-fold by 2050 if the world is to meet its climate change, biodiversity and land degradation targets. When it comes to scaling up wetland restoration initiatives, for example, financial incentives are needed to change landowner's and investors' practices and policies with regards to wetland management.

POLICIES AT A NATIONAL LEVEL

Now the EU Nature Restoration Law is put on hold, the development and implementation of policies at national level of member states becomes even more important.

Therefore, IUCN NL, through REWET, will examine if and how implementation of existing policy falls short and what measures are needed to remedy this. We will publish a report based on this study at the end of this year.

Recommendations to EU Member States

Without existing EU legislation, such as EU evaluations (fitness checks) for the Nature Directive, the water and nitrates directives and the evaluation of the EU 2020 biodiversity strategy, member countries would be further away from reaching the 2030 climate and biodiversity targets. Nevertheless, there is a need for more effective measures to achieve wetland restoration, both at EU and national level.

The REWET analysis led to the following key recommendations:

- Strong international and national incentives are required to enable the break with business-as-usual development scenarios.
- To effectively tackle the biodiversity, climate and pollution crises, environmental policies must be seen as an integral part of policies on trade, finance, energy, water, agriculture, infrastructure and spatial planning. Therefore, coherence with other major EU policies is essential (and one of the key objectives of the Green Deal).
- Policies need to consider the multiple benefits of wetland restoration, such as climate change mitigation, disaster risk reduction, water security and pollution control. These values could incentivise companies to develop and implement wetland policies.
- Member states should develop a more coordinated approach towards the implementation of environmental policies, as they often have decentralised the responsibility to implement (or even develop) environmental policies to provincial or district level. Decentralisation may affect the level and pace of implementation, depending on budget, capacities and political will, and hinder the progress of wetland restoration. Moreover, wetlands depend on river basins that often go beyond provincial or district level.
- Transformative change requires policy makers to establish financial incentives, strengthen environmental policy and laws to reduce unsustainable agricultural development, build capacity and enhance cross-sectoral cooperation, taking pre-emptive and precautionary action to increase sustainability at the catchment scale.
- Involve a wide array of local stakeholders in wetland restoration, including citizens, businesses, politicians and NGOs.

ABOUT REWET

REWET is a laboratory for the restoration of wetlands at European scale. In the REWET project, funded by the European Union, NGOs, universities, companies and institutions joined forces to study the full potential of wetland areas. With information from seven open laboratories, we are developing a comprehensive understanding of how European wetlands can best contribute to climate mitigation and adaptation. Would you like to learn more?

- [Visit the REWET website >>](#)
- [Or contact Caspar Verwer >>](#)



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