



European Economic and Social Committee

NAT/296
Conservation of biodiversity

Brussels, 18 May 2006

OPINION

of the
European Economic and Social Committee
on the

EU campaign to conserve biodiversity: position and contribution of civil society
(exploratory opinion)

In a letter dated 13 September 2005, the Austrian presidency, acting under Article 262 of the EC Treaty, asked the European Economic and Social Committee to draw up an exploratory opinion on the:

EU campaign to conserve biodiversity: position and contribution of civil society.

The Section for Agriculture, Rural Development and the Environment, which was responsible for preparing the Committee's work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 26 April 2006. The rapporteur was Mr Ribbe.

At its 427th plenary session, held on 17 and 18 May 2006 (meeting of 18 May), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 125 votes to none, with four abstentions:

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1. **Summary of the Committee's conclusions and recommendations**

- 1.1 Biodiversity is the foundation and guarantee of life on our planet. Economic self-interest alone dictates that humanity must strive to keep ecosystems stable. We also owe a debt of responsibility to the natural world to maintain species diversity. Protecting biodiversity is not some "luxury" to be indulged in or dispensed with at will.
- 1.2 Humanity itself is the greatest beneficiary of biodiversity; yet it is humanity that is, at the moment, the main cause of its decline.
- 1.3 As the EESC sees it, biodiversity in Europe remains under extreme threat. EU action to date has not been enough to halt the decline of the past few decades.
- 1.4 The EESC welcomes the commitment of all the European institutions and, as contracting parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity, of the EU Member States not only to halt but also to reverse this decline.
- 1.5 That said, however, the EESC laments the huge gulf that has grown up between ideal and reality: public authorities have so far failed to make the contribution to conserving biodiversity that might have been expected of them. In fact, in this field, it is their duty to be role models; instead, planning decisions and support schemes are often instrumental in imperilling biodiversity still further. Moreover, in the 2007-2013 funding period, particular savings are to be made in precisely those EU policy areas that are of key importance for biodiversity protection.

- 1.6 Biodiversity loss is an insidious process that has been going on for many years. As fewer and fewer people have any direct connection with the natural environment, there is relatively little sense of personal concern – and thus relatively little political pressure for change. This must not set policymakers' minds at ease, however. On the contrary, it is essential to draw up counterstrategies.
- 1.7 Just as civil society needs to be better informed of the background to – and indeed the point of – biodiversity conservation, so also there is a need to train and educate local, regional and national officials and public employees, since many are wholly unaware of the issues at stake and often have no motivation to act.
- 1.8 The EESC feels that a campaign to conserve biodiversity of the kind being considered by the EU presidency is a useful step and an opportunity for civil society both to have practical input and – something that is particularly important – to help raise awareness of the issues involved. However, a campaign of this kind cannot make up for the existing shortcomings that the EU itself has identified. Nor must it under any circumstances convey the impression that the problems are solely or chiefly the result of inadequate commitment on the part of civil society.
- 1.9 More overtly positive, practical examples and prototype projects are needed. There must be more action to raise awareness of the intrinsic and practical value of landscapes and of biodiversity in general. Commitment is also needed by public role models. It is, after all, a question of preserving the very foundations of human existence.

2. **The Committee opinion: main features and background**

- 2.1 In a letter dated 13 September 2005, the Austrian presidency asked the EESC to draft an exploratory opinion on the *EU campaign to conserve biodiversity: position and contribution of civil society*. In terms of both content and policy, an opinion of this kind could, as the letter points out, be helpful to the Council and the Commission as they pursue the objective of halting biodiversity decline by 2010¹.
- 2.2 The letter proposes that the EESC might consider the following aspects:
- the causes of biodiversity loss;
 - whether the measures taken so far by the Council and the Commission to achieve this goal are sufficient;
 - whether the various EU policies are coherent;
 - what other measures have to be taken by the Commission and the Member States;

¹ See decision of the Gothenburg European Council, 15 and 16 June 2001.

- what consequences this will have in relation to the Lisbon and sustainable development strategies; and
- what contribution can be made by civil society.

2.3 The Austrian presidency's request no doubt stems from the point made in the letter itself, namely that: "*current data from various research bodies and institutes, including Eurostat, show that, despite efforts made so far, biodiversity both in Europe and across the world is in steady decline, with no reversal of the trend at present in sight. In its communications as part of the EU sustainability strategy review process, the European Commission also assumes a negative trend in this area.*"

2.4 The EESC thanks the presidency for approaching it on this key issue. It will now consider the issues involved, respond to each in turn and explore some ideas for a possible campaign.

3. **General comments**

3.1 Biodiversity is the foundation of life on our planet. Without it, humanity would be doomed: plants, which convert sunlight into biomass, form the basis of the earth's energy and substance flows that are the very fabric of people's day-to-day lives as they breathe, eat and work. And human life and activity would also be impossible without those species that make use of and convert our waste "products".

3.2 It follows, then, that biodiversity is not something that society can "indulge in" whenever it considers it important to do so but which can be dispensed with when other apparent priorities need to be set. Biodiversity is an absolute necessity.

3.3 In the *2003 environment policy review*², the Commission explains what is at stake in the biodiversity issue: "*Biodiversity reflects the complexity, balance and status of the various ecosystems. Not only does biodiversity perform essential life support functions but it also provides the basis for important economic, recreational and cultural activities.*"

3.4 The literal translation of biodiversity is "variety of life" but the term can be used on a number of different levels. It can be used to mean the genetic diversity within a particular population, and also the degree of species diversity within a particular habitat.

3.5 As intelligent beings, humans are the main beneficiaries of biodiversity. No other living species makes use of – or draws advantage from – so many other species than humankind. Yet humanity is now also the main destroyer of biodiversity. The distinction we make between "useful" and "harmful" species is purely economic and anthropocentric. Such distinctions are not found in the natural world, which knows only balanced relationships that that are largely self-regulating. Biodiversity is one of the key indicators of sustainability.

² COM(2003) 745/2.

- 3.6 Any uncontrolled shifts in these balances pose a problem for those with a stake in maintaining stability. Human activity – wide in its range and largely economic in its focus – impacts and influences ecological balances. This has been the case for thousands of years and, in earlier times, some activities – extensive land-use practices, for instance – often even spawned new and, in turn, largely stable systems. Today, however, human impact on biodiversity has grown to unprecedented levels. Humanity has created a wealth of possibilities for itself, with the result that species composition is no longer just altered slightly but is, in many cases, completely destroyed.

Point of departure and causes of biodiversity loss

- 3.7 In its letter to the EESC (see point 2.3 above), the presidency outlined in clear and unmistakable terms the current state of play in the field of biodiversity conservation. Its analysis ties in with, among other things, the United Nations Environment Programme report on biological diversity which states that biodiversity across the world is declining faster than ever before.
- 3.8 As early as 1998, the EU had noted in its biodiversity strategy³ that the situation in Europe was a matter of grave concern: "*The rich biodiversity of the European Union has been subject to slow changes over the centuries, due to the impact of human activities. The scale of this impact has accelerated dramatically in the last few decades. The Assessment by UNEP confirms that in some European countries up to 24% of species of certain groups such as butterflies, birds and mammals are now nationally extinct.*"
- 3.9 The 2001 Gothenburg strategy for sustainable development⁴ states: "*The loss of biodiversity in Europe has accelerated dramatically in recent decades*". The EESC points out that today's species extinction rate is between a hundred and a thousand times higher than the natural rate; a quite recent study drawn up by the University of Utrecht even starts from the assumption that the present rate of extinction is between one thousand and ten thousand times higher than the natural rate.
- 3.10 The causes of biodiversity decline are many and varied. Broadly speaking, biodiversity is lost when fauna and flora habitats are destroyed or substantively altered. The causes are, essentially: the fragmentation of natural habitats as a result of infrastructure and urbanisation; the input of nutrients; the fact that habitats are being built over; mass tourism; and water and air pollution.

³ Cf COM(1998) 42 final.

⁴ COM(2001) 264 final.

- 3.11 Agriculture in Europe has a particular, almost dual role to play in this process. Historically, extensive and highly varied farming practices did, in the first instance, help boost biodiversity. However, many of these extensive practices have long ceased to be economical, and have therefore been replaced by more intensive uses that have a greater impact on the natural processes. This has a twofold effect on biodiversity. Not only does intensive farming play a major role in biodiversity decline, but valuable biotopes are also lost through land being abandoned or, on sites that were formerly farmed extensively or in a near-natural way, being allowed to fall permanently fallow or undergoing a change of use. Depending on how it is practised, therefore, agriculture either benefits or harms biodiversity.
- 3.12 Other key causes of biodiversity loss are: plant succession; the shift in the competitive balance (caused, among other things, by nutrient inputs); the afforestation of unwooded areas; the introduction of foreign species; and overfishing.
- 3.12.1 New and hitherto less important causes may also make the situation much worse in the future. In its recent report⁵, the European Environment Agency cites predicted climate change as a huge and perhaps, in the future, even predominant threat resulting in irreversible biodiversity shifts.
- 3.12.2 The use of green genetic technology is another potential new danger to biodiversity in Europe. The commercial cultivation of genetically modified plants could, researchers believe, have a major impact on the surrounding flora – and thus also on butterflies and bees. These are the findings of a three-year study commissioned by the British government and involving over 150 researchers⁶. The EESC calls upon the Commission to provide strong support for research activities in this area.
- 3.13 A specific example may be used to illustrate the potential impact of this biodiversity loss. Pollinator insects, for instance, are clearly in numerical and – according to the FAO – worldwide decline. The pollination systems of flowering plants have evolved and, at the same time, adapted to changes in pollinator insects, which, in turn, have developed more efficient nectar and pollen collection mechanisms. For pollinated plants, this has helped make for improved seed production and dispersal. Cross-pollination by insects boosts genetic diversity and results in more resistant seed and a higher-quality yield. Between 70% and 95% of pollinator insects are classed as hymenopterans ("membrane-winged"), a genus to which the domestic honeybee also belongs. The decline in the pollinator insect population may have a devastating impact, not least economically.
- 3.14 Given the wealth of studies and statements on the dramatic decline in biodiversity, the Committee need not concern itself in this opinion with delving deeper into the individual

⁵ *The European Environment – State and outlook 2005*, EEA, November 2005.

⁶ See the scientific magazine *Nature*, 22.3.2005.

causes, let alone raising awareness of the issue. All policymakers should be fully alive to the problem. There is no lack of pertinent data on the subject.

- 3.15 The EESC is pleased that all the EU institutions consistently express their commitment to maintaining biodiversity. Yet despite political commitments and policy statements of every kind, despite the signing of the Convention on Biological Diversity, which has been ratified by all 25 EU Member States and by the EU, and despite sensible nature protection provisions adopted at EU level – including the 1979 Birds Directive⁷ and the 1992 directive on the conservation of natural habitats and of wild fauna and flora (Habitats Directive)⁸ – biodiversity continues to decline.
- 3.16 At the UN World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg, the parties committed themselves to significantly reducing the rate of biodiversity loss by 2010. The EU has gone even further by committing itself to halting biodiversity decline by 2010⁹.
- 3.17 Biodiversity conservation is thus recognised as a sensible, necessary, yet highly complex task in which all political levels (from the EU down to local authorities) must work together with civil society to provide an example for society to follow.

Biodiversity loss: political and social background

- 3.18 One burning question is, unfortunately, all too seldom asked, yet urgently requires an answer: what are the political reasons that allowed biodiversity to decline – sometimes to a dramatic extent – over decades without any adequate political action being taken or enforced to counter the trend?
- 3.19 There many different reasons for this. One difficulty is undoubtedly that biodiversity loss is a very slow, insidious and thus, in the first instance, virtually imperceptible process (begging, in fact, a ready comparison with climate change). No single "measure" can be blamed for the emergence of the problem, just as no single "countermeasure" can be brought to bear to resolve it. The biodiversity loss we are witnessing at the moment is the product of millions of actions and decisions over the last number of years and decades, each of which – individually – has had a seemingly insignificant or merely marginal impact.
- 3.20 It is extremely difficult, therefore, to successfully caution against – or indeed block – upcoming decisions on the grounds of preserving biodiversity, especially in the face of contentions by the relevant public authorities that the impact on the particular part of the

⁷ OJ L 103, 25.4.1979, p. 1.

⁸ OJ L 206, 22.7.1992, p. 7.

⁹ See paragraph 31, presidency conclusions, Gothenburg European Council.

natural environment in question is being offset by compensation or substitution measures elsewhere (although this all too frequently is not successful).

- 3.21 Another probable reason is that, in a development that has taken place over a relatively short space of time, fewer and fewer people have any direct experience and perception of the importance of biodiversity and countryside areas, and the changes that are taking place there. We are witnessing a process of alienation from nature, which starts as fewer and fewer people know or recognise the value – both **practical**¹⁰ and **intrinsic**¹¹ – of countryside areas.
- 3.22 Most people (and indeed most policymakers) are, in all likelihood, not fully aware of the importance and relevance of the real task of protecting biodiversity (including the major ethical and moral responsibility involved.). They "consume" the countryside and admire its beauty. They enjoy its sights, spend their leisure time there, play sports, take holidays. Yet they have little idea any longer of how the biotic elements of countryside areas, the individual species of fauna and flora, interact with and through each other and thus play a part both in making the landscape what it is and in ensuring its stability. Equally, they have little inkling of the tremendous importance of this fragile stability as the backbone of our way of life and of our economic system. For broad swathes of society, nature is something that is experienced sporadically, sometimes more on television than in the open countryside, in films that focus more on the beauties of Africa, the Galapagos Islands or other far-flung places, but hardly ever address the problems facing Europe's own natural heritage.
- 3.23 It is no accident, therefore, that nature conservation organisations find, to their surprise, that Europeans are frequently more willing to support campaigns to save the elephant or conserve the Siberian tiger than to protect the local field hamster.
- 3.24 Biodiversity loss is something that is talked about, reported on and discussed in political tracts. Yet people have no direct experience of the adverse impact involved. In some cases, they have no personal experience whatsoever of what is actually being lost "out there" in the countryside. As we know, people are prepared to commit only to causes they genuinely know and care about, causes from which they expect in some way to derive benefit.
- 3.25 Daily experience shows therefore, that, as an issue, biodiversity enjoys broad recognition but it is also increasingly far outside the ambit of most people's own experience. Values arise because people care about what they represent. For many people, biodiversity appears to have no direct bearing on their lives and, in consequence, they increasingly feel that its protection

¹⁰ The **practical value** – the economic value – of countryside areas goes far beyond their importance as farming or forestry "production sites". Tourism and locally based recreation are a good case in point. Tourism is underpinned by species-rich, diverse landscapes of generally recognised "beauty".

¹¹ The **intrinsic value** of the countryside has two facets. On the one hand, "nature" has a unique value that must be recognised and protected, not frittered away by one-sided technological and economic exploitation. On the other hand, the countryside is also of value as a place where people can seek physical and, above all, spiritual regeneration and find their proper place in the natural order.

is not something for which they are in any sense personally responsible. That, they feel, is a job for the state.

3.26 Across the world, biodiversity conservation will depend on the extent to which political decision-makers succeed in rekindling a sense of "personal concern". It must be brought home to people that just because something *can* be done does not necessarily mean that it *should* be done. People must again come to recognise that sacrifices do have to be made to protect the natural environment but that such sacrifices are a source of enrichment to us. That goal should be an integral part of any EU campaign on biodiversity loss.

3.27 And as what is described above does seem a true reflection of what is actually going on, situations arise time and again in which universal commitment to conserving biodiversity is taken as read, yet questions are still asked as to:

- whether the environment really needs protection just where that new bypass road is scheduled to be built;
- whether the presence of a species enjoying European protection under the Habitats Directive should be a valid reason for blocking, say, the building of a trading estate;
- and whether nature conservation really does have to cost (so much) money.

3.28 It does not end there. When the economy is, ostensibly, going through a bad patch, nature conservation is not seen as the very foundation of life and economic activity but is, instead, turned into a scapegoat and accused of holding back one key development or another that is deemed "good" for the economy. It should, incidentally, also be noted that arguments used in this debate frequently follow a highly contradictory line of reasoning. People are indignant if a road they personally consider important cannot be built because of nature conservation rules. Yet they are more than willing to cite landscape conservation as grounds to block road building in areas they use for holidays or recreation.

3.29 As things stand, nature is seen as a "freely available, common resource" which can be shaped and influenced more or less at will to suit the economic requirements of an industrially based and increasingly urbanised society with its high leisure requirements. And, against that backdrop, policymakers wrongly promote the idea that compensation and substitution measures are enough to satisfy the needs of biodiversity protection.

Impact of the measures introduced by the Council and the Commission to date

3.30 As the current position shows, the impact of the measures introduced by the Council and the Commission to date has been wholly inadequate. That said, the Commission's approach to protecting the habitats of European animals and plants – exemplified in the 1979 Birds Directive and the 1992 Habitats Directive – was and remains both right and sensible. The critical problem lies in the political will to implement and enforce the measures, as the Commission itself recognises: "*Implementation of the **Birds and Habitats Directives** has been*

*difficult. Infringements relating to the two Directives account for over a quarter of instances where the European Commission has taken legal action."*¹²

- 3.31 In this regard, the EESC sees two different levels of responsibility:
- 3.31.1 The first is the political level where awareness is distinctly lacking. The EESC simply cannot understand, for instance, why Member States should adopt nature conservation directives in the Council only to fail to implement them – or to do so in a wholly inadequate way – on the ground. The EESC considers this completely unacceptable. Policymakers themselves are creating a huge credibility gap by failing even to enforce nature conservation measures.
- 3.31.2 There is also no credibility in a policy that claims to want to halt biodiversity decline by 2010, while policymakers, full in the knowledge this costs money, are, under the financial perspective, at the same time cutting the key budgetary appropriations to the "old" Member States in this area by more than 30%¹³. The heads of state or government of the EU Member States have thus themselves laid the groundwork for a policy that cannot match their own ambitions. The policy itself sets a bad example.
- 3.31.3 That said, however, Member States – the second tier of responsibility – must not lay the blame for the failure of their own policy at the door of those who "use" the natural environment. The EESC has, in a number of opinions, considered the failure to implement the directives that are so important for maintaining biodiversity. It can but repeat that until such times as measures to protect or improve biodiversity dovetail with, for instance, the (understandable) economic interests of land users, then compensation must be forthcoming – at least to offset potential financial losses. An even better option would be to provide incentives for appropriate action on biodiversity. A key stumbling block is the continued uncertainty – following the European Council's decision of 16 December 2005 – about the financing of Natura 2000 measures in the upcoming EU funding period. Any political commitment to maintain and develop biodiversity, however well meaning, is worthless unless the economic conditions are right.
- 3.32 Basically, therefore, the EU's approach will remain ineffectual unless the Natura 2000 financing issue is resolved along the lines advocated both by the EESC and by the European Parliament (i.e. a separate, adequate budgetary heading for Natura 2000 compensation). No public information campaign – however well intentioned – will be able to change that.
- 3.33 One measure to conserve biodiversity announced in the sustainability strategy was, *"in the mid-term review of the Common Agricultural Policy, [to] improve the agri-environmental measures so that they provide a transparent system of direct payments for environmental*

¹² COM(2003) 745/2 and also, using the selfsame wording, COM(2004) 17.

¹³ Rural development – see heading 2 of the Financial Perspective 2007-2013.

services". As the Committee notes with regret, this is yet another important and worthwhile undertaking that has not been met. The result has been counterproductive. The main responsibility for this failure lay not so much with the Commission as with the Member States, particularly their stance on funding.

Are the various EU policies coherent enough?

- 3.34 The EESC does not feel that the various EU policy areas are, as yet, coordinated in such a way as to be able to halt biodiversity loss. On the contrary, EU policies continue to pose risks that cannot be offset by the modest nature protection measures that are in place. Even the ongoing action programmes¹⁴ are doing nothing to change that, and the thematic strategies that are currently in the pipeline do not seem set to make any decisive difference either¹⁵.
- 3.35 Aside from agricultural policy, which the Committee has already considered in other opinions, one particular project – part of the trans-European transport networks – is a good case in point. The Danube – 2 880 km long and cutting across ten European countries – can undoubtedly be seen as *the* European river *par excellence*. The Danube is a lifeline along which countless natural havens that are to be included in the Natura-2000 network have been preserved. Yet the EU says that some 1 400 km (i.e. half) of the river – for the most part the remaining free-flowing sections, in Germany (Straubing-Vilshofen), for instance, or in Austria (near Heinburg and in the Wachau), as well as large sections in Hungary and virtually the entire tract in Bulgaria and Romania – are shipping bottlenecks that need to be removed. A policy such as this ultimately leads to confrontation between economic growth and nature conservation, and in fact provokes and orchestrates those very conflicts which policymakers – by dint of the sustainable development and biodiversity strategies and thus as part of a coherent policy – are supposed to be resolving.
- 3.36 The EESC's point here about an insufficiently coherent policy is, moreover, true not only in those sectors traditionally seen as potentially hazardous to nature protection and biodiversity conservation – such as the transport or infrastructure policy touched on above or over-intensive farming, forestry and fishing – but also in policy areas which, at first glance, appear to have no direct connection with biodiversity at all.
- 3.36.1 Measures introduced to combat BSE are a case in point. These include a broadly definitive ban on animal carcasses being left or dumped on the land¹⁶, obliging farmers, at great expense, to take the bodies of dead animals to rendering facilities.

14 On organic farming, for instance.

15 The Committee is currently working on separate opinions on the individual strategies; reference will be made to them here.

16 This is allowed only under conditions so complicated that they are hardly ever applied.

- 3.36.2 In areas of Europe with still-intact populations of wild carrion-eaters, such as vultures, wolves or bears, this poses major problems for species protection. In Asturias, for example, in the 1990s and right up to 2003, around 3 000 bodies of domestic animals were, on average, delivered to rendering facilities each year. In 2004, as a result of consistent application of the relevant EU regulation, that figure rose to around 20 000.
- 3.36.3 This means, therefore, that Asturias (area: 10 604 km²) is "short" of some 17 000 animal carcasses, which had, until then, been a major source of food for vultures, bears, wolves and many other carrion-eaters. Taking 200 kg per animal as a benchmark, this represents a total protein biomass of 3 400 tonnes¹⁷. It remains to be seen whether the November 2002 Spanish royal decree allowing carrion-eaters to be fed the carcasses or by-products of certain animals will make any difference to this situation. No other EU Member State has introduced a national provision of this kind.

What other measures might have to be taken by the Commission and the Member States

- 3.37 In its *environment policy review* for 2003¹⁸, the Commission itself recognises the need, as a matter of priority, to:
- move towards a more sustainable agricultural policy;
 - green the Common Fisheries Policy;
 - better protect soils and the marine environment;
 - improve implementation in the field of nature protection;
 - better highlight trends in the biodiversity area; and
 - strengthen biodiversity protection at international level.
- 3.38 In its 2007 policy strategy, the Commission has also announced a review of the habitats and birds directives "*to adapt them to new scientific knowledge*"¹⁹. The EESC would be very pleased if the Commission were to make known, as soon as possible, the nature of this new scientific knowledge and to make clear how extensive the review, which, in the EESC's view, could only lead to an improvement in European nature conservation will be.
- 3.39 The EESC is convinced of the need to boost habitat protection and make the requisite funding available to that end. The directive on the conservation of natural habitats and of wild fauna and flora and the birds directive have not yet done enough to safeguard species and habitats

¹⁷ Let us give just a cursory glance at the impact of this. For many years, the Spanish nature protection organisation FAPAS has been monitoring griffon vultures in Valle delle Trubia. Until 2003, it was normal to have ten pairs, which usually produced some eight or nine young. Griffon vultures never produce more than one chick. In 2004, however, the number of fledglings was down to four. Bear conservationists are also reporting many young bears being found dead for lack of food.

¹⁸ COM(2003) 745/2.

¹⁹ COM(2006) 122.

that require protection across Europe. A further – and in the EESC's view crucial – difficulty, however, is the stance now taken in some Member States, a stance that permeates down even as far as the local level, namely that when it comes to the natural environment, anything that does not have European protected status but is perhaps protected only at national level is somehow "second-class". The attitude is that if the EU does not provide funding, then we do nothing either. Biodiversity protection outside specifically designated reserves is in an even more parlous state: here publicly funded activities are now virtually nonexistent. Yet the task of protecting biodiversity cannot be restricted to just a few designated areas.

- 3.40 Such a stance and viewpoint demonstrate all too clearly, however, that most members of the public – not to mention most policymakers – still fail to understand that in nature everything is interlinked, hence the need to protect biodiversity in particular. Public bodies in particular are also called upon to lead by example. They must demonstrate to the public that conserving biodiversity is important to them and that they are ready to take appropriate action in their own areas, even if, in the short term, economically "more effective" options may be available.
- 3.41 The UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2015) should therefore be used as a launch pad for a broad-based campaign designed to halt and reverse the noticeable fall-off in knowledge and experience of biodiversity. A large-scale, positive campaign is needed to make clear that nature is not a luxury that societies can allow themselves in periods of economic prosperity, to be dispensed with when the economy takes a downturn. Biodiversity must again be conveyed to society as an economic, cultural and spiritual asset. Nature conservation must be presented as something positive (and what can be more positive than maintaining the very basis of life itself?) Nature conservation should be something to be enjoyed; it should be fun, rather than seen as a burden. It must also be made clear that the costs of any further erosion of our natural basis for life will be much higher than the costs of protecting that basis in the first place, and that valuable assets are being lost that cannot be expressed in purely monetary terms.
- 3.42 The EESC is well aware that EU nature conservation policy is restricted to tackling objectives that can only be achieved through cross-border action. But an appropriate biodiversity protection policy must also be pursued at national, regional and indeed local level, and even at the level of private individuals. Thus, the Member States are, at the very least, just as much called upon to act as the EU.
- 3.43 The EESC would therefore very much like to see the Commission, as part of a campaign of this kind, work together with the environmental groups and land-user associations concerned to back – and bring to wide public attention – prototype schemes for nature protection, designed, among other things, to generate a Europe-wide sense of identity. The Green Belt Europe initiative might, for instance, be a suitable vehicle for such a scheme. This is an NGO project that also to some extent already enjoys publicly-funded support²⁰ and is designed to

²⁰ For instance, from the German Federal Agency for Nature Conservation.

look after habitats that grew up "protected" in the shadow of sometimes even inhumane national borders. The Green Belt Europe, which runs from Scandinavia to the Balkans, is (still) Europe's longest biotope corridor.

- 3.44 To boost biodiversity protection at an international level, the EESC feels that, as what is termed a "non-trade concern", biodiversity should become an integral part of the trade system (*inter alia* of the WTO).

Impact on the Lisbon and sustainable development strategies

- 3.45 The EESC's comments in this opinion relate solely to the Lisbon strategy. There is no need to discuss the sustainable development strategy here, not only because the points made in the Commission's communication on the subject²¹ are so vague and noncommittal that little can be expected from them in terms of sound biodiversity protection, but also because the EESC will be considering this document in a separate opinion.
- 3.46 If the European Council, meeting for its spring summit in Brussels in 2005, was right in its assertion that the Lisbon strategy is part of the sustainable development strategy, then the Lisbon strategy should be framed in such a way that it seeks not only to take account of environmental concerns but also to secure the economic developments that are deemed appropriate, while at the same time consciously fostering action in areas like biodiversity protection. However, the Lisbon strategy documents give not the slightest indication of any approach along these lines.
- 3.47 The Commission should, as soon as possible, undertake an overall assessment of the purely economic importance of biodiversity protection in Europe. It is also vital to set out, and bring to public notice, much more positive examples, clearly showing that biodiversity protection and economic development are mutually beneficial. It is also important to launch – at last – the discussion that society needs to engage in about practical ways of internalising external costs.

Contribution of civil society

- 3.48 Civil society input to conserving biodiversity is important, and there is without doubt still major scope for further positive action on this front. However, civil society input cannot offset or make up for omissions or mistakes by the public authorities. It is right to ask civil society to do more, but that must not deflect attention away from public-authority shortcomings.
- 3.49 The EESC would very much welcome a new campaign, as mentioned by the presidency in its letter of 13 September 2005. Such a campaign should be designed to encourage motivation

²¹ COM(2005) 658, 13.12.2005, *Review of the Sustainable Development Strategy – "A platform for action"*.

and to foster understanding of the need to protect the natural environment and conserve biodiversity. Education in this field should start very early, in nursery schools and schools, and should also aim to make clear that we must all – every single one of us – play our part in conserving the very foundations of human existence. Protecting biodiversity starts on our own doorsteps, in the way we shop, how we design our gardens etc.

- 3.50 It is easier for individuals to commit to something when they know what is at stake, feel their commitment is wanted and valued and can see the world of politics setting an example. A campaign of this kind could be used not only to convey basic knowledge but also to win "ambassadors" for biodiversity conservation, such as rock musicians, literary figures, actors, politicians and journalists.
- 3.51 Non-governmental organisations and also many citizens not involved in associations and groups do a great deal of laudable work in nature conservation and species protection. Farmers contribute through agri-environmental programmes and voluntary initiatives. Many other groups in society are working hard to protect biodiversity, sometimes even taking on board tasks that should clearly devolve on the public authorities²². Much of the success that has been achieved in the field of biodiversity protection would not have been possible without this commitment. It is, in particular, thanks also to the work of private nature conservationists and that of many nature users that the situation is not even worse today than it actually is. Policymakers should foster this commitment, not only financially but in other ways as well.
- 3.52 This cannot, however, just mean practical fieldwork in the countryside itself. If policymakers really are determined to halt biodiversity decline, then it must also be in their interests to see demand for such a policy emerge within society. Political pressure is also involved. There can be no doubt that the European public does basically agree on the need for action. Nine out of ten people in the EU think that, on key issues, political decision-makers should pay the same degree of attention to environmental concerns as to economic and social factors (*Attitudes of Europeans towards the environment*, EC Eurobarometer, 2004).
- 3.53 It is absolutely essential to foster public education in order to promote understanding of policies (including expenditure). Civil society can and must play its part here, but it also needs publicly-funded support. For instance, civil society must ensure that nature conservation is no longer decried as "anti-progress" but that appropriate answers are found to the questions raised, leading – ultimately – to more and not less biodiversity protection.
- 3.54 The Committee therefore welcomes the Countdown 2010²³ initiative launched by a range of non-governmental organisations and designed to incite all European governments to take the steps that are really needed to halt biodiversity decline by 2010 and thus to ensure that the

²² Cf EESC hearing of 2.3.2006 as part of the work on this opinion.

²³ <http://www.countdown2010.net/>.

declared political objective is also backed up by the necessary action. The campaign shows that, together, civil society and governments have a long list of tasks to complete.

Brussels, 18 May 2006.

The President
of the
European Economic and Social Committee

The Secretary-General
of the
European Economic and Social Committee

Anne-Marie Sigmund

Patrick Venturini

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N.B.: Appendix overleaf

The complexity of nature conservation and species protection: an example

Migratory species²⁴, or species with a large cruising range and thus extensive habitat requirements, have particular needs. Some birds, fish and mammals travel thousands of kilometres every year. Not only, therefore, do they need adequate habitats and appropriate living conditions at their summer and winter quarters, but they are also dependent on stopping places and resting grounds during migration itself. Large mammals such as bears, wolves and lynx are increasingly hard put to find any suitable habitats at all within the EU. Moreover, migration between suitable habitats is also becoming ever more difficult as it is hampered by, among other things, fragmentation as the result of infrastructure projects such as road building. Ultimately, this impedes the genetic exchange that is needed for long-term species maintenance.

To illustrate the complexity of biodiversity protection, the EESC would like to take the example of the European eel, a species not generally perceived as endangered in any way.

Eels are highly migratory and, in the course of their development from young glass eel to adulthood, travel more than 5 000 kilometres in inland and coastal waters and on the open seas. In Europe, eels are now an endangered species. In many inland waterways, their continued presence is due solely to the introduction of young eels by fishermen and anglers for commercial or sporting reasons.

Eels are under threat for two main reasons. The first is that, in France, Spain, Portugal and also the UK, young glass eels reaching Europe on the Gulf Stream from the Sargasso Sea are systematically fished in the estuaries before they get a chance to swim upriver. Glass eels currently fetch EUR 600 and more a kilogramme²⁵, with each kilogramme consisting of some 4 000 individual eels. Only a small percentage of these glass eels are used for restocking in Europe; some are marketed locally as a delicacy, but the vast majority are sold to Asia and reared there in tanks.

The second main reason why this species is endangered is that sexually mature adult eels migrating back to the Sargasso Sea are caught as they leave the river systems, preventing them from spawning. Fisheries associations, for instance in Germany, have agreed to stop fishing for adult eels on condition that glass-eel fishing is also discontinued. As there is no prospect of that happening at present, young glass eels and sexually mature adult eels are being fished on an irresponsibly large scale, endangering stocks across Europe.

Another virtually ubiquitous problem for European eels is the impassibility of river systems, with migration hampered by power stations, weirs, locks and other river constructions.

²⁴ Migratory species are species that migrate between summer and winter quarters, sometimes over long distances.

²⁵ Just marginally less than for caviar.