

COM-4/052

Brussels, 29 November 2001

OPINION

of the

Committee of the Regions

of 15 November 2001

on the

Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament

Biodiversity action plans in the areas of conservation of natural resources, agriculture, fisheries, and economic and development cooperation

(COM(2001) 162 final)

The Committee of the Regions,

HAVING REGARD TO the Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament on *Biodiversity Action Plans in the areas of Conservation of Natural Resources, Agriculture, Fisheries and Economic and Development Cooperation* (COM(2001) 162 final);

HAVING REGARD TO the decision of its Bureau of 12 June 2001 under the fifth paragraph of Article 265 of the Treaty establishing the European Community to draw up an opinion on the Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament on *Biodiversity Action Plans in the areas of Conservation of Natural Resources, Agriculture, Fisheries and Economic and Development Cooperation* and to instruct Commission 4 for Spatial Planning, Urban Issues, Energy and Environment to draw up the relevant opinion;

HAVING REGARD TO the report of the European Environment Agency on the *Environment in the European Union at the turn of the century*;

HAVING REGARD TO the Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament on a *European Community biodiversity strategy* (COM(1998) 42 final);

HAVING REGARD TO the decision of the Council of 25 October 1993 concerning the conclusion of the Convention on Biological Diversity¹;

HAVING REGARD TO the UN/ECE Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters;

HAVING REGARD TO the draft opinion (CdR 201/2001 rev. 1) adopted by Commission 4 on 8 October 2001 for which the rapporteur was **Mr Torchio** (Mayor of Spineda , I-PPE)

adopted unanimously the following opinion at its 41st plenary session of 14 and 15 November 2001 (session of 15 November)

1. **The Committee of the Regions' position**

1. On 27 March 2001 the European Commission forwarded a Communication on Biodiversity Action Plans in the areas of Conservation of Natural Resources, Agriculture, Fisheries and Economic and Development Cooperation to the Council and the European Parliament. The initiative originated in a series of measures to stem the worrying reduction and loss of biodiversity in Europe and worldwide: there has been no let up in the rate of reduction and loss of entire species, with their habitats, ecosystems and genes at European or world level.
2. The Committee of the Regions shares the Commission's concern at data revealing average losses in Europe of more than a third of butterflies and bird species and a quarter of species of certain groups of plants; in some Member States more than two-thirds of existing habitat types are endangered, with a reduction in European wetlands of 60% over recent decades; nearly a hundred domestic animal breeds have been lost, and 30% of the surviving breeds are at risk of extinction. The picture which emerges from FAO data is even more alarming, with over 11,000 plant and animal species in danger of immediate extinction as a result of human activity. The international trade in wildlife is a global threat to some 30,000 species, and incalculable losses are caused by the annual destruction of around 600,000 km² of tropical forests in the Amazon.
3. The Committee of the Regions considers that if agriculture, fisheries and many industrial processes including the production of medicines are to be viable in the long term, emphasis must be placed on the ethical responsibility to preserve the biodiversity on which many communities depend and which, if lost, reduced or subjected to excessive pressure, leads to loss of economic opportunity.
4. The Committee of the Regions is convinced that protecting biodiversity means effectively protecting the quality of life, primarily at local level. Local and regional authorities are under strong pressure from public opinion, which is increasingly vocal in its concerns regarding shrinking biodiversity. Many people now measure quality of life not only in terms of economic and material well-being, but increasingly in terms of upholding a certain level of biological and environmental standards. These same standards are the focus of strong demands from civil society, as a result of burgeoning environmental and animal-rights movements. The holding of summits and meetings of world leaders in European cities is, in itself, having a growing political impact on governments and public order, as a result of the increasingly determined challenge to

existing policies and the process of globalisation.

5. While the concern to safeguard biodiversity is becoming ever more widespread, ecological and environmental movements are focusing their most vigorous campaigns on genetic manipulation or modification of certain crops.
6. The Committee of the Regions agrees on the need to pursue a more vigorous policy breaking the bounds of traditional forms of land conservation, with the aim of implementing conservation measures far beyond the current 10-20% of the world's surface area that could be designated as protected areas. To safeguard diversity today, action is needed to combat endocrine-disrupting and persistent organic pollutants, the proliferation of alien invasive species, and to assess the effects of introducing specific GMOs.

Action to highlight and promote the history and identity of communities living in rural areas and semi-natural rural agro-ecosystems - which act as effective natural reservoirs of biodiversity - could help to weave a new, integrated territorial fabric as part of a vision of tomorrow's Europe which is not geared exclusively to urban or industrial centres.

The outward signs of biodiversity and the associated areas should be considered as non-negotiable and fixed factors in European spatial management, in keeping with the approach of the document underpinning the various European policies: the European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP).

2. The Committee of the Regions' recommendations

1. The Committee of the Regions agrees with the European Commission's view that the action plans need to be monitored and their effectiveness assessed, and that "indicators" should be established for project implementation and sustainable use of policy instruments in implementing individual Community actions.
2. Although the European Commission, the European Environment Agency, the Member States and relevant international organisations have devoted considerable efforts to the issue, they have not yet come up with precise indicators for the action plans' implementation system. The Commission's report to the Helsinki summit does however provide a full picture of the state of progress of these activities. The Committee of the Regions stresses the need for the indicators to reflect local circumstances and, at the same time, to be comparable, taking due account of the on-going need for specific indicators for agro-ecosystems signalling the presence or absence of the area-wide, linear or isolated features which typify Europe's traditional farming landscapes. The presence of different livestock breeds and types of land-holding pattern should also be reflected in the choice of biodiversity indicators, in relation with the different spatial features that make up the ecological fabric of the EU's regions.
3. The Committee of the Regions therefore hopes that in preparing a framework to define the indicators, account will firstly be taken of the proposals for biodiversity indicators made by the Member States, who have long been engaged, alongside their regional and local authorities, in identifying criteria for selecting priority indicators. It also hopes that this will subsequently be fleshed out with the introduction of an integrated information exchange system.
4. Policy to protect the environment and preserve biodiversity in different types of

human activity and areas of intervention ties in closely with the individual actions promoted by local and regional authorities - either directly, or in cooperation with the broader and more complex initiatives undertaken by the Member States, the European Environment Agency or under international protocols.

5. In this respect, the Committee of the Regions hopes that the recent worldwide protocols and agreements on the environment represent more than a momentary ideological shift by individual national governments who wish to distinguish themselves from their predecessors, and represent a real commitment to protecting the greatest possible number of living animal and plant species, as this would undoubtedly have a positive impact on preserving biodiversity.
6. Furthermore, the compilation of guides to proper production in agriculture, industry and other sectors, and prior cost-benefit calculations of specific policies, should include assessments of the direct and indirect effects of such actions in terms of higher or lower levels of protection of biodiversity, avoiding the adoption of purely production-driven or economic parameters and assessing their direct and indirect environmental costs and benefits.
7. The Committee of the Regions believes the impact of man-made global climate change on natural and semi-natural systems must be monitored, together with its local economic implications (e.g. the link between snowfall levels and mountain tourism, variation in sea levels, fluctuations in water and drinking water resources, the emergence of new, climate-related illnesses, etc.).

Emissions of man-made greenhouse gases such as CO₂, CFCs and N₂O are affecting today's climate: how much these changes will make themselves felt, and where, remains a matter of controversy within the scientific community. The most expected and feared effects may be resumed as follows:

- rising sea levels;
- shifts in patterns of precipitation, possibly affecting natural vegetation, agro-systems and forests;
- accelerating loss of biodiversity;
- more frequent occurrence of extreme weather conditions;
- fluctuations in precipitation and temperature;
- changes in the size of areas under snow and glacier cover;
- changes in the size of areas under vegetation and types of cover;
- changes in the populations of invasive thermophilic species (insects, weeds etc.).

Against this backdrop, the identification of climate change indicators which can detect changes in the above-mentioned environments and the relevant biocoenoses are specially important in protecting biodiversity.

8. The Committee of the Regions notes the need to monitor the state of biodiversity and the critical factors presenting the greatest local threat (as is already being done in Switzerland and the Netherlands, where dedicated biodiversity monitoring networks have been set up). A monitoring system based on local structures, along agency lines, would allow conservation policies to be guided and adjusted at local level, while fitting them into the national and international legal framework.

In short, monitoring biodiversity at local level would help to:

- improve biodiversity-related knowledge;
- accurately identify critical situations and assess their seriousness;
- ascertain the exact relationship between sources of pressure and environmental indicators;
- establish practical foundations for local and regional spatial development modelling;
- provide technical and scientific back-up for decision-making processes and for national-level environmental planning;
- evaluate the results of natural heritage management policies, through the use of indicators;
- assess in economic terms the expected or actual results of specific environmental management measures;
- bring Member States into line with the European Union's biodiversity information standards (local Agenda 21).

9. Lastly, the Committee of the Regions believes that existing environmental data networks should be streamlined, and a "network of networks" set up along the lines of the European Environment Agency system. Environmental information is a key factor in managing biodiversity in practical terms, especially at local level. Effective coordination between regional environmental monitoring bodies and the national and European level is essential if the quality of the "information chain" is to be ensured.

Brussels, 15 November 2001

The President

The Secretary-General

of the

of the

Committee of the Regions

Committee of the Regions

Jos Chabert

Vincenzo Falcone

¹ OJ L 309 of 13.12.1993.

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