

## **EU Biodiversity Strategy and the European Natural Forest Heritage**

**Recommendations for consideration with the new EU Biodiversity Strategy to preserve EU's remaining old growth and primary forests and to avoid further loss of intact and climate crisis resilient forest cover.**

***Follow-up of the International Conference on Forests for Biodiversity and Climate in Brussels, February 4-5, 2020.***

### **Statement by EuroNatur Foundation:**

Natural forests have become extremely rare in Europe. They are an irreplaceable haven for rare and threatened biodiversity and they show a significantly higher degree of resilience against disturbances and stress due to the worsening climate crisis. Furthermore, natural forests play an important role in forest carbon capture and sequestration and are thus helpful in the efforts for climate security.

Less than 4% of the forests within the EU are in a close to nature status, more or less "undisturbed by man" (Forest Europe 2015). Unfortunately, the rest of Europe's forest cover is in a rather unnatural, young, immature and/or biodiversity degraded status.

However, the increasing demand for wood and wood biomass is progressively endangering these valuable ecosystems. At the same time, large areas of unnatural tree plantations and industrially used forests are increasingly breaking down due to heat and drought, insect infestation, forest fires and other factors. This implies that the preservation of all more or less intact natural forests is becoming even more important for maintaining the persistence of key ecosystem services such as water catchment area protection, flood or avalanche prevention, local climate regulation etc.

The protection status of the EU's natural (old growth and primary) forests is unsatisfying. Although large forest areas are included within Natura 2000 sites, the avoidance of degradation of forest ecosystems in favorable conservation status is not guaranteed due to implementation deficiencies and lack of appropriate funding of compensation of private and municipal forest owners.

All across the EU, interest groups are campaigning for intensified forest exploitation (e.g. for bioenergy) and opposing better protection of natural forests. As several statements at the International Conference on Forests for Biodiversity and Climate emphasized, current forest management practices are often presented as already sufficiently "sustainable", suggesting that no additional measures are needed to preserve or restore biodiversity in forests. Representatives of the forest sector even claimed that forests and their biodiversity would decline without management.

However, a huge number of scientific studies reveals just the opposite. While we speak, natural forests are vanishing, also in the EU. In particular in the Carpathians (e.g. Romania, Slovakia) and in Scandinavia natural forests are under massive threat by logging. This also involves numerous Natura 2000 sites. It is not helpful that the EU Habitats Directive does not explicitly distinguish between primary and secondary forests in terms of conservation objectives and measures.

In Romania, for instance, commercial logging of old growth and primary forests is omnipresent in most Natura 2000 sites. Strategic environmental assessments (of forest management plans) and appropriate assessments (of logging plans or projects) are either missing or done in a very bad manner. Habitat types and species are poorly mapped and researched. The situation suggests that provisions from both the Habitats and Birds Directives have been systematically disregarded or even ignored since the accession to the EU.

The comprehensive protection of all old growth and primary forest remains in the EU (non-intervention approach) needs to be the subject of all relevant future EU legal, political and strategic processes but also funding instruments. The protection of all natural forests of the EU has to be reflected therefore in the currently discussed EU Biodiversity Strategy and the EU Forest Strategy. Furthermore, funding instruments for compensating a non-intervention approach in private natural forests have to be planned in the framework of the MFF 2021-2027.

**EuroNatur Foundation suggests with regard to the natural forest heritage of the European Union the following measures:**

- In order to implement the commitments related to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD; Aichi Biodiversity Targets) all natural (old growth and primary) forests in the EU need to be protected strictly, permanently and comprehensively in all Member States.
- Furthermore, we strongly support a target of at least 10% strict protection of the marine and terrestrial ecosystems in the EU. This should include all primary and old growth forest remains as well as other ecologically mature forests that have the potential to rapidly develop towards near-natural conditions. In total, we suggest to put 10% of the EU's forest ecosystems under non-intervention management.
- In order to win forest owners as collaboration partners, appropriate funds are needed to compensate private and municipal property holders for loss of income from timber use. The ongoing discussion about the MFF 2021-2027 should be used to earmark appropriate funding.
- In a first step, all still intact natural (old growth and primary) forests in Natura 2000 sites should be identified, mapped and turned into non-intervention zones. State-owned natural forests should be given priority, but also privately owned natural forests should be addressed.
- In order to speed up this process all forests with an average age of more than 120 years should be assessed regarding their naturalness and intactness.
- Average age data of forest parcels from forest inventories and forest management plans should be made available for the public as these are relevant environmental information.
- National forest and environmental authorities need to be informed and educated about proper implementation of Natura 2000 in the forest sector.
- Old growth and primary forests outside existing Natura 2000 sites should be included in new or enlarged Natura 2000 sites.

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