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The New EU Biodiversity Strategy – Reason for Hope?

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On May 20th, the European Commission (EC) published its long-awaited communication “[EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 - Bringing nature back into our lives](#)”, which lays out the EC’s political objectives for biodiversity conservation and restoration in the European Union for the next decade. Overall, the strategy is extraordinarily comprehensive and ambitious. It includes, among others,

- A new 30% target for protected areas on land (currently 26%) and at sea (currently 11%),
- A 10% target for strictly protected areas (although the strategy provides a very rough definition for protected areas and does not refer to the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) categories),
- A nature restoration plan for degraded and carbon-rich ecosystems and water courses,
- The protection of all remaining EU primary and old-growth forests and a roadmap for planting 3 billion trees,
- A 50% reduction target for pesticide use and nutrient loss,
- The aim to dedicate at least 10% of the EU’s agricultural area to high-diversity landscape features and 25% to organic farming,
- Support for urban greening plans,
- The conceptual basis for a strengthened governance and monitoring framework, and
- A global biodiversity agenda.

These objectives represent welcome political support for the European land conservation community. In particular, the protected area, landscape feature and restoration targets offer exciting opportunities for creative and collaborative conservation approaches across sectors.

As the strategy is not legally binding and needs to be operationalized through legislation, significant political efforts still lie ahead. Not only will the EC need the support of the European Parliament and the 27 EU member states when it translates the strategy’s targets into new legislation, it will also have to navigate contrasting demands and priorities from different stakeholder groups. While the conservation community overall was very pleased with the strategy, industrial farming and forestry lobbies across Europe rejected its targets, fearing that they place too high a burden on land users.

Going forward, several critical EU policies will need to closely align with the Biodiversity Strategy in order for it to be successfully executed. Several important legislative acts, such as the “multi-annual financial framework” (MFR - the EU’s budget for the next seven years), the Covid-19 recovery plan, and the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP - the EU’s biggest subsidy program), are being negotiated at this moment, and drafts of the MFR and the CAP have shown little sign of adequately reflecting the Biodiversity Strategy, e.g. by securing sufficient funding for biodiversity conservation or by making agricultural subsidies conditional to effective farm-level conservation measures.

Without drastic changes to these drafts in the next months, the EU’s budget and its funding programs may run the risk of contradicting key EU biodiversity targets. It is to be hoped that Germany will use its mandate as the moderator in the negotiations during its EU presidency in the second half of 2020 to reconcile the Biodiversity Strategy with other EU policies and its budget.

While open questions remain about its implementation, the EU's new Biodiversity Strategy is a welcome early sign that the EC is ready to lead the way to an ambitious new global framework for post-2020 at the upcoming 15th Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity, and gives European land conservationists much to work with to advance nature conservation across the continent.

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