The Habitats Directive

The principles of the European Community’s environmental policy, covered in Articles 130 R, S, T of the Treaty of the European Economic Community, set forth the need to conserve, protect and improve the quality of the environment, to protect human health, to ensure the prudent and rational utilization of natural resources and to promote measures at an international level to cope with regional or global environmental problems. The objective is to achieve a level of protection based on preventive action and the correction of environmental damages, preferably at their source.

Based on these principles and the international commitments that it has made, the European Union has developed a broad legislative framework on the environment that is integrated in the different areas of its policies and those of its Member States. These include the Convention on Biological Diversity, the Framework Convention on Climate Change, the Convention to Combat Desertification, the Millennium Development Goals, the EU Sustainable Development Strategy, the EU Biodiversity Strategy, and the creation of the European Environment Agency (EEA).

Two of the key protective measures adopted are Directive 2009/147/EC on the conservation of wild birds and Council Directive 92/43/ECC on the conservation of natural habitats and of wild fauna and flora, also known as the Habitats Directive, in which maintaining biodiversity while also taking into consideration economic, social, cultural, regional and local requirements is seen as an essential objective of general interest, given that, in Europe as a whole, natural and semi-natural habitats are continuing to deteriorate and an increasing number of wild species are seriously threatened, affecting future opportunities and prosperity within the Community.

Natura 2000

To guarantee the restoration, survival and maintenance of natural habitats and species of Community interest in a favourable state of conservation in the long term, over the last 20 years special conservation areas have been designated, creating a transnational environmental network known as the Natura 2000 Network. This covers protected areas such as Special Protection Areas for Birds, Sites of Community Importance and Special Areas of Conservation which address the need to promote land management and development policies and the management of elements of the landscape that have key importance for wild fauna and flora, including culture and agro-biodiversity. This last statement represents a more than acceptable definition of what we would consider as a monumental tree.

Twenty years after the Habitats Directive was enacted, the results can be regarded as favourable in terms of the diversity and surface area of habitats and species protected by the Natura 2000 Network and advances in knowledge of biodiversity. However, in spite of all these actions and investments, the importance of biodiversity for the future well-being of society,
the solid economic arguments in favour of conservation and the measures taken have not been enough to counteract the loss of biodiversity. As shown in reports and assessments by the European Environment Agency, there is still a constant downward trend: important ecosystems are still in danger; the situation of populations is heterogeneous as a whole, some of them are starting to recover but others are continuing to decline alarmingly, and this decline also affects other species which were previously common. In this respect, it should be added that there are many biological groups, habitats and species for which information on their stock, distribution and state of conservation is still partial, incomplete and biased. Only 17% of habitats and species and 11% of key ecosystems protected by European legislation are in a favourable state of conservation.

The objectives set by the EU to stop the loss of biodiversity in the 2001-2010 period have not been reached. Continuous and growing pressure associated with land-use changes, overexploitation of biodiversity and its components, the spread of alien invasive species, pollution and climate change are some of the structural causes. Other barriers to conservation are population growth, insufficient social awareness about the consequences of biodiversity loss, and the fact that the economic value of biodiversity is not reflected in decision-making processes. Sociological studies have indicated that 85% of the population is unaware of the existence and significance of the Natura 2000 Network, which translates into indifference, if not actual confrontation, limiting the progress of the EU’s biodiversity objectives.

There is an urgent need to put a priority on better informing the European people about the value of biodiversity, the European people about the value of the Natura 2000 Network, highlighting its importance to quality and life and the European people about the value of the Natura 2000 Network, which translates into indifference, if not actual confrontation, limiting the progress of the EU’s biodiversity objectives. Sociological studies have indicated that 85% of the population is unaware of the existence and significance of the Natura 2000 Network, which translates into indifference, if not actual confrontation, limiting the progress of the EU’s biodiversity objectives.

The framework of action in the European Union over the next ten years comprises a series of interdependent strategic objectives which are reinforced by those designed to stop the loss of biodiversity, most notably: protecting and restoring biodiversity and ecosystem services, accelerating the implementation of directives and increasing assessments to improve states of conservation, helping to make growth objectives more sustainable, fighting against climate change, promoting economic, regional and social cohesion, protecting the cultural heritage of the European Union and guaranteeing the better functional connectivity of ecosystems both inside and outside the Natura 2000 Network. In this way, monumental trees, and their legacy, will come to be recognised as an essential part of European Natural and Cultural Heritage.

Monumental Trees and Agriculture

Some 30% of European territory is either moderately or very fragmented, which makes it essential to incorporate green infrastructures in land management in order to help maintain and improve ecosystem services. This new strategy is extremely beneficial with regard to monumental trees, mature forests, centuries-old agricultural trees and crops and the most emblematic tree landscapes in the European Union, which are transformed into essential pillars for the maintenance and improvement of the Natura 2000 Network. The inclusion of sustainable agriculture and forestry in the EU’s Biodiversity Strategy represents a significant addition for the 2013-2020 period. It should be borne in mind that the land earmarked for these activities represents 72% of European Union territory, creating new ways of integrating the sustainable use of biodiversity in development, and its incorporation in the execution of other key policies and sectors. In this way, the financial instruments of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) and the forthcoming Multiannual Financial Framework offer opportunities for improving synergies and optimizing consistency between the objectives to protect biodiversity and rural development.

This recognises the value of and protects centuries-old fruit trees and traditional crops such as olives, chestnuts, carobs, apples, pears and citrus fruit, amongst many other species, and a host of varieties and dehesas, mature trees that form part of hedgerows, the edges of crop fields and along river banks that have been used traditionally for wood and food for livestock. It also recognises their...
extraordinary role in safeguarding the biodiversity of species of wild fauna and flora and the microhabitats they generate. It will also put an end to the vulnerability and despoliation that have been suffered over the last decades by centuries-old olive trees torn up by the roots for landscape gardening and the indiscriminate felling of old ash, walnut, poplar and oak trees to use their noble wood. All these trees will continue to play a role in local economies, providing resources and exclusive services of great value to the whole region. According to the FAO, since 1990 some 75% of the genetic diversity of global crops has been lost.

Monumental Trees and Forestry

The objective of implementing Forest Management Plans, in accordance with Sustainable Forestry Management, in all publicly-owned countryside areas and in privately-owned forestry holdings by 2020 will be very helpful in improving the state of conservation of the habitats and species that depend on forestry or are affected in the provision of ecosystem services. Incorporated into Rural Development Plans, they will receive funding from the EU Rural Development Programme. Solitary trees and groves, riparian woodlands and forests in general which include both mature and senescent trees will become priorities for conservation through their intrinsic value, the rich diversity of habitats they engender and the many organisms that depend on them for life. This implies a qualitative leap of habitats they engender and the many organisms that depend on them for life. This implies a qualitative leap.

Achieving the biodiversity conservation objectives requires the full implementation of current European environmental legislation as well as decisive local, regional and national action that is capable of taking advantage of new opportunities in which everyone should play an active role, including both civil society and the economic sectors involved: agriculture, forestry, the chemicals industry, mining and energy, the financial sector, research, the food industry and tourism.

To do so, it will be necessary to mobilize European financial resources and use them efficiently. These include the Structural Funds and Cohesion Fund, LIFE+, the Framework Programme for Research and the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) and the Structural Funds and Cohesion Fund, LIFE+, the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) of the European Union, in line with the 2020 Biodiversity Strategy and framework directives on priority action for the Natura 2000 Network, should incorporate as a strategic priority the conservation of monumental trees, mature forests, centuries-old agricultural trees and the most emblematic treed landscapes of Europe. It is essential to provide them with legal protection and to protect and include them in Community strategies, which calls for new efforts to improve citizen participation and governance. The oldest trees on this, the Old Continent, still enjoy tremendous appreciation and recognition at a local level and can once again play an essential role in our future and our prosperity.

ecosystem services of agricultural and forestry ecosystems, incentivizing investments in green infrastructure and biodiversity offsetting, amongst others. Every country in the European Union, in line with the 2020 Biodiversity Strategy and framework directives on priority action for the Natura 2000 Network, should incorporate as a strategic priority the conservation of monumental trees, mature forests, centuries-old agricultural trees and the most emblematic treed landscapes of Europe. It is essential to provide them with legal protection and to protect and include them in Community strategies, which calls for new efforts to improve citizen participation and governance. The oldest trees on this, the Old Continent, still enjoy tremendous appreciation and recognition at a local level and can once again play an essential role in our future and our prosperity.

Invasive species

Date palms attacked by the pest of red palm weevil (Rhynchophorus ferrugineus), Quart de les Valls - Spain.