

SPEECH/08/82

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## **EU Nature Policy – Challenges in a changing world**

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Seul le texte prononcé fait foi  
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort

Launch of BirdLife International "A climatic Atlas of European Breeding Birds" - Berlaymont Building, Brussels

**Thursday, 14 February 2008**

Ladies and gentlemen,

2007 has been a remarkable year with environmental issues rising to the top of the EU's political agenda. Climate has grabbed the headlines but the loss of biodiversity is a global threat that is just as serious and needs to be faced with the same urgency. In one crucial way it is more worrying since there is no way to reverse extinction.

This evening I would like to look at three of the key challenges facing EU nature policy.

The first is the need for the conservation of biodiversity to move to the top of the political agenda. A recent poll for the Commission on public attitudes to biodiversity confirmed that people care passionately about this issue with 88% of the Europeans recognising that the loss of biodiversity is a serious problem. As the global rate of extinction is at least 100 times the natural level, these concerns are very well grounded.

Given the strength of public support and the scientific reality it is surprising that protecting biodiversity is not higher on the political agenda. This situation needs to change because one of the lessons from climate change is that the real breakthroughs come when the issue moves onto the agenda of Prime Ministers and Presidents.

A second message is that our existing policy works – but needs to work better.

The NATURA 2000 network of protected areas covers almost 20% of the EU territory and is the cornerstone of our policy to protect Europe's biodiversity. It sets a model for nature protection – science-driven, legally enforceable and based upon ecosystems as the basic unit. In August last year an analysis in the eminent journal SCIENCE by BirdLife International experts confirmed that the Birds Directive has made a significant and measurable difference in reversing the decline of our most threatened bird species. Natura 2000 was central to this success.

But it is also a very flexible system and I would like to correct one of the common misconceptions about NATURA 2000 – which is that once a site is designated all economic activities have to stop. This is simply not true and it is unfortunate that this myth continues. The NATURA network consists of living landscapes in which farming, fishing, forestry and hunting can continue. Even major development projects can be carried out once certain safeguards have been respected. The experience from most Member States is that it is perfectly possible to use the flexibility provided in the nature directives in an intelligent manner and find a good balance between biodiversity protection and economic needs.

Thirdly, we need to step up our implementation efforts to meet the EU's 2010 target of halting the loss of biodiversity in Europe and to start preparing for a truly sustainable future.

One of the key emerging challenges highlighted in the EU Biodiversity Action Plan is to minimise the impacts from climate change on biodiversity. The new BirdLife publication on the 'Climatic Atlas of European Breeding Birds' is an important landmark in our understanding of how climate change is likely to impact on European nature. It predicts large-scale changes in the distribution of our birdlife, with an overall loss of suitable space for many different species.

To minimise the disruption of nature we need to urgently build on existing initiatives to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The 16<sup>th</sup> February is the third anniversary of the entry into effect of the Kyoto Protocol. A lot is being achieved under Kyoto but we need to push forward to achieve even more ambitious targets as soon as possible.

Healthy ecosystems are essential in any strategy for climate change adaptation. Natura 2000 will be a central element to mitigate and adapt to climate change. One can say that conservation of biodiversity is our life insurance for the future. The current threats of habitat loss and fragmentation and pollution need to be addressed. There is not enough appreciation of the essential goods and services provided by ecosystems or of the economic consequences of failing to protect these vital natural assets. We have started to address this concern and it needs to become more central to our policies.

And it should go without saying that our climate mitigation policies should not come at the expense of biodiversity. We have very important targets to achieve for renewable energies but we need to be very careful about how and where they are developed. We need to make sure that when promoting biofuels we are not encouraging the destruction of habitats. Being strategic in our planning and getting this balance right will be key challenges of the coming years.

To conclude, I would simply like to congratulate Birdlife for taking the initiative to hold this event. I can think of no greater challenge than protecting Europe's nature for future generations. And by letting a wider audience understand the issues involved I am sure that it will come to be seen by businesses, by citizens and by politicians as one of the defining policy issues for the rest of this century.

Thank you – and I hope you enjoy the rest of the evening.