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LIFE-Nature along European coasts

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Abstract

Since 1992, LIFE-Nature has been funding nature conservation projects across the European territory of the EC Member states. The current article briefly explains the rationale of the LIFE-Nature programme, its relationship to the implementation of the Birds and Habitats Directives and provides an overview of the types of actions funded. Given that LIFE-Nature is a limited fund compared to the needs of the Natura 2000 network, funding is only available for the most relevant actions at the European level.

Keywords: LIFE-Nature; Natura 2000; EU Birds Directive; EU Habitats Directive.

LIFE: an overview

LIFE stands for 'L'Instrument Financier pour l'Environnement', the environmental funding programme of the European Commission, DG Environment. The objective of LIFE, as defined in EC Regulation No. 1655/2000, is 'the implementation, updating and development of Community environment policy and of environmental legislation, in particular as regards the integration of the environment into other policies, and to sustainable development in the Community'.

LIFE III, the third LIFE programme covering the period 2000-2004 (Regulation (EC) No. 1655/2000), has recently been extended by two further years, until 31 December 2006 (Regulation (EC) No 1682/2004). LIFE III comprises three branches: LIFE-Nature, LIFE-Environment and LIFE-Third Countries. Between 1992 and 2004, the LIFE programme has provided co-funding of € 1.3 billion towards a total of almost 2500 projects worth € 3.6 billion.

Under LIFE III, 47% of the LIFE budget is for LIFE-Environment, 47% for LIFE-Nature and the remaining 6% to LIFE-Third Countries. For each of the three sub-programmes, separate calls for proposals, application guidelines, proposal form and selection criteria are published on an annual basis. Projects are selected on the basis of eligibility, selection and award criteria, the latter being coherence and quality, environmental benefit, socio-economic and operation context, as well as Community interest criteria. Projects are chosen purely on their quality and their potential

environmental value, and not according to national quotas. This ensures that only the very best proposals are selected for funding.

LIFE-projects are required (1) to be of Community interest by making a significant contribution to the above objectives, (2) to be carried out by technically and financially sound participants and (3) to be feasible in terms of technical proposals, timetable, budget and value for money. Priority is given to projects based on a multinational approach, when this was likely to have more effective results in terms of achievement of objectives taking into account feasibility and costs.

LIFE-Nature

Since 1992, the LIFE-Nature programme has been providing financial assistance to nature conservation projects throughout the European territory of the EU member states. The specific objective of LIFE-Nature is to contribute to the implementation of Council Directive 79/409/EEC of 2 April 1979 on the conservation of wild birds (the 'Birds Directive'), Council Directive 92/43/EEC of 21 May 1992 on the conservation of natural habitats and of wild fauna and flora (the 'Habitats Directive') and, in particular, the Natura 2000 European network established by the latter Directive.

Individual LIFE-Nature projects typically last 2-4 years. Applicants are primarily public nature conservation authorities (73%) and nature conservation NGOs (25%). Fewer projects are run by scientific institutions and other private bodies (2%).

LIFE-Nature funding is primarily used to finance actions maintaining or restoring the favourable conservation status of natural habitats and/or natural species populations. Financial assistance to projects is generally restricted to a 50% co-financing. Up to 75% of EC co-funding may however be granted to projects focussing on priority natural habitats or priority species within the meaning of Directive 92/43/EEC, or bird species considered as 'priority for funding under LIFE-Nature' by the ORNIS committee (of EU Member State delegates, set up pursuant to Article 16 of Directive 79/409/EEC).

The European Commission has further specified that LIFE-Nature projects should make a significant and tangible contribution to the conservation of habitats and species of European importance. Projects should focus on concrete conservation actions rather than desk studies, theoretical plans or research activities. Emergency actions, innovative actions, best-practice demonstration measures and actions based on sound scientific knowledge are considered a priority for funding. Projects should have a sustainable positive impact on the conservation status of the habitat types and species populations targeted. Obligatory compensation actions, related to the mitigation of negative impacts of plans and projects on Natura 2000 sites, are not eligible for LIFE-Nature funding.

Prior information to and participation of the local populations and strategic stakeholders is centrally important for a successful project implementation. The promotion of partnership, experience-sharing and dissemination of best practices are thus often an integral part of each project. Lessons learned during the project implementation should

be disseminated through the best available means, including internet-based communication and publicly available layman's reports.

Preparing the Natura 2000 network

Since its start, LIFE-Nature has been designed as a support fund for the Birds and Habitats Directives (European Commission, 2003a).

In terms of providing assistance for the preparation of Natura 2000, LIFE-Nature has co-financed national or regional habitats and species inventories for Natura 2000 in Ireland, Spain, Italy, Greece and Portugal. Support has also been provided for the elaboration of legal and management planning guidelines, notably in Greece, France and the United Kingdom. A project in Germany developed guidelines for a national monitoring scheme.

In addition to the above direct support, LIFE-Nature has also indirectly fostered the set-up of Natura 2000: since 1996, while Member States have been under increasing pressure from the European Commission to set-up their Natura 2000 network, this was paralleled, under LIFE-Nature, by a strengthened conditionality for prior Natura 2000 site designation of the project area. Thus, in order to be eligible for LIFE-Nature funding, any site-related project after 1995 required a prior Natura 2000 designation. The condition for prior designation has been a strong incentive for the designation of additional Natura 2000 sites, particularly in those Member States and/or regions where designation has initially been limited to residual areas of the highest conservation value (which generally do not require any LIFE-Nature support).

Types of actions financed under LIFE-Nature

LIFE-Nature funding concentrates on those Natura 2000 sites that are not yet in an optimal state of conservation. Projects contribute, either directly or indirectly, to an improvement of the conservation status of the species and habitats of European importance. For all projects financed, detailed information is available in the electronic LIFE database: <http://europa.eu.int/comm/environment/life/project/Projects/index.cfm>

Rather than repeating what can be found in the detailed database information, I will only mention here those types of actions that have most often been financed on coastal sites:

Development of site management plans

Almost 60% of all site-related LIFE-Nature projects have involved a planning procedure that can be called a management plan in the widest sense. In addition to the detailed technical plans for site restoration and management prescriptions of the recurring site management, the preparation of management plans typically entails actions such as species and habitats inventories and mapping, preliminary socio-economic assessments and public consultation procedures.

However, management plan preparation actions are only eligible for LIFE-Nature funding, as long as they are part of a bigger project that is primarily focussing on concrete measures. The eligibility of management planning costs is also conditional to an appropriate approval of the plan by the relevant authority, at the latest by project end.

Land purchase and/or long-term appropriation of land use rights

Where land ownership structure and use rights on coastal Natura 2000 sites are contrary to the long-term conservation objectives of these sites, land purchase is an indispensable tool to dedicate the land use durably to habitats and species conservation. This is notably the case if intensive agricultural land uses are to be discontinued, in order to restore species-rich natural habitats, such as coastal salt marshes, heath lands, etc. More than 25% of the LIFE-Nature funding has been used for purchasing land.

Because of the political sensitivity that a transfer of land title using Community financial support entails, the Commission has defined a set of conditions, under which land purchase can be eligible. These include restrictions regarding the purchase of land outside Natura 2000 areas, the prohibition of the purchase of land already under public ownership, and the prohibition of the purchase of land not required for active restoration/management measures. Land purchase under LIFE-Nature must thus clearly be justified by the needs for an active and positive site management, which goes beyond the status quo of conservation status. Moreover, there are specific conditions regarding the purchase price and the final ownership of the land. For each land section purchased, a legal clause has to be inserted either in the legal act or in the public land register, specifying the exclusive nature conservation purpose of the purchase.

Hydrological engineering works

On coastal sites of the Member States bordering the Atlantic, the North and the Baltic Sea LIFE-Nature has often been used for the co-financing of large-scale hydrological restoration projects (together with land purchase). Typical actions include the removal or the relocation of man-made structures and dykes along shores and river mouths, the dredging of silted water bodies and the construction of dams and other hydrological infrastructure to increase the water table in dune wetlands, to restore salt marshes, etc. Project costs do not only cover the actual work, but may also include technical planning, permit procedures, and other preparatory steps.

Restoration and maintenance of open habitat types

The **restoration** of open habitat types is one of the most recurring themes in coastal LIFE-Nature projects targeting coastal dunes, meadows and heaths. A variety of techniques, both manual and mechanical, are used to restore open habitat types and prepare their future maintenance management. These include the clearance of overgrowth and scrubs, the removal of non-native forestry plantations and the initial mowing or flailing of abandoned grassland sites. In southern Europe, LIFE-Nature has frequently been financing the removal of invasive plant species on coastal sites (European Commission, 2004a).

Investments in maintenance equipment and infrastructure for the long-term management of open habitat types are also frequently funded under LIFE-Nature. Where mowing or turf cutting are prescribed, this may primarily involve the purchase of machinery. If the follow-up management is done through grazing, investment for the set-up of cattle fences, troughs, shelters, cattle stops and corrals are most often considered for LIFE-Nature funding. The purchase of grazing animals may also be considered eligible, provided that (1) the sites to be grazed are currently not eligible for Community funding under the Common Agricultural Policy, (2) the long-term maintenance of the animals is financially secured and (3) there is a long term guarantee for maintaining the grazing animals on the site after the project period.

Unless carried out on an experimental scale, and for demonstration purposes only, LIFE-Nature does not finance recurring **maintenance** actions such as grazing, mowing, burning etc., for two reasons. Firstly, the annual maintenance management of Natura 2000 sites often benefits from agri-environmental funding support under the Rural Development Regulation. LIFE-Nature is relatively limited in financial terms, and should not finance actions that could also be financed through other, better-endowed Community programmes. Secondly, LIFE-Nature projects have a limited duration, typically up to 4 or 5 years. It would be unsustainable to finance maintenance work during a limited period of time, if the follow-up financing for annual compensation-for-losses or active-management-payments after the project end would not be secured.

On the site demonstration level, LIFE-Nature has provided many good examples on how nature conservation can be usefully combined with recurring agricultural land uses, and has substantially contributed to the promotion and adaptation of existing agri-environmental schemes to the purposes of nature development (European Commission, 2003b).

Visitor control and guidance, public awareness for Natura 2000

Infrastructure cost for the guidance of visitors through Natura 2000 sites are eligible for LIFE-Nature funding, provided that the infrastructure is primarily aimed at mitigating the negative impact of an uncontrolled access to the site. This may include the financing of board-walks and paths through the Natura 2000 site, fences and barriers, information panels etc. Large-scale infrastructure aimed at recreational or tourism purposes, including the set-up of large visitor centres, are not eligible for LIFE-Nature funding.

LIFE-Nature projects are required to inform the public and relevant stakeholders about the objectives of the projects, and their role for the implementation of the Natura 2000 network. Good-practice guidelines on how to communicate Natura 2000 in LIFE projects have recently been published (European Commission, 2004b).

Monitoring and dissemination of project results

The monitoring of the impact of the concrete conservation measures is an obligatory duty for each LIFE-Nature project. Ideally, this entails an inventory of the situation before and after the work, and control sites to be monitored simultaneously with non-

intervention sites. The findings of the monitoring study should, as far as possible, be reported to the public in a layman's report, which is to be published at the end of the project on the internet. International networking and exchange of know-how amongst LIFE-nature projects is also strongly encouraged by the Commission.

Conclusions

On many coastal sites, LIFE-Nature has contributed to the set-up and implementation of Natura 2000, through preparatory inventories for site designation, management planning, land purchase, concrete site restoration, investment in the long-term management and dissemination of best-practice management measures. On the level of individual sites, the project based approach generates management capacity and know-how that remains available after the project. LIFE contributes to the creation of new partnership structures, both at the site level and through the exchange of knowledge at the supra-site level.

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