Natural capital

EU protected habitats

Indicator	EU indicator past trend	Selected objective to be met by 2020	Indicative outlook of the EU meeting the selected objective by 2020
Habitats of European interest	▲	Ensure that 34 % of habitat assessments under the Habitats Directive are in a favourable or improved conservation status — EU Biodiversity Strategy	●
The EU has shown limited progress in improving the conservation status of EU protected habitats and the pressures on these habitats remain. It is therefore unlikely that the 2020 target will be met			

The Seventh Environment Action Programme (7th EAP) includes the objective of halting loss of biodiversity and degradation of ecosystem services by 2020. The Habitats Directive is one of the cornerstones in EU biodiversity legislation and aims to preserve and restore EU protected habitats. According to the Biodiversity Strategy to 2020, 34 % of habitat assessments should be in a favourable or improved conservation status by 2020. The latest assessment from 2007–2012 shows that only 16 % of the assessments of habitats have a 'favourable' conservation status and only 4 % of assessments have shown an improvement compared with 2001–2006. Habitats continue to face pressures from, for example, land use change and pollution. In addition, habitat status often takes a long time to improve when conservation and other measures are first implemented. It is therefore unlikely that the 2020 target will be met.

For further information on the scoreboard methodology please see Box I.1 in the EEA Environmental indicator report 2016

Setting the Scene

The 7th EAP (EU, 2013) includes the objective of halting loss of biodiversity and degradation of ecosystem services by 2020. Preserving and restoring the EU's protected habitats is a key element in achieving this. An EU-wide network of protected habitats in good conservation status is crucial, not only for the intrinsic value of these habitats and the species that depend on them, but also because protecting them is important to ensure provision of a wide range of ecosystem services—natural flood protection, air and water quality regulation, pollination, recreation, etc.—for the benefit of EU citizens.

Policy targets and progress

In line with the 7th EAP objective, the overall aim of the Biodiversity Strategy to 2020 (EC, 2011) is to halt loss of biodiversity and degradation of ecosystem services in the EU by 2020. The Habitats Directive (EU, 1992) aims to ensure that the habitats of European interest are in a good status. Target 1 of the Biodiversity Strategy to 2020 sets out the specific goal that, by 2020, 100 % more habitat assessments under the Habitats Directive show a favourable or improved conservation status. In practice this means that, by 2020, 34 % of habitats assessments should have either reached a favourable conservation status or shown a significant improvement in their status.

Overall results for conservation status and trends reported under the Habitats Directive for the 2007–2012 period show that only 16.4 % of habitat assessments have a favourable conservation status, while 77 % are unfavourable. Of the unfavourable assessments, only 4.4 % have improving trends, 33 % are stable and 30 % show ongoing deterioration. Consequently, only around 21 % of habitat assessments have reached the target condition, which is still some way short of the 2020 target of 34 % (EC, 2015; EEA, 2015a). For habitats associated with agricultural ecosystems (grassland and cropland), 39 % of assessments showed deterioration compared with the previous reporting period (EC, 2015).

Looking at conservation status by main habitat group (see Figure 1), favourable conservation status is lowest for dune habitats and highest for rocky habitats (mostly in high mountain areas and away from human activities). For conservation status trends, 'unfavourable and deteriorating' is particularly high for bogs, mires and fens, but also for grasslands. Marine habitats assessments also give rise for concern: only 9 % were in a favourable conservation status, 66 % were considered to be in unfavourable status and 25 % were categorised as having 'unknown' status. However, it should be noted that the number of marine habitats covered under this Directive is very low.

Figure 1. Conservation status and trends of habitats assessed under the Habitats Directive (2007-2012), EU
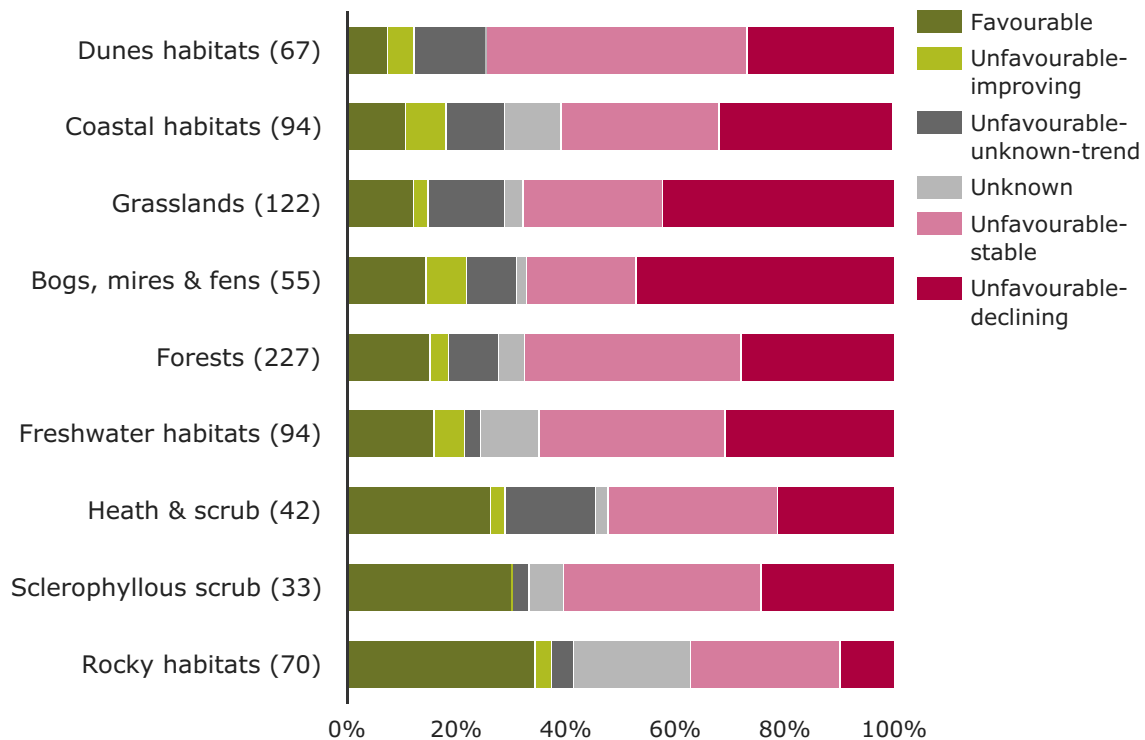
Note: The number of assessments is indicated in parentheses. The total number of assessments is 804.
Data sources:

a. DG ENV. Conservation status of habitat types and species (Article 17, Habitats Directive 92/43/EEC)
b. EEA. Conservation status of habitat types and species (Article 17, Habitats Directive 92/43/EEC)
c. EEA – Indicator SEBI005

Overall, the conservation status of EU protected habitats has not improved, and habitats of European interest show a worse conservation status and trend than species of European interest.

Several factors contribute to this. Firstly, habitat restoration can often take a long time to get from the initial implementation of measures to the achievement of tangible improvement in conservation status. A key component in the implementation of the Habitats and Birds Directives is the Natura 2000 network, an EU-wide network of nature conservation areas. The terrestrial Natura 2000 network designation is now considered largely complete (18 % of EU land). The coverage of protected marine areas has increased to 6 % but still requires substantial additional effort. The effective management and restoration of Natura 2000 sites is central to improving the conservation status of habitats. In 2012, however, only 58 % of Natura 2000 sites

had management plans, or had such plans in development (EEA, 2015a). Similarly, other measures that can benefit conservation status are still being implemented across the EU, e.g. policy measures anticipated under the Birds and Habitats Directives, the Common Agricultural Policy reform and the increased integration of biodiversity objectives in the EU's financial instruments.

Finally, EU terrestrial habitats continue to be subject to many pressures, including agricultural practices such as modification of cultivation techniques, overgrazing, abandonment of pastoral systems, and the use of fertilisers and pesticides, as well as human-induced modifications of natural conditions (mostly related to hydrological changes). For marine habitats, the main reported pressure and threat is pollution. Many of these threats and pressures arise from a wide range of sectors and policies (including agriculture, fisheries, forestry and transport) and are expected to be ongoing. Consequently, the fate of European biodiversity is closely intertwined with developments in these areas. The adequate integration of biodiversity considerations into certain economic sectors and regional policies remains critical, therefore, in attempting to reduce the pressures on biodiversity (EEA, 2015b).

Given the limited progress in improving the conservation status of EU protected habitats and the ongoing cumulative pressures on these habitats, it is very unlikely that the 2020 target for conservation status of habitats will be met.

Country level information

At the level of EU Member States, the majority of assessments indicate a low proportion of habitats in a favourable condition, with notable exceptions—Cyprus, Estonia, Malta, Romania and Slovenia—reporting more than 40 % of habitat assessments as 'favourable'. The countries reporting the most habitat assessments with 'unfavourable' status are all in northern Europe—Belgium, Denmark, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom (see Figure 2). This pattern can probably be attributed mainly to the relatively intensive agriculture practised in these Member States. As for the conservation status trends within the reporting period (2007–2012), there are overall more declining than improving habitat assessments.

Figure 2. Conservation status and trends of habitats assessed under the Habitats Directive (2007-2012), by country
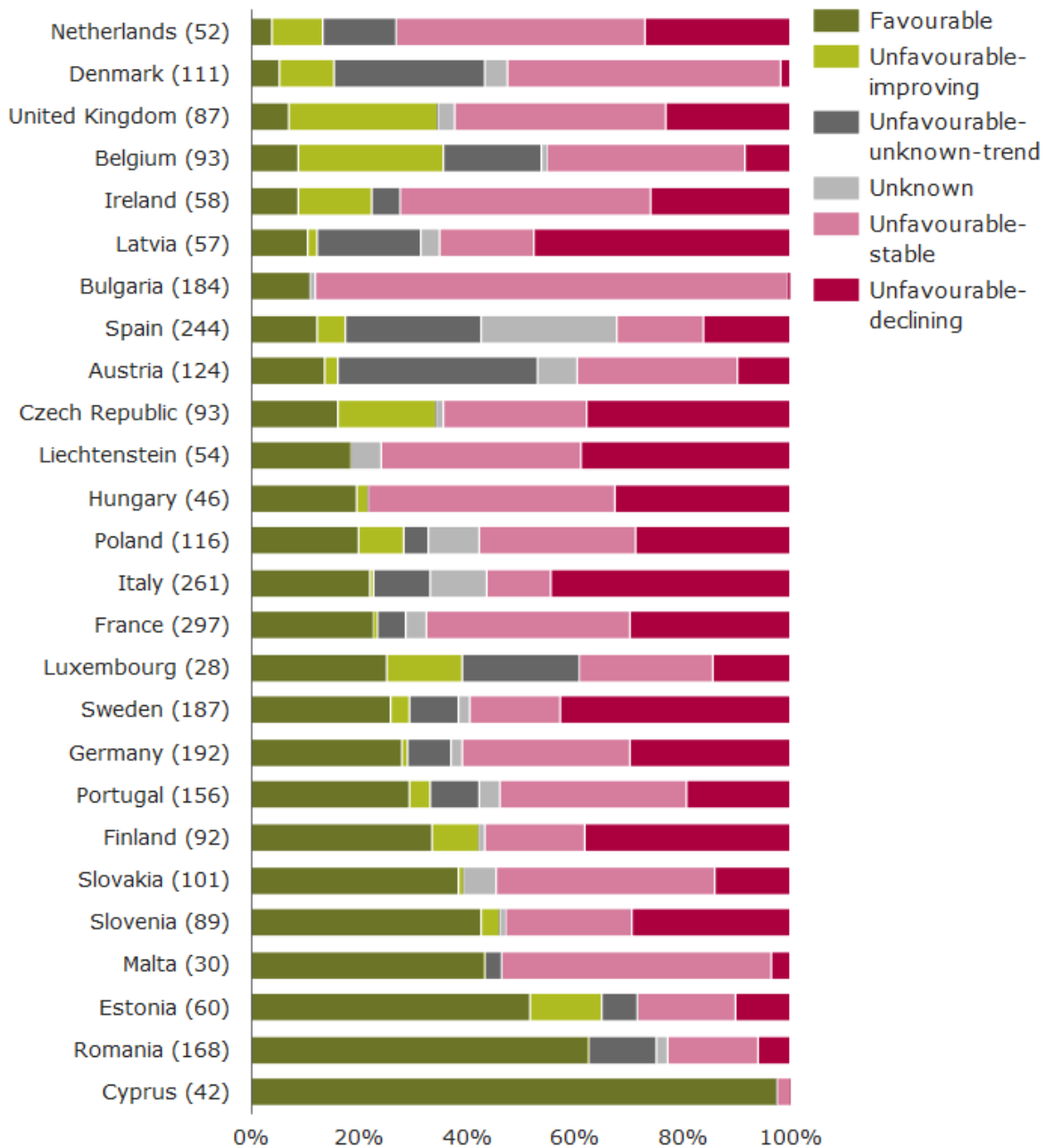
Outlook beyond 2020

Achieving favourable conservation status for EU protected habitats in the longer term is challenging. This is due to the expected continuation of many environmental pressures, with some pressures such as climate change set to increase, and to the time lag between the implementation of restoration measures and the desired outcomes in terms of habitat conservation status. Marine habitats are especially challenging because of their currently poor status, and a substantial increase in the network of protected marine areas still needs to be implemented.

About the indicator

The indicator covers habitats that are considered to be of European interest (listed in Annex I of the Habitats Directive). The Habitats Directive protects 233 rare and characteristic natural and semi-natural habitat types (e.g. types of grasslands, wetlands, dunes) within the territory of the EU. Their conservation status is assessed by all EU Member States every 6 years, and these assessments and other data from the Member States are subsequently used to make EU-level assessments. There have been two reporting rounds so far (2000–2006 and 2007–2012).

The indicator measures conservation status for habitat types in terms of 'favourable', 'unfavourable–inadequate', 'unfavourable–bad' and 'unknown'. Furthermore, the indicator measures trends for assessments with unfavourable conservation status: 'unfavourable–improving', 'unfavourable stable', 'unfavourable–deteriorating', 'unfavourable–unknown'. The assessments are based on four parameters: (1) trends and status of range; (2) trends and status of the area; (3) structure and function including typical species; and (4) future prospects.

Footnotes and references

EC, 2011, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions 'Our life insurance, our natural capital: an EU biodiversity strategy to 2020' (COM(2011) 244 final) (http://ec.europa.eu/environment/marine/pdf/1_EN_ACT.pdf) accessed 14 November 2016.

EC, 2015, 'Mid-term review of the EU Biodiversity Strategy to 2020 — EU assessment of progress towards the targets and action' (COM(2015) 478 final) (http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52015DC0478&from=EN) accessed 14 November 2016.

EEA, 2015a, State of nature in the EU, EEA Technical Report No 2/2015, European Environment Agency (http://www.eea.europa.eu/publications/state-of-nature-in-the-eu) accessed 14 November 2016.

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EU, 1992, Council Directive 92/43/EEC of 21 May 1992 on the conservation of natural habitats and of wild fauna and flora (OJ L 206, 22.7.1992, p. 7–50).

EU, 2013, Decision No 1386/2013/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 November 2013 on a General Union Environment Action Programme to 2020 'Living well, within the limits of our planet', Annexe A, paragraph 28(a) (http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32013D1386&from=EN) accessed 14 November 2016.

> Environmental indicator report 2016 – In support to the monitoring of the 7th Environment Action Programme, EEA report No30/2016, European Environment Agency