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Protection of biodiversity in Europe: 100 British conservation groups oppose review of EU wildlife laws

Thursday 14 May 2015, by [NESLEN Arthur](#) (Date first published: 12 May 2015).

Changes to EU birds and habitat directives 'single biggest threat' to biodiversity and species, say groups as they launch their campaign to block the move.

One hundred British conservationist groups have launched a campaign to oppose a review of key wildlife protection laws which they say presents the single biggest threat to UK and European nature in a generation.

Last week, the EU began a [12-week public consultation](#) to look at the cost-effectiveness of the birds and habitats directives, their administrative burdens to business, and whether such goals could better be met at national level.

Environmentalists are outraged as the two laws cornerstone EU conservation rules, enshrining a network of ['Natura 2000'](#) protected sites, and offering statutory protection to over 1,000 animals and plant species. More than 200 habitats such as meadows, wetlands and forests are also safeguarded by the directives.

"The habitats and birds directives are the foundation of nature conservation across Europe and are scientifically proven to be effective where properly implemented," said Kate Jennings, the head of the RSPB's site policy unit, and chair of the campaign. "The directives deliver demonstrable benefits for nature, as well as significant social and economic benefits."

Protected sites in the UK were being lost at a rate of 15% a year before the directives, but this declined to just 1% a year afterwards, Jennings said.

Action plans drawn up under the birds directive have also helped nurture the recovery of over [half of the globally endangered bird species targeted](#), according to research by Birdlife International. These include griffon vultures, dalmatian pelicans, Bonelli's eagles and the common crane.

The EU's environment department is unenthusiastic about the review and officials stress that they want to modernise rather than bury the conservation rules.

"They ain't broke but they are a bit old," Enrico Brivio, said a spokesman for the environment commissioner Karmenu Vella.

"One piece of legislation dates from 1979, the other is from 1992 and there is a need for an update. But there is no intention to scale back on our environmental objectives. The idea is to reduce certain administrative burdens without compromising the directives' main purpose."

Shortly after his election, the EU's president Jean Claude Juncker [instructed Vella](#) to "overhaul the existing environmental legislative framework to make it fit for purpose." Specifically, Juncker ordered an assessment of the potential for merging the two directives.

The Dutch government has offered strong support for Juncker's thrust, with Dutch and German farmers associations making lobbying forays to expand intensive farming practices. The UK has also been supportive, even though a [review](#) by the Department for Food and Rural Affairs in 2012 found the directives were largely working well.

But a surprisingly wide coalition of opposition has emerged, taking in hunters, landowners, port owners and grid operators. Cemex, the cement-producing multinational signed a joint statement with Birdlife, singling out Natura 2000 as the fundament of biodiversity conservation.

"This review is clearly part of a wider ideological deregulation agenda that is going on," Jennings said. "In our experience, the majority of developers and the business community value regulatory certainty and the thing they least like to see are goalposts moving. The review introduces this."

"If the birds and habitats directives are weakened, the water framework directive will be next in line, and the national emissions ceiling directive will follow soon after," added Ariel Brunner, the head of EU policy at Birdlife.

Arthur Neslen in Brussels

P.S.

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