

Work Package 2: Assessment of the network of protected areas in Lithuania in the context of European Green Deal

Activity 2.1. Achieving consensus in assigning types of national protected areas as “protected” and “strictly protected” for evaluation of the progress towards the goals of EU biodiversity strategy for 2030

Summary of the report

Following the European Green Deal, the European Commission (EC) adopted, on 20 May 2020, a Communication on an “EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 – Bringing nature back into our lives” (subsequently referred to as the Strategy). The Strategy sets the objective of establishing a truly coherent Trans-European Nature Network, to legally protect at least 30% of the land, including inland waters, and 30% of the sea in the EU, of which at least one third to be under strict protection. The Strategy states that the designation of additional protected and strictly protected areas, either to complete the Natura 2000 network or under national protection schemes, will be a responsibility of the Member States.

EU countries have different national systems of protected areas (PAs). Not all of them are protected for reasons that are linked to the conservation of biodiversity and do have conservation objectives and measures in place. On the contrary, there are areas that contribute to conservation of biodiversity, but have no status of protected areas (so called other effective conservation measures (OECMs)). In order to set the common ground for accounting of the PAs and OECMs the EC, together with Member States and the European Environment Agency put forward criteria and guidance for identifying and designating additional protected areas, including definition of strict protection, as well as appropriate management planning, that resulted in the Commission Staff working document „Criteria and guidance for protected areas designations“¹. These criteria (ecological, management effectiveness and formal designation) and guidance were used as a basis for screening of current Lithuanian PAs and potential OECMs. Only land area was analysed as sea areas were out of scope. The results are presented in this report and serve as a baseline for development of proposals for contribution towards the aims of the Strategy.

All Natura 2000 network sites (including those awaiting formal designation) were considered as corresponding to the ecological criteria. Screening of national PAs was carried out on the level of types and functional priority zones (in case of complex areas) and was based on analysis of conservation objectives as they are described in the legal acts and individual designations. Types of PAs or functional priority zones prioritising biodiversity conservation were considered as corresponding to the ecological criteria. Screening according to the described methodology revealed that biodiversity is protected on 13.7% of LT land area. Most of this area (13.5%) is part of Natura 2000 network. Only 0.2% – national PAs, or their parts that do not belong to Natura 2000 network. However there was a number of cases when clear distinguishing was complicated and should be further clarified by carrying individual site assessments. For this purpose it was proposed to develop detailed national ecological criteria for establishment of PAs. Those criteria could be applied for more precise screening of individual PAs, as well as selection of new sites.

¹ Commission staff working document „Criteria and guidance for protected areas designations“
https://ec.europa.eu/environment/publications/criteria-and-guidance-protected-areas-designations-staff-working-document_en

Lithuanian system of PAs is undergoing fast evolution in terms of management effectiveness that makes assessment of the current state rather irrelevant. Detailed conservation objectives are being formulated for Natura 2000 sites. The process started just one year ago and is expected to be completed only by the end of this decade. National PAs currently have very general designation objectives. Report indicated the need for more detailed conservation objectives if management effectiveness criteria are to be fulfilled.

Development of conservation measures for Natura 2000 sites was based on less detailed conservation objectives and has been taking place for more than a decade. Analysis revealed that 5 different types of planning documents have been used for planning of conservation measures. Their content requirements quite differ and not all of them correspond to criteria of management effectiveness. Therefore it was proposed to ensure that biodiversity conservation measures are foreseen only in those planning documents that have corresponding content requirements.

The report also indicates that systematic assessments of management effectiveness of PAs are not being carried out. However this is expected to be solved in the near future.

Screening of PAs according to formal designation criteria revealed that PAs covering 12.1% of Lithuanian territory correspond to it (i.e. majority of PAs corresponding to ecological criteria).

Assessment of OECMs potential was assessed between 1 and 4% of LT land area excluding potential migration corridors and other areas connecting PA's that will be assessed separately during other stages of the LITPAs project. Assessed potential OECMs include grasslands and peatlands (up to 1.48% and 0.85% LT land area respectively) protected under the law of Special land use terms and recreational forests (up to 0.8% LT land area) protected under the Forest law. Furthermore, representative areas of FSC certified forest ecosystems (part of 1.94% LT land area; it was not possible to calculate exact area as spatial data were not available during preparation of the report) were assessed, which are protected under voluntary certification scheme, therefore additional conservation contracts would probably be needed in order to ensure long-time conservation of biodiversity in these areas. Woodland key habitats (up to 0.16% LT land area) currently have no legal protection, however certain bigger woodland habitats could be protected according to long-term contracts.

Finally, it was assessed that strictly protected areas currently make only 0.6% of LT land area. Assessment of "low-hanging fruits" revealed that area under strict protection could be doubled by amending regulation of telmological reserves and state botanical reserves. These PAs are mostly state owned (more than 80%) and have the highest cover of natural habitat types (40-60%) that would benefit from strict protection. Additionally, pedological reserves, which are part of Natura 2000 network, require strict protection for sustaining of pedological values and are mostly state owned (>90 %), could be placed under strict protection, however their area is rather small – 0.015% of LT land area.

The assessment provides preliminary baseline percentage of the LT land area under protection – 13.5% PAs and 1-4% – OECMs, 0.6% – strictly protected areas (plus additional 0.6% „low-hanging fruit“ potential). LITPAs project aims to propose approximately 16% of additional PAs and localised OECMs, as well as indicate additional PA's (not less than 8% of LT land area) to be placed under strict protection.