

EUROPEAN HUNTERS' CONTRIBUTION TO GREEN INFRASTRUCTURE

INTRODUCTION

By adopting the EU Biodiversity Strategy to 2020, the European Commission (EC) committed to develop an EU Strategy for Green Infrastructure (GI). In its Communication on GI, the EC defined GI as a *strategically planned network of natural and semi-natural areas with other environmental features designed and managed to deliver a wide range of ecosystem services. It incorporates green spaces (or blue if aquatic ecosystems are concerned) and other physical features in terrestrial (including coastal) and marine areas (...).*

Whilst protected areas such as Natura 2000 sites are important backbone for the conservation of the EU's natural capital, the conservation of the wider countryside is crucial for supporting ecosystems, providing connectivity, flexibility and resilience. Whilst specific measures such as green bridges are seen as important, it is the management of the wider countryside that is needed for successful conservation. This is where hunters have a vital role to play as they manage a substantial part of the countryside in collaboration with landowners, farmers, foresters, local communities and other stakeholders. Whilst the primary goal of this management is for huntable species, there is good evidence of the positive effects for a wide range of flora and fauna.

HUNTING PERSPECTIVE ON GREEN INFRASTRUCTURE

CONSERVING NATURE AND ITS ECOSYSTEM SERVICES

Hunting is one of the many cultural ecosystem services provided by nature and therefore contributes to the EU cultural and natural heritage. At the same time, hunters promote and have practical experience in the maintenance and restoration of habitats allowing many other services and benefits to be provided by nature.

DEVELOPING COLLABORATION AND SYNERGIES

Hunters' management experience and their knowledge of the practical issues linked to rural activities are relevant for the implementation of GI, which would take both the environmental and socio-economic aspects into account.

Indeed, a variety of their activities is often done in collaboration with other stakeholders such as foresters, NGOs, farmers and cattle breeders, creating synergies for the maintenance of habitats and the sustainable development of rural areas. They work mostly at local and regional scale, but they also undertake trans-boundary and interconnected actions (e.g. in Scandinavia or the Mediterranean).

PROVIDING KNOWLEDGE

Hunters can also deliver a significant amount of knowledge and information on the ecosystem services linked to their activities, which is considered crucial to the development of GI in the EU.

Furthermore, through their knowledge of the local landscape and its related wildlife populations, hunters are able to provide relevant data on ecosystem and wildlife status while contributing to the identification of habitats that could fall into the scope of GI projects.

INVESTING IN GREEN INFRASTRUCTURE

Hunters are contributing to sustainability and ecosystem services provision in a cost-effective way, since most of the conservation projects and activities they execute are self-financed. For example, in terms of private investment, BASC is responsible for over £200,000 of public money to undertake conservation work, but UK hunting community invests time and expenditure for conservation worth £250 million. Put another way hunters provide over 99.9% co-financing for their conservation work.

Even though European hunters are involved in funding mechanisms such as LIFE project grants contributing to GI implementation, some improvement is still needed to get rural actors engaged in EU funding lines.



THE CONTRIBUTION OF HUNTERS IN PRACTICE

● HUNTERS AND RESTORATION

In **France**, 23 projects throughout the territory are carried out by hunters to restore and manage wetlands, enhancing the diversity of both huntable and protected species on sites, controlling invasive alien species, promoting research and educational activities, and creating employment (scientists, keepers, managers).

● HUNTING AND CONNECTIVITY

In **Germany**, hunters play a substantial role in the communication and preparation of conservation actions linked to the establishment of **ecological connections for wildlife** passages across motorway (mainly in forest and agricultural lands). These connections between nature reserves has led to the recolonisation of the area of threatened species, but it has also fostered stakeholder partnership, changes in public interest and in media reporting on fauna passages.

In **Portugal**, hunters' collaboration has been significant to connect different areas into a large non-hunting area, allowing wildlife to move and expand.

British hunters, through the programme Green Shoots (launched by the British Association for Hunting and Conservation, BASC) have established new hedgerows and gapped up existing ones in order to provide a quality habitat for Dormice and other wildlife species.

● HUNTING, EMPLOYMENT CREATION AND MULTI-STAKEHOLDER

Across Europe, and through the variety of projects and activities hunters promote, jobs are created and synergies are promoted with farmers, NGOs, educational and research centres, private and public bodies...

Throughout all continental and island **Greece**, **350 gamekeepers are working** to enforce environmental law in order to protect wildlife species and their habitat, as well as to participate in scientific and research programs. A number of researchers, trainees and university professors are also involved in the projects.

In **Spain**, the LIFE-granted reintroduction of the Iberian lynx project in Andalusia is a successful experience of **multi-stakeholder initiative**. Various regional hunting organisations are collaborating with the national, regional and local authorities and conservation NGOs for a common purpose, contributing to a greater social fabric in the area.

CONCLUSION

There are many examples of hunters' experience in carrying out actions that can contribute to a GI strategy in Europe, enhancing ecosystem services, contributing to jobs creation and building synergies and cooperation schemes between many rural stakeholders.

Through their passion, hunters are willing to find compromises and to engage in nature conservation activities, so that habitats remain in good ecological condition. On the other hand, hunters should have interest in engaging GI process in order to implement nature-based solutions taking into account the various environmental and socio-economic aspects.

More is required to identify and promote the role of hunters in the cooperative management of green infrastructure, as hunting activities and products are directly linked to ecosystem services provided by nature. This could be supported by incentive measures for hunters and their local organisations, to ensure that these areas are managed as part of wider landscape management objectives and to increase flexibility in response to a changing environment.

For more information on hunters' actions for nature conservation please visit:

<http://www.face.eu/nature-conservation/hunters-for-conservation>

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