

EUROPEAN HUNTERS' CONTRIBUTION TO HABITATS RESTORATION

INTRODUCTION

Target 2 of the EU Biodiversity Strategy calls upon Member States to restore at least 15% of degraded ecosystems by 2020. The IUCN defines degraded ecosystems as those that have been simplified, disrupted or have lost biodiversity due to disturbance. Restoration is defined by the European Commission's [Biodiversity Strategy Impact Assessment](#) (chapter 4.1, p 21) as the return of an ecosystem to its original community structure, species complement and natural functions. This restoration may include connecting fragmented habitat by developing a green infrastructure, and contributes to the European Commission's no net loss initiative.

Healthy ecosystems provide goods and services vital to society such as food, fibres, clean water, healthy soils and recreational opportunities. Degraded ecosystems cannot provide these services to the same extent or quality. FACE therefore recognises the importance of restoring degraded ecosystems and, through this information note, highlights how hunters contribute to restoration.

HUNTERS IN THE RESTORATION PROCESS

In the report developed by the European Commission on the "Priorities for the restoration of ecosystems and their services in the EU", 5 stages were identified in the habitat restoration process and our views on hunters' contributions to those stages are provided below:

STAGE 1 - DEFINE THE SCOPE OF THE PRIORITIZATION EXERCISE

The first step is to form a working team, agree on a vision and plan basic milestones. It is extremely important to ensure the involvement of the scientific community and all stakeholders, including hunters as they represent a large body of land users and have a detailed understanding of the land management.

STAGE 2 - COLLECT DATA AND INFORMATION

Restoration of ecosystems requires accurate biophysical data regarding species, habitats and hydrology; as well as socioeconomic data on land use and cultural activities. Knowing their extensive knowledge of the land and the time they spend in the field observing nature, hunters should be considered as relevant partners to collect this data and to conduct monitoring activities.

STAGE 3 - ANALYSE THE SITUATION AND INFORMATION

Analysis of the factors that influence(d) degradation, and identification of the potential stakeholders involved, leads to a better understanding of both the past evolution of the landscape and the possible future of the restoration process. Inclusion of all stakeholders in this process is essential to ensure exhaustivity of the mapping analysis and hunters constitute an important source of information.

STAGE 4 - DEVELOP APPROPRIATE RESTORATION STRATEGIES

Restoration strategies must be developed and must be prioritised according to agreed-upon criteria. The latter relies upon accurate information and data that can be largely collected by hunters.

STAGE 5 - IMPLEMENT, MONITOR, EVALUATE AND REPORT RESTORATION ACTIONS

On one hand, implementation requires practical work, and hunters' interest in the landscape makes them a relevant source of voluntary labour, often self-funded. On the other hand implementation should include some adaptability, implying regular data collection and monitoring which hunters have the abilities to contribute to.

● RESTORATION OF GRASSLANDS, MEADOWS AND HEATHS

In **France**, several projects involve hunters restoring grassland ecosystems to the mosaic landscape (that historically were maintained by wild grazing herbivores) by clearing strips of vegetation, both in meadow and semi-open “garrigue” landscapes.

On Boleybrack Mountain (**Ireland**), hunters have resurrected the native red grouse population by restoring the ecosystem to an upland heath through controlling heather, predators and the spread of woodlands, as well as livestock grazing.

● RESTORATION OF WETLANDS

In recent decades the area of European wetlands has declined as a result of drainage for agriculture and urban expansion. Hunters are doing much to reverse this trend.

In **France**, 23 projects exist to restore lost wetland ecosystems through flooding, creating islets and replanting aquatic vegetation, promoting both recreational opportunities and biodiversity, and conducting monitoring activities.

Hunters in Italy and Belgium, who own land, contribute to wetland restoration by allowing agricultural land to be flooded, allowing the recreation of hundreds of wetlands. As recognition, some of the restored wetlands have been included in the Natura 2000 network.

In the **UK** and **Finland**, wetland ecosystem restoration is being achieved by the control of populations of invasive predators by hunters to allow the recovery of native wetland species such as water birds and Water voles (*Arvicola amphibious*).

● RESTORATION OF WOODLANDS AND FORESTS

In **Europe**, population growth and increasing farming intensity has resulted in the halting of natural reforestation, the shrinking of existing woodlands and the removal of copses from farmland.

Belgian hunters are restoring native woodlands by planting endemic species and eradicating invasive ones. This has improved the habitat for threatened amphibians and other wildlife.

In **Malta**, population growth has come at the expense of the forests that once covered the island; hunters are encouraging reforestation by planting, pruning and managing new areas of woodland.

In **Poland** mixed conifer forest is being restored in several sites with the help of hunters in order to conserve the Western Capercaillie (*Tetrao urogallus*). This habitat benefits many different species while preserving regional biodiversity in general.

CONCLUSION

Hunters have a clear interest in maintaining healthy and preserved habitats supporting wildlife. They have always been involved in the natural environment and have no desire to see complex ecosystems disappear or be degraded. This passion for wildlife supports the recovery of biodiversity and species (both game and protected), and makes European hunters important players in ecosystem restoration.

Furthermore, there are numerous examples of hunters devoting a significant amount of voluntary time and/or private resources to manage and restore various landscapes with activities undertaken in grassland, wetland and forested environments. This contribution should be acknowledged and taken into account while developing restoration projects; there is sometimes no need to reinvent the wheel as some restoration process could start from the basis provided by hunters' activities. Finally, restoration activities conducted by hunters directly contribute to the achievement of the EU objectives which aim to restore at least 15% of degraded ecosystems by 2020.

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

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

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