



THE VOICE OF EUROPEAN HUNTERS

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The role of hunters in nature restoration

Introduction

There are various schools of thought in nature conservation, from the strictly hands off approach to one which considers that regular maintenance efforts are needed to ensure that ecosystems remain healthy. In light of the accelerating climate and biodiversity crisis, there is growing support for the latter¹. Given that hunters already invest considerable time, money, and other resources to conserve the habitats and the species, their positive role should be given greater consideration in formulating restoration plans and strategies.

Policy relevance

At the EU level, only 15 % of habitat assessed under the Habitats Directive have a good conservation status, with 81 % having poor or bad conservation status². Grasslands, dunes, bog, mire, and fen habitats show strong deteriorating trends, while forests have the most improving trends.

FACE has long advocated for habitat restoration as the most effective way to bring significant benefits to biodiversity, including huntable species, which have been heavily affected by land use change in Europe. This advocacy work has been completed over the years by the field work of hundreds of hunters across the EU who have engaged in restoration projects.

[The FACE Biodiversity Manifesto](#) collects and describes nature projects involving hunters from across the EU and provides an overview of these projects to a broader audience, that may not be aware of the scale and variety of the contribution that hunters make to nature. Up to now, 219 projects of the +500 projects focus on habitat restoration ranging from agricultural to wetland habitats.

In light of the European Commission's proposal on binding restoration targets to restore nature³ and the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework" (GBF)⁴, hunters' work has become even more relevant as it shows that a local approach is required to ensure that the European and international policies can translate into countless initiatives on the ground.

¹ <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41893-022-01045-w>

²The Habitats Directive protects 233 natural and semi-natural habitat types (called habitats of Community interest), which are in danger of disappearing, have a small range or are outstanding examples of biogeographical regions.

³The EC's proposal, unveiled in June 2022, introduces binding restoration targets for the EU as a whole (restoration measures should be put in place on 20% of the EU's land and sea areas) and specific targets for ecosystems.

⁴The Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework" (GBF) officially adopted in December 2022 includes a restoration target of having 30% of degraded terrestrial, inland waters, and coastal and marine ecosystems restored by 2030.

The important role of hunters for nature restoration– a scientific perspective

Landscapes and associated restoration plans are embedded with values that people have about environment, society and culture. Involving rural stakeholders and land users in all steps of future nature restoration plans is therefore essential as around 70% of Europe's land is in private hands.

In the scientific literature, stakeholder involvement in restoration projects is increasingly addressed. The process of deciding what to restore, where and how is often referred to as landscape governance. This term generally refers to a place-based multi-stakeholder process of negotiation and spatial decision-making, with the aim of enhancing, maintaining, or restoring the landscape's ecological functions, goods, and services for the long term⁵.

Hunters can already see that nature restoration will bring important benefits to Europe's nature and are committed to restore and maintain valuable ecosystems. For instance, in Europe's forest ecosystems, hunters play a crucial role in maintaining the vitality, regeneration ability, and protective functions of forests by managing ungulate populations. In general, wildlife management is essential to maintain ecological functions of important habitats.

Restoration projects

Wetland restoration by Vendée hunters, France:

Short portrait:

In Vendée, France, the Departmental Hunters' Federation is active in several areas to create wetlands for biodiversity and to improve water quality. The restoration of ponds generally involves cleaning (removal of muddy deposits or other accumulated sediments) and re-profiling the banks with a gentle slope. This is important to ensure that these ponds fulfil all their environmental functions (water regulation, buffer zone, refuge, breeding and feeding ground for numerous species, etc.).

Success factors:

- Active management, monitoring, and maintenance: Active management is key as a pond requires regular maintenance to meet certain criteria. It must be sinuous in shape and have gentle slopes in order to offer several types of habitats for the fauna and flora present. Maintenance must be carried out every 15-20 years to ensure that the ponds function ecologically.
- Collaboration with farmers and local governments: The pond restorations are based on voluntary participation and consultation with farmers. The projects developed are then carried out with the help of local actors or volunteers, including in particular the hunters of the communes for the participative planting sites.

Game management benefits Little bustard (*Tetrax tetrax*), Spain:

Short portrait:

Spain holds the largest Little bustard (*Tetrax tetrax*) population in Western Europe. However, this population suffered a 48% population reduction in 11 years. In the Ciudad Real province, which holds 60% of the Spanish Little bustard population, researchers found a similar decline magnitude (46%), using the results of two national Little bustard surveys carried out in 2005 and 2016. While the species declined in the province, it was found that this decline was not geographically homogeneous. Compared to similar Little bustard densities across different types of hunting areas in 2005, the

⁵ van Oosten, C., Runhaar, H., & Arts, B. (2021). Capable to govern landscape restoration? Exploring landscape governance capabilities, based on literature and stakeholder perceptions. *Land Use Policy*, 104, 104020.

species abundance decreased significantly in all categories except in hunting estates with high intensity of releases in 2016.

Success factors:

- Wildlife and habitat management for game and non-game species: In hunting estates, a range of management measures are frequently implemented to benefit game species which also benefit non-huntable species. These management measures include legal predator control and the provision of habitats including game crops (crops planted specifically for game that are not harvested) which are probably the most beneficial for Little bustards.

Hunters' strong commitment to habitat restoration in South Tyrol, Italy:**Short portrait:**

In the Alpine regions, degradation and loss of habitats is mainly due to the poor or lack of care of pastures and open areas and the resulting reforestation. For many years South Tyrolean hunters have been implementing measures to preserve and improve natural habitats in their hunting grounds. With their commitment, South Tyrolean hunters make a valuable contribution to the long-term preservation of these habitats. Since 2016, the Landscape Fund of the Autonomous Province of Bolzano has supported more than 25 project areas. The hunting community has contributed around 10,625 hours of voluntary work, of which 2,500 hours in 2019 alone, distributed across 40 projects.

Success factors:

- Support by local governments topped up by voluntary commitments: Via a Landscape Fund, the local government financially supported restoration projects in South Tyrol. In addition to the initiatives supported by the Landscape Fund, many hunting reserves initiated environmental improvement projects on their own initiative and implement them independently and without subsidies.

Recommendations

- FACE stresses that a strategic framework for the restoration of habitats and ecosystems requires priorities at sub-national level and involvement of regional and local authorities as well as key stakeholders from an early stage in the planning process.
- As restoration requires a landscape level approach, the role of stakeholders, including farmers, land managers and hunters, is key to develop workable conservation measures.
- As restoration will also take place on private land, the right incentives to promote community-based conservation must be provided to increase local acceptance and support by relevant stakeholders to make sure that restoration projects become success stories.