



## 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 ongoing 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 latter<sup>1</sup>. Given that hunters already invest considerable time, money, and other resources to conserve habitats and species, their positive role should be given greater consideration in formulating restoration plans and strategies.

### Policy relevance

Currently in Europe, only 15 % of habitats assessed under the Habitats Directive have good conservation status, with 81 % having poor or bad conservation status<sup>2</sup>. 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 work has been completed over the years by hunters across Europe who have engaged in restoration projects.

[The FACE Biodiversity Manifesto](#) gathers conservation projects involving hunters from across Europe and provides an overview to a broader audience. The projects collated thus far show the scale and variety of hunters' contribution to nature. Up to now, 219 projects of the 500+ projects focus on restoration efforts ranging from agricultural to wetland habitats/ecosystems.

In light of the European Commission's proposed regulation to restore nature<sup>3</sup>, hunters' work has become even more relevant as it shows that locally-tailored approaches are required to ensure that European policies can translate into countless initiatives on the ground.

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

<sup>2</sup> The Habitats Directive protects 233 natural and semi-natural habitat types, which are in danger of disappearing, have a small range or are outstanding examples of biogeographical regions.

<sup>3</sup> The 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.

## Making nature restoration work

Landscapes are embedded with values that people have about environment, society, and culture. Actively involving rural stakeholders in nature restoration planning is therefore essential. It is also important to recognise that around 70% of Europe's land is in private hands.

In the scientific literature, the need for active 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 term<sup>4</sup>.

Hunters know that nature restoration brings important benefits and are committed to maintain and improve 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. Hunters are also actively engaged in habitat conservation efforts to restore small game populations on Europe's farmlands. Many projects in the Biodiversity Manifesto focus on wetland creation and management to improve conditions for waterbirds.

## Examples of restoration projects by hunters

### Wetland restoration by Vendée hunters, France:

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 zones, refuges, breeding and feeding grounds 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 features for the fauna and flora present. Maintenance must be carried out every 15-20 years to ensure that the ponds function well ecologically.
- Collaboration with farmers and local government: These restoration projects 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 local hunters, which are actively engaged..

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

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

<sup>4</sup> 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.

60% of the Spanish Little bustard population, researchers found a similar decline magnitude (46%). 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 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:**

In the Alpine regions, degradation and loss of habitats is mainly due to the poor or lack of management of pastures and open areas and the resulting reforestation. For many years, South Tyrolean hunters have been implementing measures to preserve and improve semi-natural habitats in their hunting grounds. Since 2016, the Landscape Fund of the Autonomous Province of Bolzano has supported more than 25 conservation project areas. The hunting community has contributed around 10,625 hours of voluntary work, of which 2,500 hours was undertaken in 2019 alone, distributed across 40 project sites.

**Success factors:**

- Support by local governments topped up by voluntary commitments: Through 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 initiatives without subsidies.

**Recommendations**

- FACE stresses that a strategic framework for the restoration of habitats and ecosystems requires priorities set at local, regional and national levels with active involvement of rural stakeholders from an early stage in the planning process.
- As restoration requires a landscape-level approach, the active buy-in from rural stakeholders is key to develop workable conservation measures.
- The right incentives are required to promote community-based conservation on private land, both inside and outside of protected areas. Tailored solutions must be provided to increase local acceptance and support by relevant stakeholders to make sure that restoration projects become success stories.