

NATURA 2000

The programme of the network of nature protection areas in the European Union countries, the aims of which are to: 1) preserve certain types of natural habitats and species considered valuable and endangered on the scale of the whole Europe; 2) protect biodiversity.

The decision to create a network of European protected areas was taken in the 1990s. The network supervised by one of the European Commission's bodies, the Directorate-General for Environment, but the direct responsibility for implementing the rules of the programme rests with each Member State. The national networks included in the European network are established on the basis of both the national nature conservation law and the general criteria for the designation of sites (representativeness vis-à-vis Europe's biogeographical regions, the conservation status of the site, the degree of threat, the rarity of species) (Radziejowski). A characteristic feature of Natura 2000 is that selected species of fauna and flora, as well as their natural habitats, are protected. Unlike traditional forms of nature protection (national parks, nature reserves), Natura 2000 does not provide care for all components in the designated area.

The network of areas programme is based on the premise that joint action to protect and safeguard Europe's natural heritage will contribute to cost optimisation and will have positive environmental effects. Natura 2000 is regulated by two EU directives: the directive of 2 April 1979 on the conservation of wild birds (the so-called Birds Directive, extended and improved in 2009) and the directive of 21 May 1992 on the conservation of natural habitats and of wild fauna and flora (the so-called Habitats Directive). Currently, the programme covers 26,400 areas with a total area of approximately 788,000 km² of land and 318,000 km² of marine area. In Poland, the Natura 2000 network comprises 994 areas.

The concept of a conservation area is crucial for the Natura 2000 programme. It means that certain species and habitats are protected in the designated area. The conservation under the programme covers areas important for the occurrence of endangered or very rare plant species, animals or distinctive natural habitats, which are important for the protection of Europe's natural qualities. The functioning of protection areas is based on three basic obligations: 1) the obligation to assess (i.e. any project that could have an impact on the area covered by the programme must be assessed in terms of its effects on the protected area; when assessing real threats to the landscape, the precautionary principle applies, which guarantees that activities unfavourable for the environment will be excluded; the principle does not apply in a situation where the activity in the Natura 2000 area is dictated by a higher public interest); 2) the obligation of proactive conservation (i.e. the obligation to provide special means of protection – legislation, active protection measures, system of agreements allowing full protection to be extended over the areas); 3) the obligation to prevent any deterioration (i.e. administration and nature protection authorities are obliged to prevent deterioration of habitats and species resulting from natural factors or human activity; to this end, the so-called plan of protection tasks is established, drawn up for at least 10 years).

Poland was obliged to join the Natura 2000 programme when it signed the Athens Treaty of 16 April 2003, which provides the legal basis for Poland's accession to the European Union. The EU

directives which are the legal basis for the functioning of the Natura 2000 programme have been incorporated into the binding Nature Conservation Act of 16 April 2004.

The advantage of the Natura 2000 programme is that it favours natural tourism. In Poland, a manifestation of cooperation between administrative bodies and the tourism industry is the existence of the “Blisko Natury” (“Close to Nature”) Certificate awarded to agritourism farms that provide a natural tourism offer.

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