

STAKING A CLAIM FOR NATURE

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POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE ALPINE SPACE



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Project partners



These policy recommendations

- relate to EU policies and strategies
- target decision makers from different sectors
- contribute to regional and national policy dialogue

The policy recommendations in this document highlight some of the gaps that have to be filled and needs that have to be met in order to implement successful nature protection measures. Moreover, they underline the huge impact that political situations have on nature conservation.

They address all decision makers and stakeholders from local to EU level and across all sectors. We make suggestions regarding how to overcome some of the difficulties that currently prevent existing policies from being implemented effectively.

1 Develop an integrated, trans-sectoral landscape vision for the Alps

Alpine landscapes are highly diverse, featuring a multitude of different ecosystems and providing habitats for many different species. Human settlements and activities are increasingly fragmenting Alpine landscapes, especially in valleys and at mid-altitude.

This fragmentation is contributing towards a loss of natural habitats and connectivity between them, resulting in a gradual degradation of ecosystems and a decline in biodiversity levels and ecological function. Since ecological connectivity is of key importance for ecosystem function, which in turn is necessary for human wellbeing, integrated landscape-level planning is essential at a national, provincial and local government level. Planning processes must assimilate the conservation of biodiversity and the protection and enhancement of ecological connectivity as a priority concern. Valuing biodiversity, connectivity and ecosystem services should be given the same priority as economic growth considerations are in regional planning. Currently there are many individual, localised measures, but no overall guiding vision for strategic landscape planning in the Alps.

greenAlps recommends that policy makers from Alpine Space countries participate in a process of developing a joint guiding, integrated, trans-sectoral landscape vision for the Alps. This vision should be based on existing biodiversity policies and strategies, both at EU level and at a national and provincial level, but it must be supplemented with concrete operational action plans that will guide ground-level implementation.

1 *A guiding, integrated, trans-sectoral landscape vision for the Alps needs to be developed, discussed and approved by policy makers and relevant governments.*

2

Migrate from practices that require compensation for environmental damage to the valuation of and payment for ecosystem services

The rich biodiversity and ecological functions of the diverse ecosystems found in the Alps are of great benefit to the wellbeing of people living in the region and beyond. Also termed ecosystem services, many of these functions are currently taken for granted or insufficiently appreciated. Efforts have been made for several decades to calculate the total economic value of ecosystems, including use and non-use values. The concept of paying for ecosystem services has recently become a point of discussion both in academic and in policy circles. At the interface between science and policy, the 2012 study on the Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity (TEEB) provided an impetus for European countries to assess the value of their ecosystem services. A few such assessments are currently underway. However, the principal focus within the EU and its Member States is on economic growth, even within the realm of a “green” economy. The value of ecosystem services, and especially their value to future generations, tends to be grossly discounted.

greenAlps recommends exploring ecosystem services-based approaches to provide a new impetus for trans-sectoral collaboration. We recommend the concept be further explored through an on-the-ground assessment and valuation of ecosystems and their services, with the long-term goal of protecting and, where necessary, improving ecological connectivity. Any initiatives in this direction should by default be cross-sectoral and include stakeholders from different interest groups. Furthermore, in order to function, ecosystem services-based approaches probably need to be perceived as having benefits for local stakeholders (e.g. landowners).

2

The value of ecosystem services is under-appreciated in EU and national policy, where the principal focus is on economic growth. A new practice is needed, expanding from compensation for environmental damage to the valuation of and payment for ecosystem services.

3 Ensure project results are visible and given due consideration in EU policies and strategies

European cooperation projects and their results substantially contribute to the application of European goals. They serve as laboratories for developing trans-sectoral and transnational solutions. Where the European Commission has set concrete goals through directives or regulations, transnational projects can contribute to a more harmonised implementation of such goals. Project results may reflect what is at stake in a given thematic field. Issues relating to nature and biodiversity are always site-specific, and benefits from nature conservation tend to accrue over long timescales. In addition, they are difficult (though not impossible) to monetise. Transferring specific project results to abstract policy levels can therefore be a challenge, and there is a perception that many results do not get the political attention they deserve. Public relations work to highlight the importance of biodiversity and ecological connectivity has lost momentum with regard to the effort made, for example, during the International Year of Biodiversity, while biodiversity losses have continued.

greenAlps recommends that European programmes ensure project results are systematically transferred to the relevant policy levels. Strategic communication and lobbying must be intensified for biodiversity to achieve the same degree of importance on the political agenda as climate change



3

Project results need to be better communicated at EU level, and taken into account in EU policies and strategies. Drawing on the insights of European stakeholders working in the Alpine Space is a principle of a bottom-up governance approach.

4

Bring EU projects to the people and avoid stakeholder burnout by making concrete results visible and improving communication

Local stakeholders in pilot areas are often unaware of national and international biodiversity conservation efforts and, more generally, EU programmes and projects operating in their area. Although stakeholders in pilot areas are frequently confronted with requests to participate in a large number of different EU projects, many stakeholders complain of a lack of information regarding the results of projects for which they have been invited to participate in workshops or other activities. This leads to distrust towards such projects and stakeholder fatigue. greenAlps has also found that, across the entire Alpine territory, some politicians regularly invoke EU policies as a reason for local, regional or national economic or social deficiencies, especially in sectors such as agriculture, the environment and spatial planning. Negative perceptions of EU policies appear to receive more public attention than positive examples. Local policies reflect this negative publicity and mistrust of initiatives coming from “abroad” in the sense that EU project results and developed tools are insufficiently embedded in these policies. The effectiveness of EU programmes, procedures and tools, in particular the long-term use and local implementation of their results, tends to suffer in these circumstances.

greenAlps recommends that community councils designate at least one member as a focal point for EU policies. This person would communicate valid positive information about European programmes and initiatives to the community. Regular concrete activities with stakeholders, such as information events and opportunities for active participation, should be included in projects from the start to keep stakeholders mobilised and motivated. Furthermore, involving stakeholders must have a “pay-off”, showing them how their views, expertise and expectations are being considered in project outcomes. Concrete information about ongoing activities and the intermediate and final results of projects must be provided through official channels and publications, but also through media and other outreach efforts.

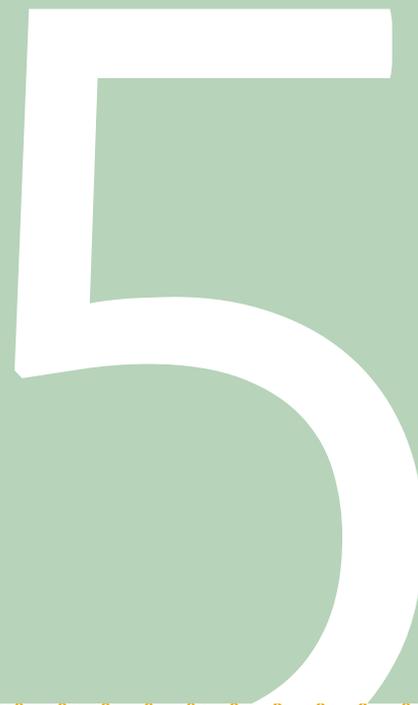
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There is a need for greater cooperation between communities and EU project managers. Better communication concerning EU initiatives at a local and regional level is required to ensure programmes, procedures and tools are accepted and embedded in local policies.

5 Ensure concrete pilot implementation activities

Most projects that form part of European territorial cooperation programmes develop useful strategies and tools, perform analyses and draw up recommendations, but they rarely go as far as implementing project results on the ground. Concrete nature conservation measures such as building a green infrastructure, introducing wildlife protection measures and developing concrete political, legal and spatial planning actions should be included within projects to ensure stakeholder acceptance and project efficiency. This is especially important in so-called “pilot areas” linked directly to Alpine communities, provinces, regions or protected areas.

greenAlps recommends that implementation measures related to project subject matter be integrated into every project that is linked directly to a specific area or region. Additional actions undertaken beyond a project’s lifespan obviously have resource implications. Nevertheless, even small steps taken together with stakeholders can help EU projects to be better accepted.



5

To achieve sustainable results, projects should include concrete implementation measures in pilot areas. These measures should relate to the project’s subject matter both during and beyond the project’s lifetime.

6

Empower municipalities to implement strategic biodiversity conservation and ecological connectivity measures

Municipalities own and manage major parts of the Alpine territory. Their land-use decisions affect biodiversity, the quality of ecosystems and the connections between them. In some cases connectivity measures that are implemented by municipalities lack a long-term vision and are not integrated into regional connectivity strategies. In addition, decisions taken by municipalities are often influenced by short-term thinking and political considerations, such as upcoming elections.

greenAlps recommends that, to ensure the role of municipalities as small but decisive units for long-term biodiversity conservation, local capacity be strengthened through special training. Municipalities need to be able to develop a common binding strategic framework for biodiversity protection and ecological connectivity that is negotiated and agreed at a regional level. This is especially important in border regions, since ecological connectivity must not be interrupted by political borders. Agreements between neighbouring countries and regions are required. At a concrete implementation level, contractual arrangements and agreements with landowners are crucial. Larger territorial and national administrations should support communities in such efforts through special dedicated funding.

6

Municipalities, as the smallest territorial unit at which biodiversity and ecological connectivity measures can be implemented, need to strengthen their capacity to act strategically outside municipal boundaries in partnership with neighbouring municipalities, regions and, where applicable, across borders.

Authorise protected area administrations to operate beyond the borders of protected areas

Ecological connectivity is a central issue of biodiversity protection. It is also very often a controversial topic because it is directly based on concrete landscape planning and affects land use rights. Protected area administrations are charged with implementing measures to protect biodiversity and ecosystems in parks. Their mission is to ensure the best possible biodiversity conservation status for future generations. However, given current legal frameworks and their lack of authority to operate beyond park boundaries, compounded by the generally relatively small size of protected areas in the Alps, it is impossible for park managers to fulfil this task bearing in mind long-term needs. The ecological connectivity that is necessary to ensure the requisite genetic exchange for the long-term population viability of species living on these "conservation islands" can only be achieved by connecting parks to surrounding landscapes, thereby preventing and reversing the fragmentation of natural spaces.

While some strategies for large, efficient and coherent ecological networks for the Alps and wider Europe have been elaborated and some isolated, one-off actions have been taken to remove barriers, such favourable and important local actions are useful but insufficient.

Existing protected areas and Natura 2000 sites represent a very exciting opportunity: linking the remaining large more or less unfragmented areas of the Alps (very often land in parks and Natura 2000 sites) via a permeable landscape matrix based on landscape planning and stakeholder involvement would provide a good chance of achieving the goal of protecting Alpine ecosystems in the long term. The close involvement of protected area administrations with surrounding communities to explain, negotiate and act in favour of ecological connectivity would present a classical win-win situation. On the one hand it would allow parks to fulfil their mission over the long term, and on the other hand establishing an ecological Alpine network of natural areas would ensure the long-term sustainability of ecosystem services that benefit people living in and beyond the Alps.

greenAlps recommends that provincial and municipal administrations create the legal foundation for connectivity measures and grant park administrations the authority to undertake such measures and play a proactive role in negotiating concrete conservation and connectivity measures with communities and individual landowners.

Protected area administrations need to be empowered to fulfil their role as long-term protectors of biodiversity by initiating, negotiating and implementing ecological connectivity measures inside and outside protected areas on the basis of appropriate legal foundations.

8

Strengthen cooperation in “working regions”

The sustainable management of biodiversity resources and other types of ecosystem services does not fit within sectoral and administrative boundaries. Today, such boundaries are often still visible. In particular, ecological connectivity activities only have a limited sphere of influence if measures are taken without being embedded in a strategic framework. Cross-sector cooperation can only be effective if it takes place at a manageable scale where all relevant partners can contribute to achieving tangible results and learning can be embedded in policies and operational plans. Experience has shown that “working regions” that extend beyond administrative or national boundaries are the most promising level for such new models of cooperation. These “working regions” are defined by local actors to suit their needs for successful implementation. Examples of such regions include pilot areas within the Alpine Space Projects Econnect and greenAlps, and also LEADER regions.

greenAlps recommends that administrations from local to national level ensure that cooperation in such informal “working regions” is underpinned by a long-term political commitment. In addition, financial resources need to be made available beyond the duration of individual projects and administrative boundaries.



8

Cooperation works best at a provincial/regional level (Länder/regions/cantons). Dedicated resources need to be made available to facilitate cooperation and joint implementation at this regional level.

9 Ensure trans-sectoral implementation of ecological connectivity measures

Connections between regular wildlife habitats are composed of a matrix of land-cover types, including farmland, land occupied by industrial complexes or settlements, and other land with no special protection status. Key sectors that have an interest in and potential impact on the functioning of ecosystems (environment, agriculture, forestry, fisheries, energy, transport, construction, tourism and spatial/land-use planning) often have conflicting goals. The objectives of stakeholders in these areas do not usually include the improvement of ecological connectivity and they may even be opposed to it. Settlement areas, for example, are focused on the quality of the living space for inhabitants, but housing facilities built in key positions for ecological connectivity can disturb or totally block the migration of animals and plants. Representatives of sectors other than nature conservation are regularly unaware of the importance of ecological connectivity in protecting biodiversity. They are not aware of the fact that their decisions can help or hinder the migration of flora and fauna. Yet potential synergies between these sectors and the nature conservation sector exist and should be further exploited. The implementation of ecological connectivity measures needs the support of the representatives of these other sectors.

greenAlps recommends that nature conservationists “translate” the concept of ecological connectivity into a language that can be understood by other sectors. Some work has already been done on this at a global level and should be adapted to the Alpine context, with illustrative examples that can be easily understood. The benefits obtained from functioning ecosystems are an important aspect to communicate. The link between all these activities in various sectors is spatial planning. It has to guarantee that biodiversity and ecological connectivity do not fall victim to individual or sectoral interests.



9

The concept of ecological connectivity has to become better understood in sectors outside nature conservation. Dialogue and collaboration with other sectors is essential for the effective implementation of connectivity measures.

10 Improve compliance monitoring for the realisation of biodiversity conservation actions

Legal mechanisms are available for all domains of environmental protection. But work in pilot areas shows that they are insufficiently respected. Even if enforcement mechanisms are in place, regulatory compliance and the implementation of decisive, efficient measures are poorly monitored. This can be observed at all levels – European countries are currently not fulfilling their obligation to nominate a sufficient number of Natura 2000 sites, they are not respecting EU hunting rules and are failing to correctly undertake the required environmental impact studies for new infrastructure. At a regional level, procedures, laws and the degree of implementation of nature protection measures differ, making coordinated and efficient nature protection actions difficult. This is especially the case in the federal systems of some Alpine countries, where legal expertise in the field of nature protection is completely decentralised. At a local level, individual interests regularly interfere with coherent biodiversity protection policies, especially those with a long-term vision. In protected areas, the legal expertise of rangers and other official staff is often too limited to allow effective prosecutions to be undertaken for violating protected area rules.

greenAlps recommends improving compliance monitoring for laws and regulations, and monitoring the efficacy of measures, including those promoted by EU projects at different levels. The development of some common EU-wide standards and criteria for enforcement bodies such as rangers and environmental police would be helpful. This would also highlight environmental protection efforts for both political stakeholders and the population at large.



10

The effects of measures and activities aimed at biodiversity protection must be followed up. In general, legal instruments must be better respected and the consequences of non-compliance must be increased.



greenAlps – connecting mountains, people, nature

The greenAlps project has screened EU biodiversity policies and results from other EU projects and assessed their relevance for current and future nature conservation strategies in the Alpine Space. It has drawn on this analysis and experiences gathered from local stakeholders in pilot areas to reveal opportunities for, and also obstacles to, an effective strategy for the conservation of biodiversity and the sustainable use of natural resources in the Alpine Space. The project ran from September 2013 to November 2014. It was co-financed by the European Regional Development Fund in the frame of the European Territorial Cooperation Programme Alpine Space.

This publication recommends ways in which decision makers can implement biodiversity policies more effectively. Together with other project publications, it can be downloaded from www.greenalps-project.eu

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