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**OPINION**

**Promoting coexistence with conflict species within the framework of the EU Nature Directives**

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| THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS   * draws attention to the importance for biodiversity, the Natura 2000 network and species protection that Member States, regions and local authorities adopt coordinated measures in accordance with the principles of solidarity and subsidiarity; * finds that new measures need to be put in place to encourage positive externalities – so often mentioned in relation to biodiversity and large predators – to fully develop in local communities: in many cases, these opportunities are still under-utilised in practice, or else the conditions for seizing such opportunities, especially the requisite expertise and assistance, are insufficient; * in view of the definition of conflict species as those which, due to their biology and ethology, compete with a range of human activities for the use of common resources and space, calls for new measures, based on scientific evidence, that can be used when devising suitable methods for implementing the directives and various other types of measures; * calls on the Commission to take the necessary steps to ensure that local and regional communities, their organisations and representatives are directly involved and can participate effectively and efficiently in setting up platforms and cooperation mechanisms on conflict species and in shaping policies in this area; * hopes that when the next Multiannual Financial Framework is being planned, adequate resources will be granted to ensure funding of protection, prevention (including also awareness raising and environmental education), compensatory measures, research and other specific initiatives to promote development in the different areas for action, and under relevant EU Funds; * is of the view that in some regions the approach adopted so far to large carnivores is unsatisfactory, so there is a need to improve the management of the conflicts associated to large carnivores, fully exploiting the relevant experiences from research and development projects as well as from other relevant projects, with a view to reducing the impact and risk for humans and farm animals. |

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| Rapporteur  Csaba Borboly (RO/EPP) President of Harghita County Council  Reference document  Own-initiative opinion |

**Opinion of the European Committee of the Regions –   
Promoting coexistence with conflict species within the framework of the EU Nature Directives**

1. **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

# draws attention to the fact that biodiversity, the Natura 2000 network and the protection of species are an issue of common interest in Europe, one which concerns all the Member States, regions and local authorities, and thinks it is therefore very important to continue and further develop the current practice whereby Member States, regions and local authorities adopt coordinated measures to achieve the objectives and deliver shared benefits, in accordance with the principles of solidarity and subsidiarity;

# restates the position it took in a previous opinion drawn up at the time of the fitness check of Nature Directives – a position shared by the European Parliament also – that there is no need to revise the Nature directives, but rather to focus on their proper implementation, in line with the latest technical and scientific progress, across the EU's different regions and Member States, taking advantage of the flexibility provided within the directives to address specific local concerns regarding conflicts that may arise between particular species and human activity; therefore commits to contribute to the Action Plan for nature, people and the economy ensuring adequate efforts also to promote coexistence with conflict species in the relevant actions on European, national, regional and local level too;

# emphasises the critical importance of these directives, as the Natura 2000 network and efficient coordination of environmental protection policy have made a significant contribution to harmonising biodiversity objectives among the Member States, clearly demonstrating the added value of the European Union;

# recalls the responsibility of Member States to find the appropriate solutions within their territories and within the framework and in the spirit of the directives to take account of the specific situations in different regions, regarding individual species and particular problems, involving local and regional authorities as well as all other stakeholders in the process;

# notes that many of the problems related to the cohabitation between humans and "conflict species" can be caused by the pressure exercised by human activity on the natural habitats of many species, and often inappropriate behaviour of humans vis-à-vis these animals, ranging from invasive activities in protected areas to active grooming for hunting or tourism, or inappropriate waste management which draws for instance large carnivores towards human settlements; underlines therefore the need to adopt a holistic approach to biodiversity and the need to find solutions for specific problems within local contexts, which in turn requires a close cooperation between different levels of governance and all relevant stakeholders;

# hopes that when the next Multiannual Financial Framework is being planned, adequate resources will be granted to ensure funding of protection, prevention (including also awareness raising and environmental education), compensatory measures, research and other specific initiatives to promote development in the different areas for action, and under relevant EU Funds;

# reiterates that improving biodiversity is in the interest of all local and regional levels in the EU and that there is, therefore, a continued need for coordinated measures;

# draws attention to the quantitative and qualitative improvement in biodiversity in many regions, and to the concomitant increase in the likelihood of interaction with human communities. In case of some conflict species, these encounters may entail considerable risks for humans, and for economic activities, if local communities are not properly prepared or no suitable, realistic, proportional and locally adapted solutions are proposed to help them deal with these problems;

***Towards more effective implementation***

# in view of the definition of conflict species as those which, due to their biology and ethology, compete with a range of human activities for the use of common resources and space, calls for new measures, based on scientific evidence, that can be used when devising suitable methods for implementing the directives and various other types of measures;

# considers it indispensable for conserving biodiversity and implementing the directives to earmark funding for multidisciplinary, comprehensive research where the social sciences can play an important role alongside the natural sciences specific in this field;

# underscores that local and regional communities are, in three fundamental respects, the front runners in protecting the environment and biodiversity: first, as the main drivers of investment drawing on funding from the Member States and the ESIF; second as public regulatory authorities or bodies responsible for issuing permits in the agricultural sector and for territorial and urban planning, hence in a position to exercise considerable influence over land use and ensure that environmental considerations are prioritised; third, local and regional bodies are in the closest proximity to local residents and fulfil an important function by providing them with information, incentives and support with regard to the protection of habitats and conflict species;

# encourages the European Commission to continue and to step up efforts in the area of knowledge transfer to support solutions, at local and regional level, on how to live with conflict species, and, where possible, to turn potential problems into advantages; this should include the promotion of best practices on the most appropriate management models for areas covered by Natura 2000 and for protected species. Non-governmental organisations and other relevant stakeholders, as carriers of practical knowledge from relevant projects that they implement throughout Europe, should be considered strong partners in the area of knowledge transfer;

# is concerned that in several Member States opposition has emerged on the part of local communities to the return, presence and expansion of populations of conflict species. Non-adequate solutions to conflicts, as well as ill-conceived, piecemeal or poorly explained management approaches lead to environment policy being rejected – particularly in certain regions where large predators are to be found – with an upsurge in illegal hunting, trapping and poisoning as a result, an absolutely deplorable trend which cannot be reversed simply by introducing bans and sanctions;

# notes that in many Member States there are excellent local and regional practices of coexistence with conflict species, including large carnivores, and believes that for this very reason it is important to stress the need to encourage local and regional projects based on these examples; points out that besides these local, regional, or national public or private initiatives, LIFE projects can also provide good practices, if they are sustained and continued after the given project ends;

# hopes that when the next Multiannual Financial Framework is being planned, actions related to protected species, our common European heritage, and particularly investments and initiatives concerning large carnivores and conflict species – that are effective, efficient and sensitive to the interests of communities –will be given appropriate consideration in the continuation of the Horizon 2020 programme and the mechanism following the ESIF;

# assures the Commission of its unequivocal support for setting up platforms for biogeographical regions in the future and points out that direct involvement of local and regional bodies is imperative if they are to operate properly;

***Research and development: new initiatives***

# stresses that procedures to select studies must place particular emphasis on research and development that works towards biodiversity goals, economic and social targets, and wildlife management objectives, and that lends itself to tangible and rapid implementation;

# considers it necessary, when carrying out research and development work locally and regionally, to prevent disparities from arising, including under-representation, in access to research funding, of regions and localities that contain areas of great natural value and important habitats but that are less developed;

# would like to point out that the various biodiversity pilot projects have made a significant contribution to the transfer of knowledge between Member States and have in many cases had positive results by helping local communities to better understand and take ownership of the various goals, hence leading to practical cooperation with public authorities and non-governmental organisations to protect endangered and valuable species;

# notes, however, that in many cases these initiatives are not put on a permanent footing – i.e. they are one-off and temporary; therefore believes that the procedure to select these projects should include a criterion that considers practical monitoring of the projects previously carried out by the organisation in question or by its members, which will encourage efficient use of EU funds;

# finds that new measures need to be put in place to encourage positive externalities – so often mentioned in relation to biodiversity and large predators – to fully develop in local communities: in many cases, these opportunities are still under-utilised in practice, or else the conditions for seizing such opportunities, especially the requisite expertise and assistance, are insufficient;

***Specific aspects related to large predators***

# is of the view that in some regions the approach adopted so far to large carnivores – the behaviour, physical and ecological traits and instincts of which mean that they may cause significant damage to human health or even inflict fatal injuries, and which seriously endanger the health and welfare of livestock – is unsatisfactory, so there is a need to improve the management of the conflicts associated to large carnivores, fully exploiting the relevant experiences from research and development projects as well as from other relevant projects, with a view to reducing the impact and risk for humans and farm animals;

# considers that a large carnivore, regardless of whether it lives within or outside a protection site under the Natura 2000 network, should be protected outside human settlements, in line with its protection level; is of the view, however, that if a large carnivore is entering human settlements regularly rather than occasionally, then this constitutes a pattern of behaviour that poses a risk to humans (particularly for children, the elderly and people with reduced mobility) and that such behaviour cannot be seen as natural for the "conflict individual" of the species concerned; considers that in such cases, every effort must be made to reduce the risk, and, if unavoidable, to remove the "conflict individual" in an appropriate way open to monitoring, or to take other necessary measures; such measures must be taken in accordance with the relevant management plans where they exist. The aim is to ensure that management plans are in place everywhere to govern both conservation and conflicts. In any case, measures against "conflict individuals" must remain exceptional and should not affect the future and viability of the population;

# deeply regrets that currently farmers and breeders are not party to the activities of the platform on large European predators, meaning that the special interests of this group of stakeholders cannot be voiced directly in the cooperation mechanism put in place by the European Commission; therefore urges all those concerned to demonstrate their willingness to reach a compromise so as to create the necessary conditions, as swiftly as possible, to ensure that all interests can be taken on board in this platform;

***Regional and local aspects in relation to biodiversity***

# draws attention to the fact that the quality and surface area of large predators' habitats are improving in many regions, though this – in conjunction with agricultural factors – may however be accompanied by a decline in some traditional forms of farming; notes that in mountain pastures and meadows in particular, many other habitats, including areas protecting birds and plant communities, are disappearing as the human activities necessary for their survival are also disappearing;

# is of the view, with regard to habitats and linked forms of agriculture, that new incentives need to be introduced and made accessible for farmers, both in areas that are directly covered by the Natura 2000 network and in neighbouring areas, as these forms of agriculture – especially traditional forms, which are mostly extensive and are sensitive to local conditions – make a significant contribution to improving biodiversity and sustainable development of rural areas. Urges the European Commission to propose such new incentives and possible adjustment methods in its forthcoming evaluation of the impact of the Common Agricultural Policy on biodiversity;

# acknowledges that local and regional authorities' measures to achieve the biodiversity objectives could be stepped up and made more effective, but is of the view that cooperation and coordination with the Member States and the EU should be strengthened in order to highlight the full range of possibilities offered by involving local and regional authorities for which an appropriate framework is needed;

# requests that the Member States – and local and regional authorities first and foremost – be able to benefit from technical assistance provided by EU agencies so that they can set up their own programmes, co-financed with national and/or EU funds;

# considers it vital for hunters, gamekeepers, foresters and livestock farmers to be directly involved in reporting on biodiversity and in drawing up action plans, given that for many valuable and protected species it is in fact those people who have made a significant contribution to bringing about and maintaining the current situation – seen as being natural – by taking care of and regulating stocks, organising and structuring forests, and managing the necessary infrastructure;

# calls on the Member States to apply the exceptions and derogations set out in the Nature Directives for certain species which may cause conflicts with the requisite speed and flexibility and due regard to the situation at regional or local level and where necessary in cooperation with neighbouring Member States/regions; also believes that regional and national projects related to large predators and conflict species should take into account the distinctive features, traditions and natural and cultural heritage of local areas and regions;

***Policy coherence***

# draws attention to the fact that payment systems related to Natura 2000 areas vary widely between Member States and notes that in certain Member States it was decided not to introduce these payments when implementing the Common Agricultural Policy, despite the fact that they have significant populations of large predators; considers that steps should be taken in this area starting from the current programming period;

# suggests that special attention should be given to the interconnection between habitats and the corridors used by large carnivores when transport infrastructure (particularly road and railway infrastructure) is being developed and modernised. Given the growing fragmentation of habitats due to the way that European landscape is divided up and its particular layout, large predators are often forced, whether individually or in groups, to cross areas used or populated by humans in order to migrate between different parts of their habitats. This situation requires particular attention at the level of land-use planning and the design of the management of protected sites and neighbouring areas;

# calls on the European Commission and the Member States to tailor funding schemes more effectively to tackle issues relating to biodiversity and habitat management including large carnivores' habitats, to ensure that the necessary infrastructure and human capital for the management of conflicts between humans and certain species can be developed and quick and straightforward compensation be provided;

# agrees that the multi-level governance model can be fruitfully applied to environmental protection, particularly to efforts to improve biodiversity, and therefore believes that new coordinated measures are also needed in this area;

***Next steps***

# suggests, so as to promote the broadest possible and most well-informed involvement of local and regional authorities, holding a joint conference with the European Commission in 2019 on coexistence with conflict species and in particular large predators that is both safe and useful for communities. This would provide an opportunity to evaluate the impact of the own-initiative opinion and the functioning of the platforms on European and biogeographical regions, and to hold a policy and scientific debate on the specific measures to be put in place after 2021;

# calls on the Commission to take the necessary steps to ensure that local and regional communities, their organisations and representatives are directly involved and can participate effectively and efficiently in setting up platforms and cooperation mechanisms on conflict species and in shaping policies in this area; asks the Commission to publish recommendations and guidelines in this domain to assist Member States, too, in exchanging good practice;

# thinks that it would be useful for local and regional authorities affected by large predators to institute cooperation in the form of a European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC) starting from the current programming period – either along macro-regional or biogeographical lines, or open to the entire European Union – so as to tackle shared or similar problems and take more effective and coordinated action.

Brussels, 31 January 2018

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| The President of the European Committee of the Regions     Karl-Heinz Lambertz |  |
|  | The Secretary-General of the European Committee of the Regions     Jiří Buriánek |

1. **PROCEDURE**

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| **Title** | Promoting coexistence with conflict species within the framework of the EU Nature Directives |
| **References** | Own initiative opinion |
| **Legal basis** | Article 307(4) TFEU |
| **Procedural basis** | Rule 41(b)(ii) |
| **Date of Commission letter** |  |
| **Date of Bureau/President's decision** | 11 July 2017 |
| **Commission responsible** | Commission for the Environment, Climate Change and Energy |
| **Rapporteur** | Csaba Borboly (RO/EPP)  President of Harghita County Council |
| **Analysis** | 13 October 2017 |
| **Discussed in commission** | 22 November 2017 |
| **Date adopted by commission** | 22 November 2017 |
| **Result of the commission vote**  **(majority, unanimity)** | Majority |
| **Date of adoption in plenary** | 31 January 2018 |
| **Previous Committee opinions** |  |
| **Date of subsidiarity monitoring consultation** |  |

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