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Natura 2000 not a burden but an opportunity for sustainable economic growth

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Summary: We need to search for a redirection of rural development by considering the Natura 2000 network not a burden but an opportunity for sustainable economic growth. So far Natura 2000 is frequently received by land users as a rather fixed and isolated juridical network in spatial policy merely aimed at protection and conservation, which does not yet allow for a gentle interplay with socio-economic realities. However in the past habitat sizes changed significantly under natural conditions, and when humans entered the ecosystem, biodiversity became largely linked to land-use systems being part and an outcome of socio-economic developments. A flexible approach of Natura 2000 may be better suited to guarantee biodiversity on the long run, while both capturing new opportunities from socio-economic developments and climate change.

Indeed as Jeffrey McNeely pointed out, maintaining life on earth should be seen not as a burden, but cast in much more positive terms if we are actually to convince all sectors to contribute.

Let me give it a try by stating that we need to search for a redirection of rural development by considering the Natura 2000 network not a burden but an opportunity for sustainable economic growth.

The Natura 2000 network in the European Union aims at maintaining a favourable status of species and habitats listed in the Habitats Directive. So far Natura 2000 is frequently received by land users as a rather fixed and isolated juridical network in spatial policy merely aimed at protection and conservation, which does not yet allow for a gentle interplay with socio-economic realities. However in the past habitat sizes changed significantly under natural conditions, and when humans entered the ecosystem, biodiversity became largely linked to land-use systems being part and an outcome of socio-economic developments.

It is an 'idée fixe' to think that we can protect habitats if we would be able to keep them as they are. History shows that landscapes always have been subject to changes. It is also an 'idée fixe' to think that we can preserve biodiversity by fencing off habitats in nature reserves. Here history also shows that there has always been interplay with socio-economic developments some of which have been initiated by political-administrative measures.

Most of the European agro-pastoral infield-outfield systems stayed economic profitable until the end of the 19th century. In some places these systems developed as a flywheel for market-oriented economic development. There was a shift from the primary sector to the second and tertiary sector. Policies intervened to steer to economic more profitable land-use systems. In the course of the 20th century outfields became forest plantations, arable land (due to artificial fertilizers) or... nature reserves.

Now, a century later, a major part of the species and habitats of the Natura 2000 network is found in the former outfield areas. But nature conservation and economic growth are difficult to reconcile as is clear from the many ways that economic expansion, including the productivity increase in agriculture, has to be compensated elsewhere. Competitive farming in the global agricultural market is no longer an option in the Less Favoured Areas (LFA's). Instead Natura 2000 is a possible vehicle to reconcile farming for niche markets supplying services including the provision of biodiversity, clean water, fire protection, and attractive landscapes preconditioning opportunities for tourism and rural enterprise.

The Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) has been a success in terms of increasing agricultural production and, since its introduction in 1962, the EU has developed from being an importer to a major exporter of food. Now most of the food needed in the EU can be produced on a relatively small area of farmland. Unintentionally the CAP has been one of the driving forces behind the loss of social cohesion and the decline of ecosystem functions,

landscape quality and cultural heritage⁵. A new challenge for the CAP therefore is to invest in the LFA's that cover already more than half the territory, not for massive food production but rather for other services.

Clearly we need to define sustainable land-use scenario's, in which biodiversity objectives and the socio-economic conditions can enforce each other, which is a factor sine qua non to achieve the Natura 2000 goals in the EU.

Natura 2000 is a powerful tool but the increasing extent of legal regulation and book keeping can result in the opposite effect. I think I do understand the fear both from nature protectors, but also from businessmen and arguing in court between lawyers is not exactly the best place to enhance a better interplay between entrepreneurs and ecologists. Therefore, a flexible approach of Natura 2000 and a bridge to other political-administrative tools such as the CAP may be better suited to guarantee biodiversity on the long run, while both capturing new opportunities from socio-economic development and raising resilience of the local eco-infrastructure to globalization and climate change.

⁵ Position paper REP 2008 (Rural European Platform)
<http://www.ruraleuropeanplatform.org/docs/PositionPorto>