

The European “Business and Biodiversity Initiative“

András Demeter, Nature Conservation Policy Officer,
Nature and Biodiversity Unit, Directorate General for the Environment,
European Commission, Brussels

Biodiversity is a source of goods and services that are central to our economies, and the destruction of species and habitats has an enormous economic impact. The European Commission now considers the issue of biodiversity loss to be as important as climate change. The urgent need for action in this area has been repeated several times in conclusions of various meetings of the Environment Council of the EU.

Businesses consume ecosystem goods and services, and they contribute to ecosystem change. They therefore have a huge impact on biodiversity. The potential impact of biodiversity loss on business is also very large, so conserving biodiversity makes good business case. When businesses get this message, preserving biodiversity will be a movement driven by an understanding of the competitive advantages to be gained from biodiversity conservation, and from the sustainable use of biological resources.

There is a growing realisation in the business world that natural resources must be used in a sustainable fashion, and there is a new sense of urgency in biodiversity conservation. Since it has become increasingly widely accepted that governments and policy makers alone cannot tackle the biodiversity crisis, the European Commission's 2006 Communication on Biodiversity and the associated Biodiversity Action Plan identified for the first time in an EU document the need for building partnerships with businesses as one of its key actions. For the same reason, the Portuguese Presidency of the EU Council in the second half of 2007 chose the development of a European Business and Biodiversity Initiative as one of its environmental priorities, a project it pursued in close cooperation with the European Commission. Substantial technical assistance was also provided by the IUCN Countdown 2010 Initiative.

After a series of consultative meetings with various stakeholders, one of the first results of this joint work was the high-level Conference on Business and Biodiversity held in Lisbon on 12 and 13 November 2007, which brought together over 400 participants, including representatives from over 150 companies, for in-depth discussions on how the initiative should be shaped. A number of important conclusions are summarized in the Message from Lisbon (<http://countdown2010.net/business>), including the need to promote the incorporation of biodiversity strategies in the business sector, to raise awareness among consumers, to offer information and expertise to business, and to assist companies in shaping their commitments to biodiversity.

The European Commission is committed to implementing the Message from Lisbon, and to ensuring that the European Business and Biodiversity Initiative becomes a working entity that leads to measurable results. In 2008 a call for tender will be published for a service contract to assist the Commission to set up and to put into operation a technical facility - a platform - to engage businesses and other stakeholders in the initiative, and to organize activities such as exchange and benchmarking of best practices and preparation of guidance documents. The dialogue started in 2007 will continue with a number of priority sectors in order to stimulate action on the ground, and the Commission will continue to work with the Member States to harmonize ongoing activities at the national level with the added value at the EU level.

The Natura 2000 ecological network, with some 25,000 sites covering approximately 18% of the EU27 Member States, is the centrepiece of the EU's biodiversity policy. Natura 2000 has also been identified as one of the added values at the EU level for the business and biodiversity initiative. In 2008, the Directorate General for the Environment of the European Commission continues to fund a pilot project started in 2007 to set up Biodiversity Technical Assistance Unit (BTAUs) in Bulgaria, Hungary and Poland - new Member States with economies dominated by Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (SME) which comprise 99.8% of EU businesses. These Member States are also characterised by large rural populations and with extensive new networks of Natura 2000 sites that require management. By finding ways to enable appropriate profitable business activities that also benefit Natura 2000 site management, this pilot project is devising and testing methodologies, and creating generic tools to help SMEs, hopefully applicable across all EU27 countries (for more information, see www.smeforbiodiversity.eu).

Finally, the Ninth Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity, to be held in Bonn, Germany in May 2008, and the continued development of the European Business and Biodiversity Initiative with support from the European Commission, will provide further opportunities to strengthen European leadership in halting biodiversity loss.