



The Irish Uplands Forum

Comments on the EU Biodiversity Strategy

August 2020

What is the Irish Uplands Forum?

The Irish Uplands Forum (IUF) is a voluntary body established in 1995 following a national conference, to assist upland communities to face the many economic, social and environmental challenges arising in the upland districts of Ireland. Its members include farmers, recreational users, ecologists, tourism and other countryside service providers who represent those who live, work or recreate in the Irish Uplands. The primary focus of IUF is the pursuit of a partnership approach to sustainable upland management and to assist upland communities to address local challenges. To find out more about the IUF go to www.irishuplandsforum.org

IUF Vision

The Forum will be a collective voice advocating the sustainable management of Ireland's uplands with state bodies and providing informed support to partnership based groups that share this aim so as to build a vibrant network that will contribute to the realisation of the full potential of upland people and places.

IUF Guiding Principles:

Uplands provide society with a range of priceless eco-services including being sources of clean drinking water, significant carbon stores, home to a unique biodiversity, some of our wildest landscapes, resource for farming, forestry and recreational experiences. The sustainable management of these services should be guided by the following principles:

- Respect for their special natural environment;
- Recognition of diverse interests and the importance of ensuring all voices are heard;
- Nourishment and maintenance of a partnership approach;
- Enhancing the quality of life of residents;
- Fostering appropriate enterprises;
- Recognition of the role of hill-farmer in maintaining these unique environments;
- Adherence to eco-tourism principles (See <http://www.ecotourism.org>)
- Transparency and respectful communications

Voice

IUF communications will inform national policy by providing an integrated stakeholder response to discussions and proposals regarding upland issues and communities.



EU Biodiversity Strategy

IUF welcomes the publication of the EU Biodiversity Strategy, issued in early 2020. This document provides our assessment of the potential impact of the strategy on Upland environments and communities and suggests an approach to its implementation.

The objectives of the EU Biodiversity Strategy are to:

- Fully implement the Birds and Habitats Directives
- Maintain and restore ecosystems and their services
- Increase the contribution of agriculture and forestry to biodiversity
- Ensure the sustainable use of fisheries resources
- Combat alien species
- Step up action to tackle the global biodiversity crisis

IUF Analysis of Objectives of the Biodiversity Strategy

- *Fully implement the Birds and Habitats Directives*

This is a regular call. What has been done in Ireland? Designation - yes (c. 13% of the country); management plans - yes (but only paper exercises), with very limited resources for management by the responsible agencies, in particular the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS), with the exception of work for specialist ecologists. Significant resources allocated by the EU for Natura lands in the past have been redirected to other government programmes. Unfortunately, the Natura designation process has antagonized many farmers and made them suspicious of almost everything associated with the NPWS.

This section of the Strategy specifies the percentage (%) of a country's area requiring designation (30%) and "strict protection" (10%), without providing any rationale for these figures. As the Uplands are currently well represented by existing designations it is likely that they will become the focus of attention for this objective, and also potentially the cutaway Midlands (ex Bord na Mona) bogs, or coastal/ estuarine areas.

- *Maintain and Restore Ecosystems and their Services*

The reference to ecosystem services is welcome as it recognizes the multi-functionality of lands and waters, their biodiversity, as well as their regulating and productive values. The achievement of this objective should provide particular resources to Uplands communities to maintain and enhance their significant ecosystem services (upland soils and rocks, water storage, carbon sequestration, etc).

- *Increase the Contribution of Agriculture and Forestry to Biodiversity*



This objective should support traditional agriculture in the Uplands as these areas contribute significantly to biodiversity, as indicated by the area of uplands already designated for biodiversity. While monocultural coniferous forestry is not suitable for upland areas, targeted silviculture of appropriate species, possibly along riparian zones, can foster biodiversity and reduce flooding risks downstream.

- *Ensure the Sustainable Use of Fisheries Resources*

This objective is of some relevance to the Uplands as it highlights the use of watercourses for electricity generation and for water extraction, a function that is relevant for certain upland rivers and catchments.

- *Combat Alien Species*

This objective is of relevance as *Rhododendron* and *Gunnera* are common problems in upland areas in the west of Ireland. Sitka spruce has 'escaped' coniferous plantations and in many cases has become invasive.

- *Step Up Action to Tackle the Global Biodiversity Crisis*

Addressing biodiversity issues in the Uplands, the 'water towers' of the country, will enhance these unique environments and deliver benefits downstream for communities.

Implementation of the Eu Biodiversity Strategy

1. Where will resources come from to implement this strategy?

In the opinion of IUF, resources should come from the Irish government and the EU, through the CAP and multi-annual funding frameworks. As a start, targeted rural development funds should support the integration of land use and biodiversity.

2. How will this strategy be implemented in Ireland?

In the past, Ireland has implemented EU strategies and Directives concerned with biodiversity with the support of environmental NGOs. However, limited discussion has taken place with landowners or rural development interests. The achievement of the ambitious targets in this Biodiversity Strategy requires a national debate and research, using a participatory planning approach. The active involvement and support of all landowners, foresters and community development interests should be sought and the development of the strategy should go beyond consultation with environmental NGOs.



The IUF recommends that the elaboration of the Biodiversity Strategy should be informed by:

- 1) a critical review of previous initiatives
- 2) research on the various approaches which could be used to deliver these objectives, and
- 3) analysis of funding and management structures required.

Sustained funding to the national agency charged with conservation and management, the NPWS, must be provided. The IUF suggests that future resourcing of NPWS should include community liaison officers in each functional region to ensure engagement with and buy-in of landowners, communities and NGOs.

The IUF is an advocate of community-based initiatives to support sustainable development in the uplands. It is providing support to upland communities currently implementing upland European Innovation Partnerships (EIPs).

The IUF suggests that the EIP approach should be used to achieve the objectives of the EU Biodiversity Strategy. Should the EIP approach be followed, the achievements of these objectives should be attractive to farmers. They would be provided with advisory services and financial incentives to manage their land for biodiversity and a monitoring system would be put in place to ensure biodiversity objectives are achieved. This would provide benefits for landowners and all of our citizens.

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