

Nature Conservation in Europe: Approaches and Lessons

Annex SK.1 The Identification and Designation of Natura 2000 Sites in Slovakia

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The process for the identification of sites for inclusion in the Natura 2000 network in Slovakia made good use of funding, through initial grants received by environmental NGOs, and the mobilisation and cooperation of all available experts and institutions. The best national expert data concerning the habitats and species were collected, literature reviewed, and some field data were collected. All data were streamlined and made available in electronic GIS format. Afterwards, all distribution layers for all species and habitats were assessed, and locations with the highest overlap of species and habitats protected under the Birds and Habitats Directives were identified. These sites with the highest biodiversity were mainly those proposed as new Sites of Conservation Interest (SCIs) under the Habitats Directive and Special Protection Areas (SPAs) under the Birds Directive. After this, a quality assessment was carried out and some new areas were proposed in relation to the coherency of the network.

Most of the SCIs were identified for multiple habitats and species, in fact there is no site identified for only one species or habitat. This supports the stability and sustainability of the proposed sites (Šeffer and Lasák, 2004). The result was 381 proposed SCIs, covering 11.7% of the country, which were included in the Decree of the Ministry of Environment of SR No. 3/2004-5.1 on the National list of SCIs¹. The list was updated in 2011 and 2017. In July 2022 the Government of the Slovak Republic approved the addition of another 97 sites², increasing to the current 739 SCIs in total, covering 12.7% of the country's area. The sufficiency of the national list of SCIs is the subject of bilateral negotiations between Slovakia and the European Commission, which filed an infringement against Slovakia on this matter.

The identification of SPAs was based on BirdLife International's Important Bird Area (IBA) inventory, which entailed the mapping of Birds Directive Annex I species, migratory bird populations and the application of IBA – C criteria (Rybanič *et al.*, 2004). Initially the list of SPAs proposed by the government at the time of EU accession, was slightly different from that developed using the IBA-C criteria. The proposed list was challenged by the European Commission and after some discussions the final list of 41 SPAs was adopted in May 2005 by the government.

The SPA designation process was completed in 2012 with Levočské vrchy SPA. With this addition, the SPA network now covers 26.2% of the total area of the Slovak Republic.

The experience with the designation of SPAs varied regionally, from SPAs where owners were requesting quicker designation with the intention to receive payments from Rural Development funds (e.g. Horná Orava SPA), to significant resistance and discussion. An example of the latter was Levočské vrchy SPA, which was previously a military area and where land had been given back to the original owners, who disputed the need for conservation restrictions in the SPA.

Communication with various stakeholders remained the biggest challenge in the whole process of Natura 2000 designation in Slovakia. Not only because the authorities were initially insufficiently prepared, but also due to very different perspectives of local owners and citizens, who were unclear about the role of the Natura 2000 network, which is a complex concept beyond their experience. Another reason was the distrust of some local populations towards the state administration, which was apparent especially in less-developed and more socially marginalised regions.

¹ <http://www.soprs.sk/natura/dokumenty/legislativa/eu/vynos.doc>

² <https://rokovania.gov.sk/RVL/Material/27465/1>

References

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