



Nature & Health

Green 10 briefing for the European Parliament

6-8 October 2009

Nature and health: Why ecosystems matter to human health and the economy

Nature's goods and services (the so called ecosystem services) are the ultimate foundations of life, health and our whole economy. Human beings' fundamental need for food, water, clean air, shelter and climate stability, are all provided by ecosystems. Moreover, nature is essential for mental well-being, recreation and recovery from stress. We often assume that good health derives from prudent consumer choices and behaviours, with access to good health care. But this ignores the role of the array of ecosystems that allow people to enjoy good health, economic activity and life itself.

However, across the globe, most valuable ecosystems and the services they provide are being overexploited, degraded, or lost. Global extinction of species is over 100 times the natural rate. Most major marine fish stocks are outside safe biological limits. Worldwide, forest ecosystems are exposed to illegal logging and being destroyed from conversion to agriculture. Availability of freshwater, so essential for human health, has declined markedly in recent decades with up to 7 billion people forecasted to live in water-stressed areas by 2050; meanwhile many of our natural water sources have been polluted, over-abstracted and abused. Thousands of different chemicals find their way into the environment, often directly or indirectly damaging wildlife and people, for example by causing cancer, reproductive problems or disruption of the hormone system. Climate change is expected to make the situation worse.

The costs of repairing ecological damage can be prohibitive and often requires a lot of time. A recent study on the Economics of Ecosystems & Biodiversity shows a clear need to tackle the loss of biodiversity and ecosystem services proactively. Not only to prevent a further decline in ecosystem services, but also to avoid a high financial burden on citizens that an end-of-pipe solution would entail.

Why this is important for the European Parliament

The European Parliament starts its new term at a moment where the world faces unprecedented environmental and economic challenges. MEPs therefore have a great responsibility to ensure Europe embarks to become a global leader on sustainability – fighting climate change and biodiversity loss in an integrated way, and ensuring human health and long-term prosperity around the globe.

Almost nine in ten European citizens say that they are concerned about the impact of the environment on their health. Health risks are no longer merely a result of localized exposures to "traditional" forms of pollution – although these still certainly exist. They are also a result of broader pressures on ecosystems.

During this Parliament term, several key environmental issues will be up for debate and legislative action including biodiversity, agriculture, fisheries, forest and water. The European Parliament has co-decision powers on environmental legislation. If the Lisbon Treaty is adopted, the co-decision procedure would apply to agriculture as well as all fisheries decisions apart from establishing yearly fishing opportunities. In addition, the European Parliament plays a fundamental role in overseeing how legislation safeguarding biodiversity and ecosystem services is properly implemented and enforced.

When and how the European Parliament will work on it

Post 2010 Biodiversity Policy

The EU is failing to meet its objective of halting the loss of biodiversity by 2010 – a recent European Commission report estimates that 65 per cent of European habitats and more than half its remaining species are still under threat. It will be in this context, that the new biodiversity targets and strategies for the EU and the world will be agreed upon.

The European Commission is expected to publish important proposals in early 2010 (on overarching targets) and at the end of 2010 (on a new biodiversity strategy). The European Parliament should be a driver for an ambitious new policy framework on biodiversity and ecosystem protection: firstly by strengthening and better financing the implementation of existing legislation (such as Nature, Water, Marine Directives) and secondly through stronger and better integration of biodiversity and ecosystems in all relevant EU policies. To ensure this integration, the European Parliament should put biodiversity and ecosystem services firmly on the agenda of all its relevant committees including Agriculture and Rural Development, Fisheries, Budgets, Regional Development and International Trade.

EU Budget

The European Parliament will have a crucial influence in shaping the new EU budget (2014-2020). The phasing out of environmentally harmful subsidies and investments in a sustainable and healthy future must be at the core of this debate.

Common Fisheries Policy

The reform of the Common Fisheries Policy, to be finalised in 2012, will provide another and perhaps final chance to protect our seas and manage our fisheries sustainably. The European Parliament can help ensure real reform around ecosystem-based management practices and stock recovery plans.

Forests

Legislation to halt the trade in illegal timber within the EU, although currently delayed, will be crucial for consumers and business. It is estimated that 16 to 19% of EU imports are coming from illegal or suspicious sources. Legislation to halt the trade in illegal wood and products on the EU market is under discussion in the EU Council. The second reading is expected in the first half of 2010. The European Parliament should support strong measures against deforestation and forest degradation including at the international level and ensure that only legally sourced timber and timber products can be sold in the EU. Furthermore, the Parliament will probably play a role in the EU implementation of the deforestation component of the next global climate agreement (expected in Copenhagen in the end of 2009).

Climate change adaptation

The EU is currently preparing its strategy to reduce the EU's vulnerability to the impacts of climate change. A first phase of the EU's strategy will run until 2012 and will lay the groundwork for preparing a comprehensive EU adaptation strategy from 2013 and beyond. The European Parliament should push for the proposed framework for all adaptation measures to be firmly based on a cross cutting approach that strengthens the resilience of ecosystems – because we can only adapt if we help nature to adapt!

Water

The EU water policy reform started with the adoption of the Water Framework Directive (WFD) has entered a crucial phase when the results of analysis and preparations will be translated into specific actions to return our freshwater ecosystems to ecological health. The European Parliament played a crucial role in the shaping of the WFD and now still has an essential role to play to keep the implementation of the WFD high on the political agenda and ensure that it will deliver for EU citizens. In 2011, the European Parliament will vote on the updated list of priority substances under the Water Framework Directive.

Moreover, new complementary instruments in the field of water may be proposed such as for example related to water using products and building standards.

Chemicals

The European Parliament plays an important role in supervising the implementation of EU's chemical legislation (REACH). Especially the use of hormone disrupting chemicals is causing a substantive threat to European citizens, requiring a strong EU response.

Health

The European Parliament should call for a reinvigorated and more legally binding EU Action Plan on environment and health, and prepare the EU budget in such a way that it contributes to sustained ecosystem functioning, a key building block for a healthy EU.

Genetically Modified Organisms (GMO)

The Parliament should ensure a thorough and transparent reform of the way in which the EU carries out GMO risk assessments. In particular, it should encourage the European Commission to fulfil its role as a risk manager and to ensure the proper application of the current rules on GMO authorisation. Also it should encourage the Commission and Member States to adopt strict rules to prevent contamination in the EU ("coexistence") by supporting the lowest technically possible thresholds for GMO presence when the Seeds Directives are amended, as well as supporting a strict and full liability regime which places the burden on companies and farmers using/producing GM crops.

Europe's global ecological footprint

Fisheries, agriculture, forests and water policy reforms, as well as the development of a new EU Budget provide opportunities to take serious steps to reduce the EU's footprint in terms of the unsustainable demand for resources from other parts of the world. The EU has one of the largest global footprints in terms of water, import of timber and timber products, and wild-caught seafood.

How can we work together

The Green10 coordinates joint responses and recommendations to EU decision makers. We work with the EU law-making institutions - the European Commission, the European Parliament and the Council of Ministers - to ensure that the environment is placed at the heart of policymaking. This includes working with our member organisations in the Member States to facilitate their input into the EU decision-making process.

For more detailed information please download our report "*Environment at the heart of Europe - The role of the European Parliament*" at www.green10.org !

Who we are

The Green 10 are ten of the leading European environmental organisations and networks, including: BirdLife International, CAN-Europe, CEE Bankwatch Network, the European Environmental Bureau (EEB), Friends of the Earth Europe, Greenpeace, Health & Environment Alliance (HEAL), International Friends of Nature, Transport + Environment (T&E) and WWF European Policy Office. Membership of the Green 10 is more than 20 million people.



www.green10.org