



FACTSHEET 2

ECONOMIC BENEFITS OF INVESTING IN NATURE RESTORATION

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OF PROTECTED
HABITATS AND
63%
OF SPECIES IN THE EU
HAVE A POOR OR BAD
CONSERVATION STATUS

Ecosystem restoration is not just about saving wildlife. A growing body of evidence shows that nature contributes to our overall health and wellbeing¹ and provides significant socio-economic benefits including sustainable jobs and ecotourism opportunities. Protecting and restoring nature and well-functioning ecosystems is also a fundamental tool in tackling the twin crisis of biodiversity loss and climate change.

But today, we are losing nature at an unprecedented rate. Globally, one million species are threatened with extinction and the health of the ecosystems on which we depend is deteriorating more rapidly than ever². Europe is no exception, with 81% of protected habitats and 63% of species in the EU having a poor or bad conservation status³.

To bend the curve of nature loss, protecting remaining natural places will not be sufficient – we need to invest in large-scale restoration as well.

In the 2030 Biodiversity Strategy, the European Commission announced that it will propose legally binding EU nature restoration targets in 2021 to restore biodiversity and degraded ecosystems. WWF welcomes this proposal and is advocating for the following restoration targets by 2030⁴:

- **At least 15% of both EU's land and sea area to be restored**
- **15% of rivers restored to a free-flowing state**
- **A target for CO₂ removal by natural sinks as a separate target from the EU 2030 emission reduction target**

This factsheet looks at just some of the economic benefits of investing in nature restoration.





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The challenge

Ecosystem services delivered by biodiversity – from crop pollination and water purification to flood protection and carbon sequestration – are vital to human wellbeing. Globally, these services are worth an estimated USD 125-140 trillion (EUR 102-115 trillion) per year – more than one and a half times the size of the global economy⁵.

But we are losing nature faster than it can restore itself, and the costs of inaction on biodiversity loss are soaring. Between 1997 and 2011, the world lost an estimated USD 4-20 trillion (EUR 3.3-16.5 trillion) each year in ecosystem services due to land-cover change, including conversion of natural forests into cropland, and USD 6-11 trillion (EUR 5-9 trillion) a year from land degradation, like soil erosion and desertification⁵. Today, more than half of the world's total GDP is at risk due to nature loss⁶.

In Europe, the economic benefits of the Natura 2000 network are valued at EUR 200-300 billion a year and around 4.4 million jobs are directly dependent on the maintenance of healthy ecosystems, a significant proportion of which is situated within the Natura 2000 sites⁷. Closing the funding gap that's needed for the effective management of the network could generate 500,000 additional jobs⁸.

All in all, investing in large-scale nature restoration makes socio-economic sense, and the benefits of restoration are on average ten times higher than the costs⁹. Achieving the Bonn Challenge target of restoring 46% of the world's degraded forests, for example, could generate USD 7-30 (EUR 6-25) for every euro spent⁵.

The economic benefits of investing in nature

Nature restoration leads to **job creation** and **economic growth** in regions where the environment has been degraded or even completely destroyed. In post-industrial regions and landscapes, for example, nature restoration has helped boost the local economy through employment and tourism opportunities, restoring the social fabric of the region and providing locals with a healthier environment to live in.

The tourism sector – the third largest industry in the EU – is crucial for many European countries and regions. The lockdown measures in response to the COVID-19 pandemic have heightened our appreciation for green spaces, but if carried out irresponsibly, tourism can cause severe environmental damage¹⁰. Luckily, there are ways of combining responsible and sustainable tourism with measures to restore the natural environment – and do so with huge socio-economic benefits.

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CASE STUDY 1

When the mines close

When the last coal mines in the Limburg region of Belgium closed in the 1990s, 40,000 people lost their jobs and the area's vast extraction pits, which have over time turned into wetlands, went into post-industrial decline. In 2006, following efforts by the local environmental NGO Regionaal Landschap Kempen en Maasland (RLKM), the area became Belgium's first national park, stretching over several Natura 2000 sites.

The creation of the Hoge Kempen National Park had a strong socio-economic argument behind it – the park has created 400 direct and indirect full-time jobs and direct economic benefits of around EUR 20 million. Each year, the park generates around EUR 191 million in indirect revenue, dwarfing the investment costs of EUR 128 million¹¹.

CASE STUDY 2

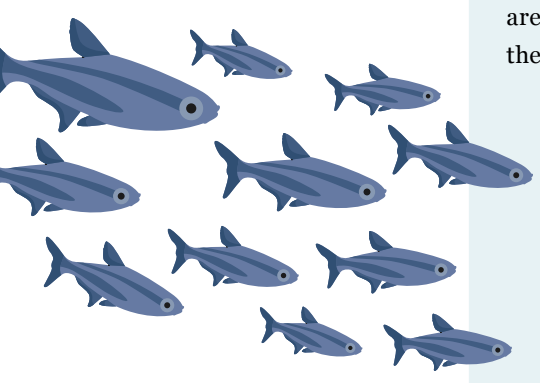
Connecting green areas

The Emscher Landscape Park (ELP), in the north of Germany's Ruhr area, is the largest ecosystem restoration project in Europe. Created over 20 years ago in a once heavily industrialised region, the park system has brought together 20 cities, and is part of a river revitalisation programme and more than 100 complementary green projects.

The ELP acts as a "green connector" between the settlements of the Ruhr valley, and uses the abandoned industrial areas along the Emscher River as a unique form of green space. In addition to the major benefits for the local ecosystems, surface water quality and urban regeneration, the ELP has created more than 55,000 jobs in the North Rhine-Westphalia region.

With numerous recreational activities on offer – including hiking and biking trails, industrial heritage and cultural sites, as well as a climbing wall at a former iron smelting site – the park attracts around one million visitors every year. The value of the parks' direct ecosystem services is estimated at EUR 21 million, while the additional benefits to users are estimated at EUR 107 million annually¹².





CASE STUDY 3

Bringing the fish back

The Mediterranean Sea is the most overfished sea in the world, with over 75% of its fish stocks at risk of depletion¹⁴. In recent decades, no-take marine reserves – areas where no fishing, mining, drilling, or other extractive activities are allowed – have proven effective in restoring marine biodiversity within their boundaries, while improving the surrounding local economies. They achieve this by enhancing fisheries and tourism opportunities through the restoration of fish populations.

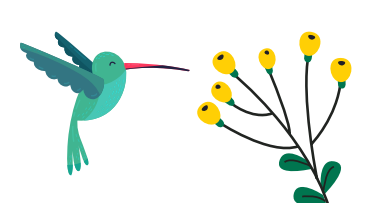
The Medes Islands Marine Reserve in Spain, created in 1983, successfully recovered fish biomass by some 500%, compared to the nearby unprotected areas – and did so in just one decade. Despite the no-take area spanning only around 1km², the recovery of fish biomass stimulated the growth of marine ecotourism, a sector that now supports 200 direct jobs and brings in EUR 12 million to the local economy each year. This recovery has also led to a spillover effect of more fish being present outside of the no-take area, which benefits local fishers. By 1991, the total annual profit from fishing and tourism was 13 times higher than before the reserve was implemented.¹³

The Medes Islands Marine Reserve shows us that, if designed properly, marine reserves can generate enough revenue to pay for themselves and help recuperate short-term financial losses for fishers through income from tourism. On average, they are also four to 12 times more profitable than unprotected areas.



Healthy ecosystems provide fertile soils, clean water and food, while reducing the spread of diseases and offering protection against natural disasters. These services have a high social and economic value: insect pollinators, for example, are essential to agriculture, while natural river floodplains help protect against flooding that can cause severe economic and social damage.

In Europe, 84% of crop species benefit from **animal pollination**, which is estimated to be worth around EUR 10-15 billion to the EU's agriculture each year¹⁵. One case in point – the economic value of the strawberry increases by 92% thanks to animal pollination¹⁶. Unfortunately, Europe is experiencing a widespread decline in pollinator species caused by land-use changes, urbanisation, pesticide use and climate change. In just 27 years, Germany, for instance, lost over 75% of its flying insect populations, with wild pollinators being particularly hard hit¹⁷.





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CASE STUDY 4

Pathways for pollinators



B-Lines, launched by the Buglife conservation charity in the UK, is a shared endeavour to reverse the decline of pollinators by focusing the national efforts to restore and create wildflower-rich grasslands and habitats. The B-Lines are a series of 'insect pathways' running through the countryside and urban areas, along which people are restoring and creating wildflower-rich habitats.

B-Lines aims to create and restore flower-rich habitat across the UK, not only strengthening the connectivity of the insect pathways, but also improving the health and wellbeing of local communities by bringing them closer to nature. In North East England, B-Lines has so far restored 30 hectares by bringing neglected grassland into positive management and creating new ones. To encourage a culture shift in the management of parks and green spaces, the local land managers have been trained to understand how simple changes to grassland management can help pollinators, and eight wildflower areas were created at local schools to increase engagement of the local communities¹⁸.

Healthy rivers and freshwater ecosystems provide a wide range of services, including food and building materials and recreational opportunities. Despite their high socio-economic value, however, rivers across the globe have been modified for irrigation, hydropower, flood protection and navigation at the expense of their other functions. There is a business case for large-scale investments to **restore rivers** to their more natural state and mitigate the risk of flooding and droughts.

CASE STUDY 5

Flood prevention in the Danube



Over the past decades, the Danube, Europe's second-largest river, has been significantly modified with extensive embankments, dams and drainage works to allow for intensive agriculture in its floodplains. To this day only a small percentage of the floodplains remain in natural condition. These developments came at the cost of severe ecological degradation, endangering many of the fish species and increasing the risk of flooding.

Many of the man-made embankments are now in a poor state, requiring an estimated EUR 572 million to repair them, but there is evidence to suggest that large-scale restoration of the floodplains would make more socio-economic sense, even if the initial investment costs would be higher. Traditional dams amplify the risk of downstream flooding, and analyses of similar restoration





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projects show that floodplains can significantly reduce that risk. One cost-benefit analysis estimates that large-scale floodplain restoration in the Danube could also generate hundreds of thousands of jobs in the short to medium term, while offsetting the losses to agricultural production through tourism and fishing opportunities¹⁹. The restoration would also improve the quality of water and address shortages during dry seasons.

Conclusion

From rebuilding the social fabric of post-industrial regions and creating jobs to the provision of ecosystem services like clean water and flood protection, nature restoration makes socio-economic sense.

As such, spending money on nature restoration is an investment – not an expense. Large-scale nature restoration in the EU will not only help tackle the twin crises of biodiversity loss and climate change but also benefit local – and global – economies.

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