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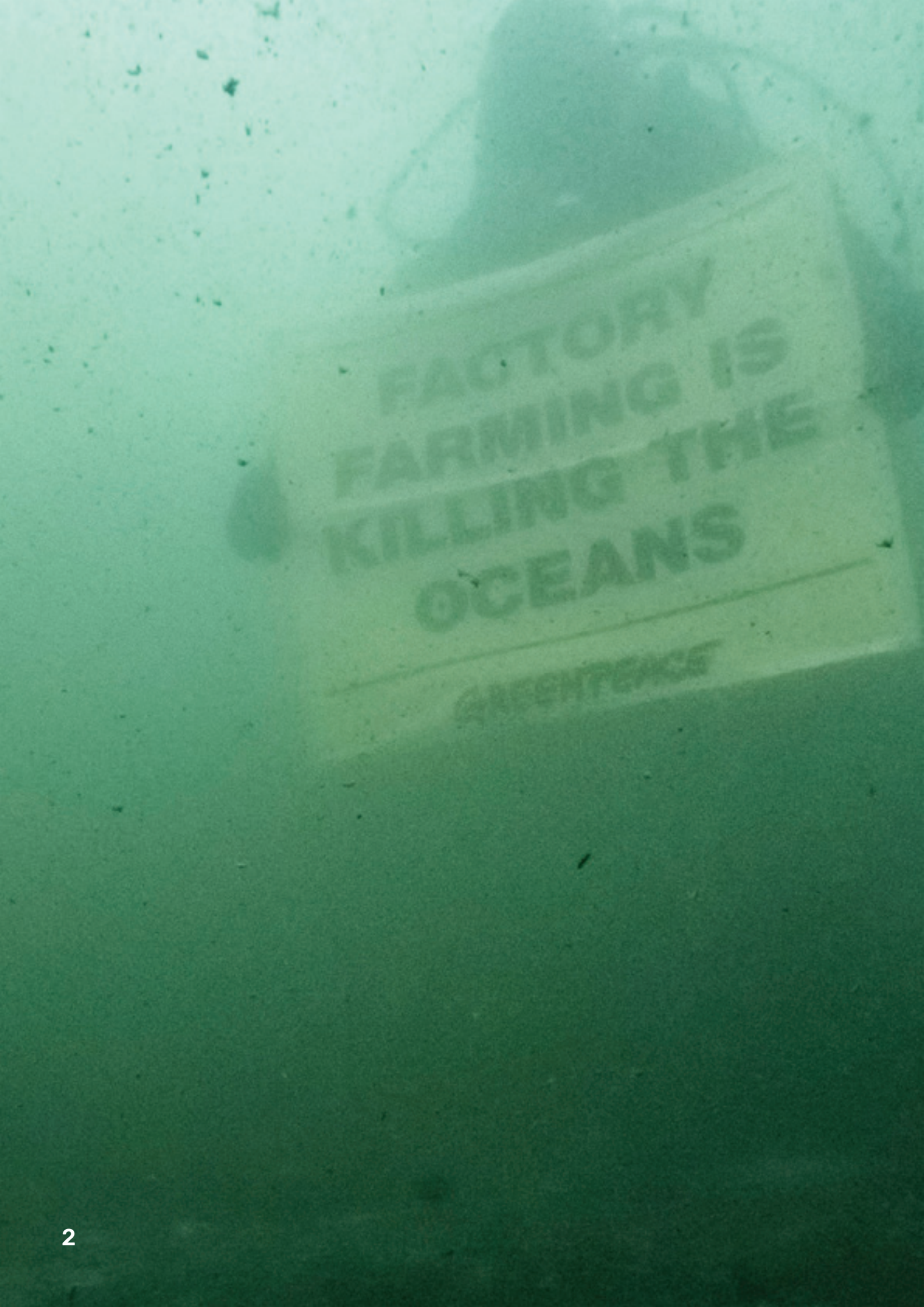
Failing Nature

How life and biodiversity are destroyed in Europe


FACTORY
FARMING IS
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Executive Summary

The 6th mass extinction that is happening now is caused by human activity. As a species, we have a clear set of environmental, planetary boundaries that we must stay within if we are to survive.

The EU and its member states are good at acknowledging these facts, whilst simultaneously displaying a shocking willingness to decimate natural resources locally, nationally, and around the world.

Biodiversity is widely understood to be one of many factors interlinked with the climate crisis. But that is only one side of the story. Biodiversity loss isn't a singular issue to be addressed amongst climate conversations, rather it is a fundamental driver of the climate crisis and as such should be given equal political and public priority.

Human activity is an important influencer of biological, geological and atmospheric processes. Nature is our life support system, with the power to mitigate and adapt to the impacts of a heating planet. Putting planetary health and the protection of all species at the heart of all human activity should be obvious. Instead we are seeing the chemical pollution of land and seas, the destruction of forests and habitats, and an increase in industrial agriculture that is stripping EU countries and the rest of the planet of vital natural assets. These are irreplaceable natural resources, and our greatest defence against the climate crisis.

Global targets attempt to address these issues, and they provide a useful set of measurements for governments. Targets can be ambitious and far reaching, they can provide a guideline for action, but throughout Europe, they are failing to prompt decisive, binding improvements. Instead the protections that are in place are woefully inadequate.

This publication outlines some of the most devastating losses of biodiversity in Europe. The pollution of important bodies of water in Bulgaria, Denmark, Germany and Spain. Rampant logging and clear cutting of forests in Sweden, Romania, Poland and Germany. Slaughterhouse plans that risk the environment in Switzerland, nitrogen pollution from animal farming in the Netherlands and bulldozing urban green spaces in Belgium.

These EU Member states are supposed leaders in the fight against the climate and biodiversity crisis. If this is how they behave, how can the EU demand action from the rest of the world?

Across the continent, local people are taking up the fight to protect their homes, and life supporting systems of nature. Now, it is also time for governments and politicians to stand up and tackle the drivers of destruction at their roots.

Divers documenting oxygen depletion in Denmark's coastal waters

Sites of nature destruction across Europe

Contents

Introduction:

The world is in a planetary emergency

Headlines from the most comprehensive scientific assessment on global biodiversity[1] are bleak: The sixth mass extinction is underway, and it is driven by human action. Around 1 million species face extinction, many within decades.

Research has identified nine planetary boundaries[2] within which humanity can safely operate. As of the beginning of 2022, six of the nine boundaries have been surpassed[3,4]. Many of the exceeded boundaries; novel entities, biosphere integrity, land-system change, biogeochemical flows, freshwater change and climate change are directly related to biodiversity loss. Researchers have warned for many years that the loss of biodiversity is as serious an emergency as the climate crisis. Despite this global understanding, the destruction of biodiversity continues around the world.

The hypocrisy of Europe

European countries and especially the EU are positioned as global leaders in action against the climate crisis and biodiversity loss. Collectively, the EU is excellent at setting targets, writing goals and discussing the problem, but so far, has failed to achieve any essential targets to halt biodiversity loss even at home.

'Lagging behind' might be something of an understatement. The case studies in this publication are indicative of the way targets are ineffectual even in European countries who present themselves as role models of nature protection.

"All environmental legislation relies on proper implementation and enforcement. Over the last 30 years, the EU has put in place a solid legislative framework to protect and restore its natural capital. However, recent evaluations show that although legislation is fit for purpose, implementation on the ground is lagging behind[5]". EU 2030 Biodiversity Strategy

Aerial view of forest and clearcut close nature reserve in Västernorrland in Sweden

The forces driving nature destruction

Humans have become one of the most important influencers of biological, geological, and atmospheric processes on the planet. Under our influence we are seeing an earth age dominated by species extinction, population decline, loss of biodiversity, species displacement, spread of diseases, climate crisis, and destruction of nature.

The negative impacts of human activity can be defined in four distinct forms:

1. **Toxicological**
   Leaching chemicals, acid rain, toxic landfills and waste deposits.
2. **Natural balance disruption**
   Desertification and destruction of habitats.
3. **Overconsumption**
   High energy and material use.
4. **Suffering of living beings**
   Factory farming, modern slavery, meat industry etc.

According to the IPBES for Europe and Central Asia[6], the major drivers of change in biodiversity are:

- **Land-use change: Production-based subsidies have led to intensification in agriculture and forestry, and, together with urban development, have led to biodiversity decline.**
- **Climate crisis: Rising temperatures and extreme weather events drastically change the conditions for intact ecosystems and have a high impact on biodiversity.**
- **Natural resource extraction and pollution: Despite regulations, pollution continues to pose a major threat to biodiversity and human health.**
- **Invasive alien species have increased in number – for all taxonomic groups across all the subregions of Europe – and this has severe effects on biodiversity and ecosystem services.**

Global Targets

Global targets to halt biodiversity loss were first adopted over 30 years ago at the 1992 Nairobi Conference under the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). In 2010, the world adopted the 20 Global Aichi Targets[7] designed to protect nature and biodiversity.

Thus far there has been some progress towards four of the latest 20 global targets. But according to IPBES we're further than ever from others, namely when it comes to halting habitat loss and unsustainable agriculture, forestry, fishing, and pollution.

In 2015 the UN set 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with ambitious targets and clear objectives. At least two SDGs are directly linked to biodiversity, with several others indirectly related to natural systems and biodiversity. However, the 2022 report is clear: "*Cascading and interlinked crises are putting the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in grave danger, along with humanity's very own survival*[8]".

Cracked soil at Neusiedl Lake in Austria

Within the EU, targets are failing too. The European Environmental Agency State of Nature report especially noted that the EU's targets to protect habitats and species had not been met[9], and that there had been no progress at all in achieving more sustainable agriculture or forestry practices.

Ambitious targets are not the problem, rather a profound lack of *binding* commitments, of legislation and further implementation and of political priority. Despite lofty words, the case studies from across Europe, from Sweden to Bulgaria, from Poland to Spain, across forests, land, and sea outline some of the reality.

"We see the most progress on actions linked to the second priority objective, towards a resource efficient low carbon economy. By contrast, the least progress so far is on actions related to nature protection, environment and health, and integration[10]".

Evaluation of the EU's 7th Environment Action Programme

Nature needs action

Around the world, local groups, nature lovers and protectors are fighting to defend their homes and habitats. There is a clear message that the way we treat nature needs to change. But this has yet to happen at a political level. The only way to end this devastating destruction is to put nature and the overall planetary emergency at the top of the political agenda alongside the climate emergency, in Europe as well as globally. This means that we need to not only protect the life supporting systems of nature, but also tackle the root causes and drivers of these emergencies.

Aerial view of tree cuts in the Hainich, Thuringia in Germany

Case Study Austria and Hungary:

Bird paradise jeopardised for tourism

Lake Neusiedl (Hungarian: Fertő) is a natural treasure protected by many national and international agreements. The Fertő-Hanság National Park (Lake Neusiedl-Seewinkel National Park) is a hotspot of biodiversity. These ecologically diverse habitats are home to a vast richness of rare and unique animal and plant species. The surrounding salt lakes are home to more than 300 rare bird species[11] and an important hub for bird migration from northern Europe and Siberia to the African continent.

The area's natural beauty generates great interest from tourists, with bird watchers and nature lovers travelling to the lake for its biodiversity. Tourism is an important part of the area's economy, however this comes at a price.

Tourism takes a heavy toll

Despite the many protections in place and the precious nature of the habitat, damaging infrastructure is being built around the lake and directly on the lakeshore to accommodate tourism, but at the cost of the very habitats that tourists come to see. Increasing lake and land traffic adversely affects the quality of life for local people and is putting impossible pressure on the ecosystem. As a result the number of birds is decreasing[12].

On the Hungarian side of the lake the Hungarian government unceremoniously transformed a planned renovation of a public bathing place, into a 60-hectare mega-construction project. But in 2021, the president of UNESCO World Heritage demanded an immediate stop to construction and is now threatening to put Lake Neusiedl/Fertő on the red list. The construction site of the 60-hectare area now lies fallow after almost two years (2020-2022) of earthworks.

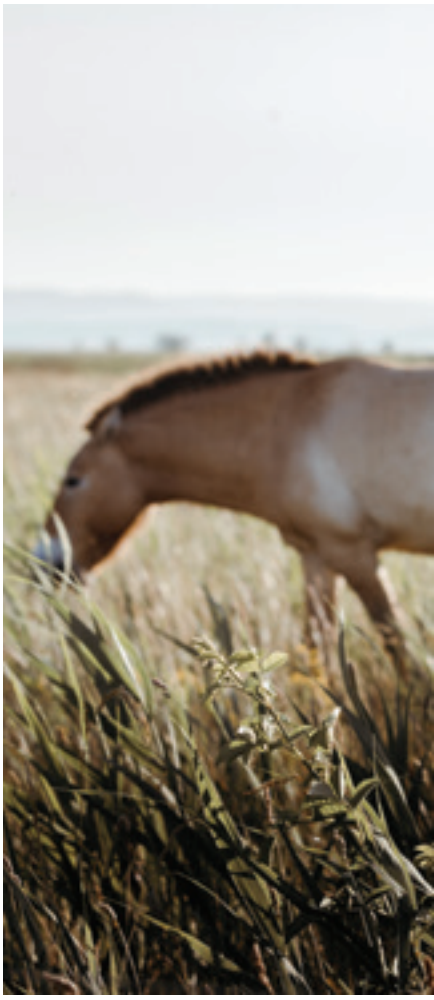
The water is disappearing

Meanwhile, the climate crisis is aggravating an already precarious balance for the lake itself. The lake's water level is 80% dependent on precipitation and evaporation. As the climate crisis continues, less precipitation is arriving at increasingly concentrated intervals. In addition, an increase in water-intensive arable crops is putting pressure on the groundwater table.

In 2022 the water levels dropped to the lowest they've been since records began[13]. Another year as dry as 2022 would dry up the lake completely. These forces combine to create a deadly cocktail for the region.

Construction site at lake Neusiedl

Natural beauty at
Neusiedl Lake in Austria



Ineffective measures to protect nature

The region and the steppe lake are protected by all possible protection agreements, but these are too little implemented and respected. Although many agreements contain requirements to halt degradation, this is not taken seriously, especially in construction projects.

Business interests are given first priority while ecological factors are completely ignored, even though they form the basis for local tourism. Underlining the irony of this is the plan to establish a falconry in the middle of a Natura 2000 bird sanctuary.

Local resistance is working

Surveys commissioned by Greenpeace in Austria as well as in Hungary showed that almost 90% oppose the project and support the protection of Lake Neusiedl/Fertő[14]. The Hungarian mega-construction project was successfully put on hold, before it was too late to restore the area. The project received a lot of media attention and became part of a lawsuit. It can be hoped that the project will be redesigned with an ecological approach. This success is thanks to local support and a concerted effort, efforts that would not be necessary if the protections in place were respected and enforced.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Case Study Belgium:

Citizens protect what they love – urban nature in Europe's capital

The 'Friche Josaphat', Belgium

The ongoing loss of green spaces in Europe's capital is in direct contravention to Europe's Green Deal recommendations. The EU biodiversity strategy[15] urges cities to stop the loss of green urban ecosystems and encourages urban greening. The European Commission recently proposed a nature restoration law[16] with the goal to have no net loss of urban nature by 2030 and a gradual increase of urban nature instead.

Despite this, the Brussels region lost about 14% of its green spaces[17] between 2003 and 2016, affecting forests, open spaces and agricultural lands[18]. The main cause is ongoing urbanisation, mainly for new housing projects. With more destructive projects in the pipeline, Brussels' citizens are organising to protect green spaces in and around Europe's capital.

Green space matters

In densely populated areas like the Brussels region, urban nature is of vital importance. During the Covid-19 lockdown, people realised how crucial access to nature is for their physical health and mental wellbeing. A growing body of academic studies confirms the importance of urban nature for human health.

Urban forests, large trees and other open green spaces help protect urban inhabitants against the strongest impacts of increasingly frequent extreme weather events. Forests serve as sponges during intense rainfalls and help prevent floods. Green areas and forests also serve as natural air conditioners in cities where a profusion of concrete creates "heat-islands" and prevents rainwater infiltration. Urban nature can also be remarkably rich in biodiversity and can even host populations of rapidly declining species.

For example, a house-construction project in Brussels is threatening a forest that harbours a significant population of the rare and fast declining garden dormouse[19]. The adjacent area of threatened "urban wasteland[20]", is rich in biodiversity with over 1200 species, including a wide range of birds, plants, butterflies and dragonflies. While the forests and marshlands under threat may be small compared to old growth forests across Europe, these are major refuges for people and animal species in a densely populated area like Brussels.

Threatened urban nature in Brussels

Friche Josaphat:

25 hectares of marshlands home to over 1200 species including a wide range of birds, plants, butterflies and dragonflies, threatened by housing development including some social housing.

Vallée de Meylemeersch:

12 hectares of fields and forest with rich biodiversity and a unique water absorption capacity, threatened by office buildings and student housing.

Mediapark Bois Georgin:

8 hectares of forest home to the largest population in Brussels of the protected garden dormouse, threatened by offices and housing.

Marais Wiels:

23 hectares of (accidentally created) marshlands where nature has returned in a remarkable way, at risk of housing development.

Donderberg:

2.6 hectares of forest beloved by Brussels' inhabitants for quiet walks, under threat of a development project including private housing, a school, a parking lot and roads.

Citizens push back

Outrage and objection towards the continued onslaught of nature in Brussels is growing fast. The debate is intense and complex. There is a real need for more social housing infrastructure, and efforts to protect nature in the capital must also benefit the more vulnerable communities who often have the least access to green spaces. Yet Brussels' politicians have generally failed to sufficiently consider alternatives to protect both green space and develop social housing, pitting pro-poor and environmental interests against one another instead.

Local committees are uniting and exploring alternative development options with Greenpeace giving full support. In summer 2022, 27 citizen groups and nature associations (representing more than 4000 people) published a manifesto[21] and collected 40,000 signatures addressing Brussels' Prime Minister Rudy Vervoort. They denounce the loss of biodiversity in the capital and demand a moratorium on the destruction of natural sites.

The Groene Delle, a beautiful nature reserve in the Belgian province of Limburg that was threatened by the expansion of an industrial zone, which was ultimately protected thanks to pressure from activists

Children protest with drawings against the plans to turn part of the forest Zennebeemdenbos in Mechelen into a waterpark

Protest sign at the Marais Wiels in Brussels, Belgium. This urban marshland with spontaneous growth of a rich biodiversity is threatened by housing development

After long protest and a forest occupation by activists and locals, the Sterrebos in Ghent, Belgium, was saved from deforestation for student houses

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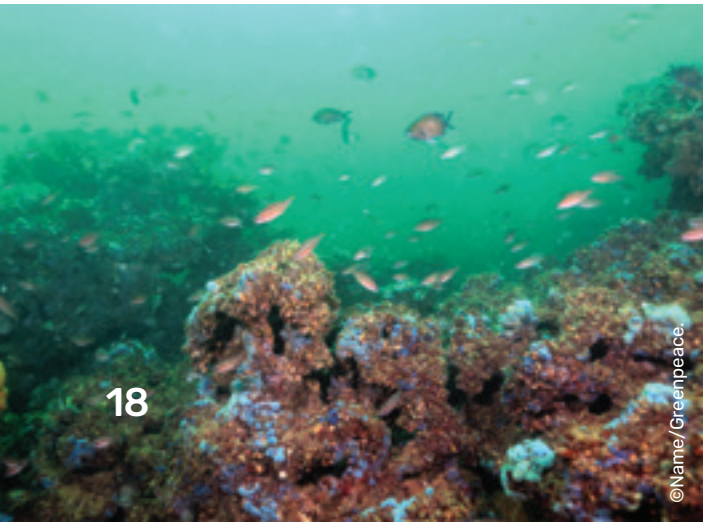
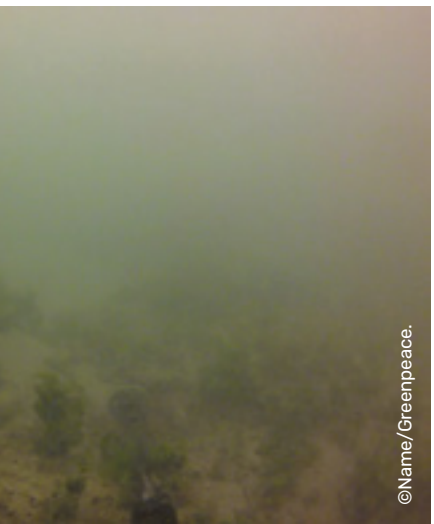
Case Study Bulgaria:

Pressures from your plate - how trending seafood dishes are a disaster for the Black Sea





Despite pledges by the Bulgarian government, the Black Sea is under extreme pressure from industrial fishing and pollution. The Black Sea is part of the vast network of seas in Europe, these are of existential importance not just for humanity, but for a myriad of marine systems and species. These seas moderate our air quality, they impact the weather and they provide us with food and energy.

The huge catchment area and near landlocked location of the Black Sea make its environment and ecosystems acutely vulnerable[22]. The three biggest pressures on the Black Sea are over-fishing, pollution and eutrophication[23] from interaction with coastal activity, and litter. This area of outstanding beauty and home to the Bottlenose dolphin as well as 200 other species of fish, is being decimated by people.

Overfishing and rubbish

Industrial fishing puts significant pressure on marine life for a variety of reasons; high demand for popular foods such as rapa whelk or clams are bringing commercial equipment to the area. The indiscriminate use of fishing gear, or the beam trawls used to catch rapa whelk (subject to a long-standing dispute), equals the destruction of large areas of the sea bed. These effects are hard to evaluate, but the damage is indisputable.

Marine litter is another common and costly problem that coastal communities are facing. The Black Sea receives freshwater inflows from around the basin, but one of the more significant rivers - the Danube - discharges into the Bulgarian coastal waters bringing litter from the inland cities and a flow of pollutants from agriculture and other industrial sectors. This waste, especially plastics, poses a serious threat to living things. Various estimates suggest more than a million birds, and 100,000 marine mammals die every year from ingesting or getting caught in marine litter[24].

The damage is not just to living things, clean-ups cost the local economies and litter can cause damage to ships and fisheries.

The push for protections

Local and national organisations are calling for the protection of marine areas in the Bulgarian coastal waters of the Black Sea, but political and executive will to establish and implement these is lacking. Finding a framework that fishing and coastal communities will support is complex. There are initiatives and campaigns calling for an end to plastic pollution, but a consensus that improves and maintains the health of these ecosystems and their inhabitants may yet be a long way off.

Preserved and degraded ecosystems in the Black Sea

Case Study Denmark:

Livestock overproduction putting ocean life in danger

Denmark's huge livestock production is killing the oceans. The beautiful coastal waters around Denmark are dying. The fish are disappearing and the ocean floor is becoming an underwater desert of smelly sludge and rotting algae. Fjords and inland waters are increasingly affected by catastrophic oxygen depletion.

The environmental disaster is caused by nitrogen pollution, mainly from industrial meat and dairy production. Denmark is one of the biggest meat producers (per capita) in the world and the most intensively cultivated country in Europe.

60% of the land in Denmark is used for agriculture

Wetlands and other natural areas have historically been drained and converted to agricultural lands. 80% of the agricultural land is being used for feeding livestock[25], and when manure and artificial fertilisers are used they end up in drainage channels and rivers, carried by water streams to the ocean.

Local fishermen and divers report that within their lifetime, the environmental state of the ocean has got steadily worse. Fish populations have declined so much that it is hard to make a living for many fishermen. The dead zones are growing and they fear that the ecosystem will soon collapse. Tourists and bathing guests observe a bad smell like rotten eggs at the beaches in the affected areas. This is the smell of hydrogen sulphide, a toxic gas that is formed in the decomposition of algae and kills animals and plants. Oxygen depletion happens when high levels of nitrogen and phosphate combined with warm weather, make algae thrive and spread.

Like all EU member states, Denmark is obliged by the EU Water Framework Directive to secure a good environmental state in its waters by 2027. The actual status is that only five out of the country's 109 coastal waters are in a good environmental state[26]. Since 1987 there have been targets for the agricultural sector to decrease its nitrogen emissions, but during the last decade, the nitrogen pollution from the sector has increased[27]. At this point, it is not likely that Denmark will deliver on the obligation by 2027.

There are many sources of nitrogen pollution in the ocean. Industrial agriculture is responsible for 70% of waterborne pollution. The obvious solution is to take agricultural lands out of production and convert them to wetlands, forests and other nature. With most of agricultural lands being used for feeding livestock, it is clear that a significant reduction of livestock production is inevitable if we are to save nature from suffocation in Danish waters.

Underwater secrets

Even though Denmark is surrounded by the ocean, most people know very little about what happens under the water. That's why Greenpeace Denmark launched the documentary Desert Ocean under the Water[28] in April 2022. This explains the problem and the emergency for our coastal waters. In September 2022, a ship tour to document widespread oxygen depletion on the ocean floor was carried out. Together with other Danish nature and environmental organisations and local fishermen, Greenpeace calls for political action.

Coastal and aerial view of South Funen Archipelago in Denmark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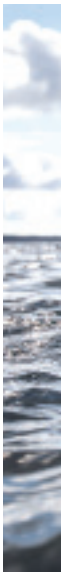


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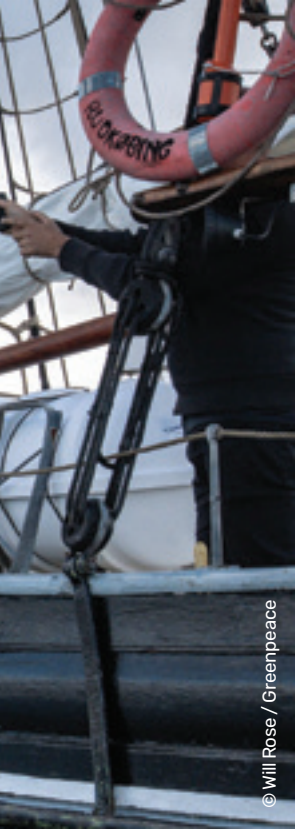

Nordic Seabed Sampling Expedition in the dead oceans in Denmark

Aerial view of cyanobacteria bloom on the surface of the Baltic Sea

Case Study North Sea, Germany:

Rare whale under enormous pressure

The German North and Baltic seas are failing the targets of the Marine Strategy Framework Directive. Environmental conditions are so bad that the only native whale species of these waters is on the brink of extinction in some areas. The harbour porpoise is an apex predator and an integral top-down regulating part of the food chain. But there are only 20,000 remaining in the German North Sea, and in the Central Baltic Sea there are only 500 left[29,30]. This key species is widely understood (and legally important) as an indicator of overall environmental status where a healthy population of porpoises means the seas are well.

Harbour porpoise (Phocoena Phocoena) in the Baltic Sea

Fillnet on the seabed of the Baltic Sea in the "Natura 2000" protected area Fehmarn Belt, Germany

Aerial view of an oil drilling and production rig in the tidal flats of Wadden Sea National Park in Germany


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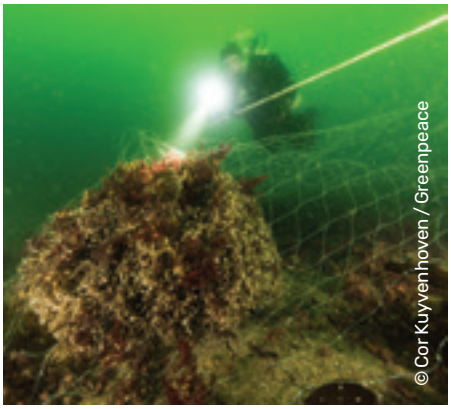
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Destructive forces

The most obvious cause of the species decline is an increase in damaging activities in so-called protected areas. Fishing practices, namely gillnet fishing, cause a high rate of harbour porpoise bycatch.

Instead of further protections however, a new gas field is planned in the direct vicinity of the Borkum Reef in the Exclusive Economic Zones of the German North Sea, a protected area and one of only two hotspots for this species. The gas project, planned by the Dutch company ONE-Dyas, would also threaten other unique habitats, such as the UNESCO World Heritage Wadden Sea National Park and its biodiversity. And of course the continued extraction and use of fossil gas would be an accelerator of the climate crisis.

The planned gas project between the islands of Borkum and Schiermonnikoog would further threaten the marine ecosystem. The local people of the islands are opposing the project, it threatens the tourist appeal, the possibility of earthquakes and potential negative impacts on their groundwater.

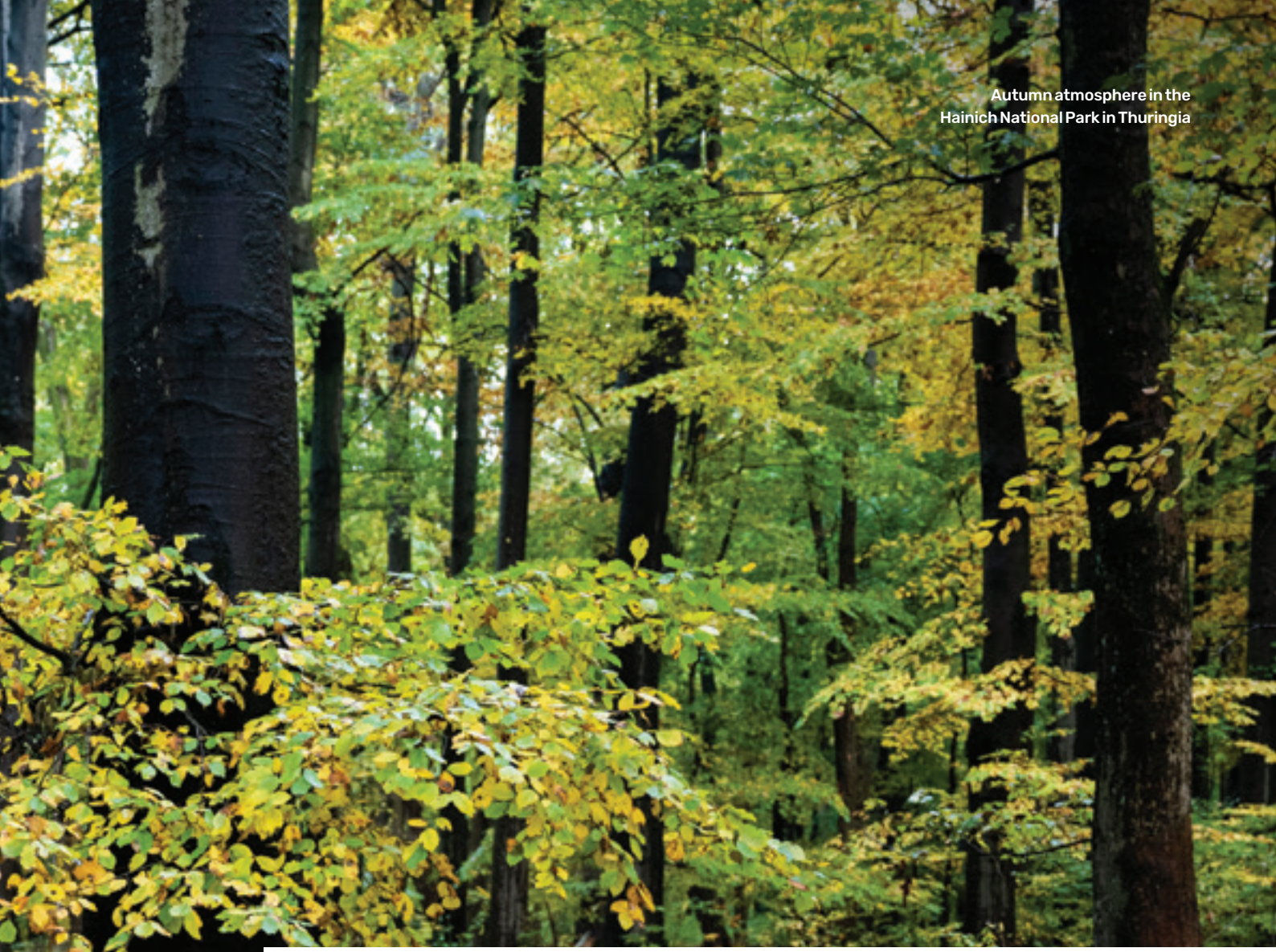
Protect the porpoise, save the sea

In July 2022 the people of Borkum island came together to spell out NO NEW GAS using their bodies as a collective protest together with Greenpeace against the fossil fuel project[31]. Several environmental groups, such as the Deutsche Umwelthilfe, and the city councils of the islands Borkum, Juist and Norderney, have already filed suits against the decisions to start the gas project[32].

Protecting the harbour porpoise has wider positive implications for the seas they inhabit. They urgently need more binding protections to prevent further degradation of the marine ecosystems and effectively managed marine protected areas – with a large proportion of no-take areas where fishing and other extractive uses are banned.

Case Study Germany:

Beech woodlands in danger even in Natura 2000 protected areas



Autumn atmosphere in the Hainich National Park in Thuringia

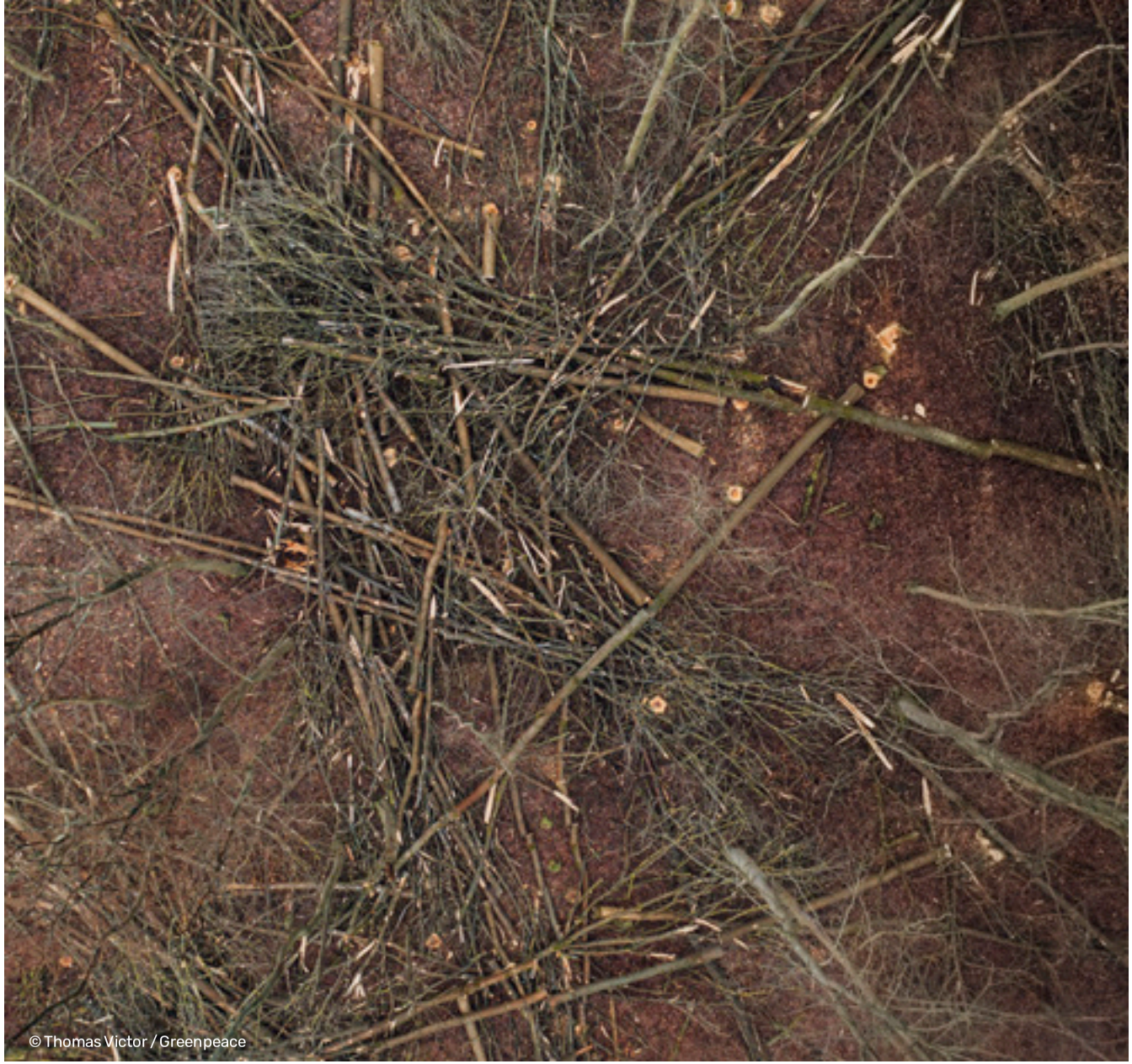
Although 67% of forests in Germany have a formal protection status, only 2.8% of the total forest area is strictly and legally protected from forestry interventions such as logging[33]. Most forests are not strictly protected and logging continues without effective restrictions. This is also true for the about 7% share of the German forest area included in the European Natura 2000 network of protected areas, the majority of these are beech forests.

Beech woodlands have a history that is specifically European. The European beech did not become a dominant forest tree until after the last glacier retreated and the species migrated to central Europe. In a natural situation, 25% of the world's total area of beech forest would be found in Germany. Instead, today German beech woodlands cover only around 7% of the original area of 91 million hectares[34].

Germany bears global responsibility for protecting these woodlands. Almost all of the natural beech forest types occurring in Germany should be classified as "severely endangered". Two are threatened with complete destruction if not appropriately protected immediately[35].

“Germany bears global responsibility for protecting beech woodlands.”

Tree cuts documented in
Hainich, Thuringia in Germany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What is causing the destruction of nature?

Current measures for protecting Germany's remaining beech woodlands are completely inadequate. Commercial logging is still taking place in most Natura 2000 protected forest areas in Germany. While leaving paths or picking flowers is often prohibited in protected areas for ordinary people, logging and the use of heavy machinery for logging or forwarding timber continues.

A free pass for business as usual

German forestry has a very long history and claims to have invented the term "sustainability". Nevertheless, the EU Commission has referred Germany to the European Court of Justice as it fails to meet its obligations under the Habitats Directive[36] on the conservation of natural habitats and of wild fauna and flora.

The Commission claims that the conservation objectives set for sites in Germany are not sufficiently measurable, quantified and reportable. And surely: if objectives are not sufficiently measurable it is difficult to prove that logging actually jeopardises the achievement of these goals.

In Thuringia, where the forest site "Hainich" is located, the federal state published a list[37] of the most common forestry measurements, declaring that they are not harmful in general. This list is as good as a free pass for business as usual logging inside a "protected" area.

What is being done to stop these threats?

Forests in Germany are suffering from biodiversity loss and the climate crisis. If forests should guard us through climate crises they need to be resilient against draughts, storms and other extremes. Yet the focus of forest management is still on producing timber rather than protecting ecological values.

Citizens in Germany have become more active in protests against local forest destruction and destructive forest management. Citizen initiatives have been founded in many villages and towns, with the objective of improving the protection and/or the management in the forests around them[38]. Even in most public forests, owned by municipalities and states, citizens are rarely included in the decision making process of what happens in their local forests. Local groups including various Greenpeace volunteer groups are challenging this and demanding to be included in the decisions around their forests.

Autumn atmosphere in the Hainich National Park in Thuringia

Aerial view of tree cuts in the Hainich, Thuringia in Germany

Case Study Italy:

Industrial agriculture versus bees

Dead bees killed by pesticides
in Lombardia Region in Italy

Italy is famous for its huge variety of food, landscapes, natural beauty and biodiversity, but this heritage is at risk. The main threat to biodiversity in Italy is the destruction and fragmentation of natural habitats, and industrial agriculture plays a big role in this.

The Po Valley in the north of Italy, is a major centre for food production. But the impact of this intense industrial agriculture has altered the landscape. Despite regulations around the safe use of chemicals, use of these is causing habitat loss, pollution and water withdrawal, and represents a serious threat to the availability and diversity of plant and animal species in the area.

We need bees

About ⅔ of the food we put on our tables, and 90% of wild plants rely on animal-mediated pollination to reproduce[39]. Ecosystem services and the wild habitats providing them also depend, directly or indirectly, on insect pollinators. Bees and other pollinators are enormously influential and directly impact the quantity and variety of crops we can grow. But they're disappearing.

In spring 2022, more than 12 million honeybees didn't come back to their beehives in Lombardia[40]. This number only accounts for the insect populations we can track, in fact beekeepers agree this is likely to be a much more widespread problem when we add wild insect populations that we can't count.

Lombardia's apiaries are located in areas of intense agricultural activity that undergo tillage and treatments that often involve chemicals, including glyphosate. These substances end up on the vegetation surrounding the fields, where pollinators go in search of food and water. Farms also use seeds treated with pesticides that can drift onto wild vegetation that is foraged by bees. It is also increasingly common to find weeded ditch margins, something which is forbidden by the regional rules.

Toxic leak

In Italy, around 114,000 tons of pesticides are used every year[41]. We are dealing with known culprits: herbicides, insecticides and fungicides constituting around 400 different substances. The most widely used of these is the herbicide glyphosate - the authorisation to use glyphosate is about to expire, and will be reviewed by the EU.

These substances don't simply stay on the fields where they are used, they leak into groundwater and surrounding areas. In 2019, the concentrations exceeded regulatory limits in 25% of monitoring sites for surface water and in 5% of those for groundwater, and the contamination detected is still underestimated.

Without action Silent Springs will become commonplace. Greenpeace stands with beekeepers to track and denounce the continued loss of bees and pollinators. Italian authorities must find those responsible and take action to avoid new silent springs.

Case Study Netherlands:

Nitrogen pollution brings nature to the verge of collapse

Greenpeace activist in the
Hoge Veluwe nature reserve

Dutch nature is in crisis, protected habitats are on the brink of collapse, plant species are disappearing, and the number of wild animals has halved since 1990. In total, only 15% of original Dutch nature is intact[42] with over one third of the plant and animal species on the Red List already[43]. In the Netherlands there are 162 Natura 2000 areas with 52 different habitats. In 2020 it was reported to the European Commission that between 2013 - 2018 only 6 of these 52 habitats were doing well. Right now, the Netherlands is failing in its European and international obligations to protect nature under the EU Habitats Directive.

The main driver of this nature crisis is nitrogen emissions caused by traffic, industry, aviation, and livestock. Of all European countries, the Netherlands keeps the most animals per hectare of agricultural land. This contributes to the fact that the Netherlands emits four times as much nitrogen as the European average.


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The impact of nitrogen overload

If the nitrogen precipitation on these habitats is not reduced before 2025, the risk of loss or irreparable damage to highly vulnerable nature is considerable. The excess nitrogen disrupts the functioning of ecosystems resulting in collapse of characteristic biodiversity. What remains are acidified and nitrogen overfertilized areas where less and less species unique to the Netherlands and Europe live.

The solution

Since a legal threat in 2021, the (new) government has increased funding to tackle the nature crisis fivefold. €25 billion will be allocated over the next 15 years to reform the agricultural system in the country. A target to reduce emissions 50% by 2030 has been agreed. In practice, this means an approximately 30% decrease in the number of livestock in the Netherlands. However these plans have met with fierce resistance from farmers and the agricultural sector.

Local and environmental organisations are campaigning to ensure the government upholds its promise to reduce nitrogen emissions by 50% in 2030, and to prioritise saving the 14 most urgently threatened habitats before the end of 2025. The transition must be fair, honest and sustainable in the long-term, supporting the transition to ecological farming with fewer animals. It needs to be based on a good income for farmers, support for those who have already made the transition and inclusion of all big polluters in the nitrogen emission reduction plans beyond the agricultural sector.

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Meadow birds such as the godwit that are sensitive to nitrogen pollution have already disappeared in the Netherlands

Acidification of the soil washes lime away which is building material for animals and plants. Birds find so little lime that their chicks break their legs even in the nest

Endangered butterfly (veenbesblauwtje) in the Netherlands.

Greenpeace Netherlands activists in The Hague to demand drastic measures to tackle the nature crisis

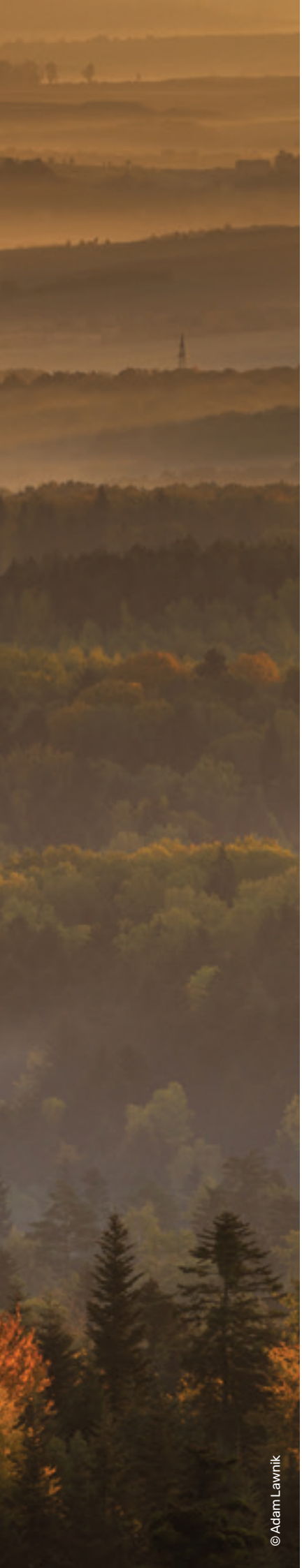
Species such as the wheatear are highly threatened in the Netherlands

Case Study Poland:

Losing one of Europe's most valuable forest areas

The Carpathian Forest is one of the largest and most valuable forest complexes in all of Europe. It stretches over 8 countries (including 6 EU member states) and is home to big predators like brown bears, lynxes and wolves, many rare and endangered species, and around 500 species of endemic vascular plants[44]. These Carpathian forests and mountains defend us against climate change, providing protection from floods, droughts and strong winds, and they sequester and store large amounts of carbon[45]. The importance and value of these areas cannot be overstated.

On paper, the Carpathians are one of the best protected regions in the EU. Protections of various forms cover practically the whole of the Carpathians, with half the forests included in the Natura 2000 network.



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Protections in place

Despite this, natural areas including protected habitats are constantly being lost to aggressive forestry, illegal logging, unsustainable infrastructure development and the disappearance of traditional agriculture.

In Poland the main threats are posed by the State Forest. The state-owned holding that manages about 80% of the Polish forests, holds a near-monopoly position in the Polish timber market and is responsible for approximately 96% of domestic logging in Poland[46]. This organisation is obliged by the law to protect the forest ecosystems which are under their management. But they are also responsible for generating revenues from timber. As a result, the State Forests intensify logging activities, block the expansion of protected areas, and build new forest roads.

Protection isn't enough

Although there are six National Parks in the Polish Carpathians, only about 1-3% of the area is strictly protected[47]. This is well below the 10% benchmark from the EU Biodiversity Strategy.

Foresters in the Krosno region, which covers the Carpathian forests in South-Eastern Poland, are logging about two million cubic metres of trees every year[48].

Logging carried out in valuable areas reduces habitats for species that require forests with large-size, old-growth trees and availability of dead wood. Young trees from monoculture plantings are not rich in biodiversity and they are often separated by steel nets from the rest of the forest, which poses a direct threat to the wildlife.

The road network has also been developing significantly in recent years causing soil erosion and adding pressure to the fragile ecosystem by changing habitats and behaviours of large mammals like bears, lynxes and wolves. In the Krosno region, the length of roads created to facilitate the forestry is estimated at over 30,000 km, a density well above the European average[49].

Ancient forest in the Polish Carpathians


“Only about 1-3% of the Polish Carpathians is strictly protected”

Logging in the Polish Carpathian Mountains

An obvious conflict of interests

The State Forests have a substantial impact on local authorities, preventing them from agreeing to expansion of national parks[50]. Communal land tax is higher from forests where logging is allowed, and the State Forests are a powerful, wealthy organisation, with high salaries and a surplus which may be spent on local needs, while the national parks are permanently underfinanced in Poland. There are currently no sufficient national tools that would help the region develop socially and economically, based on better nature protection.

State Forests are openly lobbying against EU Forest & Biodiversity Strategies, suggesting that the implementation of these policies will result in collapse of the local economy[51]. At the same time State Forests are failing to provide the appropriate protection of valuable habitats under their management[52].

In many parts of the Polish East Carpathians forest management is carried out without valid forest management plans (FMPs) or on the basis of FMPs not agreed by the regional directorate for environmental protection[53]. As a result the old-growth firs and beeches are cut and the habitats of rare species destroyed. Recently, Lutowiska forest inspectorate logged in the vicinity of bear lairs. Fortunately, this activity was stopped by a court on the request of activists from the Dziedzictwo Przyrodnicze Foundation, but this case shows how strongly State Forests are neglecting the protection of species and habitats[54].

Calling for solutions

There is a clear and urgent need to enlarge national parks and create new areas of strict protection, particularly in the Krosno region. There's also an obvious need for substantial reform of the State Forests. Together with many organisations active in the region, Greenpeace calls for political action aimed at increasing the protection of the Polish Carpathians, in such a way that the unique nature of the region will be saved and the people who live there will be provided with a decent life.

Animals and landscapes of the Carpathian Mountains in Poland

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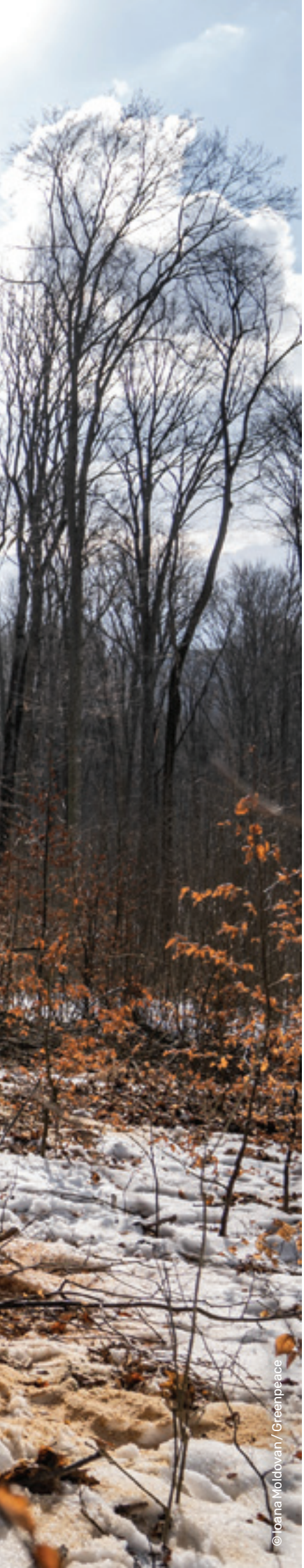
Case Study Romania:

Corruption and illegal logging in Carpathian forests



The Romanian Carpathian Mountains are covered by the most vast primary forests in the EU. These are remnants of forests that once covered over 80% of modern Romania, and a vital part of EU history and cultural identity. Home to 13000 species, including the largest bear population in Europe. Deciduous and mixed primary forests containing European beech are of particular importance because their characteristics offer opportunities for a vast array of plant species to develop.

Romanian primaeval forests encompass an awe-inspiring variety of ecological niches and microhabitats capable of sustaining a high level of biodiversity, a mosaic of micro arboretums and an incredible range of age-span in its trees, from seedlings and saplings to ancient ancestral trees. Despite the obvious ecological value of these forests, and their inclusion on the List of World Heritage Sites UNESCO, they are being pillaged.

Threatened and attacked

Aside from the devastation of nature, the human cost of "green gold" is also high. Exploitation is tearing up the fabric of the small communities that live around the forest. Entire villages are subjugated by the local power structure, built on corruption. In the past decade, forestry guards have reported two murders, and more than 600[55] cases of aggression, with some suffering life threatening injuries. Environmental activists and journalists investigating logging sites have been victims of assault from what is locally known as the wood mafia.

This level of corruption has led to unchecked aggressive logging, leaving large areas vulnerable to floods. The disregard for the history and ecology of the forest means areas have been clear cut far outside forestry norms.

Even if legal enforcement was adequate, only 1% of the Romanian forest is strictly protected. In the past 20 years Romania has lost around 50%[56] of its intact primary forests.

Fighting back

Recently though, activists have exposed and reported numerous cases of illegal logging activities, and the national media have covered the debate around illegal logging and forest management in general - as a result, it has become the biggest domestic environmental issue in Romania.

Nationwide protests[57] took place, and a coalition of NGO's asked for a public wood traceability system to stop illegal logging. After this mechanism was enforced in 2020, attention shifted to growing the 1% strict protection to 10%, with a strong focus on creating a reform that would effectively ban industrial harvesting from national parks.

Heavily exploited Codrii Iașilor old growth forests near a major city in Romania

Case Study Spain:

The largest salt lagoon in Europe on the brink of collapse

The Mar Menor in Spain is Europe's largest salt lagoon and the area is protected by up to ten approved environmental protection schemes like Natura 2000, or as a wetland of international importance by the Ramsar Convention, and many others. It is recognised as an area of profound ecological, geological and environmental importance. It is home to a rich biodiversity of birds and marine and terrestrial species. And yet, despite these "protections" this precious lagoon is almost dead.

What happened?

This area has a special social and cultural identity for residents due to its natural beauty and wonderful weather. Until recently there was a small, permanent artisanal fishing community. The northern end of the lagoon (La Puntica) is home to mud that has been used in therapeutic treatments for generations. These qualities have also bought tourism, and with tourism came unbridled urban growth.

Pollution in the
Mar Menor in Spain

Pollution in the Mar Menor in Spain

The cause of death - profit over protection

In recent years, the growth of tourism has given rise to massive construction along the coast, untreated sewage discharges and pollution from agriculture and factory farms[58] has created a toxic cocktail, causing dangerous nutrient runoff[59] and eutrophication - algae blooms and dead zones that suffocate other marine life. The degraded ecosystem has led to both species decline and economic collapse. The Mar Menor has become the paradigm of the ills suffered by the environment as a result of the uncontrolled construction of housing and excessive impacts of industrial agriculture and livestock[60]. The indiscriminate use of fertilisers and animal excrement is killing the biodiversity of the area, and without nature as a reason to visit, the markets for real estate and tourism have dropped. The housing market has suffered as buyers are unwilling to invest in the area.

Good news!

The reticence of the government to protect the area despite a clear need has prompted action from locals and environmental groups. A legal battle for this, the soul of the Spanish coast has been mired in bad decisions, manoeuvring by companies to escape blame, and impossible processes. These actions have been especially numerous following episodes of massive deaths of species or algae blooms. Finally, in September 2022, Spain granted Mar Menor personhood status, the first time such a measure has been taken in Europe.

The initiative was debated in parliament after campaigners collected over 500,000 signatures to support it. This will allow the rights of the lagoon located in south-eastern Spain to be defended in court, as though it were a person or business. This means the Mar Menor is the first EU ecosystem with a legal identity and rights. It will be legally represented by a group consisting of local officials, scientists and residents.

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Case Study Sweden:

Decimating Northern forests for false solutions

Forests and deforestation in Muonio, Sámi Village, in northern Sweden

Sweden is a country rich in trees, but natural forests have been declining as the forest industry clear cuts invaluable ecosystems and replaces them with monocultures. Clear cutting entails creating areas that have been vacuumed for any branch, pinecone or stem that can be turned e.g. into biofuels. The consequences of this activity are severe, particularly for biodiversity, carbon storage and people who are directly dependent on forests.

Sweden's environmental goal *Levande Skogar* (living forests)[61] is one of 16 environmental goals that describe what the Swedish government and parliament is supposed to achieve with its environmental policies by 2030. It is intended to protect the remaining biodiversity in its forests, as well as social values and sustainable production of wood. The latest assessment on the progress of this goal by the Swedish Forest Authority shows that the development is negative as valuable forests are cut down[62]. Indigenous reindeer herders rely on old-growth and natural forests to provide shelter and food, specifically ground and hanging lichens, but 60% of productive forest in Sweden has been clear cut since 1950[63] causing massive losses of both[64]. Between 2015 and 2020 there was an 11%[65] increase in the number of threatened or near threatened species on the Swedish Red List of species.

Of these, 40% depend on forests. This destruction occurs so that Sweden can produce single use products and bioenergy.

The misleading nature of bioenergy

The bioenergy market is being hailed as the future, a 'better than fossil fuels' alternative that politicians claim will give Sweden fuel self-sufficiency. Sweden has been granted tax exemptions for bioenergy from the EU, and has invested so heavily in its "fuel substitution program" that biogenic emissions are now higher than fossil emissions. In 2020 Sweden's biogenic emissions e.g. from wood burning were higher than fossil emissions. That made Sweden's total emissions, including both fossil and biogenic emissions, higher than in 1990[66].

The political optimism for this energy solution is misplaced for many reasons. Claims that bioenergy is 'better' than fossils fail to take into account the emissions from wood burning, the intense forestry and biodiversity loss and the ridiculous amount of time it would take to show actual improvement. They ignore the needs of Indigenous People and the commitment to living forests over monocultures, and they fail to address the pressing need to reduce emissions from fuels of all kinds.

Cutting down forests does not cut the climate crisis

The climate crisis cannot be fixed by destroying nature. In Sweden, bioenergy is one of the main false solutions that not only adds to global warming but also threatens the ecosystems, humanity and the planet.

Case Study Switzerland:

A slaughterhouse disguised as innovation

In one of the most popular, beautiful and agriculturally important areas in Switzerland, the cooperative Migros-Genossenschafts-Bund - via its subsidiary Micarna - is trying to build the biggest broiler-chicken slaughterhouse in Switzerland, as part of the project "Swiss Campus for Agri&Food Innovation[67,68]". This name is misleading. A slaughterhouse can barely be seen as innovative, especially given the current climate and biodiversity crisis. Ultimately it will be the region and its inhabitants that will have to deal with the ecological and economic risks of this project.

Taking a stand against Micarna slaugtherhouse in Switzerland

Deeply damaging

The impacts of this kind of mega-project are far-reaching. There are immediate, local ecological threats such as contamination of bodies of water, including drinking water, destruction of arable land and the enclosing of conservation areas. There are also potentially long-term social issues for the workforce, like psychological consequences[69], improper training[70], and low potential to unionise stemming from the fact that many are not directly employed by the company itself and/or may come from groups that are more vulnerable and discouraged from demanding better working conditions or a higher salary[71].

The physical reality

The slaughterhouse project is inherently destructive. Arable land will be destroyed when the slaughterhouse is built, and the surrounding conservation area and entire water bodies are at severe risk from the sewage water treatment. The region already urgently requires a managed drinking water pump, but dependence on that will most likely increase due to the slaughterhouse processes.

Apart from the environmental issues and the frightening lack of transparency surrounding this project, there is also a social impact. The project claims to be a great creator of jobs in the region, but fails to mention the high likelihood that most of those will be badly paid and psychologically traumatising.

A need for action

This opportunity for genuine innovation is being subverted. Instead of enhancing the resilience of the food system by using the 100 hectares[72] of land to promote agroforestry, permaculture projects or seed storage, there will be further death and destruction with the planned slaughterhouse project. Abandoning this project would send a clear message to Swiss retailers that they will be held accountable for their role in ecological damage, and that the people demand a food system that remains within planetary boundaries.

EU impacts around the world

Forests, lakes, meadows and natural areas across Europe are in danger from industrial agriculture, intensive forest harvesting, expanding infrastructure and high extraction and consumption of natural resources. Current consumption is so high that Europe's own resources aren't enough and the so-called ecological footprint of Europeans stretches way beyond the limits of sustainability.

For example, just Europe's consumption of handful of commodities like meat, palm oil and soy (mostly used for animal feed) mean the EU is responsible for 16% of tropical deforestation[73] linked to internationally traded commodities[74]. Even though more than 400 companies[75] that supply Europeans promised they would end their contribution to deforestation by 2020, none of them have met that goal. Rather, at least 50 million hectares of forest[76] – an area the size of Spain – have likely been destroyed for global commodity production since those promises were first made in 2010.

This makes Europe's fair share of the efforts needed to halt nature destruction even more significant. European leaders cannot credibly demand, or even encourage, other world leaders to tackle e.g. deforestation, if they are not protecting nature and biodiversity at home, and if they keep on buying, trading with and funding companies and products linked to such destruction. Meaning if we are to meet any global targets, Europe needs to protect its own nature as well as drastically **reducing its footprint by cutting consumption of many destructive products.**

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What needs to be done?

The unfolding and ongoing destruction of nature across Europe shows that urgent, serious and tangible action is needed by European decision makers. Promises, strategies or even legislation adopted so far have failed to halt the dramatic loss of biodiversity in Europe. As the world gathers once again to agree on a new global biodiversity framework to protect nature and to ensure its implementation in national biodiversity strategies and action plans, European national governments and the EU as a whole must:

1. Support and forge an ambitious, post-2020 global biodiversity framework[77] – **a new deal for nature** – including strict and binding targets to ensure the protection of at least 30% of land and ocean by 2030[78] latest while recognising Indigenous Peoples' and local communities' (IPLCS) rights and roles in effective biodiversity conservation and restoration. Financial flows and the overall subsidy policy should only fund conservation measures, not allow investments in destructive industries or offsetting.


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2. Adopt binding targets and commitments on European and national level, and allocate adequate resources to implement the global biodiversity framework and previous EU commitments such as the EU Biodiversity Strategy, including:

- **legal protection of at least 30% of both the EU's land area and seas and**
- **strict protection (without any extractive activities) of at least 10% of the EU's land and sea.**

3. Ensure that the new global biodiversity framework and the European legislation includes targets to not only significantly reduce the drivers of nature destruction in Europe and beyond, but also a commitment to restore the most valuable, destroyed ecosystems. Tackling the drivers should start from reducing industrial forest logging especially for energy and other short-lived uses of wood, from significantly reducing industrial animal farming and fisheries and consumption of animal products.

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