NATURA CONNECT

Webinar Report

Financing Nature Conservation in the Danube-Carpathian Region

Date: 23 October 2025, 9:30-11:30 CEST

Organized by: WWF Central and Eastern Europe and the Institute of European Environmental Policy (IEEP), with support from EUROPARC Federation, BirdLife Europe and the Secretariat of the Carpathian Convention

Participants: ~50 attendees from European institutions, government authorities, research institutes, protected area administrations and NGOs.

Objectives of the Webinar

- Explore current and future financing options for nature conservation.
- Share public and private funding examples.
- Focus on the Danube-Carpathian region and the upcoming **EU Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) 2028–2034**.
- Discuss challenges and formulate action points for policy and practice.

Key Presentations and Insights

A. Introduction to Natura Connect

- Aims to support the implementation of the EU Biodiversity Strategy 2030 objectives on the expansion of protected areas up to 30% and strictly protected areas (10% of protected areas), and the establishment of the **Trans-European Nature Network (TEN-N)**.
- Selected Outputs of Interest to this Audience Include:
    - GIS databases for species occurrence and habitats
    - Connectivity guidelines for planning TEN-N & models
    - Factsheets for public and private funding opportunities
    - Learning Platform (Module 'Finance Instruments' recently launched - LINK)

B. EU Public Funding Landscape

Presented by Auriane Flottes de Pouzols (IEEP) – Presentation LINK

The **EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030** and the **Nature Restoration Regulation** set ambitious goals.

- Funding is crucial: EU aims to allocate 10% of its budget to biodiversity in 2026–2027 and double external funding to €7 billion for 2021–2027.
- However, there's a significant **funding gap**—estimated at €65 billion annually.

The largest sources of EU funding for biodiversity are included in the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), which makes up 31% of the EU budget. Other key funding sources are the European Regional Development Fund and Cohesion Fund, and the Recovery and Resilience Facilities.

- Key funding sources analysed that could support the financing of the TEN-T establishment
    - **LIFE Programme** – the only fund dedicated solely to nature and biodiversity.
    - **European Territorial Cooperation (Interreg)** - for transboundary cooperation
    - **European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund (EMFAF)**
    - **Common Agricultural Policy (CAP)**
    - **European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and Cohesion Fund.**
    - **Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF).**
- Examples:
    - Slovakia's CAP eco-scheme (€530M budget)
    - LIFE strategic nature projects in Slovakia and Poland, implementing the National Prioritised Action Framework
    - Interreg projects TRANSGREEN, ConnectGREEN and SaveGREEN, three complementary projects that worked on ecological connectivity from different perspectives

Challenges of the LIFE programme

- High co-financing requirements
- Administrative burden - applicants must manage significant reporting and monitoring obligations.
- Competitive application process – only 1 out of 5 projects received funding
- Limited flexibility for arising opportunities or urgent needs

NATURA CONNECT

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

Q: CAP is the biggest funding for nature. Have you looked at the quality of results from the CAP spending?

A: (Evelyn Underwood, IEEP): There are some very good agri-environment programmes and some of the eco-schemes have introduced biodiversity actions onto many arable farms where there were previously none; however, too much of the CAP money goes towards the direct payments and other payments like ANC (areas of natural constraint) that don't have any kind of requirement for nature and biodiversity.

There was an official evaluation of the impact of the 2014 to 2020 CAP on biodiversity, published here: Alliance Environnement (2019) *Evaluation of the impact of the CAP on habitats, landscapes, biodiversity*. Alliance Environnement (IEEP and Oréade-Brèche), Brussels. https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/6d9e0724-4d8a-11ea-aece-01aa75ed71a1

The conclusions are muted, as it is a DG AGRI evaluation, but two clear messages were that:

a) Overall, only a small part of the CAP budget went to targeted biodiversity measures, but there were big differences between member states (for example, in 9 member states, only 10% or less of their agricultural land was targeted by agri-environment schemes that included some actions for biodiversity, whilst in 5 MS over 50% of the land was programmed to be covered).

b) The evaluation pointed out the key role of advice and tailored guidance to farmers for biodiversity action, and providing opportunities to cooperate at the landscape scale, and opportunities to innovate and cooperate with research programmes (the European Innovation Partnership for Agriculture – EIP-AGRI). The payments for farmers in Natura 2000 sites (the Natura 2000 payment) has had a positive effect on farmers acceptance of the restrictions imposed by the site designation.

For the current CAP period, several assessments of the draft CAP strategic plans were published by NGOs and IEEP; pointing to weaknesses and failures to increase environmental ambition but also highlighting some promising measures. There is not much information available yet on what impact the current period has had (it started January 2023).

C. Private Funding Examples

Example 1. Living Danube Partnership (LDP) – Emöke Györfi (WWF-CEE) – Presentation **LINK**

Overview:

The Living Danube Partnership is a long-term, cross-sectoral initiative focused on climate resilience and nature-based solutions. It began with pilot projects before 2014 and evolved into structured phases of implementation.

Goals:

- Drive collective action on climate resilience.
- Restore rivers and wetlands.
- Engage stakeholders through awareness, advocacy, and water stewardship.
- Improve agricultural livelihoods.

Structure & Partners:

- Operates at basin level with public and private sector partners.
- Key partners include WWF, Coca-Cola Foundation, Hellenic Bottling Company, ministries, municipalities, NGOs, and landowners.
- Governance and funding structures are clearly defined to support flexibility and scalability.

Funding Model:

- Direct Funding: Full coverage of pilot costs by foundation funds.
- Co-Funding: Joint funding with public sector for specific projects.
- Leveraged Support: Use of funds for staff time, external support, and applications for additional public funding.

Examples of using private financing for restoration:

- Romania: Wetland restoration funded directly by LDP.
- Hungary: LDP funds complemented a LIFE restoration project.
- Bulgaria: LDP built on World Bank infrastructure, leading to further funding applications.

Learnings:

- Importance of joint concepts and governance.
- Flexibility in funding mechanisms.
- Strong partnerships enable impactful pilot implementations.

Outlook:

- Continue scaling the partnership.
- Expand private sector involvement.
- Build on trust and shared objectives for long-term impact.

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

Q: What do you see as the main barriers for companies to engage in such philanthropic funding?

A: In individual pilots, the proportion varies; in some cases, it has been 100% private funding. Overall, at the Living Danube Partnership level, private funds have been used primarily to leverage public funds across all pilots and activities. While the flexibility has allowed for this, the amounts from private funding are by far not enough for large-scale green infrastructure investments. Therefore, it is better to use private funding to test solutions and then use the results to secure public funding for implementation. Alternatively, public authorities could be encouraged to implement KPIs. However, there are many barriers to this. They need to plan in the short term, and they need quick KPIs and grand results. They need to be convinced that it makes business sense for them too, and that it is an investment in increasing resilience and mitigating the risks of climate change-related natural hazards in areas beyond their direct interests. Building trust over time and demonstrating results on the ground is needed to convince them to support the less glamorous aspects of the work (studies, preparation and stakeholder involvement).

---

2. Foundation Conservation Carpathia – Mihai Soria – Presentation **LINK**

Overview of the Carpathia Foundation

- Founded in 2009 by Christoph and Barbara Promberger, initially inspired by Romania's rich wildlife.
- Focuses on species reintroduction (e.g., European bison, beavers), ecological reconstruction, and educational programs.
- Owns 28,000 hectares of alpine meadows and forests.
- Employs around 160 people and operates multiple facilities, including educational and visitor centres.

Key Activities

- Ecological Restoration:
  - Over 5 million saplings planted.
  - Restoration of roads and reintroduction of native alpine species.
  - Removal of monoculture forests to support biodiversity.
- Education:
  - Programs like 'Junior Rangers', school camps, and outreach to private schools.
  - Around 75 junior rangers involved.
- Eco-tourism and Social Enterprise:
  - Wildlife hides, biodiversity farms, and eco-tourism services.
  - A 'food hub' supporting local producers.
  - Public events and festivals (e.g., one with 6,000 attendees).

Funding Sources

- National & Romanian
  - Government grants (e.g., for educational programs).
  - Private donors and companies (some offering unrestricted or project-specific funds).
  - Creative fundraising (e.g., "Adopt a Birch Tree" with QR-coded stories).
- International
  - Partnerships with global foundations and investors.
  - European grants (e.g., LIFE, Endangered Landscapes Programme).
  - Long-term sponsors like 'Jack Wolfskin' (providing gear and support).
- Own resources
  - Food Hub
  - Travel Carpathia experiences (wildlife hides, mountain huts)
  - Biodiversity Farms

- Private educational programmes
- Public events

Challenges

- Maintaining strong relationships with diverse private funders - a lot of activities offered for them.
- Adapting to global economic uncertainties and shifting donor priorities.
- Ensuring ‘diversified funding’ to avoid over-reliance on any single source.

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

Q: What is the proportion between private and public funding at Fundatia Conservation Carpathia?

A: There is never a fixed percentage. Some years are dominated by private funding, while others are dominated by public grants, so it is hard to give percentages. However, if we had to give an estimate, it would be around 30% to 40% private funding and the rest public grants. Therefore, it is safe to say that more than half of our funding comes from the public sector.

---

3. EU Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) 2028–2034 – Evelyn Underwood (IEEP) & Frank Vassen (European Commission) – Presentation **LINK**

Overview of the new MFF Proposal

- The proposal, published in July 2025, will be negotiated over the next two years – so anything is subject to change.
- EU funds will be consolidated into three major funds, including:
  - European Competitiveness Fund (ECF): Centrally managed (by Commission), heavy focus on innovation and competitiveness with increased Horizon Europe budget; includes some of the priorities of current LIFE programme.
  - National and Regional Partnership Fund (NRPF): Over half of the EU budget, combining CAP (both pillars), Cohesion funds (CF, ERDF, Social Fund), and smaller funds; co-programmed and co-funded by Member States.
  - Global Europe; combines the overseas and neighbourhood funds (not further described in the session today).
  - Fourth strand of MFF groups some other funding priorities (infrastructure etc)

Key features of the proposed new structure

- Performance framework across all funds: Applies the “Do No Significant Harm” principle and uses “intervention fields” for tracking how funding is allocated to purposes.
- Environmental spending target: 35% of overall MFF funding aimed at climate and environment and circular economy. Environment includes biodiversity/nature, water, soil, air. Target for NRPF is higher – 43% - targets for some of the other funds are lower.
- No dedicated biodiversity fund or earmarking or minimum spend: Unlike the current MFF, biodiversity is not separately targeted.

National and Regional Partnership Fund

- Requires partnership plans with milestones describing policy reforms similar to the Recovery and Resilience Facility programmes – agreed between Member States and Commission.
- Funding conditionality: Commission can withhold funds if milestones are unmet.
- Flexibility for Member States: Encouraged to shift budgets between funds based on priorities.
- Strategic planning: Must be more integrated and connected across programs.

Concerns and Opportunities

- Environment not a main objective: Nature and biodiversity are buried under sub-objectives.
- Responsibility shifted to the national level: Biodiversity funding depends on national decisions, with limited commission leverage.
- Lack of ring-fencing: No guaranteed funding for nature, except ring-fencing of some of the CAP interventions.
- Need for better indicators: Current tracking and impact measurement for biodiversity are insufficient.

Current Developments

- Negotiations have begun: Mixed reactions from different councils:
    - Environment ministers: Support for LIFE program and dedicated nature restoration funding.
    - General Affairs Council: Focused on defence, security, and competitiveness.
- Diverging Member State views: Disagreements on how much EU should spend (more or less than now) and whether/how funding should be allocated with geographical weighting.

Calls to Action

- Letter circulating: Urging LIFE program to remain a standalone fund (deadline: tomorrow).
- Long-term needs:
    - Define policy reform milestones for environmental legislation and for TEN-N.
    - Improve government capacity for absorbing and managing biodiversity funding – needs dedicated funding and planning.
    - Develop better indicators and tracking systems.

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

Q: Will the National Restoration Plans be more important than the Prioritised Action Frameworks (PAFs)?

A: Yes, they will, for two reasons. The PAFs are based on a requirement in Article 8 of the Habitats Directive, which is a legal requirement on the Commission but not on Member States. They did the PAFs on a voluntary basis. This allowed the EC to review Member State draft funding plans to check if they are budgeting for the needs identified in the PAF, and also to estimate the cost of nature conservation and restoration for the whole EU. The nature restoration plans, including cost estimates, are a legally binding obligation on member states.

The PAF budgeted for nature restoration (habitat restoration within Natura 2000 sites and green infrastructure outside the network), but to a limited extent compared to the Nature Restoration Regulation, which has a broader and higher ambition for restoration.

In the Commission proposal, the National and Regional Partnership Plans are required to be 'coherent' with the National Restoration Plan. They could indeed become an important tool to leverage funding from the NRPF. How this will play out in reality remains to be seen but it seems to have real potential.

Q: Is there a fixed procedure for developing the Nature Restoration Plans (NRPs; stakeholder involvement, transparency, etc.) or is it up to the Member States to decide how to do it?

A: There are a number of requirements for the minimum content of the plans, which are actually quite ambitious. There is an agreed format for the National Restoration Plans and the requirement for a proper public consultation on the plans, but many details are, of course, left to the Member States.

---

4. Breakout Group Discussions

Group 1 Mainstreaming nature priorities in the next MFF

Question:

1. ***How can the new national investment and reform plans set an objective or milestone for the TEN-N? How can this be linked to a national strategy or priority area mapping?***

Challenges:

- Unclear future due to loss of LIFE Programme
- How can we ensure money is invested in nature? Decisions on investments may be made by other parts of national government.
- How to integrate existing projects in the national restoration plans
- Partnership funds handled by the government pose a certain risk depending on the interest of the Government, which might have negative consequence on available budget for nature conservation
- Current Biodiversity funds are not flexible enough and are not fully available for NGOs

The questions about the next MFF and the future of the LIFE programme raise many concerns and uncertainties. If member states will administer LIFE funds instead of the Commission - and have the choice of whether to provide LIFE funds or not - it will be a very different situation. For example, governments might choose to not make funds available for NGOs or not be ambitious enough – not allocate money for ambitious nature restoration projects. The expectation is that funds will be managed by those who are not in favour of nature conservation spending or who do not understand the needs.

Funds are not available to NGOs under some current environmental operational programmes for the cohesion funds (Cohesion and ERDF).

Positive aspects:

- International and transboundary collaboration is crucial for expanding the protected area network and creating ecological connectivity, like the Danube Region Programme.
- Focus is now on nature restoration projects
- Opportunity for cooperation between countries for nature restoration under the umbrella of the International Commission of River Basin
- Interreg is important for strategic planning and cooperation, including developing LIFE project proposals
- LIFE projects are essential to fund the operational actions – the restoration
- Horizon Europe projects will become more important. We need to understand better how we could scale up actions as part of Horizon Europe projects, building on what has been achieved with LIFE funding.
- Opportunities for follow up projects are extremely important, especially for restoration action.
- Due to the nature restoration regulation, there is more focus on nature restoration projects. It would be more effective to have cooperation between countries under the umbrella of the International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River to implement large-scale cross-border restoration.

DANUBEPARKS has established action plans with priorities for restoration (DANUBE4ALL project).

In Hungary the cooperation between the nature conservation sector and the water sector has improved, and we are now able to find the synergies between the two sectors, especially for restoration that addresses drought and water scarcity, which is a common problem in Hungary.

Interreg funds are important for strategic planning and building cooperation between the partners. Interreg can help put in place a LIFE proposal. that funds action on the ground, and Horizon Europe projects can follow on LIFE.

Group 2 Overcoming bottlenecks to accessing EU funds for nature

Questions:

1. ***How can we make EU biodiversity funding more accessible to small NGOs and SMEs?***

- Create a matchmaking system to identify and connect interested partners with relevant programmes, facilitating strategic partnerships.
- Strengthen institutional capacity through targeted training on how to effectively apply for funding programmes.
- Advocate for simplified administrative procedures, such as revising LIFE programme rules on pre-financing (e.g., allowing future funding disbursement before 100% of previous funds are used by all partners).
- Expand co-funding mechanisms, encouraging state authorities or larger organizations to support smaller beneficiaries.

- Develop a unified digital platform to centralize and regularly update information on available funding opportunities and programmes.

2. ***How to improve understanding, streamline processes and build capacity to develop, assess, and implement biodiversity projects?***

Encourage donors to host iterative workshops and networking sessions to co-develop project ideas and address common challenges. These events should:

- Be conducted in local languages to ensure inclusivity.
- Include direct invitations to NGOs and potential partners.
- Be promoted by larger organizations to broaden outreach.

Increase state involvement by:

- Supporting beneficiaries in engaging with national LIFE focal points.
- Providing co-financing and pre-funding options to reduce financial barriers for applicants.

Group 3 How to use EU funds to leverage private financing?

Questions:

1. ***What are your experiences in using private finance for TEN-N?***

Strengthening PES (Payment for Ecosystem Services) Implementation

- **Address local readiness**: Many regions lack the governance structures and enabling conditions to implement PES schemes effectively. Support is needed to build sustainable frameworks.
- **Improve state engagement**: In cases like state-owned forests, ecosystem services are often overlooked in favour of production roles. Greater state support is needed to recognize and integrate ecosystem services.
- **Facilitate partnerships**: Bureaucratic hurdles have hindered private-public collaboration. NGOs should be empowered to absorb funds and redistribute benefits to local communities.
- **Raise awareness**: There is a widespread lack of understanding of nature's value. Sharing successful PES case studies can help build public and institutional support.

Enhancing Funding Access and Security

- **Diversify funding sources**: There is limited expertise in private financing among many stakeholders. Capacity building is essential to explore and access alternative funding streams.
- **Increase grant security**: Beneficiaries need more predictable and secure grant agreements to reduce financial risk and encourage participation.

2. ***How can nature credits or nature certificates fund TEN-N?***

Example of biodiversity credits in **Romania Foundation Adept** - issuance of credit before the end of 2025; possibility to upscale this in other regions https://fundatia-adept.org/voluntary-biodiversity-credit-in-transylvania/

5. Next Steps

- **Report and materials** to be shared via Natura Connect website.
- **Finance module** on the **NaturaConnect Learning Platform** launching end of October.
- Upcoming events:
    - **Webinar on Blue-Green Infrastructure** – 11 November
    - **Stakeholder Event in Brussels** – 26–27 November

RESOURCES

EU budget 2028–2034 explained

https://commission.europa.eu/topics/budget/eu-budget-2028-2034-explained_en

The NaturaConnect Financing Factsheets

https://naturaconnect.eu/financing-options-for-the-trans-european-nature-network-ten-n/

The NaturaConnect Learning Platform

https://www.europeannatureacademy.com/course/naturaconnect

Module 2.2: Finance Instruments Module

RESPONSES FROM CIVIL SOCIETY & THINK TANKS

- **NGOs:** Future of LIFE programme https://www.wwf.eu/?19380941/The-future-of-LIFE-in-the-next-EU-budget
- EUROPARC Federation call to save LIFE funding: https://www.europarc.org/news/2025/09/is-life-over-as-we-know-it/
- **Bankwatch:** https://bankwatch.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/2025_10_14_The-future-of-biodiversity-financing_Wh…
- **WWF**: Getting National and Regional Partnership Plans right https://www.wwf.eu/?19327266/An-EU-budget-that-delivers-on-climate-and-nature-Getting-National-and-…
- **WWF:** Performance Regulation in the next MFF https://www.wwf.eu/?19067441/A-more-impactful-EU-budget-Performance-Regulation-in-the-next-MFF
- **IEEP**: MFF and post 2027 CAP https://ieep.eu/publications/the-post-2027-cap-and-mff-proposals-for-the-eu-first-reflections-on-their-environmental-implications/

NaturaConnect aims to design and develop a blueprint for a truly coherent Trans-European Nature Network (TEN-N) of conserved areas that protect at least 30% of land in the European Union, with at least one third of it under strict protection. Our project unites universities and research institutes, government bodies and non-governmental organizations, working together with key stakeholders to create targeted knowledge and tools, and build the capacity needed to support European Union Member States in realizing an ecologically representative, resilient and well-connected network of conserved areas across Europe

Funded by the European Union

NaturaConnect receives funding under the European Union's Horizon Europe research and innovation programme under grant agreement number 101060429.