

Funding Resilience:

Securing Europe's Biodiversity through the Trans-European Nature Network (TEN-N)

Key messages from NaturaConnect

- **Environmental risks dominate global threats;** biodiversity loss is a top systemic economic risk. With ~50% of the global economy dependent on nature, the next EU Multiannual Financial Framework must treat biodiversity and Trans-European Nature Network expansion as core investments, not optional spending.
- **Strategically expanding and connecting protected areas delivers multiple benefits,** contributing to biodiversity protection, soil erosion control, pollination services, and climate mitigation and adaptation. With only ~5% additional land, it could double the protection of the most threatened habitats and species, sequester ~108 Mt CO₂ per year, safeguard ~34 Gt of stored carbon, reduce soil erosion, and provide ~27% of the EU's pollination services.
- **A disproportionate amount of the highest-priority conservation areas,** including protection expansion zones and connectivity hotspots, are located in transboundary regions, making cross-border coordination essential.
- **Long-term, well-targeted funding is critical,** as effective Trans-European Nature Network delivery depends on sustained EU financing, shared planning, capacity building, and robust monitoring frameworks.

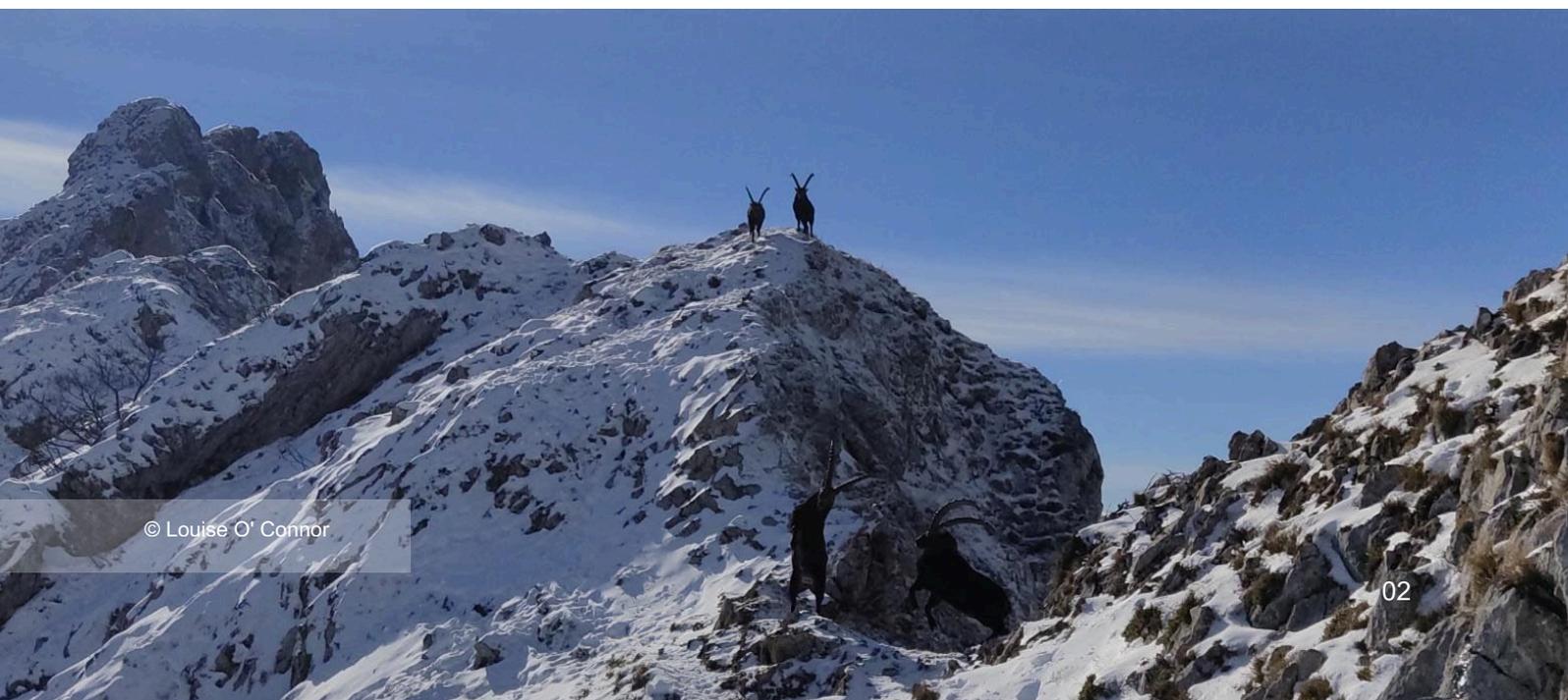


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Key policy recommendations

- **Include, in the next Multiannual Financial Framework, dedicated and well-resourced biodiversity funding within Member States' National and Regional Partnership plans and the European Competitiveness Fund**, as well as the continuation of a **standalone LIFE programme**, with clear and independent earmarking separate from general environmental or climate spending.
- **Require national programmes and sectors to fully implement a strengthened Do No Significant Harm Principle** and withhold EU funds in cases of violations of the principle, insufficient implementation of EU environmental law or breaching of environmental policy goals and milestones.
- **Require publicly accessible tracking of all biodiversity-related expenditures, specifying the link to Trans-European Nature Network objectives** and mandate inclusion of Trans-European Nature Network investment priorities in national reform and investment plans submitted to the European Commission.
- **Tie funding disbursement to demonstrated progress in creating and managing connected networks of protected areas** using a monitoring framework and Specific, Measurable, Adequate, Relevant, and Time-Bound indicators.
- **Strengthen the administrative, technical, and financial capacity of regional and local authorities and protected area managers** through targeted training and support. Improve project implementation and promote coordinated management of transboundary protected areas and ecological corridors.





Context

The Trans-European Nature Network (TEN-N) is an essential part of the solution to our societal crises

Europe's biodiversity and ecosystem services are fundamental to its long-term economic resilience, climate security, and competitiveness. The EU's protected area network (including the Natura 2000 network) is an essential part of the solution to the biodiversity crisis, and the EU Biodiversity Strategy sets the goal to build a Trans-European Nature Network (TEN-N). The TEN-N is a vision for an ecologically coherent, climate robust, effective network of protected areas and ecological corridors that protects and connects Europe's habitats and species. The EU has set voluntary targets for Member States to protect 30% of EU land and seas by 2030, with 10% under strict protection (European Commission, EU Biodiversity Strategy, 2020). The EU Nature Restoration Regulation sets legally binding targets to restore Europe's ecosystems by 2050, largely focused until 2030 on habitats in the Natura 2000 protected area network (Regulation (EU) 2024/1991).

Yet with 80% of the EU's habitats still in poor condition (European Environment Agency, 2020), and the protected area network fragmented and under pressure, the gap between commitments and implementation remains wide (European Environment Agency, 2025). As climate and nature emergencies converge, investing in ecosystem protection and restoration and increased ecological connectivity within and between protected areas is no longer optional: it is a strategic necessity for Europe's long-term sustainability, resilience, and prosperity.

The Trans-European Nature Network (TEN-N) needs more and more effective public funding

EU funding instruments, particularly LIFE, the Interreg programme and other Cohesion Funds, have been paramount in supporting protected areas, ecological corridors, and nature restoration, most noticeably in countries with limited public budgets for protected areas. Beyond LIFE - the EU's only funding programme dedicated solely to the environment and climate - the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) has been a significant source of funding for protected areas and ecological connectivity.

However, EU funding for protected areas remains under-resourced, inconsistently applied, and not sufficiently aligned with biodiversity objectives. The annual EU funding needs to meet the EU's biodiversity goals are estimated at more than €19 billion per year (European Commission (DG ENV) et al., 2022); overall biodiversity investment needs are estimated at more than €54 billion per year (Neuville et al., 2024).

Critical window to mobilise and dedicate public funding for biodiversity in the next decade

As the next EU budget (2028-2034) approaches, covering the final years before the 2030 deadline and shaping the trajectory towards 2050, the EU has a critical window to mobilise sufficient long-term financing. Meeting both EU and global commitments under the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, including closing the biodiversity funding gap, will depend on frontloaded investment and a financing architecture capable of delivering a coherent TEN-N.

Commission proposal for next MFF puts biodiversity and nature priorities in a funding pot with competing priorities

The Commission presented its proposal for the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) 2028-2034 in July 2025 (COM, 2025a). The proposal highlights a fundamental redesign of the EU's budget structure, grouping the funds under four headings and fund groupings, of which the first two are most relevant for biodiversity funding.

- Heading 1: ‘invest in people, Member States & regions’, the **National and Regional Partnership** fund combines five policy areas, putting nature and biodiversity in competition with cohesion; defence, security and home affairs; social policy; agriculture and fisheries; and fundamental rights, democracy and rule of law. Most funding will be planned and allocated in National and Regional Partnership plans, with flexible funding envelopes across the policy areas. Interreg programmes will continue. An EU Facility administered by the Commission will fund Union actions for agriculture, home affairs, social policy, and strategic LIFE projects with a cross-border or transnational dimension and projects of Union interest contributing to the implementation of environmental law and policies.
- Heading 2: ‘competitiveness, prosperity & security’, includes the **European Competitiveness Fund (ECF)**, Horizon Europe, and the Connecting Europe Facility.

The proposal makes key changes to LIFE and CAP, affecting biodiversity funding:

- Future of LIFE: The proposal no longer includes LIFE as a standalone programme, absorbing the climate and industrial innovation priorities into a LIFE stream in the European Competitiveness Fund and strategic transnational projects into the EU Facility. LIFE strategic nature projects or strategic integrated projects with a national or regional focus are encouraged in the National and Regional Partnership plans, but without obligations. There is no dedicated, ring-fenced LIFE budget.
- Future of CAP: The new CAP proposal has no ring-fencing for the environment and climate (European Commission, Proposal for CAP support, 2025). Voluntary agri-environmental and climate actions (bringing together multi-annual agri-environment programmes and annual ecoschemes) must be programmed and co-funded, but Member States are no longer required to allocate a minimum budget (Hart & Baldock, 2025).

Climate and environment earmarking applies across MFF,
but loses biodiversity focus with a lack of results indicators
and weaknesses in the tracking system

The Commission proposes to allocate 35% of the MFF budget to projects that support climate and environmental objectives, with a 43% target for the National and Regional Partnership fund (but excluding spending on defence and security). This increases the overall environmental ambition compared to the current MFF, but **no longer distinguishes biodiversity from climate and other environmental priorities**. The allocations are tracked using coefficients (100%, 40% and 0% markers) for the grouped climate and environmental objective, no longer allowing the separate identification of biodiversity funding streams (COM, 2025c).

Performance-based approach and Nature Restoration Regulation alignment can be used as leverage

The National and Regional Partnership plans will use performance-based budgeting (COM, 2025b), meaning that funding is released to Member States in tranches only after specific milestones and targets have been achieved. These could include increased leverage and conditionality to ensure the full implementation of EU environmental legislation, but the scope is not clarified. The regulation applies a single system for monitoring spending across the MFF, with a list of 543 eligible activities, including seven nature protection and restoration interventions, designed to link to output and result indicators. All funding is required to adhere to the 'Do No Significant Harm' (DNSH) principle.

Significantly, **National and Regional Partnership plans must be consistent with the national nature restoration plans, which should set out the estimated financing needs and the planned use of EU funding** (Regulation (EU) 2024/1991). However, the MFF proposal places considerable responsibility on national authorities to determine how and to what extent biodiversity is financed with no dedicated funding lines or ring-fencing.



Proposals from the nature conservation community to the MFF proposal

In this context, nature conservation and protected area experts, civil society nature organisations, and regional governments have identified key recommendations related to funding for biodiversity and TEN-N going forward, which, based on all scientific evidence available, we endorse and recommend for implementation:

- **Biodiversity earmarking: Introduce a dedicated spending target for biodiversity of at least 10% of the entire MFF, separate from other climate and environment objectives** (Thomson 2025; WWF 2025) **and ring-fencing 15% of Member States' National and Regional Partnership plans for biodiversity objectives** (WWF 2025). Strengthen the programme-specific targets and corresponding sectoral regulations to ensure every programme contributes a defined minimum share.

- Performance milestones: **Prioritise the development of milestones and targets for reforms to address outstanding issues with environmental legislation** and ensure that the EU budget adheres to the rule of law, extending to the environment (Thomson, 2025).
- LIFE: **Keep LIFE as an autonomous programme** with its own legal basis, governance, and dedicated budget line, and value, disseminate and scale up results; strengthen the LIFE budget matching the scale of environmental and climate challenges; maintain and strengthen the bottom-up approach and accessibility to a wide range of beneficiaries (Region of Liguria Letter, 2025). Establish a dedicated budget line for LIFE actions within the EU Facility and implement LIFE funding across the MFF through multi-annual work programmes (NGO Briefing, 2025).
- Target funding for protected area management and managers: The MFF focuses on business and agriculture means that funding going towards biodiversity conservation is likely be directed to those sectors, reducing available funds for organisations that manage protected areas and have the expertise (EUROPARC Federation, 2025). **This should be rectified by directing more funding towards protected area authorities, environmental NGOs** and other actors more directly involved with environmental conservation, since they are, in all effects, land stewards that increase social and economic resilience through increased ecological resilience of the areas they manage.
- Prioritise low-impact actors: **Reserve part of the budget specifically for low-impact sustainable farming, forestry and fishing and agro-environmental measures** and simplify access to funding for low-impact actors, in line with the CAP proposal focus on extensive livestock farming (Client Earth, 2025).
- 'Do No Significant Harm' (DNSH) principle: **The DNSH principle must be implemented and enforced consistently and sufficiently based on clear and harmonised conditionality criteria with a horizontal exclusion** list and sector-specific guidance on what qualifies as potentially harmful investments (Joint Statement by 29 Organisations, 2025).
- Tracking: **Develop separate tracking methods for all six environmental objectives and restrict the use of 40% and 100% coefficients** to activities with a guaranteed and inherent positive contribution based on scientific evidence (WWF, 2025a).
- Indicators: **Assign additional result and impact indicators to ensure the benefits of EU spending on the ground can be monitored** (WWF, 2025a). Only 6 intervention fields currently have biodiversity-related results indicators (all CAP-related).
- Improve capacity: **Implement reforms and investments to improve operational capacity at national, regional and local levels**, thereby removing obstacles to programming and absorbing funds for biodiversity (Bores et al., 2024; Thomson, 2025).



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Key messages and results from NaturaConnect

This briefing outlines how NaturaConnect's results can help ensure the next MFF provides sufficient funding for effective nature restoration and connectivity across Europe.

Strategically expanding and connecting protected areas can generate substantial climate and ecosystem service benefits

NaturaConnect research demonstrates how a strategically planned, climate-resilient TEN-N of protected sites and corridors can **double the amount of protection of the most threatened habitat and species according to the Birds and Habitats Directives with only 5% additional land area protected**, while simultaneously strengthening climate mitigation and adaptation, and safeguarding essential ecosystem services such as food production, carbon storage and natural hazard risks.

NaturaConnect ecosystem services maps show that protecting strategically planned new and existing areas would contribute to sequestering 108 megatons of carbon per year - 1/3 of the target for carbon removal of the EU climate targets by 2030 - and would maintain 34 gigatons of carbon. These new areas would also provide approximately 27% of the EU's total pollination services (NaturaConnect unpublished results), directly supporting agricultural productivity and food security, as well as delivering other services (IPBES, 2016).

These findings demonstrate that biodiversity investments deliver multiple co-benefits for climate mitigation, adaptation, and the wider European policy landscape.

Indicators and datasets track progress towards TEN-N objectives across the EU and allow comparisons between regions

NaturaConnect has developed a set of indicators that draw on the NaturaConnect datasets and maps to track progress towards TEN-N objectives (NaturaConnect indicator factsheets (unpublished final drafts, December 2025)). This small, well-designed suite of indicators collectively captures the key attributes of a resilient and coherent network.

Funding must be strategic, long-term and better targeted and monitored

NaturaConnect identified persistent shortcomings in funding for ecological connectivity actions in Europe (Moreira et al., 2024). Even where public funding is available to support ecological connectivity, it is often project-based and fails to achieve long-term impact. Many existing protected area networks are also under-resourced (Bores et al., 2024). This underscores the need for long-term public financing, which can, in turn, also help drive up additional private investments.

Cross-border cooperation and capacity building are essential for an effective TEN-N

The NaturaConnect scenarios for the TEN-N show that cross-border collaboration improves ecological representation and cost-effectiveness of conservation measures. When countries jointly plan to meet the 30% target for a shared set of species and habitats, they can achieve a higher representation of threatened habitats and threatened species compared with uncoordinated national planning (Kukkala et al., 2016). The analysis shows that a high proportion of protection expansion priorities lie within transboundary regions (NaturaConnect unpublished results). Connectivity hotspots are also predominantly transboundary. Highly prioritised ecological corridors frequently originate in or connect across major mountain ranges (e.g., the Alps, Carpathians), making cross-border governance essential.

NaturaConnect's analysis of funding needs and projects in protected areas in the project's case study regions has demonstrated that Member States strongly rely on EU funds such as LIFE and INTERREG to support transboundary collaboration, because national funds are often inadequate or not available for activities that go beyond the immediately necessary national or regional priorities (Bores et al., 2024). Yet, without targeted capacity building, these mechanisms cannot deliver impact at scale, and their potential remains underutilised and therefore inefficient.



Policy recommendations

Environmental risks dominate global long-term threats, and with biodiversity loss recognised as one of the most severe systemic risks to the global economy by the World Economic Forum, halting biodiversity loss is of strategic importance. The most recent Global Risks Report (2025) of the World Economic Forum estimates that 50% of the global economy is dependent on nature. The next MFF must recognise that biodiversity protection, and with that the strategic expansion of the protected area network, is not optional environmental spending; instead, it is an integral part of European competitiveness and long-term resilience. The NaturaConnect results and tools described above can ensure enhanced cost efficiency and help direct funding to the right places. In light of this, the following are recommended:

Set an EU funding priority for the creation, restoration, and management of a connected, climate-resilient network of protected and conserved areas to which a budget line is allocated:

- Define the Trans-European Nature Network (TEN-N) as a strategic EU-wide objective supporting the Birds and Habitats Directives EU and the Nature Restoration Regulation with the integration of EU-wide biodiversity priorities across Member States.
- Define policy milestones in National and Regional Partnership plans tied to clear time-bound targets for TEN-N, including the identification of ecological corridor needs and climate change action hotspots. Disbursements of EU funds linked to TEN-N should be conditional on Member States demonstrating measurable progress toward building and managing a functional, connected network. This could include, but is not limited to, conditionalities such as:
 - Evidence of new or restored ecological corridors.
 - Implementation of management strategies for connectivity areas.
 - Demonstrated integration of TEN-N requirements into protected area planning and regional land-use policies.

Use indicators to guide investment and increase the conditionality of biodiversity investment:

- Use a monitoring framework with Specific, Measurable, Adequate, Relevant, Time-Bound (SMART) indicators to track progress toward biodiversity and TEN-N objectives, ensure accountability, and harmonise evaluation (Adams et al., 2021).
- For TEN-N objectives, a small set of indicators should be defined, using the best available knowledge, to capture most of the important qualitative elements of a TEN-N.

Guide investment to rural transboundary areas that are of biodiversity significance:

- Recognise the socio-economic significance and biodiversity value of transboundary areas and the need for targeted support for transboundary cooperation. Use the best available information, such as NaturaConnect maps, to identify key areas.
- Set objectives within rural targets for funding for transboundary restoration and connectivity projects.

Strengthen safeguards for funding to protect ecological connectivity:

- Make ecological connectivity restoration and mitigation measures a non-negotiable condition for funding approval for all large infrastructure projects. Demonstrate net positive gain for ecological connectivity and/or ecosystem services.

Invest in strengthening the administrative, technical, and financial management capacity of regional and local authorities and protected area managers:

- Provide targeted capacity-building instruments to improve project design, implementation, and monitoring. Beneficiaries of funding for capacity building include all relevant groups, including but not limited to civil society groups, regional and local administrations, researchers, etc. Use available training resources to upskill protected area managers, regional and local administrations and spatial planners.
- Support coordinated management of transboundary protected areas and ecological corridors.





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