



# Technical note to the EU discussion on strict protection

Submission from the IUCN World Commission on Protected Areas  
regional representation for Europe

## Summary

IUCN and WCPA Europe support the target to strictly protect at least a third of the EU's protected areas. We recognise that there may be variations in the way that the concept of 'strict protection' is currently interpreted in different countries. However, we urge countries to respect the qualifying components of the EU-definition i.e. that the purpose of strict protection is to “*restore the integrity of biodiversity-rich natural areas with their underlying ecological structure and supporting natural environmental processes.*” in which “*natural processes are therefore left essentially undisturbed from human pressures*”. We emphasise the need to ensure that strictly protected areas are left undisturbed from human pressures, and that areas are carefully managed, taking a landscape and seascape approach, to ensure that threats, whether from inside or outside the boundaries, are eliminated or maximally reduced.

## Background

The EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030<sup>1</sup> includes the commitment to “*Strictly protect at least a third of the EU's protected areas - representing 10% of the EU land and 10% of EU sea - including all remaining primary and old-growth forests as well as other carbon rich ecosystems, such as peatlands, grasslands, wetlands, mangroves and seagrass meadows.*” WCPA Europe supports the target to strictly protect at least 10% of the EU's land and sea. This is part of the 30% target of the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 which is aligned with the global 30x30 Target of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework.

Within the framework of the Natura 2000 Biogeographical Processes, a workshop involving protected area experts from across Europe was held in November 2024 to discuss the practical implementation of strict protection. The workshop identified important questions, and a working group was formed by members of the IUCN World Commission on Protected Areas regional representation for Europe (WCPA Europe) to agree on expert inputs into the EU level discussion.

Protected and conserved areas are important tools to respond to the biodiversity and climate crises. However, while there is ample experience in Europe in protecting secondary habitats (those that have been disturbed or altered by human activities), there is much less knowledge about how to guarantee the survival of primary habitats (those that have never been significantly modified by human activities) for future generations. This makes strict protection a critically important endeavour in the EU. Hence, WCPA Europe formed a working group to formulate this submission, which seeks to:

- Inform EU Member States and institutions on important elements of strict protection

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<sup>1</sup> <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A52020DC0380>



- Facilitate the establishment of a clear EU-wide definition of a strictly protected area
- Help guide decisions designating areas for strict protection

The document presents the group's suggested way forward for interpreting the concept of strict protection on EU level. Member State-level interpretation and case-by-case decisions on what is defined as strict protection could lead to confusion and make the monitoring of the 10% target of the EU Biodiversity Strategy nearly impossible. The lack of consistency in the implementation of protected area category II (National Parks) across EU member states demonstrates how confusing different national level interpretations can be. While there is a need for flexibility, for example to allow for restoration and/or rewilding activities to enlarge strictly protected areas, a single EU-wide definition is paramount.

The content of this technical note is based on the extensive personal expertise of WCPA members and on existing IUCN guidelines and other documents. As IUCN has members in most EU Member States, and as WCPA Europe benefits from and represents a substantial amount of collective expertise and knowledge from protected area experts across Europe, we consider our input to be highly relevant, informed, and pertinent to the ongoing discussion on strict protection in Europe.<sup>2</sup> The document does not address the management of semi-natural habitats.

## Definition

The European Commission's guidance document<sup>3</sup> provides the following definition of strictly protected areas:

*"Strictly protected areas are fully and legally protected areas designated to conserve and/or restore the integrity of biodiversity-rich natural areas with their underlying ecological structure and supporting natural environmental processes. Natural processes are therefore left essentially undisturbed from human pressures and threats to the area's overall ecological structure and functioning, independently of whether those pressures and threats are located inside or outside the strictly protected area."*

IUCN's Guidelines for Applying Protected Area Management Categories<sup>4</sup> do not provide a definition for strict protection itself, but define category Ia protected areas (**strict nature reserve**) as *"strictly protected areas set aside to protect biodiversity and also possibly geological/geomorphological features, where human visitation, use and impacts are strictly controlled and limited to ensure protection of the conservation values. Such protected areas can serve as indispensable reference areas for scientific research and monitoring."* In practice, this should imply a complete non-intervention management, a severe limitation of public access and a total exclusion of settlements.

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<sup>2</sup> This submission assumes that the EU and its Member States consider the [Natura 2000](#) sites as protected areas

<sup>3</sup> [https://environment.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-01/SWD\\_guidance\\_protected\\_areas.pdf](https://environment.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-01/SWD_guidance_protected_areas.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> <https://portals.iucn.org/library/sites/library/files/documents/pag-021.pdf>



There are two additional types of IUCN protected area categories, which could be considered as strictly protected according to the EU definition:

- **Ib Wilderness area:** Usually large unmodified or slightly modified areas, retaining their natural character and influence, without permanent or significant human habitation, protected and managed to preserve their natural condition;
- **II National park:** Large natural or near-natural areas protecting large-scale ecological processes with characteristic species and ecosystems, which also have environmentally and culturally compatible spiritual, scientific, educational, recreational and visitor opportunities.

## Key elements of strict protection

### Objective of strict protection

Strictly protected areas, which exclude extraction, sometimes partially via zonation, are essential for keeping regionally, nationally, or globally outstanding ecosystem integrity, biodiversity, habitats, species (occurrences or aggregations), geological and geomorphological features and ecological functions in a state as undisturbed by modern human activity as possible. In most cases, these attributes have been formed mostly or entirely by non-human forces and could be further degraded or destroyed if subjected to all but the very lightest human impact. In addition to protecting known species or ecologically important attributes, strict protection can protect those species or attributes which may not yet have been taxonomically identified and are thus part of the large amount of undescribed biodiversity. Strict protection can be applied to the entire range of ecosystems (terrestrial, freshwater and marine) with the goal of preserving remaining ecological integrity across biomes and biogeographical regions, protecting areas that are closest to their natural state when only degraded examples of similar ecosystems remain, or securing the protection of species that we still do not know, and ecological processes and interactions that we are not aware of.

Non-intervention in strictly protected areas allows natural ecological processes such as ecological succession, predation, grazing, dispersal and natural disturbances, such as fires, flood pulses, or sediment accumulation, to proceed unimpeded, unless they are considered a threat to people. The conservation objectives at the site level of a strictly protected area may also include management activities such as the following:

- Monitoring and research, particularly if one of the objectives is to provide a reference site for comparing the relative impact of human activities in similar areas elsewhere;
- Secure the protection of species that we still do not know, and ecological processes and interactions that we are not aware of.
- Guarantee the opportunity for supporting a range of broad scale ecological and evolutionary processes.



## Management effectiveness of strictly protected areas

While not every protected area is strictly protected, all protected areas must be effectively managed. The IUCN definition of a protected area<sup>5</sup>, includes the requirement that the site must be managed through “*legal or other effective means.*” Target 3 of the EU Biodiversity Strategy is to “*effectively manage all protected areas, defining clear conservation objectives and measures, and monitoring them appropriately.*”

Elements to consider when assessing management effectiveness of strictly protected areas should include:

- How anthropogenic disturbance (including research and any other approved activities) is minimised through management planning and law enforcement;
- Whether the length of any ongoing intervention to achieve conservation objectives is clearly determined;
- The need for sufficient space to ensure that natural disturbances do not severely affect or threaten ecological processes, and a requirement for minimal anthropogenic intervention
- The prohibition of any activities that disturb native species, populations and communities or damage their habitats
- The control of human activities or pollution, including those originating from outside the area, which may result in the harm, damage or destruction of ecological integrity, even in buffer areas

## Political and ownership context

Strict protection does not mean excluding people from nature, but rather permitting the persistence of fundamental ecosystem processes and biodiversity that support human life and allow deep understanding of ecosystem functioning. In addition, some access restrictions may be needed to limit the possible impacts that users can have on nature. However, wherever the case, permission to access strictly protected areas along identified pathways or other designated areas can provide direct benefits to the public.

Designating 10% of protected areas for strict protection with an additional 20% with traditional conservation management can together achieve the 30% protected area commitment<sup>6</sup>, which the EU and its Member States confirmed within the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework and reaffirmed in the EU Biodiversity Strategy. The implementation of strict protection may be easier under state ownership through policies and legislation. However, it is also possible under private or community ownership. Permanent strict protection might be guaranteed through land purchase and easements.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://iucn.org/our-work/topic/effective-protected-areas>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.cbd.int/gbf/targets/3>



## Social context

Local acceptance is crucial for effective strict protection, which requires communicating the benefits, including climate, biodiversity, and water resilience. The designation of strict protection should not lead to the complete loss of the ability to practice traditional activities or the complete loss of secondary habitats that need management. For traditional activities, which by definition involve intervention, efforts should be made (for example, through appropriate zonation), to ensure that these take place outside strictly protected areas.

Human activities in land or aquatic areas surrounding strictly protected areas should be managed so that they contribute to, or at least do not obstruct, the achievement of the area's specified conservation objectives. A mixture of various management approaches should be applied at a land and seascape scale that can result in a mosaic of naturally representative habitats.

## Restoration and rewilding<sup>7</sup>

In Europe, there are very few terrestrial and marine areas which do not bear the hallmarks of human action, although in some cases human disturbance may no longer be present in its former scale and type. Therefore, in some cases strictly protected areas may require an initial process of restoration, which can happen through natural processes or time-limited interventions. If continual intervention is required for maintenance of a habitat, the area would be more suitable for non-strict protection.

The EU Nature Restoration Regulation offers a unique opportunity for development of the right scale of area to restore ecological integrity in order to increase the extent of strictly protected areas and establish connectivity between these sites.

## Transboundary context<sup>8</sup>

To guarantee ecological connectivity, transboundary cooperation must be encouraged in order to establish large scale strictly protected area networks. In all cases (marine areas, **groundwater**, freshwater rivers and lakes, and terrestrial areas), joint management bodies and shared enforcement protocols will be specifically required for strictly protected zones involving more than one country, particularly if non-EU countries are involved. Creating such no-extraction areas is essential for protecting biodiversity and ecosystem processes while maintaining corridors for species dispersal.

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<sup>7</sup> WCPA has a specific restoration working group and IUCN's Commission on Ecosystem Management is currently working on rewilding guidelines. The expertise of these groups should be utilised when linking restoration and rewilding to strict protection.

<sup>8</sup> WCPA has a transboundary protected area specialist group which can provide additional expertise on how to apply strict protection in a transboundary context.



## Financing strict protection<sup>9</sup>

In the case of strictly protected marine areas, the “spillover” of fish resources is well-documented as a means to benefit adjacent fisheries. Similarly, for terrestrial and freshwater strictly protected areas, spillover of insects may benefit nearby agricultural areas. Payment methods for non-extractive ecosystem services (e.g., carbon sequestration) exist that can be used to finance the management of strictly protected areas and incentivise stakeholders who may otherwise not be motivated to support the designation of such sites. The EU Multiannual Financial Framework should address such payments for ecosystem services.

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<sup>9</sup> WCPA Sustainable Finance specialist group might be further consulted to develop concrete financial proposals