IDDRI

BLOG POST July 12th 2023

Why is a nature restoration policy essential in Europe?

Auteur

Agnès Hallosserie

Director, Biodiversity programme

Reading time: 8 min

The European regulation dedicated to nature restoration was adopted on July 12, after much turmoil in the European Parliament. Where critics of the draft regulation have put it in opposition to other policies, particularly in agriculture, IDDRI examines in this blog post the opportunities that a wide-ranging nature restoration policy can offer by bringing coherence and increasing the resources dedicated to policies such as the transition of the agricultural and forestry sectors, their adaptation to climate change and the protection of biodiversity.

Restoration is now the top priority for biodiversity on the European continent. It is also an important part of the response to environmental crises, particularly where populations and economic activities are particularly exposed to risks such as extreme weather events (heat waves, floods) or health risks (human exposure to chemicals, vulnerability of crops or forests to diseases or pests). By incorporating objectives, methods and funding for

restoration, the legislation provides leverage for the transition of certain key sectors towards practices that are compatible with preserving biodiversity and adapting to climate change, particularly agriculture.

At a time when there are divisions over the continuation of the ecological transition in France and Europe, there is some consensus to secure the progress made on climate change; but not on biodiversity? Dealing with restoration means looking at the key issues of land use and spatial planning, with much more nuance about what this means for economic activities than we have heard from opponents of the European regulation. As climate change puts additional pressure on ecosystems that are already weakened by other factors (pollution, for example), the degraded state of ecosystems, particularly productive ones (agriculture, forestry), further reinforces the impact of climate change on human societies.

Zoom in on three points that justify the need for a major piece of regulation on nature restoration.

A need for political coordination to scale up the restoration challenge

Restoring nature is not a new project, whether for the benefit of flora and fauna or human societies. As early as 1975, the Conservatoire du Littoral was set up to conserve and restore coastal areas with the aim of preserving them and making them available to the public for recreational purposes. At the end of the 1990s, a national research programme was dedicated to "recreating nature". In the early 2000s, there was a surge in projects to restore the natural flow of rivers and wetlands that had been modified (e.g., piped) in the 1950s and 1960s. The primary objective is to limit the damage caused by flooding. Restoring water quality, and therefore aquatic ecosystems, is also at the heart of the European Water Framework Directive's objective, with mixed results to date.1 The first objective is to ensure long-term quality drinking water. There are also initiatives in the mountains to combat rock falls and landslides, through the status of "protection forests" granted to forests that directly protect dwellings.

Beyond these utilitarian functions, restoration also serves to re-establish threatened species and ecosystems, often with socio-economic benefits: jobs to carry out the restoration and manage the sites (naturalists, ecological engineering, for example) or tourism (guides), including as a complement to agricultural activities (farm catering and accommodation, payments for ecosystem services). However, these initiatives depend on a few willing local or institutional partners (water agencies, National Forestry Office) and do not go beyond the project scale. As restoration is not a public policy, it is not monitored. It is therefore difficult to assess the general state of initiatives in this area, which will nevertheless be necessary in the context of the commitments made by countries including France via the Kunming-Montreal global framework for biodiversity: Target 2 requires States to “ensure that by 2030, at least 30% of areas of degraded terrestrial, inland water, and marine and coastal ecosystems are under effective restoration measures".

In December 2022, COP15 of the Convention on Biological Diversity noted that there is still no generally accepted methodology for measuring the progress made in restoring ecosystems. The draft European regulation makes progress on this point by identifying indicators by types of ecosystems that will have to reach "a satisfactory level" following restoration operations: marine ecosystems,2 urban ecosystems, rivers and flood plains, agricultural ecosystems3 and forests.

Restoration, a life insurance policy for production areas

This list therefore includes "natural" ecosystems as well as agricultural areas, which have lost significant biodiversity, particularly in terms of insects and birds. There are two types of restoration measures that can be considered for those areas:

- Those involving the reconstruction of a mosaic of habitats, with, for example, the restoration of peatlands, heathland or grasslands that will intersperse farmland and exploited forests. As pointed out by the Institute for European Environmental Policy, these habitats generally correspond to land with little or no productivity. In the case of the Common Agricultural Policy, restoring these habitats can provide farmers with additional income.
- And those involving the introduction of "high-diversity landscape features" in farmland, as described in the appendix to the draft European regulation and corresponding to "agroecological infrastructures": flowering grass strips, hedges, copses, low stone walls, ponds and so on.

While the former can bring benefits on a regional scale (flood expansion zones, for example), the latter have a direct impact on the long-term productivity of plots of land. The scientific literature[4] estimates that agroecological infrastructures covering 10% to 20% of agricultural land would have net benefits for biodiversity, and a neutral to positive effect on food productivity.

A political commitment to restoration will necessarily involve support for agricultural and forestry practices that favour these environments, with significant scaling up compared to the existing initiatives mentioned above. This offers strong public support, including financial support, for transitional practices in agriculture and forestry, to make them more resilient to climate change. One example is the different types of meadows targeted by the draft European regulation.[5] The European Biodiversity Strategy, for example, states that €20 billion a year will be earmarked for nature protection. Given the scale of this priority in Europe, it is safe to assume that a large proportion of this funding will go towards restoration measures. It also clearly states that a significant part of the budget dedicated to climate (i.e. 30% of the total EU budget) will be invested in nature-based solutions, including restoration.

The Council of the European Union agreed on a compromise text which was examined by the European Parliament on July 12, along with other amendments. It provides considerable flexibility for Member States to develop their own approach to restoration, which we recommend should be based on consultation at territorial level, so that local populations and economic players, both beneficiaries and in charge of restoration, can together identify their priorities and possibilities. In France, territorial coherence schemes are in the spotlight as the Climate and Resilience Act clarifies the objective of net zero land take. As planning documents are reviewed with this in mind, an opportunity is opening up for each region to identify the areas that are important for biodiversity and that need to be conserved and restored, and which will therefore not be built on in the future.

The draft regulation requires each Member State to draw up a national restoration plan. If Member States do not wish to use restoration as a lever to support the transition to agriculture or forestry, they will not be obliged to do so and may choose to restore other ecosystems outside production areas.

Links with policies on protected areas

Although the ambition to restore 15% of degraded ecosystems was included in the Aichi Biodiversity Targets covering the period 2010-2020, it had not been achieved.[6] Restoration, which has been given much less prominence than the creation and proper management of protected areas, has nonetheless emerged as an essential action for biodiversity in the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, where it is now mentioned in the objective preceding that on protected areas.

This objective, like that set by the draft European regulation, is calculated at the level of national territories as a whole. Some of the ecosystems to be restored are found in protected areas, which in France already cover 30% of the territory and where human activities are limited.[7] For some ecosystems, particularly those with mosaics of open and closed landscapes, such as limestone grasslands, restoration involves working with farmers, livestock breeders

or foresters. Restoration also applies to the 70% of land outside protected areas, in order to ensure ecological continuity and provide ecosystem services (see point 2 above).

The draft European regulation is thus a lever for achieving other protection objectives, such as the application of the European Habitats and Birds Directives, which form the basis of the Natura 2000 network of protected areas. In 2018, a report by four European environmental associations indicated that, overall, these sites lack management plans, implementation and funding. Providing a legal framework for restoration would directly benefit the protected areas, but would also strengthen their effectiveness as a network, by improving the state of the ecosystems linking one protected area to another. These ecosystems outside protected areas represent an essential bridge[8] for the habitat and feeding of many species outside Natura 2000 areas.[9]

1 2021 Report from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament on the implementation of the Water Framework Directive: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/FR/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52021DC0970

2 These objectives further clarify those of the Marine Strategy Framework Directive.

3 With a sub-objective dedicated to peatlands and one to pollinators.

4 Poux, X., Aubert, P.-M. (2018). An agroecological Europe in 2050: multifunctional agriculture for healthy eating. Findings from the Ten Years For Agroecology (TYFA) modelling exercise, Iddri-AScA, Study N°09/18, Paris, France, 74 p.; Garibaldi, LA, Oddi, FJ, Miguez, FE et al. (2021). Working landscapes need at least 20% native habitat. Conservation Letters. https://doi.org/10.1111/conl.12773 ; Albrecht et al. (2020). The effectiveness of flower strips and hedgerows on pest control, pollination services and crop yield: a quantitative synthesis. Ecology Letters No 23 (10), 1488-1498. https://doi.org/10.1111/ele.13576

5 See Annex I to the draft regulation.

6 See the assessment of Objective 15 in the 5th edition of the Global Biodiversity Outlook: https://www.cbd.int/gbo/gbo5/publication/gbo-5-spm-en.pdf .

7 The Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework calls for all countries to reach the target of 30% of land and 30% of sea conserved and managed through the establishment of protected areas.

8 Amos, R. 2021. Assessing the Impact of the Habitats Directive: A Case Study of Europe's Plants, Journal of Environmental Law, Volume 33, Issue 2, March 2021, Pages 365–393, https://doi.org/10.1093/jel/eqab006

9 This would be the case, for example, for the great hamster of Alsace (Eastern France), which is covered by a National Action Plan based in particular on the restoration of the hamster's habitat and the designation of Natura 2000 sites.

BIODIVERSITÉ | UE | BIODIVERSITY EUROPE