



Session 2 – Case study 1 : “New rules to new circumstances: how to adapt international and domestic legislation on protected areas to climate change”

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In 1970 the Council of Europe launched an impressive campaign entitled « European Nature Conservation Year » with a main message: Europe’s natural habitats were under unprecedented threat and there was a strong need to create more protected areas from the continent’s flora and fauna. During the 70s and 80s the number of protected areas in Europe passed from approximately 10,000 to 30,000, a great increase. In 1973 the Council of Europe proposed the idea of a systematic coherent network of protected areas for the whole of Europe a project that, under a different form (Natura 2000 and Emerald Networks) is being completed now to cover roughly 20 % of the continent.

The building of a solid system of protected areas has been the greatest success of nature conservation in Europe in the last fifty years but its survival cannot be taken for granted if it does not adapt to the challenge of climate change.

The treaties governing the designation of protected areas (the Bern Convention, the Birds Directive and the Habitats Directive) were drafted at a time when society had not fully understood that the climate was changing at an unprecedented rate. Existing European and national legislation established that valuable areas worth protecting had to be designated when they contained substantial numbers of threatened species (or substantial populations of some threatened species) or threatened natural habitat types. This has been done well over the years but a Council of Europe report by Miguel Araujo finds that around half of European vertebrates and plants are forecasted to lose suitable climate within existing terrestrial protected areas by 2080. This figure is even higher (58 %) for Habitat Directive species occurring in Natura 2000 sites.

The conclusion is obvious. The designation of protected areas needs new rules that take into account climate change. In my modest view the building of ecological networks and designation of protected areas needs to be changed to include the concept of “naturalness” and that of “functional connectivity”.

Areas could be designated if they had a high degree of naturalness (to be legally defined as appropriate but implying a low degree human interference or low disturbance (a full discussion on the term is found in C. Margules & M.B. Usher 1981). A priority must also be to build protected areas as an interconnected network of functionally related ecosystems. That is, as real “ecological networks” and not just a series of “pristine nature islands” in the middle

of a biological desert. In my view these are the two key concepts on which to build ecological networks the next fifty years. Obviously we cannot just forget about all the effort and networks built since the 1960's but these need to be integrated into an evolving "climate-change safe" new network for which rules need to be defined.