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CONVENTION ON THE CONSERVATION OF EUROPEAN WILDLIFE
AND NATURAL HABITATS

Standing Committee

31st meeting
Strasbourg, 29 November - 2 December 2011

**RECOMMENDATION
ON THE CHARTER ON THE CONSERVATION AND
SUSTAINABLE USE OF BIOLOGICAL DIVERSITY ON
EUROPEAN ISLANDS**

*Document
prepared by
the Directorate of Democratic Governance, Culture and Diversity*

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Convention on the Conservation
of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats

Standing Committee

**Recommendation No. 153 (2011) of the Standing Committee, adopted on 2 December 2011,
on the Charter on the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Biological Diversity on
European Islands**

The Standing Committee of the Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats, acting under the terms of Article 14 of the Convention;

Noting the adoption by the Council of the European Union, in March 2010, of a long-term Vision 2050 and Headline Target 2020 for biodiversity; and noting the European Commission's Communication in May 2011 of an EU Biodiversity Strategy to 2020;

Equally noting the adoption by the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), in March 2006, of a Programme of Work on Island Biodiversity; and that the in-depth review of the Programme of Work at the 11th meeting of the Conference of the Parties of the CBD in October 2012;

Recalling that in Article 3 of the Bern Convention Parties undertake to have regard to the conservation of wild fauna and flora in their planning and development policies, and are required to take steps to promote national policies for the conservation of wild flora, wild fauna and natural habitats, with particular attention to endangered and vulnerable species, especially endemic ones, and endangered habitats;

Recalling that Article 4 of the Bern Convention requires Parties to take appropriate and necessary legislative and administrative measures to ensure the conservation of the habitats of wild flora and fauna species, as well as of endangered natural habitats; and to give special attention to the protection of areas of importance for migratory species;

Recognising, in this context, the outstanding contribution of islands to global biodiversity largely resulting from their isolation and the high degree of endemism amongst their terrestrial, freshwater and marine animal and plant communities;

Recognising that the five principal proximate drivers of biodiversity loss – pollution, habitat change and disturbance, over-exploitation, climate change, invasive alien species – all have severe and cumulative impacts on the biological diversity of European islands;

Recognising moreover the extreme vulnerability of island biodiversity and that the majority of documented modern-time species extinctions have occurred on islands;

Equally recognising the high vulnerability of human cultures and communities on islands, as well as their economies that often hinge upon only a few sectors, most notably tourism, agriculture, fisheries and mining, and on external financial support; at the same time highlighting the particular resourcefulness of islanders;

Recognising that limitations in both scale and accessibility are fundamental characteristics of many islands and that any type of activity must commonly be conducted by fewer people than in mainland situations;

Noting that Europe has more than 50,000 islands, including around 500 islands larger than 20 km², ranging from polar to subtropical latitudes, and that several European countries are entirely situated on islands;

Recalling its Decision in 2008 to create a Group of Experts on European Island Biological Diversity having the following objectives: (i) improve Network conservation work on European islands; (ii) contribute positively to the island programme of work of the Convention on Biological Diversity by bringing the views, expertise and problems of European islands; (iii) assist Bern Convention governments on specific conservation issues of European islands; (iv) propose common guidelines and tools that may be used to improve conservation of European islands; (v) analyse threats to biodiversity that may present greater challenges on islands than on the continent; (vi) foster national conservation work on islands;

Acknowledging that the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity in and around European islands is, further to the Bern Convention, subject to an array of sub-national and national policies, as well as to a range of international instruments, policies and initiatives, an non-exclusive list of which is provided in annex 1);

Referring to document T-PVS/Inf (2011) 8 rev “Draft Charter on the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Biological Diversity on European Islands”, by Yves de Soye;

Taking note with interest of the document T-PVS/Inf (2011) 9 on “Priorities for conserving Biodiversity on European Islands”;

Recommends that Contracting Parties:

1. Take note of the appended Charter on the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Biological Diversity on European Islands as a source of inspiration for their policies and practice, promoting its use also with sub-national and regional authorities;
2. Devote special attention to island biological diversity in the implementation of their international obligations and also in the achievements of the 2020 targets adopted in the framework of the Convention of Biological Diversity;
3. Take note in the elaboration of their work-plans for island biological diversity of the priorities suggested in the document mentioned above;
4. Inform the Standing Committee on the measures taken on the implementation of this recommendation.

Invites Observer States to implement as appropriate the recommendation.

Furthermore the Standing Committee decides to use the enclosed Charter and the priorities suggested in the document mentioned above as a useful framework for further Bern Convention work in the field.

Appendix to the recommendation

CHARTER ON THE CONSERVATION AND SUSTAINABLE USE OF BIOLOGICAL DIVERSITY ON EUROPEAN ISLANDS

Whilst the principles and recommendations captured hereunder could apply to most, if not all, islands worldwide, this Charter focuses specifically on the marine islands of the European and Mediterranean states which are parties to the Bern Convention¹. The Charter refers to all forms of biological diversity in the terrestrial, marine, coastal and freshwater realms, unless specified.

The Charter will be complemented by a separate plan of action detailing the corresponding recommendations and implementation means and measures.

1. The biological diversity of European islands is an important part of Europe's natural heritage and warrants protection for both its intrinsic value and because the services it provides are a fundamental pillar of local socio-economic development

Islands cover around 5% of the global land area but contribute significantly to global biodiversity and are host to a significant proportion of threatened species: 29% (10/34) of the world's terrestrial Biodiversity Hotspots are islands, and of 10 coral reef hotspots identified, 70% are on islands; 48% (104/218) of the world's Endemic Bird Areas are on islands; 25% of WWF's 200 priority Ecoregions wholly comprise islands; roughly 20% of all the world's vascular plant diversity is found only on islands; around one-third of the world's threatened mammals, birds and amphibians are found only on islands.

European islands harbour many of Europe's endemic species, host major breeding congregations of important species and may act as refuges for species threatened or extinct on the continent or 'mainland' islands. They also often represent vital wintering grounds, stopover points or bottlenecks for migrating birds, mammals, and possibly invertebrates.

The Mediterranean and Macaronesian Regions with their large numbers of islands stand out as a global Biodiversity Hotspot - despite significant historic losses of endemic species resulting from early human occupation. In the Canary Islands up to 70% of some taxa (e.g. beetles) are known to be endemic. On the Mediterranean islands of Corsica, Crete and Cyprus, endemic plants make up 12%, 10% and 9% of the respective floras. The islands in these regions are, in addition, highly vulnerable to climate change.

In contrast, the Northern European islands are characterised by a relatively impoverished biodiversity and a near complete absence of species-level endemism, due to their recent history of glaciations. However, a number of these islands are important feeding and breeding areas for birds and marine mammals, and are home to important marine living resources.

Finally, the economies and livelihoods of European islands often depend to a significant degree on the multi-faceted values of biodiversity and ecosystem services, with nature-based tourism including recreational diving, and the harvesting of marine living resources being the most obvious examples.

However, these values and services are often taken for granted, and their continuing deterioration is not noticed or heeded. The intrinsic, economic, social and cultural values of biodiversity and ecosystem services should be increasingly recognised and reflected in public and private sector decision-making on islands.

¹ i.e. those located in the Black Sea, Mediterranean Sea, Baltic Sea, Arctic Sea, North Sea, and the north and east Atlantic Ocean. Those African and near eastern countries with islands in the Mediterranean Sea are also encouraged to collaborate in delivering this Charter.

2. Renewed targeted efforts are needed to conserve and manage sustainably both species and natural habitats on European islands, especially those with the greatest and most threatened endemic biodiversity, but also noting the significant conservation potential of small uninhabited islands

Past and current efforts have been insufficient to halt the loss of species and natural habitats on most European islands. Much to the contrary, pressures are mounting on various fronts including those resulting from continuing land use change, disturbance, over-exploitation, invasive species and climate change.

Renewed efforts are required to address the most urgent biodiversity conservation challenges, particularly on those islands which harbour an important share of European endemic and threatened biodiversity, particularly in the Mediterranean and Macaronesian regions. Additional efforts should equally be directed at protecting remote and/or uninhabited European islands, especially in the north-eastern Atlantic, where important wildlife populations and wilderness areas can be protected with relatively limited investment.

3. The conversion, modification and disturbance of natural habitats continues to be a significant threat to biodiversity on many European islands, wherefore spatial planning should give biodiversity full consideration

Historically the conversion of natural habitats by man has been the most widespread and significant cause for the reduction of animal and plant species populations. This trend continues on a number of European islands, especially the more densely populated ones where the demand for urbanisation and infrastructure development as well as for recreational and exploitative activities is highest.

Integrated spatial planning including Integrated Coastal Zone Management, and impact assessments should give biodiversity and ecosystem services full consideration and avoid, mitigate or compensate for any unavoidable impacts. The integration of spatial planning with biodiversity conservation should be deepened, based on the best available knowledge, by strengthening the cross-sectoral cooperation at national and regional level, i.e. through the exchange of experiences and good practices.

4. Invasive alien species represent one of the leading threats to island biodiversity; invasive species must be prevented from arriving on islands, detected, eradicated or controlled and measures be put in place to identify and manage pathways to prevent their introduction and establishment, particularly in priority sites and to safeguard highly threatened species

Besides habitat loss, invasive alien species (IAS) represent arguably the greatest immediate threat to European island biodiversity. This is largely due to the vulnerability of the large number of restricted-range endemic animal and plant taxa, but also to the scarcity or lack of natural factors, such as predators or pathogens, to control the expansion of harmful arrivals.

In addition, IAS cause significant damage to economic activities and human health: the costs related to IAS issues, in the EU alone, are estimated to be at least EUR 12.7 billion per year. Furthermore, both climate change and the expansion of international trade are prone to exacerbate IAS problems.

Tackling the IAS threat proactively is thus fundamental for safeguarding biological diversity on European islands. Important opportunities exist because both prevention and eradication are feasible on islands, where they are almost impossible to achieve in continental situations. Global and regional including EU policies pertaining to IAS should therefore give special consideration to islands.

5. Water resources on European islands should be managed so that negative impacts on freshwater biodiversity are minimised, especially in light of the growing impacts of climate change

Freshwater ecosystems are listed as the most threatened in Europe and globally, due to a number of key impacts including overexploitation, water pollution, flow modification including water abstraction, destruction or degradation of habitat, and invasion by invasive alien species.

Water is one of the most valuable resources on many European islands, particularly in the Mediterranean and Macaronesian Regions, home to the greatest share of European island biodiversity. However, the maintenance of water resources on these islands is at risk due to losses of forests and wetlands and, most importantly, inadequate water management resulting in the over-exploitation of local resources. In addition pollution and inadequate water sanitation endanger water quality. All of these threats are intensified by high levels of seasonal tourism on some European islands. During tourist season both water consumption and wastewater discharge can be many times higher than levels resulting from permanent residents alone, with major negative effects on water resources and quality.

The predicted impacts of climate change provide additional reason for concern as they are expected to affect the rainfall patterns and freshwater regimes on European islands, with those in northern Europe experiencing an increase in annual precipitation but those in southern Europe suffering significant decreases. The widespread damming of rivers and streams for domestic and agricultural use exacerbates the problem as it profoundly affects natural freshwater ecosystems, and this is also liable to increase under a drier climate.

Special attention should therefore be given to reducing the existing, and preventing additional negative impacts of inadequate water management on freshwater biodiversity, such as through appropriate incentive and regulation schemes.

6. The direct and indirect impacts of climate change on the especially vulnerable biodiversity and living natural resources on European islands require concerted preventive action, including measures enhancing their resilience and facilitating their adaptation.

Climate change is widely expected to become the greatest threat to global biodiversity in the course of the 21st century and deserves special attention on islands. Island biotas are highly sensitive to climate change due to their isolation and ecological characteristics. While some changes may be mitigated by the buffering effect of the surrounding seas, others are likely to cause severe impacts.

In this context it is worth highlighting that biodiversity may be impacted by climate change both directly from the resulting changes in the physical and living natural environment, and indirectly through societal response measures, most notably those undertaken in the context of climate change adaptation and mitigation.

A four-part approach is therefore required for addressing climate change, by: (i) determining the vulnerabilities of island biotas and the anticipated direct impacts on species and habitats; (ii) minimising the negative direct impacts, by enhancing the resilience and adaptive capacity of island species and ecosystems, by enhancing ecosystem connectivity and other suitable interventions; (iii) determining and anticipating any potential indirect impacts from maladaptive measures; and (iv) minimising key negative indirect impacts. This reflects the increasingly accepted view that climate change and biodiversity loss are best addressed together in light of their degree of interdependency and the opportunities for synergies and co-benefits.

Within Europe, the islands in the Mediterranean and Macaronesian Regions appear as the leading priority, because they have the highest endemic biodiversity and can be expected to experience the most significant direct and indirect climate change impacts. Within these regions, sites hosting vulnerable or threatened endemic taxa should be given special consideration.

7. On many European islands the intensification of agricultural, pastoral and silvicultural practices and the abandonment of traditional low-intensity farming may have major effects on island species and habitats.

Agricultural, pastoral and silvicultural practices are critically important in the context of biodiversity management. Biodiversity may be negatively affected by both land-use intensification and the abandonment of farming. The former leads to enhanced pressures on biodiversity by removing important habitat elements from the agricultural landscape, and by increasing the chemical load of the environment.

The latter will impact negatively on those species and habitats that have benefited from traditional human management practices and rely on the maintenance of those practices.

On European islands the switch from traditional biodiversity-friendly practices to more intensive methods gives reason for increasing concern. However special attention should also be paid to the abandonment of remote and sparsely-inhabited islands that have retained traditional low-intensity management, as this may have major effects on island habitats and species.

Where possible, incentives should be directed to deliver public benefits including cultural and environmental values for example by preventing undesirable intensification measures on the one hand, and encouraging the maintenance of traditional practices and biodiversity-enhancing low impact farming practices on the other hand.

8. Recognising that many European islands offer important opportunities for renewable energy generation, the potentially serious effects of some forms of renewable energy make it imperative that impact assessments fully consider potential effects on island biodiversity.

Islands across the world are increasingly exploring means to exploit their local renewable energy resources, in order to achieve energy autonomy and export energy to consumers elsewhere. The renewable energies considered include especially solar, offshore and onshore wind, biomass, tidal stream and tidal impoundment, wave energy, geothermal and small and large-scale hydroelectric sources. Widely considered to be clean and green energies, the construction, operation and decommissioning of generation and transmission infrastructures may nevertheless have significant impacts on biodiversity, primarily through habitat loss and disturbance effects but also by favouring the establishment of invasive alien species.

Renewable energy initiatives should therefore undergo careful strategic environmental assessments and environmental impact assessments that fully integrate biodiversity considerations in order to avoid, mitigate or compensate for any important negative impacts.

9. The management of waste presents a real challenge to many European islands and requires concerted action to prevent harmful long-term effects on biodiversity, ecosystems and the wider environment.

On the more densely populated European islands, and especially those receiving large numbers of seasonal visitors, the problems of waste management and disposal may be far more acute than in mainland areas. Many islands have very limited areas for landfill and the development of island-specific approaches to maximise re-use and recycling should be a priority. There may need to be particular approaches for dealing with large waste items such as vehicles and machinery, and providing bulk storage solutions for smaller islands to enable the intermittent removal of inert waste to facilities on larger islands or the mainland.

Failure to manage waste leads to social, economic and environmental problems on islands; the accumulation of waste on land, and especially along the coasts and in the surrounding waters is an ever-growing challenge as it pollutes the environment, poses real threats to biodiversity and is counterproductive to tourism development. Failure to manage both primary and processed plastic wastes presents particular problems to marine wildlife through entanglement and ingestion of plastics. A means of reducing this risk is to minimise the use of plastics and maximise the use of biodegradable plastics on islands.

10. The situation and characteristics of islands require the development and application of specially-adapted approaches and tools for problem analyses and response measures.

Islands and their biodiversity often offer some specific challenges linked to their small size and large distance from the continent. Scientific methods, tools for analysis and management and policies and legislative frameworks aimed at the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity often originate from continental situations and may be inappropriate for island situations.

A better recognition of islands in national policy frameworks and the further development and adoption of island-specific approaches would be essential contributions in this regard. Such approaches should offer opportunities for problem analysis and solutions at appropriate scales, consider the resource and spatial constraints as well as ecological specificities inherent to most islands, and build ecological and social networks between islands. They should furthermore integrate socio-economic factors with biodiversity and wider environmental considerations aiming at holistic improvements.

11. The knowledge and sharing of scientific data on the biodiversity and living natural resources of European islands, including on the threats they face and their conservation status, remain limited, and renewed efforts should be made to fill the priority gaps.

Many island biotas remain surprisingly understudied, even in Europe. This applies especially to remote uninhabited islands and to islands exhibiting a higher biodiversity, most importantly those in the Mediterranean and Macaronesian regions. In the Canary Islands for instance, over the past decade one new species was described on average every six days. The characterisation and distribution of island species, communities and ecological interactions, across all biomes, is still far from complete.

To increase and openly share the knowledge base on the species, habitats and ecosystems on European islands, determining and monitoring their conservation status, exploring their ecological interactions, and defining their relationship with human activities is therefore a cornerstone of all efforts to protect and manage the biodiversity of these islands.

12. Biodiversity conservation and natural resource management on European islands require adequate financial means and institutional capacities, recognising that by affording greater means to islands, more may be achieved for biodiversity than by analogous investments in continental settings in Europe.

Success in the conservation and management of biodiversity and natural resources relies on institutional capacities and financial resources in proportion to the issues at stake. However, on European islands, the public and private sectors, and civil society organisations tend to lack the resources to build and maintain the capacity to adequately assess and respond to their respective biodiversity challenges. Island stakeholders continue to be relatively isolated, and different islands tend to adopt different approaches to the challenges they face.

Compared to mainland situations, investing in initiatives on islands is expected to contribute more to the conservation of biodiversity in relative terms, given the higher proportion and density of endemic and threatened species and unique ecosystems, and noting that biodiversity pressures can often be more easily controlled on islands.

National governments, local authorities and other stakeholder organisations should therefore provide financial resources in proportion to the biodiversity on islands; mobilise locally available financial resources but also seek or source external funding in cases where local economies are not in the position to cover the needs alone; consider market-based and other innovative financial mechanisms; and develop and undertake targeted and effective initiatives to build capacity and reduce isolation, making best use of local resourcefulness.

13. To achieve the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity on European islands it is fundamental to enhance local awareness and ownership.

Local people are pivotal to the success of any conservation and resource management initiative. The particular strength and nature of island communities emphasises the need for this across the islands of Europe. It is therefore essential to facilitate a better understanding of conservation objectives and build local ownership of related activities amongst islanders. Local support also helps secure the commitment from political leaders to consider the value and needs of biodiversity and ecosystem services in their decision-making.

Annex 1

Non-exclusive list of relevant sub-national and national policies, as well as international instruments, policies and initiatives:

- Convention on Biological Diversity with its Strategic Plan 2011-2020, Resource Mobilisation Strategy, and the Programme of Work on Island Biodiversity and the closely linked Global Island Partnership (GLISPA);
- Convention on Migratory Species;
- Convention on International Trade of Endangered Species;
- World Heritage Convention;
- Ramsar Convention on Wetlands of International Importance;
- European Landscape Convention (ETS No. 176);
- UN Convention on the Law of the Sea;
- EU Birds and Habitats Directives;
- EU Water Framework Directive;
- EU Common Agricultural Policy;
- EU White Paper “Adapting to climate change: Towards a European framework for action”;
- EU Marine Strategy Framework Directive;
- EU Common Fisheries Policy and the various Regional Fisheries Management Organisations;
- Our life insurance, our natural capital: an EU Biodiversity Strategy to 2020;
- Helsinki Commission on Baltic Marine Environment Protection (HELCOM);
- OSPAR Commission on the Protection and Conservation of the North-East Atlantic and its Resources;
- Barcelona Convention with its Mediterranean Action Plan;
- Convention and Action Plan for the Sustainable Development of the Smaller Islands of the Mediterranean;
- North European and Baltic Network on Invasive Alien Species (NOBANIS);
- European Small Island Network;
- European Islands Network on Energy and Environment (ISLENET) convened under the Islands Commission of the Conference of Peripheral and Maritime Regions.