

THE BERN CONVENTION

The European treaty for the
conservation of nature



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Why protect nature? ⁴⁸

Nature is critical for human life. Maintaining a diverse and healthy environment not only provides us with energy, food and clean air, as well as psychological and physical benefits, but also boosts the economy in countless different ways. The millions of other living beings with which we share our planet are an integral part of nature. However, biodiversity is being increasingly damaged by human activities, sometimes beyond repair, causing loss of species and ecosystems and depriving future generations of options for survival and development.

As recognised in the preamble of the Bern Convention, nature has an intrinsic value: it is a heritage of cultural, historical, scientific and recreational importance, not only for human beings, but also for any form of life on earth, and for the citizens of the future. We therefore have a moral obligation to look after the environment and to be careful stewards of the planet. The Bern Convention has translated this duty into law.





WHAT IS THE BERN CONVENTION?

The Bern Convention is a treaty in the field of nature conservation, covering most of the natural heritage of the European continent, and extending to some states of Africa too. This treaty aims to conserve wild flora and fauna species and their habitats, especially those whose conservation requires co-operation between several countries.

The Bern Convention was negotiated at the Council of Europe, to be later signed in Bern (Switzerland), and has been in force since June 1982. This was the first international treaty to protect both species and habitats and to bring countries together to decide upon how to act on nature conservation and promote sustainable development.

WHO IS INVOLVED?

Fifty countries, including four African states, and the European Union have signed up to the convention.

Albania, Andorra, Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belgium, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Burkina Faso, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, European Union, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Republic of Moldova, Monaco, Montenegro, Morocco, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Senegal, Serbia, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, "the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia", Tunisia, Turkey, Ukraine, United Kingdom.

WHAT THE CONVENTION MEANS

To be part of the convention means that contracting parties (those who ratified the treaty) have to maintain biodiversity in the long term, according to different scientific and ecological requirements. The commitments of the parties are to:

- ▶ promote national conservation policies;
- ▶ consider the environmental impact of planning and development;
- ▶ promote education and information on conservation;



- ▶ share practice and expertise on biodiversity management;
- ▶ harmonise legislation on biodiversity protection; and
- ▶ co-ordinate environmental research.

HOW DOES IT WORK?

■ Biodiversity must be safeguarded in the face of different threats, including demographic and climate changes. Although many Europeans are fascinated by nature, their interest needs to be translated into effective political action. To this end, the Bern Convention promotes strong political commitment through implementation mechanisms in which all citizens are represented by politicians, NGOs, civil society organisations and scientists, collaborating to make crucial decisions for the preservation of biodiversity.





THE CONVENTION IN MOTION

Parties having ratified the Bern Convention commit to managing and preserving biodiversity. The treaty itself is the first step towards the conservation of species and habitats, serving as a reference document to guide legislation at national and European levels, and beyond. It is essential to have harmonised legal and administrative regimes to protect nature in a similar way across different countries: nature has no borders.

Although the convention dates back to 1979, and its spirit remains unaltered in the articles of the treaty, its appendices are constantly updated and renewed. They include extensive lists of protected wild species (flora and fauna) and habitats, as well as a list of prohibited means and methods of killing, capture and other forms of exploitation. Additionally, the scientists mandated to represent the countries in the different groups of experts are called to develop action plans, guidelines and codes of conduct to meet the most pressing requirements for the conservation of biodiversity at any given time.

The groups of experts also assess the reports that the parties periodically submit to inform on their compliance with the convention. If parties ever temporarily derogate from some of their obligations under the strict conditions foreseen by the treaty, they have to provide scientific evidence that the derogation will not be detrimental to the survival of the population concerned.

Additionally, there is a complaint system in force whereby NGOs, observer organisations and citizens can denounce possible breaches of the convention. If required, representatives of the Bern Convention may evaluate the situation in the field and suggest measures to be taken to keep biodiversity in a favourable conservation status. In some specific cases, the Standing Committee may even launch mediation to foster dialogue between the different sides in order to find win-win solutions.

NUMBERS IN CONTEXT

1979 → the year the convention was opened to signature

1982 → the year the convention entered into force







51 → the number of contracting parties in 2015

Nearly 200 → the number of policy instruments adopted in 2015

4 → the number of the appendices to the Convention



SOME ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE CONVENTION

-  **Taking invertebrates into account:** More than 1 200 000 species of invertebrates have been described so far; they account for nearly 95% of the animal kingdom and occupy a primordial position in biological cycles. These species only started to appear in national legislation after their inclusion in the lists of the convention in 1988, changing their status to protected species to be conserved.
-  **Protecting amphibians:** According to the Global Amphibian Assessment, 43% of amphibian species are declining in population, and 32% are threatened. The Group of Experts on Amphibians and Reptiles of the convention is the only intergovernmental platform in Europe that regularly assesses the situation of these species in view of enhancing their conservation.
-  **Promoting conservation in the European Union:** The Habitats Directive, which is the cornerstone of EU legislation on nature conservation, was adopted to enable the implementation of the Bern Convention by the EU. The Natura 2000 Network was created to conserve nature across EU countries, in compliance with the Bern Convention.
-  **Promoting conservation beyond the European Union:** The Emerald Network is an ecological network of protected areas set up under the convention in European States which are not members of the European Union. In 2015, it covers already nearly 600 000 km², almost the equivalent of the terrestrial surface of France!
-  **Fighting invasive alien species:** Exotic species that are introduced into different ecosystems are the second biggest cause of extinction in the world, with devastating consequences on native biological diversity. Since 2004, in a context where globalisation and e-commerce have dramatically increased the rate of introduction of new alien species, the convention requires parties to strictly control this threat through a specific European strategy.
-  **Fighting illegal bird killing:** Millions of birds are illegally killed or trapped every year in Mediterranean countries, putting the conservation of many different species in the European continent at risk. The Bern Convention is leading European action in this field since 2011, through a call for a zero-tolerance approach and the adoption of the "Tunis Action Plan for the eradication of illegal killing, trapping and trade of wild birds, 2013-2020", providing the tools for concrete actions.

CONTACT

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The Council of Europe is the continent's leading human rights organisation. It comprises 47 member states, 28 of which are members of the European Union. All Council of Europe member states have signed up to the European Convention on Human Rights, a treaty designed to protect human rights, democracy and the rule of law. The European Court of Human Rights oversees the implementation of the Convention in the member states.



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