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CONVENTION ON THE CONSERVATION OF EUROPEAN WILDLIFE
AND NATURAL HABITATS

Standing Committee

27th meeting
Strasbourg, 26-29 November 2007

**Follow-up of Recommendation No. 96 (2002) on
conservation of natural habitats and wildlife, especially
birds, in afforestation of lowland
in Iceland**

REPORT BY THE GOVERNMENT

Document prepared by:
The Government of Iceland

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RECOMMENDATION NO. 96 (2002) ON CONSERVATION OF NATURAL HABITATS AND WILDLIFE ESPECIALLY BIRDS IN AFFORESTATION OF LOWLAND (ICELAND)

Introduction

In December 2002, the Bern Convention Standing Committee adopted recommendation No. 96, concerning conservation of natural habitats and wildlife, especially birds, in afforestation of lowland in Iceland. Recommendation No. 96 lists seven specific recommendations for implementation by the Government of Iceland. This report details Government actions addressing these recommendations.

Actions addressing Bern Convention Recommendation No. 96

***R1.** Carry an overall environmental impact assessment (EIA) of afforestation policy so as to be able to evaluate how present and future afforestation of lowlands may affect habitats and species protected under the convention.*

So far, no strategic environmental impact assessment (EIA) of afforestation policy in Iceland has been conducted and no single afforestation program in Iceland has ever been subjected to EIA. The EC Directive 2001/42/EC on strategic EIA was integrated into Icelandic law in the spring of 2006.

***R2.** Map, as a matter of urgency, areas of high biological value in Iceland so that such information may be used both for guidance to the planning process and to identify "Areas of Special Conservation Interest" referred to in recommendation No 16 (1989) of the Standing Committee;*

The Nature Conservation Registry (NC Registry) tabulates areas of high nature value, which through the years have been considered candidates for protection. Currently the NC Registry includes some 450 areas, 91 of which are currently protected by law (Fig 1).

Preparatory work for the Nature Conservation Strategy 2004 to 2009 (NC Strategy) included the identification of some 70 terrestrial areas of high biological value, most of which are also listed in the NC Registry. Nine of these areas were listed in the final NC Strategy 2004 to 2009 adopted by the Parliament in 2004 (Fig 1).

The preparation of the NC Strategy 2009-2013, which started earlier this year, includes a scientifically based review and revision of the NC Registry. Based on the results of this review further sites of high biological value will be selected for protection.

The ongoing work on identifying and mapping habitat types in Iceland has focused on highland areas with no habitat type mapping undertaken in lowland areas so far.

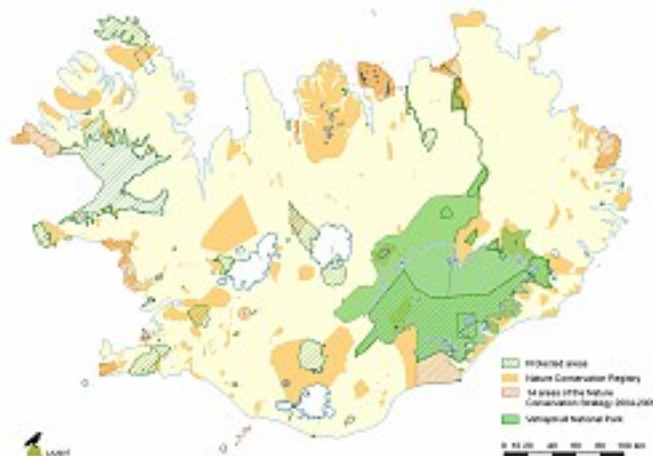


Fig 1. A map showing protected areas in Iceland, areas listed in the Nature Conservation Registry and areas included in the Nature Conservation Strategy 2004 to 2009, including the Vatnajökull National Park, which has been approved by Parliament but not formally established.

R3. *Support and encourage afforestation giving priority to areas known to have reduced biodiversity value such as eroded areas or heavily used farmland, avoiding as much as possible areas of bird interest or partially drained wetlands which might be easily restored to their former condition.*

The largest birch forest reclamation/afforestation project in Europe, was launched in the Hekla volcano area, southern Iceland, in 2005 with support from the government. It has several goals, including to halt desertification caused by blowing volcanic pumice and sheep grazing, to restore the birch forests that once existed in the area, and to sequester carbon in fulfilment of the Kyoto Protocol of the UN Convention on Climate Change. The plan is to reclaim some 60.000 hectares of birch and willow forest on currently denuded land, increasing the native birch woodland by up to 50%.

The Icelandic Forest Association has published voluntary guidelines for land- and forest owners, where it is stated that untouched wetland areas should be avoided. However, there is no law preventing land owners to drain wetland areas for afforestation projects or to plant drained wetland areas which might be restored.

R4. *Introduce as a matter of urgency a statutory consultation between the Forest, Nature and Planning Agencies for new afforestation schemes up to 200 ha, promoting co-ordination and synergy among the different departments concerned; involve the local authorities and the civil societies in the consultation process in the most appropriate manner; and establish in that framework and appeal mechanism to solve discrepancies.*

No specific action has been taken regarding this recommendation.

The Forest Research Station, the Icelandic Institute of Natural History and the Agricultural University cooperated on a large research project 2002 to 2005, which aimed specify the effects of different afforestation programs on Icelandic biota, including birds. The widely published results have greatly benefited the dialogue between forest growers and conservationists.

R5. *Consider establishing a networking of environmental data that would be suitable for Icelandic data providers and users;*

Most environmental research and education institutions have been developing web-based information systems or map servers to provide easy access to their data. A project is ongoing with the aim to network these map servers and provide a single gateway for users to access environmental data.

R6. *Draft and implement a National Strategy for biological diversity in Iceland;*

A National Strategy for biological diversity in Iceland is being drafted and will be published by the end of 2007.

R7. *Designate areas for inclusion in the Convention's Emerald Network of Areas of Special Conservation Concern.*

Work is underway to identify and produce a list of tentative Emerald-sites. This work will be completed in 2008.