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AND NATURAL HABITATS

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Follow–up of Recommendation No. 96 (2002) on the conservation of natural habitats and wildlife, specially birds, in afforestation of lowland in Iceland

REPORT BY THE NGOS

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Update on implementation of Recommendation No. 96 (2002) on conservation of natural habitats and wildlife, specially birds, in afforestation of lowland in Iceland

SUMMARY

In view of the failure of the Government of Iceland during the past five years to ensure the satisfactory implementation of any of the seven points of Recommendation 96 (2002) on conservation of natural habitats and wildlife, specially birds, in afforestation of lowland in Iceland

The Standing Committee is urged to open a case file.

BACKGROUND

In 2001, BirdLife International submitted a complaint (T-PVS (2001) 59) regarding the threat posed to internationally important populations of birds by the plan of the Icelandic Government to encourage the afforestation of a substantial proportion of the Icelandic lowlands. After a Bern Convention on-the-spot appraisal visit in summer 2002, resulting in the report T-PVS/Files (2002) 3 by consultant Michael Usher, Recommendation 96 (2002) was adopted by the Standing Committee.

The threat

The government of Iceland envisages much afforestation in the future, including to offset the CO_2 emissions from the increasing aluminium smelter industry and other heavy industry. Afforestation in Iceland is largely state subsidised. The plan of the Icelandic government and state forestry bodies is to plant up 5% of the lowlands with 2000 km^2 of forest up to the 400 m contour line by the year 2040 (Act of Parliament no. 56/1999. and no.95/2006 http://althingi.is). This compares to only 1200 km^2 of natural birch *Betula pubescens* forest and scrub, covering only 1.2% of the country, mostly as shrub growth[1].

The grave threat to birds is the fact that the vast majority of the planting is and will be in lowland Iceland below an altitude of 100 m. Large scale afforestation is unlikely to cover a significant area above the 200 m contour[2] as these are largely uninhabited areas with harsh climate and mountainous terrain. Only 3674 km^2 of the country lies between the 100-200 m.a.s.l mostly comprising rather steep mountainsides rising from the inhabited fjords and valleys to the uninhabited highland Plateau of the interior of the country. Only small areas are suitable for forestry on a small scale, where there is a gradual rise in altitude from lowland vegetated land to tundra heath land, up until the interior desert.

The area below 100m comprises only 17 000 km^2 of mostly vegetated land but also with sand deserts and lava fields in the south east and south west peninsula. The majority of Iceland's internationally important populations of breeding waders breed in the lowland vegetated areas. Most of the current forest plantations are on the three major vegetation types used by the waders; grassland, heath land and reclaimed or partially drained marsh and bog areas.

Since Recommendation 96 was adopted in 2002, the rate of afforestation of Iceland's lowlands has rapidly accelerated. In 2005, 5.7 million trees were planted compared to one million trees in 1990. By 2005 a total of 279 km^2 [3] of Iceland was covered in plantations mostly of imported, non-native species, especially spruce *Abies* sp., larch *Larix sp*.and pine *Pinus* sp., although in plantations for recreation much native birch is also planted. The vast majority of this afforestation is below the 100 m contour line[4]. Some 213 km^2 of this was planted since 1990.

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[1] Iceland is 102 700 km^2, vegetation cover is 23 805 km^2

[2] According to the Icelandic Geodetic Service the area between the contour lines is as follows: 201-400m covers 18 400 km^2, 401-600 m covers 22 000 km^2, 601 m and above covers 37 000 km^2. 70% of Iceland is above the 300 m contour.

[3] N.B. Bjarki and Björn figure give a substantially higher figure of 390 km^{2,}

[4] Icelandic Forest Service: skogur.is, B Þ Kjartansson & B Traustason, 2006.Landnotkun skógræktar á Íslandi-einfaldur samanburður landupplýsinga. Skógræktarritið 1, 81-87,

To fulfil the Governments planting objectives by 2040, the rate of tree planting will need to increase by about threefold; the area planted in 2004 was 17.4 km^2 and it would need to increase to about 47 km^2 per/year[5].

Following the 1997 law for regional forests (97% state subsidised), most afforestation is conducted in the framework of the five Regional Forest Programs "Landshluta skógar", which are small institutions with offices in each of the five areas - south, east, north, and north- west, involving farmers and landowners. Some 19% of afforestation is undertaken by the Icelandic Forestry Association "Skógræktarfélag Íslands" which is an NGO for many small regional tree planting societies. The third main forestry body in Iceland is the state run Iceland Forest Service " Skógrækt ríkisins" which now only undertakes 2.5% of the planting, now being mainly a research institution and working closely with the regional forest programs but also managing its previously planted forests. The remainder of the afforestation is undertaken by private landowners (6.5%), and the Icelandic Soil Conservation Service (3%).[6]

THE POTENTIAL IMPACT ON BIRDS

Iceland has one of the two or three most important breeding wader populations in Europe (see Annex). It has the highest density of breeding waders in Europe (along with the Netherlands)[7]. For nine wader species, it has the most important (six species) or second most important (three species) national breeding population in Europe. These represent from 6-52% of the global population and 16-69% of the European population. (Russia is the only country of greatest importance for more wader species)[8].

If one considers subspecies, Iceland has 45-100% of seven species: Black-Tailed Godwit *Limosa limosa islandica* (100%), Redshank *Tringa totanus robusta* (100%), Purple sandpiper *Calidris maritima littoralis* (100%), Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus islandicus* (99%), Snipe *Gallinago gallinago faroensis* (95%), Dunlin *Calidris alpina schinzii* (85%), Ringed plover *Charadrius hiaticula psammodroma* (45-52%) plus Golden plover *Pluvalis apricaria* (42-54%) and Red-necked Phalarope *Phalaropus lobatus (*23-35%).

Three of these species have an unfavourable conservation status in Europe (Black-tailed Godwit is globally near threatened and Dunlin is depleted and Snipe and Redshank are declining). The population trends of the Icelandic wader population are scarcely known but it seems that there are declines in Red-Necked Phalarope and Dunlin. (See Annex)

It has been estimated that 4-5 million waders leave Iceland in autumn each year[9]. These birds migrate through, and winter in, many European and North African countries.

For all but the purple sandpiper, at least a third and up to 97% of the national population of these species breed on land below 200 m a s l. Most breeding waders in Iceland avoid woodland and preferentially select open areas, at least five species preferring wetlands habitats. [10]

Where the plantations are on open, rather flat or gently sloping vegetated areas below 100 m, as is generally the case so far, they may destroy the habitat of breeding waders and meadow birds as well as Ptarmigans *Lagopus mutus* and the hunting grounds of raptor species such as Gyr Falcon. In addition, the afforestation can lead to secondary effects, such as increased predation levels.

A Snorrason & B Þ Kjartanson, 2004. Íslensk skógarúttekt-Verkefni um landsúttekt á skóglendum á Íslandi-kynning og fyrstu niðurstöður. Skógræktarritið 2,101 -108

[5] skogur.is.

[6] Einar Gunnarsson 2006. Skógræktarárið 2005. Skógræktarritið (2), 94-99. skogur.is

[7] O Thorup 2005 *Breeding waders in Europe 2000.* Wader Study Group.

[8] BirdLife International 2004 *Birds in Europe: population estimates, trends and conservation status.* Cambridge, UK: BirdLife International. (BirdLife Conservation Series No. 12).

[9] Gudmundsson, G A 1998 Importance of wetlands for birds. In: Olafsson, J S (Ed) Wetlands, Conservation and Utilisation. University of Iceland Press, Reykjavik (In Icelandic with an English summary).

[10] Gunnarsson, T G et al 2006 Large-scale habitat associations of birds in lowland Iceland: implications for conservation. *Biological conservation* 128: *265-275.*

Thus, Iceland's important breeding wader populations are likely to be threatened if the afforestation develops without taking care to avoid the most sensitive areas for birds, such as marshland, riverplains and dwarf-birch bogs. New plantings should preferentially take place on habitats avoided by breeding waders, such as on slopes and hillsides.[11]

IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATION 96 (2002)

In the five years since its adoption, neither the Icelandic government nor its institutions have fulfilled any of the seven points of the Recommendation. There have only been a few positive signs of any progress towards implementation for example through improvements in forestry practices within the forestry sector.

1 carry out an overall environmental impact assessment 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;

- There has, as yet, been negligible benefit from the June 2006 law on Strategic Environmental Assessment (in line with Directive 2001/42 in accordance with the EES agreement of European non EU states with the EU 2001/42/EU). It has so far not been used for any forestry plans; the National Planning Agency "Skipulagsstofnun", in autumn 2005 ruled against the need for an SEA for the one plan for large scale afforestation (Nordurlandsskógar Forestry in northern Iceland), that has so far been presented to it. This rejection was against the advice of the Icelandic Institution of Natural History and the Environment and Food Agency, from whom as an example, there was a complaint that no maps where presented with the plan for the 650 km^2 of forest plantations and 10 000 km of hedges and tree shelters.

However, some progress has been made:

- The National Planning Agency has encouraged forestry authorities to apply procedures defined in the Planning and Building Act to afforestation programmes, including to deal with the environmental impacts of such programmes and set rules on consultation and information requirements for the handling of individual afforestation projects. However, preparation for an afforestation plan in Northern Iceland, based on procedures recommended in the Planning and Building Act, has been ongoing for some years now, and the final planning proposal, expected to be presented for approval to the Minister of Environment in 2003, has still not been presented.
- Some of the forestry bodies have developed their own guidelines to follow when afforestation of new areas are planned. Each of the regional forestry programs has a board and undertakes some form of EIA but the information is kept private to the relevant forestry board and is not made publicly available. There is no legal obligation for them to follow the afforestation guidelines mentioned in the point below (ie no regulation from the Ministry of Agriculture which enforces it).
- Prompted by this Bern case, the Icelandic Forestry Association formed a working group (which last met once in 2006) to make recommendations for forestry practices. It comprises representatives of the Icelandic Forestry Service, BirdLife Iceland, Archeological Institute of Iceland, Icelandic Institute of Natural History, Icelandic Environmental Institute, National Association for the Protection of the Icelandic Environment (Landvernd) and from thee regional forest programs (Landsamtök Skógarbænda, Norðurlandsskógar, Héraðsskógar, Austurlandsskógar, Suðurlandsskógar, Vesturlandsskógar, Skjólskógar á Vestfjörðum). The resulting 'afforestation guide' was published in 2004 on the internet (http://www.skog.is/leidbeiningar.htm) and may subsequently be published as a book. It is designed particularly to coordinate and guide forestry activities and is logical and simple enough to be followed by everyone involved in forestry projects.
- A co-operative research project, 'the ICEWOODS project', run by the Icelandic Institute of Natural History and the Icelandic Forestry Service, has evaluated the effects of forestry on

[11] Gunnarsson, T G et al 2006 Large-scale habitat associations of birds in lowland Iceland: implications for conservation. *Biological conservation* 128: *265-275.*

biodiversity; mainly vegetation, birds and some invertebrates. Fieldwork finished in 2006. The bird part of the progress report is now available and some of the other parts but much remains to be published.

- A complete survey of all planted and proposed woods is being carried out. This monitoring project will make it easier to assess the extent to which planting has occurred on important areas for biodiversity. It will also contribute to the EIA of the forestry projects. (see http://nytjaland.is/landbunadur/wgrala.nsf/key2/nytjaland.html)

2. 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;

An important step towards implementation of this point is the new Nature Conservation Plan, a consultation draft of which was published by the Icelandic Environment and Food Agency in 2003. The Icelandic Institute of Natural History is also involved in this work. Completion of this work is urgently needed, especially to assist in assessment of large scale development plans affecting natural places.

3. 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 statement from the Icelandic Forestry Service and Icelandic Forestry Association about not draining undisturbed wetlands for afforestation is of much importance, but it does not include formerly drained wetlands. Such formerly drained areas are also very important breeding habitat for many wader species in Iceland. Over 90% of the wetlands in south and west Iceland have been drained to some extent, especially in the 1950s-1970s.

Some of these areas have been gradually returning towards their wetter natural state.[12] A committee for restoration of wetlands operated during 1996-2006, comprising the Ministry of Agriculture, institutions on nature studies and BirdLife Iceland, and some small areas of marshland and little lakes and ponds were reclaimed (Daniel Bergmann.ed. 1996. Endurheimt Votlendis. Landbúnaðarráðuneytið. See also www.rala.is/votlendi).

4. introduce as a matter of urgency a system of 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 an appeal mechanism to solve discrepancies;

There has, as yet, been negligible benefit from national law 106 /2000 on Environmental Impact Assessment which states that all proposed plantations larger than 200 ha shall undergo EIA evaluation. This has never been used for forestry - not a single plantation has undergone a formal evaluation in accordance with the law despite the hundreds of forestry plantations existing or planned. Only about five cases have been considered by the Icelandic Planning Agency as candidates for EIA (eg Silfrastaðir in Northern Iceland 450 ha in 2002 and Tungufell in Western Iceland 400 ha in 2003). It has ruled that there was "no need for evaluation with EIA or SEA".

A loophole in the EIA law allows two plantations of 199 ha immediately adjacent to each other to count as two areas if it they are divided by a road or a fence. Two or three such extensive plantations have been permitted.

Furthermore, the law also states that an EIA is only necessary if the area is not included in the land use plan of the area of jurisdiction. This renders almost all EIA unnecessary as virtually all of Iceland's land area has undergone some kind of formal regional planning, published by the regional authorities and approved by the National Planning Agency. However, there is a regulation that all new forest plots must be announced to the National Planning Agency. In the view of the Planning and

[12] Thorleifsson, E O 1998 Effects of drainage on wetlandbirds in South Iceland, 173-183 Íslensk Votlendi.ed. Jon S. Olafsson. Háskólaútgáfan .

Building Tribunal, afforestation projects are also subject to development consents if projects are in protected areas.

5. consider establishing a networking of environmental data that would be suitable for Icelandic data providers and users;

When this recommendation was adopted, the UK offered to support Iceland in establishing a networking of environmental data that would be suitable for Icelandic data providers and users, as per the recommendation.

6. draft and implement a National Strategy for biological diversity in Iceland; and
7. designate areas for inclusion in the Conventions Emerald Network of Areas of Special Conservation Interest."

Points 6 and 7 are partly covered by the Nature conservation plan, the work on habitat types in Iceland. There has been some discussion on the Emerald Network between the Icelandic Institute of Natural History and the Icelandic Environment and Food Agency. Also on the list of areas that could be protected (The nature protection register, Náttúruminjaskrá 7. útgáfa, 2002, The Environment and Food Agency of Iceland. See: www.ust.is).

CONCLUSION

Implementation of Recommendation No. 96 through consolidation of views of forestry and conservation is inevitably a long term project given the many stakeholders involved. However, progress in the five years since adoption of the recommendation has been disappointing. Particular further action is needed:

1. Revise the EIA law (106/2000) to stipulate that any two plantations must be divided by an area at least twice the area of the bigger plantation.
2. In line with the polluter-pays principle, ensure that the Icelandic Forestry Service (IFS) is in the forefront of the EIA of the regional forestry projects, and that the expenses are covered by the Ministry of Agriculture or Alþingi (ie Icelandic Parliament).
3. Put in place a system that ensures the Afforestation Guide is appropriately followed in all planting projects, for example by making subsidy dependent on compliance with the Guidelines.
4. Ensure that no planting takes place and no grants are made available to forestry projects in areas that have special nature conservation value.
5. Undertake public education to transmit the message of the "afforestation guide".
6. Discourage planting on land that could be restored to wetlands, providing state funding for restoration of wetlands as an alternative to planting grants.
7. The recommended establishment of a network of environmental data that would be suitable for Icelandic data providers and users should be developed by the Icelandic Environment and Food Agency or Icelandic Institute of Natural History. The Icelandic Forest Service and other land users should then have to take it into account during the development of relevant land use plans.
8. Iceland needs to develop a sound survey and monitoring programme for breeding waders, given its responsibility for such an outstandingly important proportion of Europe's waders. Together with Russia, Iceland is the country that most urgently needs to improve the precision of its data on breeding wader populations and trends[13]. It is also important to identify with some accuracy the most important breeding areas for the different wader species.

[13] O Thorup 2005 *Breeding waders in Europe 2000.* Wader Study Group.

ANNEX

Internationally important populations of breeding birds in Iceland that could suffer from afforestation of land under 200m (only includes species for which Iceland is one of the top five European countries or with at least 1% of the European population) Data from BirdLife International 2004 *Birds in Europe: population estimates, trends and conservation status*. Cambridge, UK: BirdLife International. (BirdLife Conservation Series No. 12).

Species	SPEC [14]	Icelandic popn. size (pairs)	Icelandic popn. trend[15]	European population estimate	% European population breeding in Iceland	Potential impact of unwisely sited forestry (estimated by BirdLife Iceland)	Icelandic population as % of European population including Greenland	Icelandic population as % of Global population	% of Icelandic population below 200 m a\s l
Anser anser Greylag goose	Sec	20,000-30,000	-0-19%	120,000-190,000	16-17	L	1st		
Falco rusticolus Gyrfalcon	3, Rare	300–400	F	1,300-2,300	17-23	L	3rd (GL 1st)		
Lagopus mutus Rock Ptarmigan	Sec	50,000–200,000	F >80	430,000-1,400,000	12-14	L–M	3rd (GL 1st)		
Charadrius hiaticula Ringed plover	Sec	30,000-50,000	?	120,000-220,000	23-25 45-52% of psammodroma ssp	L	2nd (GL 1st)	32	33
Pluvialis apricaria Golden plover	Sec	250,000-310,000	?	460,000-740,000	42-54	M- H	1st	52	32
Calidris maritima Purple sandpiper	Sec	10,000-30,000	?	28,000-75,000	36-40 100% ssp *littoralis*	L	1st	46	19
Dunlin *Calidris alpina*n	3, Depl	200,000-300,000	-[16]	300,000-570,000	53-67% 85% *schinzii ssp*	M-H	1st	16	49
Gallinago gallinago Snipe	3, Dec	180,000-300,000	?	930,000-1,900,000	16-19% 95% *ssp faroeensis*	M-H	2nd	6	62
Limosa limosa Black-tailed godwit	1, NT	15,000-25000	+0-19	99,000-140,000	15-18% **(100% ssp *islandica.*)**	L–M	3rd (1st for *islandica)*h	10	97
Numenius phaeopus Whimbrel	Sec	100,000-250,000	?	160,000-360,000	63-69% 99% of ssp *islandicus*	M–H	1st	40	75
Tringa ⁄ etanus Redshank	2, Decl	50,000-140,000	+[17]	280,000-610,000	18-23%((100% of *robusta* ssp with Faroes and Scotland)	M–H	1st	19	97
Phalaropus lobatus Red-necked phalarope	Sec	30,000-50,000	-	85,000-220,000	23-35%	L	2nd	6	55
Stercorarius parasiticus Arctic skua	Sec	5000–10,000	?	40,000-140,000	7-13%	L–M	3nd		

[14] SPEC = Species of European Conservation Concern: species in category 2 and 3 have an unfavourable conservation status in Europe (2 = species whose global populations are concentrated in Europe; 3 = species whose global populations are not (BirdLife International 2004)

[15] - = decreasing , F = fluctuating, + = increasing, 0 =stable, ? =unknown

[16] Gunnarsson, T G et al 2006 Large-scale habitat associations of birds in lowland Iceland: implications for conservation. *Biological conservation* 128: *265-275.*

[17] Gunnarsson, T G et al 2006 Large-scale habitat associations of birds in lowland Iceland: implications for conservation. *Biological conservation* 128: *265-275.*