



Strasbourg, 15 October 2008
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T-PVS/Files (2008) 12

CONVENTION ON THE CONSERVATION OF EUROPEAN WILDLIFE
AND NATURAL HABITATS

Standing Committee

28th meeting
Strasbourg, 24-27 November 2008

**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/project in Iceland has been subject to EIA. The EC Directive 2001/42/EC on strategic EIA was integrated into Icelandic legislation in the spring of 2006. The Act specifies afforestation plans as being subject to strategic EIA and the explanatory text to the law mentions regional afforestation plans as examples in this regard. The Icelandic Forestry Service has been under the auspices of the Ministry for the Environment since January 2008. Most afforestation activities are carried out according to Act on regional afforestation No. 56/1999, which is enforced by several regional bodies under the auspices of The Ministry of Fisheries and Agriculture. That legislation stipulates that at least 5% of lowland in Iceland (under 400 m above sea level) shall be afforested in the next 40 years in accordance to afforestation plans lasting for 10 years intervals. The Forest Service has been cooperating with the Icelandic Planning Agency regarding matters concerning afforestation, and the two agencies recently published jointly a printed guide for afforestation in municipal spatial planning.

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) lists areas of high conservation value, that are considered to be candidates for protection. Currently the NC Registry contains some 450 areas, of which 96 have been protected in accordance with law (Fig 1). The NC Registry covers both lowland and highland areas.

In preparation for the Nature Conservation Strategy 2004 to 2008 around 70 terrestrial areas of high nature conservation value including areas of high biological value were identified, most of which are also listed in the NC Registry. Nine of these areas were listed in the final NC Strategy 2004 to 2008 adopted by the Parliament in 2004 (Fig 1). In preparation of a new Nature Conservation Strategy for 2009-2013, which started in 2007, a scientifically based review and revision of the NC Strategy has identified or revalued about 20 tentative areas of high biological value. Amongst them are areas for plants, birds and invertebrates with emphasis on both species and habitat types based on mapping of habitat types in the central highlands.

The ongoing work on identifying and mapping habitat types in Iceland will now focus on lowland areas. As stated above all afforestation plans are carried out in lowland areas. It is therefore of great necessity for nature conservation to carry out habitat mapping of lowland areas in Iceland to identify, with best available methods areas with high biological value. This is acknowledged by the Ministry for the Environment. This does not mean, as can be seen in Fig 1, that the biological quality of lowland areas is not known. In the near future it is of urgent matter to map existing afforestation areas as well as future plans of afforestation in context of areas of high conservation values.

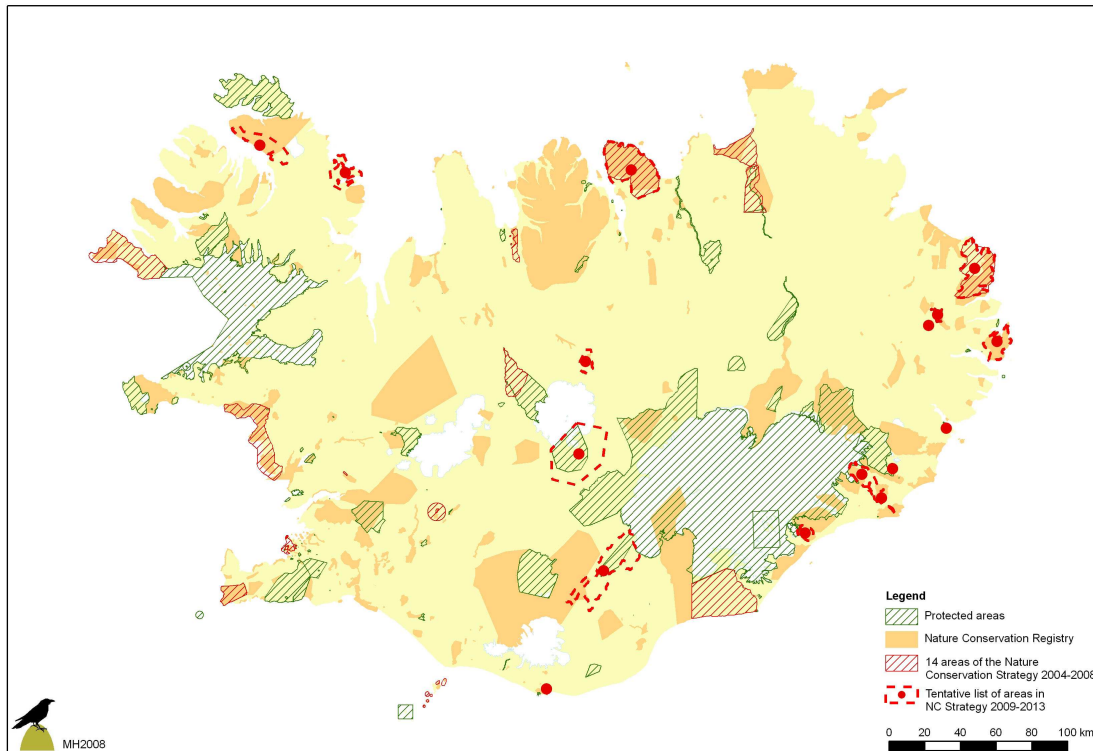


Fig 1. A map showing protected areas in Iceland, areas listed in the Nature Conservation Registry and areas included in the Nature Conservation Strategy 2004 to 2008, including the Vatnajökull National Park. The map also shows a tentative list of areas in NC 2009-2013 (under preparation).

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.

As reported in 2007 the largest birch forest reclamation/afforestation project in Europe, was launched in the Hekla volcanic area, southern Iceland, in 2005 with support from the government. It has several goals, including halting 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 60.000 hectares of birch and willow forest on currently denuded land, increasing the native birch woodland by 50%.

The Icelandic Forest Association, in cooperation with several institutions such as the Icelandic Institute of Natural History and the Environment Agency has published voluntary guidelines for land- and forest owners, where it is stated that untouched wetland areas should be avoided. There is no law specifically preventing land owners from draining wetland areas for afforestation projects or to plant in drained wetland areas which might be restored, but a provision in the 1999 Nature Conservation Act states that bogs and wetlands, 3 hectares or larger, shall enjoy special protection and their disturbance shall be avoided if at all possible. The Government of Iceland and the Ministry for the Environment have in the strategy *Welfare for the Future priorities 2006-2009*, which is a framework for sustainable development in Iceland, stated that for protection of Iceland's biota the main objectives include: the protection of diversity of species and habitat types; avoidance of further diminishing of wetlands, birch woodlands and other key ecosystems in Iceland; and restoration of wetlands and other important ecosystems. Furthermore systematic soil conservation activities should be conducted in eroded areas, in accordance with policies on land use and nature conservation in each area and the development of farm forestry should strengthen rural settlements and employment, and fit in with the country's landscape and ecosystem.

The Ministry for the Environment has decided that the Environment Agency and the Icelandic Institute of Natural History are to work on the designation of three new Ramsar areas in Iceland.

In 2007 a committee established by the Ministry of the Environment published a report on protection and reclamation of birch woodland in Iceland. Among the many proposals made by the committee is to increase birch woodland through the regional law on afforestation and birch woodland should cover at least 10 % of the land area.

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.

The Ministry for the Environment has established an Advisory Board in Afforestation and Revegetation, which is a venue for cooperation and coordination of those who work in the fields of afforestation, revegetation and nature conservation, including the Forest Service, Soil Conservation Service, Institute of Natural History, Environment Agency, Planning Agency, local forestry bodies and NGOs, as well as the Ministries for the Environment and of Agriculture and Fisheries. The cooperation of the Forest Service and the Planning Agency is mentioned in the answer to R1. Local authorities and civil societies are consulted in context with planning or EIA processes. The recent legislation on strategic EIA gives an opportunity to broaden the involvement of local authorities and civil society in afforestation projects at earlier stages.

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. The new organization of the Ministry of the Environment should facilitate this process in context of afforestation and nature conservation.

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

A National Strategy for biological diversity in Iceland has now been approved by the Icelandic government. The strategy includes several objectives, as expected, for mapping, research, and monitoring and ecosystem approach for protection of biological diversity and for land reclamation. Several objectives are specifically aimed at reclamation of natural ecosystems such as wetlands and birch woodland. These objectives will indirectly and directly affect afforestation projects.

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

In 2006 work was underway to identify and produce a list of tentative Emerald-sites. There has been a delay in this work but it will continue 2008 to 2009 and Iceland will hopefully be able to designate areas for inclusion in Emerald Network of Areas of Special interest latest at the end of 2009.