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CONVENTION ON THE CONSERVATION OF EUROPEAN WILDLIFE  
AND NATURAL HABITATS

**45<sup>th</sup> Standing Committee**

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**OVERVIEW OF THE THEMATIC GROUP OF EXPERTS AND WORKING GROUPS  
SET UP UNDER THE BERN CONVENTION**

*Document prepared by the Secretariat*

## **Overview of the Thematic Groups of Experts and Working Groups set up under the Bern Convention**

According to Article 14, paragraph 2, of the Bern Convention: *"In order to discharge its functions, the Standing Committee may, on its own initiative, arrange for meetings of groups of experts."* No further mention to the Thematic Groups of Experts is made in the current version of the Standing Committee's Rules of Procedure. Neither Working Groups nor the distinction between Thematic Groups of Experts and Working Groups are mentioned in official texts.

### **THEMATIC GROUPS OF EXPERTS**

Under the Bern Convention, numerous Species Action Plans, Codes of Conduct, and Guidelines have been developed, either at the initiative of the Convention or in collaboration with partner organisations. This work is carried out with the substantive input of Groups of Experts established under the framework of the Convention.

The Groups of Experts are composed of representatives from the Contracting Parties with expertise in relevant thematic areas. Observers, including NGOs with recognised experience in the field, are also invited to contribute. In addition to their technical role, the Groups of Experts provide a collaborative space where Contracting Parties, non-governmental organisations, and other international conventions can jointly address issues of common concern. Some Groups were co-managed with specialised NGOs, such as those on large carnivores, birds, and plants, which bring valuable expertise and ensure more efficient use of limited resources. NGOs also contribute actively by monitoring implementation, providing research and data, and developing proposals that feed into policy guidance. Moreover, the Groups of Experts have pioneered international cooperation on cross-cutting topics such as invasive alien species, biodiversity and climate change, and European island biodiversity, often in close connection with related processes under other conventions (CBD, CMS, AEW, IUCN).

Groups of Experts are generally considered to have an unlimited duration. However, this rule is not stated in any official document.

The Groups of Experts are responsible for reviewing the implementation of the Convention and for developing guidance in the form of draft recommendations, which are subsequently submitted to the Standing Committee for consideration and possible adoption. Once adopted, these recommendations offer policy guidance and encourage Parties to take action at the national level.

The first Group of Experts, focused on the Conservation of Amphibians and Reptiles, was established in 1986. Today, around a dozen Groups of Experts exist, although some are currently inactive due to resource constraints or shifting priorities, such as the Group of Experts on Island Biological Diversity and the Group of Experts on Invertebrates. Most active groups meet annually, biennially, or triennially. Over the past two years, eight Groups of Experts have convened.

The Standing Committee has adopted only three detailed terms of reference for the following groups: the Group of Experts on the Conservation of Birds (1997), the Group of Experts on the Conservation of Large Carnivores (2000), and the Group of Experts on Climate Change and Biodiversity (last updated in 2022).

It needs to be acknowledged that the Convention, with the help of the relevant Thematic Groups of Experts, has developed or co-developed, adopted and implemented several thematic and action-oriented policy documents, notably:

- European Strategy on Invasive Alien Species (2003) and several Codes of Conduct on IAS
- European Strategy for the Conservation of Invertebrates (2006)
- European Strategy for Plant Conservation (2008-2014) and a Code of Conduct on Horticulture and Invasive Alien Plants (2008)
- Action Plan for the Conservation and Restoration of the European Sturgeon (*Acipenser sturio*) (2008), later replaced by the Pan-European Action Plan for Sturgeons (2019-2029);
- Action Plan for the Conservation of the Common Hamster (*Cricetus cricetus*) (2009)
- [Revised Calendar for the implementation of the Emerald Network of Areas of Special Conservation Interest \(2011-2020\)](#)
- [Programme of work on Climatic change and biodiversity conservation](#)
- [Tunis Action Plan \(2013-2020\) for the eradication of illegal killing, trapping and trade of wild birds](#) and several bird Species Action Plans
- Rome Strategic Plan 2020-2030 for the eradication of illegal killing, trapping and trade of wild birds
- [Guidelines for Population level Management Plans for Large Carnivores](#) and numerous [recommendations on large carnivores](#)

Despite the relevance of their mandate, in the absence of any regulation in official documents, some confusion exists about their composition and rules of procedure. The Group of Experts on Large Carnivores has recently requested a clarification of its composition and rules of procedure. This request reflects a broader discussion on the future role, structure, and relevance of Groups of Experts and Working Groups under the Convention.

The table below provides a comprehensive overview of each Group of Experts established under the Bern Convention. For each entity, it outlines the date of creation, the existence of terms of reference or not, if the group is still active, the frequency of meetings, the date and outcomes of the most recent meeting, and relevant links to the last meeting reports. The table shows that:

- The first Group of Experts was set up in 1986, while the most recent was created in 2022 (though the latter could be considered closer to a working group due to its restricted scope);
- Not all Thematic Groups of Experts are equipped with detailed Terms of Reference;
- Two Groups of Experts have out-of-date Terms of Reference (the Group of Experts on Birds and on Large carnivores; however, it should be noted that they are both in the process of updating their terms of reference.);
- Several Groups of Experts have not met in recent years: On Conservation of Invertebrates (since 2013), On Conservation of Plants (including Mushrooms), On European Island Biological Diversity (since 2011), On Biodiversity and Climate Change (since 2022);
- Thematic priorities may have evolved over time, outlining the need to review the scope and mandate of some Groups;
- Some Groups could need to be relaunched due to the evolving priorities of the Council of Europe.

| Thematic Groups of Experts                      | Set up in | Terms of Reference | Active Group  | Frequency of meetings         | Last meetings   | Outcomes of the last meeting  | Last meeting report   |
|---|-----------|--------------------|---|-------------------------------|---|---|---|
| On Conservation of Amphibians and Reptiles      | 1986      | No                 | Yes, it seems still relevant, even if a specific ad hoc Working Group was created on the conservation of marine turtles in 2022 | Every 2 years / twice in 2025 | 25 March 2025 (12 <sup>th</sup> meeting) / 7 October 2025 (Joint meeting with the GoE on IAS) | Review of inspiring national actions for amphibian and reptile conservation, and ongoing challenges regarding Bsal fungus control. The Group highlighted the need for stronger mapping of key herpetofauna areas. Participants agreed to strengthen cooperation with the Group of Experts on Invasive Alien Species to tackle alien pathogens and threats linked to e-commerce and stressed the importance of practical follow-up on railway conflicts and habitat restoration to help species resilience.  | Reports to be available soon  |
| On Conservation of Invertebrates                | 1989      | No                 | No, it has been inactive since 2013, so it should be phase out or merge with an other GoE                                       | Every 2-3 years before 2013   | 25 October 2013 (10 <sup>th</sup> meeting)  | Progress made in national conservation efforts, growing importance of invertebrate protection within the Bern Convention framework, and need for improved awareness, data sharing, and research. Proposal of a draft recommendation addressing threats posed by neurotoxic insecticides to pollinators and continued national implementation of the European Strategy for the Conservation of Invertebrates. Future actions will focus on strengthening awareness-raising, updating databases, and supporting better conservation measures across Europe. | <a href="https://rm.coe.int/1680746496">https://rm.coe.int/1680746496</a>   |
| On Conservation of Plants (including Mushrooms) | 1990      | No                 | No, it has been inactive for a long time, so it may be not relevant anymore   | No past meetings              |   | Last document produced: A review of European progress towards the Global Strategy for Plant Conservation (2021-2020)  | <a href="https://rm.coe.int/plant-review-2011-2020/1680a401e2">https://rm.coe.int/plant-review-2011-2020/1680a401e2</a> |
| On Invasive Alien Species                       | 1992      | No                 | Yes, it participated in the development   | Every 2 years / twice in 2025 | 20 March 2025 (15 <sup>th</sup> meeting) / 7 October  |   | Reports to be available soon  |

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|  |      |  | of the European Strategy on Invasive Alien Species and several Codes of Conduct on IAS, so it may be still relevant  |   | 2025 (joint meeting with the GoE on Amphibians and Reptiles and Follow-up meeting) |   |   |
| On Conservation of Birds and the joint meeting on IKB with the CMS | 1997 | Yes, but it is outdated. However, the Group is currently in the process of updating its Terms of Reference . | Yes, the Group amended and validated the Tunis Action Plan (2013-2020) for the eradication of illegal killing, trapping and trade of wild birds and several bird Species Action Plans, so it may still be relevant | Every 2-3 years   | 15-16 May 2025 Bonn (joint meeting on IKB with the CMS)                            | The Scoreboard results, the progress in the implementation of the Rome Strategic Plan, litigation and enforcement, technological advancements in tracing IKB were discussed. The thematic scope of the meeting also included lowering the negative impact of power lines and wind turbines on birds.  | Report of the GoE to be available soon<br>Report of the IKB joint meeting available |
| On Conservation of Large Carnivores                                | 2000 | Yes, but it is outdated. However, the Group is currently in the process of                                   | Yes, it has been relaunched after 13 years, it seems still relevant, especially in the context of the  | Every 2-3 years / twice in 2025 / stand-by from 2012 until 2025 | 10-11 June 2025 / 30 September 2025  | Contracting Parties and observers shared national and regional updates on conservation and management efforts, highlighting successes like the Iberian lynx recovery, but also ongoing challenges such as human-wildlife conflicts and hybridisation. The Group welcomed EU-level developments, discussed best practices for managing protected populations, and identified key issues like the downlisting of wolves and bears, harmonised | Report to be available soon   |

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|  |      | updating its Terms of Reference  | downlisting of the wolf   |                                  |   | monitoring, and improved coexistence measures. Participants agreed to review and modernise past recommendations and develop new ones for the Standing Committee to better guide large carnivore conservation in Europe. |   |
| On Biodiversity and Climate Change         | 2006 | Yes, it has been last updated in 2022: <a href="https://rm.coe.int/tps09e-2022-tor-group-of-experts-on-biodiversity-and-climate-change/1680a7bca0">https://rm.coe.int/tps09e-2022-tor-group-of-experts-on-biodiversity-and-climate-change/1680a7bca0</a> | No, it has been inactive for the past 2 years, but it would be worth it to relaunch it, especially since a revised mandate has been adopted in 2022 | Every year-2 years               | 23 May 2022 (11 <sup>th</sup> meeting)                    |   | Report not available on the website but probably on DMS   |
| On Protected Areas and Ecological Networks | 2008 | No   | Yes   | Every year-2 years               | 7-8 October 2025 in Montenegro (15 <sup>th</sup> meeting) |   | <a href="https://rm.coe.int/pa09e-2024-meeting-report-gopaen-2760-4207-4633-1/1680afdaa2">https://rm.coe.int/pa09e-2024-meeting-report-gopaen-2760-4207-4633-1/1680afdaa2</a> |
| On European Island Biological Diversity    | 2009 | No   | No, it has been on stand-by since 2011, so  | 3 meetings between 2009 and 2011 | 9-11 June 2011 (3 <sup>rd</sup> meeting)                  | This meeting highlighted the unique value and vulnerability of island biodiversity, especially in places like Corsica. It was encouraging to see strong collaboration between local, national, and                      | <a href="https://rm.coe.int/16807469a7">https://rm.coe.int/16807469a7</a>   |

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|   |      |    | it could be phased out  |                    |   | international actors, and progress towards adopting the European Charter for Island Biodiversity. Invasive species control, climate impacts, and priority actions were discussed in detail, and countries shared practical projects and ideas to better protect their islands' natural heritage.   |   |
| National Focal Points for the Pan-European Action Plan for Sturgeons (In Rec. No. 199 (2018), the Secretariat was mandated to closely monitor the implementation of the Action Plan if possible through the setting-up of a dedicated WG) | 2022 | No | Yes, it's the last GoE that has been set up by the Standing Committee, so it would be counter-indicated to phase it out, except if the Standing Committee decides otherwise | Every 2 years      | 10-11 June 2024 (2 <sup>nd</sup> meeting) | Progress in the implementation of the Pan European Action Plan for Sturgeons and outputs of a project supported by the EU Commission. Participants shared mixed progress on sturgeon conservation, with encouraging examples of habitat mapping, bycatch monitoring, and restocking efforts, but also ongoing challenges like poaching and migration barriers. New guidelines on habitat assessment, population monitoring, and ex-situ conservation were welcomed to help countries coordinate better. Participants agreed on next steps, like sharing data more systematically, planning regional meetings to strengthen cross-border cooperation, and inviting the Bern Convention's Standing Committee to endorse the new tools and keep the momentum going. | <a href="https://rm.coe.int/tpvs05e-2024-report-second-meeting-nfp-ap-sturgeon-2752-7060-6090-1/1680b11cc5">https://rm.coe.int/tpvs05e-2024-report-second-meeting-nfp-ap-sturgeon-2752-7060-6090-1/1680b11cc5</a>       |
| On the implementation of the Action Plan for the eradication of the Ruddy Duck in Europe  | 2017 | No | Yes, it follows up the implementation of an Action Plan, which will end up in 2025, so it will have to continue if a new Action Plan for 5 is adopted                       | Every year-2 years | 22 November 2024                          | Good progress had been made in the eradication of the invasive Ruddy Duck in Europe. Although it seems that, on a European scale, the problem persists in 2024. The GoE agreed that, considering the mobility of the species, the growing efforts that the eradication of the last remnants of an introduced species supposes, and that the target of Ruddy Duck being functionally extinct in the wild in Europe will not be reached by some countries by the end of the current Action Plan (in 2025), it was therefore recommended that more efforts should continue in   | <a href="https://rm.coe.int/tpvs02e-2025-report-ruddy-duck-expert-meeting-22-november-2024-2771-92/1680b4b64c">https://rm.coe.int/tpvs02e-2025-report-ruddy-duck-expert-meeting-22-november-2024-2771-92/1680b4b64c</a> |

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|  |  |  |  |  |  | the future with a follow-up Action Plan for the coming years. |  |
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## WORKING GROUPS

Working Groups do not have a clear definition and are established on an ad hoc basis, usually at the request of the Standing Committee, to address specific procedural or strategic matters. Unlike the thematic mandate of Groups of Experts, Working Groups focus on time-bound and goal-oriented tasks, such as drafting protocols or reviewing financial mechanisms. For example, the Intersessional Working Group on Finances met four times in 2021 before being succeeded by the Ad hoc Drafting Group of an Amending Protocol, which convened up to six times in a year.

All Working Groups are governed by terms of reference, which typically follow a common structure: I. BACKGROUND, II. MANDATE, III. OBJECTIVES, IV. PRINCIPAL TASKS, V. COMPOSITION and VI. WORKING METHODS. In some cases, Sections II, III, and IV are merged under a single heading: SCOPE.

The table shows that:

- The practice to set up Working Groups was introduced in 2018, according to the 38<sup>th</sup> Standing Committee meeting report;
- The mandate and expected results of the Working Groups are clear because they are all equipped with detailed Terms of Reference;
- All Working Groups are active since several of them have replaced the previous ones;
- The Working Groups produce useful tools and provide follow-up on important matters;
- Their ad hoc nature allows for flexibility, enabling them to respond effectively to emerging needs and priorities.

| Working Groups   | Set up in | Terms of Reference                                      | Active Group | Frenquency of meetings  | Last meeting                              | Outcomes of the last meeting   | Last meeting report                 |
|--|-----------|---|--------------|-------------------------|---|--|-------------------------------------|
| Intersessional Working Group on Finances (replaced by the Ad hoc Drafting Group of an Amending Protocol) | 2018      | Yes, revised in 2020: <a href="#">T-PVS/Inf(2020)12</a> | No           | 4 meetings held in 2021 | 12 October 2021 (4 <sup>th</sup> meeting) | Follow up to the GR-C instructions and on the progress made in elaborating the two options to ensure the financial stability to the Bern Convention, indicated by the Standing Committee in 2020: establishing the EPA and the amendment of the Convention, as well as their estimated range of financial contributions. | Report not available on the website |

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| Working Group on a vision (and strategic plan) for the Bern Convention (for the period to 2030) (replaced by the Working Group on overseeing the implementation of the Strategic Plan) | 2020 | Yes <a href="#">T-PVS/Inf(2020)08rev</a>            | No  |   | 17-18 April 2023 (6 <sup>th</sup> meeting)   | The Group advanced the Bern Convention’s Strategic Plan towards final adoption by resolving key issues and aligning it closely with the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework. Members agreed to finalise the Plan before summer, while deferring the Monitoring Framework to a second phase, balancing the urgency for adoption with the need for technical clarity. This marks a strategic shift from drafting to implementation, reinforcing the Convention’s role in global biodiversity governance. |   |
| Ad hoc Drafting Group of an Amending Protocol (replaced by the WG on exploring sustainable financing options for the Bern Convention)  | 2022 | Yes, updated in 2023: <a href="#">T-PVS(2023)28</a> | No  | 6 meetings held in 2023 / 1 meeting in 2024 | 8-9 October 2024 (7 <sup>th</sup> meeting)   |   | Report not available on the website   |
| Ad hoc Working Group for the Conservation of Marine Turtles  | 2020 | Yes, <a href="#">T-PVS/Inf(2021)40</a>              | Yes | 1 meeting held in 2021 and one in 2022      | 19 May 2022 (next meeting scheduled in 2025) |   | Report not available on the website   |
| Ad hoc Working Group on Reporting  | 2021 | Yes, <a href="#">T-PVS/PA(2021)06</a>               | Yes | Twice a year                                | 20 February 2025 (joint                      | The Group reviewed progress made on the implementation of the Strategic Plan, supported to the proposed workplan for 2025, and agreed on next steps to advance the monitoring framework and key   | <a href="https://rm.coe.int/tpvs01e-2025-report-3rd-meeting-">https://rm.coe.int/tpvs01e-2025-report-3rd-meeting-</a> |

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|  |      |                                    |     |                      | meeting online)  | indicators. They endorsed the draft questionnaire for the 2025 voluntary national updates and its timeline, and discussed how reporting under Resolution No. 8 (2012) will feed into the Plan's indicators, despite some data gaps. The meeting concluded with commitments to circulate updated metadata and continue coordination to ensure effective monitoring and evaluation up to the next review cycle.                                  | <a href="https://rm.coe.int/tpvs03e-2025-report-1st-meeting-wg-overseeing-implementation-sp/1680b4eb73">wg-overseeing-implementation-sp/1680b4eb73</a>  |
| Working Group on overseeing the implementation of the Strategic Plan                               | 2023 | Yes, <a href="#">T-PVS(2023)31</a> | Yes | Once or twice a year |  |  |   |
| Working Group on exploring mechanisms to guide amendments to the appendices of the Bern Convention | 2024 | Yes, <a href="#">T-PVS(2024)20</a> | Yes | Twice in 2025        | 13 March 2025 (1 <sup>st</sup> meeting) / 4 September 2025 (2 <sup>nd</sup> meeting) | The current criteria for amending the Bern Convention appendices are outdated and unclear. Participants agreed on the need for a more evidence-based, transparent process, inspired by the Emerald Network and other conventions that use scientific advice. The focus now is on developing high-level principles and a flexible, non-binding mechanism, with next steps including reviews and proposals to present to the Standing Committee. | <a href="https://rm.coe.int/tpvs03e-2025-report-1st-meeting-wg-amendment-appendices-bc/1680b4fa72">https://rm.coe.int/tpvs03e-2025-report-1st-meeting-wg-amendment-appendices-bc/1680b4fa72</a> |
| Working Group on exploring sustainable financing options for the Bern Convention                   | 2024 | Yes, <a href="#">T-PVS(2024)19</a> | Yes | Once in 2025         | 9 September 2025   |  | Report to be available soon   |

## **Conclusion and Future Perspectives**

Looking ahead, a strategic reflection on the structure and functioning of both Groups of Experts and Working Groups set up under the Bern Convention appears necessary to ensure their continued relevance, efficiency, and added value. While Groups of Experts play a vital role in fostering thematic cooperation, promoting the exchange of good practices, and providing scientific guidance to the Standing Committee, their proliferation and uneven activity raise concerns in terms of resource allocation and effectiveness. In the current context of stronger EU and global biodiversity frameworks, it is legitimate to question whether all existing Groups remain necessary, or whether efforts should be consolidated on areas where the Bern Convention offers clear added value, such as the thematic Groups of Experts focusing on Large Carnivores, Invasive Alien Species, and Birds. Conversely, Working Groups, by virtue of their ad hoc nature and well-defined mandates, have demonstrated their capacity to deliver concrete outputs in a timely and targeted manner.

To address the current challenges and strengthen cost-efficiency, several options could be considered. These include:

- Adding a dedicated rule on Thematic Groups of Experts and Working Groups in the new version of the Rules of Procedure of the Standing Committee;
- Updating terms of reference for the Thematic Group of Experts that should remain active and formulating clear expectations on deliverables for both Groups of Experts and Working Groups;
- Setting thematic priorities and maintaining only the most pertinent Groups of Experts (criteria that could be used : follow-up on the implementation of an Action Plan, production of recommendations or guidelines to be adopted by the Standing Committee, ...);
- Merging groups with closely related mandates to enhance coherence and efficiency;
- Phasing out dormant groups where the thematic relevance is no longer justified or existing human and financial resources are not sufficient;
- Relaunching groups to align with the Council's current priorities, such as reviving the Group of Experts on Biodiversity and Climate Change in the context of the Reykjavik Process.
- Create three thematic and cross-cutting groups: a Group of Experts on Biodiversity (replacing all species-focused thematic Groups of Experts), a Group of Experts on Protected Areas and Ecological Networks (replacing the Expert Group on Protected Areas and Ecological Networks and possibly including the Working Group on Reporting), and a technical Working Group on all procedural and strategic issues (replacing all Working Groups).