

The Council of Europe and the environment



Reykjavik Process

COUNCIL OF EUROPE



CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

Since 1967, the Council of Europe has worked to conserve Europe's natural heritage. As awareness of the threats to our environment has grown, so have the Council of Europe's efforts to protect it.

In May 2023, leaders of the Council of Europe member states, meeting at the 4th Summit in Reykjavik (Iceland), recognised for the first time that the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment is a human right. They agreed that the Council of Europe's work in this area should be a priority and launched the "Reykjavik Process" to create an innovative new way of working, bringing together the different legal texts, projects and political initiatives to create a strong focus on environmental and human rights protection.

PROTECTING THE ENVIRONMENT THROUGH CONVENTIONS

For many years, two key Council of Europe conventions have ensured respect for the natural landscape and the animals, insects, birds and plant life within it, with countries covered by them legally bound to follow their principles.

The Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats, known as the **Bern Convention**, focuses on nature conservation and biodiversity, covering most of Europe

and parts of Africa, promoting co-operation and the preservation of wildlife and natural habitats. The earliest nature conservation measures were taken under the Bern Convention, with environmental problems identified, scientific appraisals conducted and countries expected to follow up with legal and political action.



■ In 1989, the Council of Europe launched the Network of Areas of Special Conservation Interest (Emerald Network) as part of the Bern Convention, which now includes over 3 500 sites all over Europe dedicated to areas of special conservation interest. The Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe also awards the European Diploma for Protected Areas to landscapes of exceptional importance for the preservation of biological, geological and landscape diversity which are managed in an exemplary way.

■ The **Council of Europe Landscape Convention** strengthens the link between human rights and the environment, emphasising the landscape's role in terms of well-being and quality of life.



■ Positive change has also come about thanks to judgments of the **European Court of Human Rights** (the Court), which has ruled



on over 300 environment-related cases, applying the right to life, the right to respect for private and family life, to freedom of expression and assembly, to a fair hearing and to property to a wide range of issues including pollution, environmental disasters, access to information and court procedures, and participation in decision-making processes.

Most recently the Court ruled in favour of Verein KlimaSeniorinnen Schweiz and other applicants who claimed Switzerland had violated their right to private and family life by failing to do enough to protect them against the adverse effects of climate change on their health, well-being and quality of life. The Court also recognised the principle that environmental associations could legally act to defend the rights and interests of individuals against the threats of climate change.

With the new focus on the environment, the Council of Europe is already looking at new ways to use international law with a specialised drafting group on human rights and the environment working on a needs and feasibility study, expected before the end of 2024. A new convention on criminal law in environmental protection is also currently being drafted.

Co-operation is also key to protecting the environment. This is the role of the **EUR-OPA Major Hazards Agreement**, which brings together

European and the South Mediterranean countries to fine-tune disaster risk reduction policies, strengthen prevention and preparedness across Europe and the Mediterranean, and increase resilience to and awareness of major hazards through projects developed by specialised scientific centres.



PROTECTING THE ENVIRONMENT THROUGH POLITICAL ACTION

■ Different Council of Europe organs and bodies are also putting their efforts into protecting the environment.

■ The **Parliamentary Assembly** often addresses environmental issues and recently adopted recommendations on mainstreaming the human right to a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment and on strategies for healthy seas and oceans to counter the climate crisis.

■ The **Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe** (the Congress) prioritises work on environmental challenges, ensuring communities are consulted and involved in national strategy development. For over two decades, the Congress has addressed environmental quality, the effects of climate change and energy transitions, stressing the need for local and regional strategies.

■ The **Committee of Ministers** also supports work related to human rights and the environment. An ad hoc intergovernmental multidisciplinary group is being formed to prepare a Council of Europe Strategy on the Environment and a related action plan.

CHARTING THE WAY FORWARD

■ With the launch of the Reykjavik Process, the Council of Europe is renewing its commitment to environmental and human rights protection. It recognises everyone's right to a clean, safe and healthy environment.



CONTACT

Department on the Reykjavik Process
and the Environment
Directorate of Social Rights,
Health and Environment
Council of Europe

PREMS 113724

ENG

www.coe.int

The Council of Europe is the continent's leading human rights organisation. It comprises 46 member states, including all 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.

COUNCIL OF EUROPE



CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE