



Strasbourg, 11 September 2019  
[inf03e\_2019.docx]

**T-PVS/Inf(2019)3**

CONVENTION ON THE CONSERVATION OF EUROPEAN WILDLIFE  
AND NATURAL HABITATS

**Standing Committee**

39<sup>th</sup> meeting  
Strasbourg, 3-6 December 2019

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**Steps to be taken to assess, report and  
respond to changes and likely changes in  
the ecological character of Emerald  
Network sites**

**FLOWCHART TO BE USED FOR THE PURPOSES OF  
THE BERN CONVENTION CASE-FILE SYSTEM**

*Document prepared by  
the Directorate of Democratic Participation*

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## **Background**

The Bern Convention ([Resolution No. 5 \(1998\)](#)) asks governments to inform the Secretariat about changes likely to affect negatively in a substantial way the ecological character of the designated sites in the Emerald Network, so that the Standing Committee may be able to advise on appropriate steps to take.

Since 2012, when the first adoption of Emerald Network sites took place, complaints and signals concerning alleged threats to adopted Emerald Network sites have risen significantly. However, the lack of guidance on how to define or interpret the concept of “ecological character” of a given site, how to choose a baseline state, how to monitor and detect change or potential change and how to judge its significance and formulate adaptive responses, has been an obstacle for national authorities to comply with their obligations and for the Convention decision-making bodies to efficiently assess the complaints and process them.

In 2018, a guidance document [[T-PVS/PA\(2018\)13](#)] on the issues above was presented to the Standing Committee to the Bern Convention, composed of fifteen guidelines (and an accompanying rationale for each) designed to assist Parties in implementing Resolution No. 5 (1998) and other related provisions.

## **Objective of the document**

The objective of this document is to provide national authorities responsible for the identification, designation and management of Emerald Network sites with an easy to grasp and implement flowchart and checklist of actions expected from them in relation to the Emerald Network obligations. This flowchart/checklist can equally serve the Bern Convention decision-making bodies’ (Bureau and Standing Committee) when processing complaints concerning Emerald Network sites.

This flowchart contains extracts and is an adaptation from the full Guidance document on detecting, assessing, reporting and responding to changes and likely changes in the ecological character of Emerald Network sites [[T-PVS/PA\(2018\)13](#)]. It includes additional steps, linked to management of Emerald Network areas for example, which are not described in detail in the complete Ecological Character guidance document. This full document should however be consulted for more details on the steps to be taken and presented in the flowchart below.

## **Definition of ecological character**

The “ecological character” of an Emerald Network site is defined as the particular combination of ecosystem components, processes and other ecological features or characteristics that contribute to the quality and functioning of the site. This is more than a statement of the reasons why the site qualifies for inclusion in the Network - the emphasis here is instead on specifying the full mix of ingredients on which the site’s integrity depends.

## **Definition of change in the ecological character**

For the purposes of Bern Convention Resolution No. 5 (1998), change in the ecological character of an Emerald Network site is defined as the actual or potential negative alteration of any ecosystem component, process or other ecological feature or characteristic that may substantially affect the quality or functioning of the site.

**N.B.:** The decision-making bodies of the Convention are going to assess the action of national authorities at all steps presented in the flowchart, when assessing progress in complaints and case-files.

Describe the ecological character of the site based on the information contained in the Emerald Network site Standard Data Form; including information on the known natural variability and limits of acceptable change.  
 See Guideline 1 from document T-PVS/PA(2018)13

**Step 1:** Define the conservation objectives to maintain the ecological character of the Emerald Network site.  
 The conservation objective for each site can be stated as the maintenance of the site's ecological character, to be achieved through research, description, delineation, protection, and management and monitoring. The specifics of what this involves must be explicitly defined for each individual site. This objective contributes in turn to the objective of maintaining a favourable conservation status for the species and habitats that are collectively supported by the sites.  
 See Guidelines 1 to 5

**Step 2a:** Determine the possible risks and threats to the ecological character of the Emerald Network site and report, if appropriate.  
 See Guideline 6, 7 and 11

**Step 2b:** Develop a management plan, or other relevant management regime as appropriate, including management objectives for maintaining the ecological character of the Emerald Network site and limits of acceptable change.

**Step 3:** Start the implementation of the management regime.

**Step 4:** Design and implement monitoring and surveillance arrangements: monitor the status of the ecological character against management objectives and limits of acceptable change.  
 See Guidelines 8 to 10

**Step 5:** Set up an early warning mechanism: local wardening, survey and recording schemes, vigilance of NGOs, community conservation groups and wider civil society, etc.  
 See Guideline 12

If likely changes to the ecological character are detected  
 See Guideline 13

Identify options for responding to change:

Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) and Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) are important tools for evaluating the significance of potential change and its implications for relevant conservation objectives.

Information on plans/project which can have cumulative effects are to be considered.

Options for responding to change should follow a hierarchical approach: 1) first seek to avoid adverse change where it can be avoided, then mitigate (including by habitat restoration) where it cannot be avoided, and then 2) provide habitat compensation where it cannot be avoided or mitigated.  
 See guideline 14

