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CONVENTION ON THE CONSERVATION OF EUROPEAN WILDLIFE
AND NATURAL HABITATS

Standing Committee

44th meeting

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**Report on national voluntary updates
on the Strategic Plan implementation**

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Introduction

In paragraph 2 of its Recommendation No. 220 (2023) on the implementation of the Strategic Plan for the Bern Convention for the period to 2030, the Standing Committee recommended that Contracting Parties:

“prior to each Standing Committee meeting, send an update to the Secretariat on any major national achievements regarding progress with the Strategic Plan such as in relation to point 1 of this Recommendation, the compilation of which will be made available to the Standing Committee for information”.

The point 1 referred to, recommended that Contracting Parties:

“reflect and support relevant elements of the Vision and Strategic Plan to 2030 in and through national policies and related measures, including the National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans (NBSAPs), in relation to the conservation of wild flora, fauna and their habitats”.

At its second meeting on 29 August 2024, the Working Group on overseeing implementation of the Strategic Plan agreed a simple template, in the form of a four-part questionnaire, for Parties to use on a voluntary basis for providing their national update information.

The template (document T-PVS/Inf(2024)12 rev) was duly sent to Parties on 11 September 2024 with a request for responses by 5 November; so timed as to enable a summary of the resulting information to be made available to the Standing Committee at its 44th meeting.

While emphasising the voluntary nature of this process, it has at the same time been recognised, given the central guiding importance of the Strategic Plan for the Convention, that the Standing Committee should have at its disposal each year at least some basic indicative information on the progress being made towards the objectives agreed in the Plan. There has therefore been strong encouragement for Parties to respond to the September questionnaire. Fuller assessments of progress, based on the broader suite of indicators agreed in the Plan, are also expected at a “mid-term” point in 2027, and again just prior to the Plan’s end-date of 2030.

The four questions in the questionnaire invited information about (i) key national achievements; (ii) support for the Bern Convention Vision and Strategic Plan in national policies and related measures; (iii) key implementation challenges being faced; and (iv) next priorities for action in 2025. It has been emphasised, throughout, that the purpose of this process is to gain insight into these issues at a strategic level. It is not in any way designed to make comparative assessments of the performance of individual countries, but instead to act as verification of progress overall, and to identify any areas for intensified/adjusted efforts (where the Committee may wish to consider options for support), as well as areas for celebration of success.

Responses for 2024

From the current 49 Parties to the Convention, only one returned a response by the deadline. Following a reminder, a further five late responses were received in time to be taken into account for this report.

It is possible that this low response rate was affected by 2024 being the first year that the full Strategic Plan has been in effect; although this should not be a factor in considering progress towards the headline goals it contains, since the goals were already agreed in 2021. The Working Group considered that the eight week response period in principle gave sufficient time for countries to answer the four questions, even in cases where some inter-departmental consultations may have been required - but other timing considerations may have played a part in some cases.

The updates received in this first year clearly form too small a sample on which to base any numerical analysis or discern any broad pattern of national implementation experiences. The annex to this report therefore presents just a few main points of note from the information provided, without on this occasion attributing these by name to the countries concerned.

Conclusions from the 2024 updates; and considerations for future years

The countries providing national update information on this first occasion have given thoughtful attention to the four questions that were asked, and their submitted responses are warmly appreciated.

Responses to the question concerning “Major progress achievements” (many of which in fact related to periods prior to the year in question) described various advances that will help to support the implementation of the Strategic Plan for the Bern Convention. These however were mostly described as advances driven by other agendas, including EU Directives, the Global Biodiversity Framework (and its predecessor Strategic Plan for Biodiversity) and other Conventions such as CITES. This perhaps suggests a need in future to focus still further on explicit cross-mapping of the complementarities between the Bern Convention targets and these other instruments; and to look harder to identify instances where the Bern Convention and its targets might be *attributed* as the *causal driver* for an item of positive progress, and/or where the Convention has added something extra. One country recorded that it had a national policy or related measure that was explicitly designed to support the Convention, but it gave no details.

It is notable that all of the recorded “major achievements” relate to plans, frameworks, acts of designation and programme initiatives. Some of these represent important advances, including new legislation and cooperation with non-biodiversity sectors; but none addresses any actual resulting conservation outcomes for habitats or species. If looking for attribution to the goals and targets in the Strategic Plan, this may be understandable in the first year following adoption of the targets (though not the goals, as noted above); but this issue of “ecological outcomes” will be an issue to consider more closely in future (in conjunction of course with the wider regime of indicators and reporting for the Plan as a whole).

Responses to the question concerning “greatest challenges” were perhaps unsurprising in referring to a range of threats and pressures, and to limitations of capacity, including information. Information can of course always be improved, but lack of the ideally desired level of data should not necessarily be a barrier to knowing how to take action in a clearly beneficial direction. Insufficient human and financial capacity, on the other hand, are real constraints in many cases, and it will be important to continue looking for ways in which the Bern Convention can provide enabling channels for mutual support between countries and other organisations in this respect.

In future years, each round of voluntary national updates should hopefully give a picture of notable implementation advances, and valuable points of learning for continued adaptation to evolving needs. Over a period of years, with early information as a baseline, it should also be possible to draw conclusions about directional trends, and to verify the impact of the Strategic Plan. It is anticipated that this will be a regular agenda item at each meeting of the Standing Committee, giving important insights for Parties, the Secretariat and Observers alike.

For this to have the desired result, a significantly greater response rate than that in 2024 will need to be achieved, and ways of improving this will be explored. One aspect of this could be the timing, while bearing in mind the need to balance (a) giving sufficient time for Parties to compile their responses, (b) compiling them sufficiently late in the year to allow a summary of progress during the year in question to be provided, and (c) setting a deadline that fits with timeframes for drafting, translating and making available documents for the meetings of the Standing Committee.

Given the limited response in 2024, the present first overview report has not identified each listed item in the Annex with the name/s of the country/ies to which it relates. Assuming that there will be a better response rate in future years, when a more representative picture might be built from across from across the Parties, it could be more worthwhile then to contextualise the celebrated successes and shared challenges by identifying the countries that have communicated each example. The Standing Committee may wish to offer its thoughts on this issue.

This first year’s trial of the questionnaire may have stimulated other ideas about the best approach to its use. The Working Group on overseeing the implementation of the Strategic Plan has noted the possibility of reviewing the questionnaire in 2025, in light of lessons learnt from the experience of its use in 2024.

One such lesson might be that it could be helpful to give particular encouragement to respondents in future to relate their updates specifically to the year in question; and as far as possible to indicate where the Bern Convention and its Strategic Plan may have been a key driver of any reported actions.

Responses to the question concerning “key national priorities for the year ahead” are valuable signals for countries to share. The Working Group may wish to consider whether the questionnaire in future should invite respondents to relate their information about achievements and challenges in the “update” year to the priorities they signalled in the preceding year. (This suggestion is not yet part of the template, and again the Committee may have views).

One further consideration concerns the fate of the individual country responses. The Secretariat will maintain an organised file archive of these, but no position has yet been taken on whether and how to make this potentially rich resource more openly available, for example via an area of the Bern Convention website.

➤ ***The Standing Committee is invited to:***

- (i) Thank the Parties which provided voluntary updates on the implementation of the Strategic Plan;
- (ii) Provide feedback on the experience of operating the voluntary national updates process in 2024, including any comments on the questionnaire; and
- (iii) Offer suggestions for the operation of this process in future years, including whether and how to make the individual national update responses available to view.

ANNEX

Synthesis of results from the 2024 voluntary national updates on implementation of the Strategic Plan for the Bern Convention to 2030

National updates for 2024 were received in time for inclusion in this report from Denmark, Monaco, Montenegro, Poland, Senegal and Slovakia. The full questionnaire responses from these Parties are held by the Secretariat. Under each of the four sections of the questionnaire listed below, a selection of key points from the updates is presented. (These are paraphrased summaries, and are not individually attributed).

Section I - Major progress achievements: “In your country in 2024, what have been the most successful achievements so far in implementing the Bern Convention Vision and Strategic Plan to 2030?”

Responses referred, inter alia, to:

- Implementation through the EU Biodiversity Strategy and the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework.
- Updating/strengthening of legislation (not stimulated by the Bern Convention, but relevant to it).
- Completion of a national list of SCIs/SACs.
- Designation of new protected areas.
- Management plans in place for 81% of one country’s Natura 2000 sites (= position at 2023); while another country has accelerated the development of management plans.
- Implementation of a “nature in the city” programme, with benefits for wildlife and people.
- Implementation of an Invasive Alien Species Action Plan.
- Habitat restoration initiatives, including in the marine environment.
- Enhanced biodiversity inventory and monitoring activities.
- Transboundary conservation projects.
- Agreement between the national government and agricultural, industrial, land management and environmental organisations, on a long-term greening transition plan (and associated fund) for the country.
- Adoption of a Management Plan for the Brown Bear.
- Preparation of a National Action Plan on illegal killing, taking and trade of migratory birds.
- Cooperation for enhanced “mainstreaming” of biodiversity objectives in other sectors (eg agriculture, forestry, infrastructure, health).
- Promotion of ecotourism.

Section II - Overall policy: “To what extent are relevant elements of the Bern Convention Vision and Strategic Plan to 2030 reflected in and supported by national policies and related measures in your country?”

- Two Parties selected the option “Most relevant aspects are adequately covered, and there are no significant gaps”.
- Four Parties selected the option “Only partially – some aspects are adequately covered, but there are significant gaps”.
- One Party selected the additional option “There is a national policy or related measure that refers directly to the Bern Convention Strategic Plan and is explicitly designed to support it”.

Other comments (the question included a request in particular to indicate support from National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans (NBSAPs)):

- Issues addressed through implementation of EU Directives and the EU Biodiversity Strategy.
- Preparation of a national list of protected wild species of plants, animals and fungi.
- Updating species protection regulations, including in the CITES context.
- Role played by Indigenous and Community Heritage Areas.
- NBSAP still being developed - likely to support Bern Convention objectives, though not specifically referencing them.
- NBSAP is compatible with the Vision for the Bern Convention.

Section III - Greatest challenges experienced so far: “In your country in 2024, what have been the greatest challenges experienced so far in implementing the Bern Convention Vision and Strategic Plan to 2030?”

Responses referred, inter alia, to:

- Continued high levels of anthropogenic threats & pressures (various examples cited), and continued poor conservation status of many species and habitats.
- Embarking on an ambitious new national plan for the environment.
- Gaps in organised data and information.
- Integrating the Bern Convention Strategic Plan with the country’s draft NBSAP.
- Mainstreaming biodiversity objectives in other sectors.
- Moving beyond protected area management planning, to effective implementation and successful outcomes.
- Weak capacity, in relation to research, and to protected area networks establishment and management.

Section IV - Key national priorities for 2025: “What are the most important priorities for action to implement the Bern Convention Vision and Strategic Plan in your country in the coming year?”

Responses referred, inter alia, to:

- Implementing the country’s new national plan for the environment.
- Implementing the country’s Nature Restoration Law.
- Updating environmental regulations.
- Improving availability of data and information.
- Improving coverage of protected areas by management plans.
- Producing national reports.
- Implementing the country’s “nature in the city” programme.
- Finalising a national biogeographical mapping project and associated communication strategy, as a basis for the country’s Natura 2000 network.
- Updating the country’s NBSAP.
- Developing a national restoration framework.
- Continuing biodiversity inventories work.
- Addressing problems of invasive species.
- Strengthening capacity.

[END]