

Natura 2000 and estuaries

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Estuaries and coastal zones are among the most productive ecosystems of the world, with both high ecological and economic values. They are of prime importance for wildlife, especially migrating and breeding birds. They are made up of a wide range of different habitats and are frequently classified as Natura 2000 sites. As such they are subject to the protection regimes under the 'Habitats Directive (92/43/EEC)' and/or the 'Wild Birds Directive' (79/409/EEC). Inevitably there will be occasions where port and waterways developments and Natura 2000 conservation objectives collide. The Habitats and Birds Directives do not prohibit economic developments within or around Natura 2000 sites. Instead they lay down procedures for ensuring that such developments are done in a sustainable way that is compatible with the conservation of species and natural habitats for which the Natura 2000 sites have been designated.

In response to the rapid global decline in biodiversity, the European Union set itself the goal, at the European Summit in Gothenburg in 2001, "to halt the decline of biodiversity in the EU by 2010. The Natura 2000 network is the cornerstone of the EU's biodiversity policy and the main instrument to achieve this objective.

For Natura 2000 sites the EU directives require positive conservation measures, preventive measures to avoid the deterioration of natural habitats and the disturbance of protected species and the assessment the effects of new plans and projects with regard to the nature conservation objectives. A derogation regime for authorising plans or projects with adverse effects on Natura 2000 sites is also foreseen.

Human activities in estuaries include ports & navigation, dredging, sand mining, fisheries,

industry, wind farms, flood protection, recreation, urbanism, etc. The real challenge for Natura 2000 is to reconcile the numerous human activities with the nature conservation objectives of the Natura 2000 sites.

One of the key issues for port and waterways development is the capability to plan new projects well ahead and securely. Delays in project realisation are frequently experienced because of inappropriate planning and unforeseen last minute difficulties with permitting procedures.

Since now more than two years the European Commission has been working with stakeholder organisations and environmental NGOs with a view to developing guidelines and recommendations on the implementation of the EU nature legislation in estuaries and coastal zones and for avoiding conflicts between Natura 2000 objectives and economic development needs. First results of this work indicate that many difficulties can be avoided by a stronger and earlier integration of nature conservation and development objectives in the context, not only of spatial planning, but also when designing specific development plans or projects. 'Working with nature' will in many cases lead to avoiding significant effects of plans and projects on Natura 2000 conservation objectives and as a direct consequence to avoiding the need for derogation procedures requiring the investigation of alternative solutions and the provision of compensatory measures. In cases where significant negative effects cannot be avoided, an early participatory process for designing appropriate compensatory measures will allow development projects to go ahead. Integrated development and management plans for Natura 2000 estuaries and coastal zones are other key instruments for ensuring sustainable development in these areas.