

## **Definition of Natura 2000 – a network for life**

Imagine a network of the very best places for nature spread across all 27 countries of the European Union – from sweeping coastal wetlands, through towering forests to the highest mountains. These are some of the most iconic and most loved landscapes of Europe. Their protection should be a natural reaction to their beauty and intrinsic value.

The good news is that such a network – though in parts incomplete – exists. It is called Natura 2000. It is made up of Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) designated under the 1992 Habitats Directive (see below) and Special Protection Areas (SPAs) designated under the 1979 Birds Directive. These are selected against rigorous scientific criteria to protect the most threatened and important species and habitats in Europe. They are not, generally, nature reserves; their emphasis is on ensuring that future management is sustainable, both ecologically and economically. The network of protected areas also fulfils some of the European Commission's obligations under the UN's Convention on Biological Diversity.

The RSPB's network of nature reserves encompasses over 90 SPA sites in the UK. We also work through the planning system to try to ensure that development proposals do not harm SPAs. In 2007 we engaged in 253 proposals affecting SPAs. We campaign to ensure that the UK Government honours its commitment to designate sufficient Natura 2000 sites, to meet its obligations to conserve Europe's most important species and habitats.

## **The Habitats Directive**

The Habitats Directive is designed to conserve a targeted list of animal and plant species (not including birds) and habitats of European Community importance. It establishes the Natura 2000 network for the protection of those species where protected areas are deemed as necessary to secure their conservation. It sets out a detailed process for designating, managing and protecting these sites, and it incorporates SPAs into Natura 2000. It also provides a system of protection and regulates the exploitation of a longer list of animal and plant species.

The protection for Natura 2000 sites is through a series of sequential tests that must be applied to a land-use plan or project that is likely to significantly affect a Natura 2000 site. The aim is to avoid damage to Natura 2000 sites wherever possible, given that these are the very best places for wildlife in Europe. On the whole the system works very well, but in rare cases where damage cannot be ruled out, the plan or project can only go ahead if:

- it is shown there are not less damaging alternatives
- that the benefits of the plan or project override the need to protect the European importance of the site for nature conservation (i.e. that there are "imperative reasons of over-riding public interest" to proceed with the plan or project)
- suitable compensatory habitat has been secured to protect the Natura 2000 network.