

THE PREPARATION OF THE NATURA 2000 NETWORK

The European Community's Habitats Directive and Birds Directive require the member states to set up a network of special protection areas and special areas of conservation under the title Natura 2000. The aim is to ensure the conservation of threatened species and habitats with the help of targeted measures. The Directives were implemented in Finland by the Nature Conservation Act. The Natura proposal was drafted by the Ministry of the Environment. The regional environment centres, Metsähallitus (formerly known as the Finnish Forest and Park Service), the Finnish Forest Research Institute and the Finnish Environment Institute participated in preparatory work.

This audit evaluated the preparation of the Natura 2000 network in the nature conservation administration. First it described the preparation process in Finland. The management of the preparation process was analysed according to the principles of project management. A second viewpoint and question concerned the impacts of the Natura 2000 network and a third concerned the cost of preparing the network and its significance for the state economy.

The audit revealed that the preparation of the Natura 2000 network in Finland was challenging in several ways. Especially the timetable in the Directives was very tight. The tight timetable meant that the nature conservation administration had to work at a very fast pace. In addition the Natura network was based on a different approach to nature conservation than Finns were used to. Natura's flexible, case-by-case approach to conservation was something new in Finland, and it took time to absorb it in the nature conservation administration.

The preparation of the Natura 2000 network can be considered too big a task in relation to the resources at the disposal of the nature conservation administration. The lack of resources was visible particularly in the inadequate number of competent personnel. In addition to the nature conservation administration, the entire state

administration failed to see the significance of the Natura network and to allocate sufficient resources to the preparation of its initial stage. Nor did the Ministry of the Environment and the regional environment centres give the preparation of the Natura network sufficient priority over other work.

The preparation of the Natura network was not planned or supervised sufficiently at the beginning of the preparation process. This was partly due to the fact that in the initial stage Natura was poorly understood. The management of the regional environment centres varied in its commitment to Natura. In the opinion of the National Audit Office, the supervision of the preparation of the Natura network took place excessively within the nature conservation sector. The general management of the Ministry of the Environment should have advised the general management of the regional environment centres more vigorously.

Conflicts related to the preparation of the Natura network came to a head in 1997. One reason for this was the unclear information that was provided by the nature conservation administration, which also came too late. Natura's flexible, case-by-case approach was not explained adequately. Instead Natura was viewed by landowners as a vague and threatening matter. It should be noted that in the conflicts surrounding Natura, 97% of the areas in the final proposal were already included in protected national areas or programmes. In previous decades landowners were not consulted in a similar way, and consequently some landowners did not even know that their land was included in protected areas. Natura information should have drawn attention to features associated with old protection areas.

Public hearing of land-owners and other stakeholders conducted in the Natura process according to the Nature Conservation Act. The National Audit Office points out, however, that although among the member states Finland's selection of Natura areas might be considered transparent, the idea of the role of stakeholders and participation that the Nature Conservation Act represents is quite old-fashioned compared e.g. with the Land Use and Building Act or the Act on Environmental Impact Assessment Procedure.

The preparation of the Natura network was made more difficult by problems with information systems. First of all the real-estate register system was incomplete and could not be used to determine

landowners. Secondly the natura 2000 database supplied by the European Commission was and remains rigid and outdated. Supplementing the Natura database is difficult because even small changes require a Government decision and consultations. Consequently revising information and changing incorrect borders is cumbersome.

Problems were also encountered in the mapping of Natura sites. At the time digital geographical information systems were being introduced. On the one hand the newness of geographical information and the incompleteness of available background material combined with the urgency of mapping caused problems and an unreasonable amount of work for mapmakers. On the other hand the information, software and hardware procured in connection with Natura work significantly speeded up the shift to the geographical information era in environmental administration. A positive matter related to the collecting of information is that, as a result of Natura work, information concerning Finland's conservation values increased and was made more systematic. In addition Natura spurred learning processes in the nature conservation administration: preparedness for interaction has increased in the nature conservation administration along with understanding of the social dimensions of conservation.

In preparing the Natura network there could have been more cooperation with local authorities in information activities, for example. Cooperation is still important so that local authorities can, for instance in their own land-use planning, pay sufficient attention to conservation values while avoiding the "over-protection" of Natura areas. The regional environment centres should draw attention to cooperation between nature conservation and land-use planning and support local authorities in this matter.

The audit calculated the administrative costs of preparing the Natura 2000 network. On this basis cost-effectiveness can be considered reasonable. The audit also calculated how much more it would have cost the state if all the Natura areas had been protected under the Nature Conservation Act. The extra cost was estimated at nearly 400 million euros. Although the calculation is subject to reservations, the size of the figure shows that the flexible approach to conservation represented by Natura is expedient and effective for the state economy.

From the viewpoint of the state economy a significant question involves compensation for any weakening of the Natura network. If a project or plan that significantly weakens the conservation values is allowed for reasons of overriding public interest, this must be compensated. This can take place by including a comparable area in the network. This has been interpreted to mean shifting cost responsibility to the state rather than to the party behind the project or plan. It is important for the state economy that responsibility for compensation belongs to the party that is responsible for weakening the Natura network, according to the polluter pays principle.

The selection of Natura areas alone does not ensure a favourable level of conservation. In the opinion of the National Audit Office, in order to achieve the objectives of the Natura network, it is important to develop financing mechanisms in which different parties such as the European Union, local authorities and local businesses cooperate in considering possibilities to arrange the management and use of Natura areas. The National Audit Office also believes that the present system in which two state organizations are responsible for the management and use of Natura areas should be re-evaluated.