



Development of a European Private Land Conservation Network (LIFE ELCN)

Layman's report



Photo: Klemens Karkow (NABU)



Climate breakdown, environmental degradation and biodiversity loss are existential threats to the survival of mankind. To overcome these challenges, we need to fundamentally change the way we manage and use our land. The European Green Deal sets the blueprint for this transformation in the EU. It aims to protect, conserve, and enhance the EU's natural capital, and protect the health and well-being of citizens from environment-related risks and impacts.

The European Commission has started several legislative and political initiatives to implement the EU Green Deal. The EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 aims to put Europe's biodiversity on the path to recovery by 2030 by protecting 30% of EU sea and land surface (with 10% of the EU land and sea under strict protection), by creating and integrating ecological corridors as part of a Trans-European Nature Network, and by improving the management effectiveness in all protected areas. The EU Biodiversity Strategy also sets the target to ensure habitats and species show no deterioration in their conservation trends and status and that at least 30% reach favourable conservation status or show a positive trend, to reverse the decline of pollinators, to plant three billion new trees, to restore at least 25,000 km of free-flowing rivers, and to halve the number of Red List species threatened by invasive alien species. Last not least, it proposes to develop legally binding EU restoration targets and to restore significant areas of degraded and carbon rich ecosystems by 2030.

All these targets require an active involvement of private landowners and significant support from nature conservation organisations. Without the cooperation of these two groups, it will be impossible to reach the EU climate and biodiversity targets and to implement the EU Green Deal. A significant share of protected areas and other relevant natural sites are owned, governed, and managed by private landowners. While land ownership comes with social obligations, not all publicly desired land use could or should be achieved through regulation or coercion. The implementation of EU biodiversity and climate policy thus depends to a significant degree on the voluntary involvement of the private sector in land-based conservation measures and natural site management.

This is the essence of **private land conservation**: voluntary activities by individuals, groups of individuals, or civil sector organisations with the aim to dedicate (parts of) properties under their governance to the long-term protection and/or restoration of habitats, species or ecosystem functions and services. These activities complement land conservation through regulatory tools such as the public designation of protected areas or land use planning.

Considering the ambitious EU biodiversity and climate targets, it is vital for the private land conservation community to expand its reach and increase its impact. A favourable political framework has been the basis for the remarkable success of private land conservation movements in other parts of the world. This includes the effectiveness, legal certainty, and predictability of private land conservation tools as well as the size and reliability of funding sources and financial incentives. Whether or not private land conservation in the EU will reach its potential is thus foremost a political question and creating the right conditions for achieving this goal is a political task. However, the expansion of private land conservation in the EU will not be possible without fostering cooperation and trust between private landowners and conservation NGOs. Private land conservation can only



flourish if new alliances and partnerships are formed. Building them requires not only political support but also a cultural shift – from antagonism to collaboration, from competition to trust.

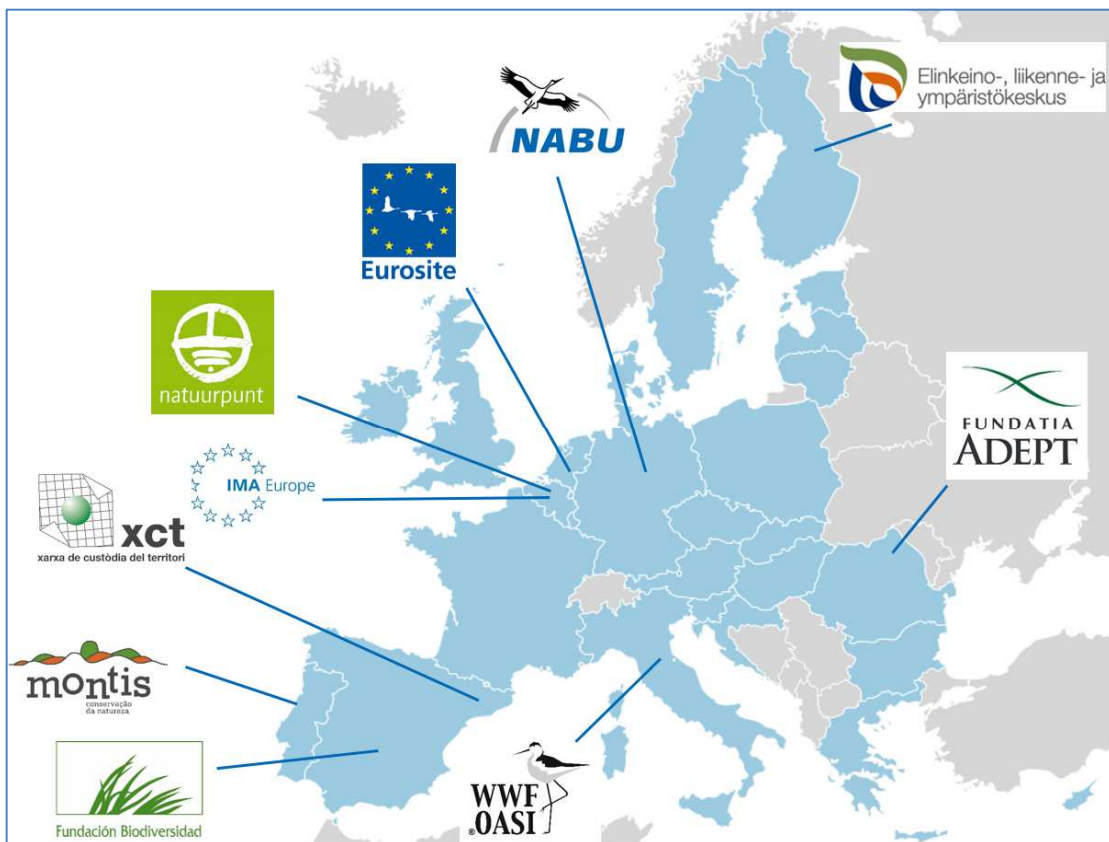
The objective of the project “Development of a European Private Land Conservation Network” (LIFE ELCN) was twofold: to test several private land conservation tools with an eye to promoting their replication at a wider level wherever feasible and proposing policy actions to support them, and to develop a robust, well-informed European network on private land conservation with a clear long-term strategy and strong international allies.

The project's work programme focused on implementing and assessing innovative private land conservation tools and models, exchanging knowledge and experience about these tools, identifying legal and political obstacles to up-scaling them, and publicising private land conservation among relevant stakeholders. By doing so, the project contributed to the further development of private land conservation tools and the expansion of their use in the EU. At the same time, the project continued and strengthened the networking among the practitioners of private land conservation in the EU and globally. It established the ELCN (European Land Conservation Network) as an organisation with a secretariat charged with the long-term management of the network. As outputs, it produced assessments of the conservation tools tested in the project as well as guidelines and policy recommendations for private land conservation in the EU.



The project in numbers:

- 10 project partners from 8 EU member states
- Total budget € 1,059,677
- EU contribution € 620,000
- 9 pilot actions implemented exploring innovative private land conservation tools
- 546 private land conservation initiatives identified in a Europe-wide census
- contacts established with over >100 partners at over 25 international events
- 3 international workshops and a global congress with a total of over 1,000 participants





Some conclusions

- **Trust and the involvement of local stakeholders are vital:** Our Romanian project partner **ADEPT** successfully established two local producer groups working within Natura 2000 sites. Their collaboration is a very good model for replication elsewhere of nature-friendly, commercially viable agriculture that benefits local communities and Natura 2000.
- **Volunteering is a great way to involve young people** in private land conservation, but it is not a tool to get cheap labour. In Portugal, our partner **MONTIS** learned that it takes persistence, patience, and creativity to build a volunteering programme, and that capacity building is key for getting motivated volunteers. Volunteers that stay for longer periods or recurring volunteers produce the best results, so make sure to keep your volunteers happy.
- **Collaboration is hard, but worth it:** In many Natura 2000 sites, land ownership and management are fragmented, with land managed by a nature conservation NGO neighbouring land managed by private landowners. The management of Natura 2000 sites by different landowners is often not coordinated, even though better cooperation could improve overall conservation of natural heritage. Legislative changes in Flanders, Belgium have recently enabled private landowners to elaborate management plans and have their land recognised as private nature reserve. The Flemish administration encourages landowners to team up and develop management plans together. LIFE ELCN project partner **NATUURPUNT** accepted the challenge and partnered with several private landowners and municipalities in five Natura 2000 sites to jointly develop integrated management plans. These plans aim to conserve and increase biodiversity at the sites across property boundaries. They define a shared vision for the site, harmonise management actions needed to reach conservation objectives, and outline how and where partners can work together. The five integrated management plans cover close to 500 hectares. Habitats in these plans range from wetlands, heathland, and ancient woodlands to 19th century fortresses where endangered bats stay over winter. The plans now create the basis for cooperation with private landowners, local governments, and a local youth movement. Developing the integrated management plans was challenging at times and took a leap of faith by all partners, but the results are worth the effort. Not only are all sites now protected as reserves. More importantly, the relationship between the different stakeholders and their mutual respect and understanding has markedly improved.
- **There is a real need for networking among private land conservation practitioners** – on EU and national level. Project partner **WWF OASI** identified private land conservation initiatives in Italy, most of which showed a high interest in national and international networking and knowledge exchange but were largely unaware of each other. Moreover, the project also showed that private land conservation initiatives focussing on nature conservation are at times difficult to identify, as many property owners do not only conserve



natural features on their land, but also cultural heritage, archaeological sites, traditional land uses, etc. To start building a community of private land conservationists in Italy, WWF OASI convened the first ever national meeting of “Italian privately protected area managers” in Orbetello in 2019. More than 50 participants representing various organisations and families who own land that is voluntarily dedicated to nature conservation participated in the meeting. The participants presented their respective private nature reserves and exchanged their views on common challenges (e.g., funding, public support, management). The results of the meeting were compiled into the first manual for private conservation landowners in Italy. Participants expressed their interest to continue networking and to develop an Italian Land Conservation Network.

→ **The world is unpredictable, but do not lose faith:** The pilot action implemented by project partners [XCN](#) and [Fundación Biodiversidad](#) aimed to create tax incentives for land stewardship agreements in Spain, starting in Catalonia. To achieve this, XCN presented a proposal for various tax reform options (personal income tax, property transfer tax, inheritance tax, donation tax) to the Catalan Government. Sadly, this proposal was not approved, as the regional government felt that an important prerequisite was missing: a national public registry of land stewardship initiatives. Since then, our partners have been lobbying hard for the establishment of this register and have helped the government in the development of a legal basis. These efforts have had positive results: in September 2021, the Catalan Government started the public consultation on a legislative proposal to create and regulate the Register of Properties with Initiatives for the Conservation of Natural Heritage and Biodiversity. Now, it is reviewing the feedback from this consultation. It is planned that the draft law will be presented to the parliament in the coming months.

Meanwhile, our project partner [NABU](#) attempted to create the first German “company reserve” in the north of Brandenburg state. Despite good progress on the restoration of the candidate site, the at times difficult relationship between the local NABU chapter and the regional authorities delayed the application procedure, so that the designation was not successful during the lifetime of the project. Sometimes it takes the right moment to start a private land conservation initiative, and good things happen to those who wait for it.