

Safeguarding Europe's ancient forests for future generations

Europe's last remaining primary and old-growth forests are more than just a collection of ancient trees. They are living ecosystems home to countless species, carbon storage giants and a key part of our natural heritage. Despite their crucial role in combating climate change, they are under threat. In this podcast from the 'Raising the Game, Better legislation' series, we will explore how the European Union is trying to protect these valuable forests.

Old-growth forests on our continent are rare, small and fragmented. To be more exact, they make up less than 3% of Europe's total forested area. About 90% of the EU's primary and old-growth forests are located in Bulgaria, Finland, Romania and Sweden.

They are untouched natural ecosystems, where there are few or no signs of human impact and wildlife thrives as it has done for centuries. These forests play a key role in conserving biodiversity, absorbing and storing carbon dioxide, providing fresh water, regulating local climate conditions and keeping humans healthy. They are also home to many endangered species.

One of the largest and most well-known old-growth forests in Europe is Białowieża, which stretches across the border between Poland and Belarus. It is one of Europe's last remaining primeval forests and is home to a rich variety of wildlife species, including the European bison, which was once nearly extinct. The forest is a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Another example of an old-growth forest in Europe is the virgin forests of the Carpathians, which spread across Romania, Slovakia and Ukraine. These vast, ancient woodlands are among the largest intact temperate forests in Europe. They provide a habitat for some of the continent's most iconic wildlife, including bears, lynxes and wolves.

Austria's Kalkalpen National Park is another striking example of an old-growth forest that comes under EU protection. Located in the Alps, this park is home to Austria's largest area of protected wilderness and features ancient beech forests. It provides a safe haven for rare species, such as lynxes, woodpeckers and owls.

Despite their ecological importance and the protection they receive from UNESCO and the EU, these old-growth forests have been subjected to and continue to face serious threats, particularly from large-scale illegal logging, climate change and overtourism.

Protecting ancient and old-growth forests is a key priority for the European Union as they are irreplaceable. Over the years, the EU has developed a range of policies, strategies and legal frameworks to ensure these ecosystems are safeguarded for future generations. Let's take a closer look at some of them.

One of the cornerstone initiatives is the Natura 2000 network, the largest coordinated network of protected areas in the EU. It covers both land and marine sites. The Białowieża Forest and parts of the Carpathian forests are included in this network. The goal of Natura 2000 is both to protect nature and ensure that natural resources are used sustainably.

As part of the European Green Deal, the EU launched its Biodiversity Strategy for 2030, which sets ambitious targets to halt biodiversity loss and protect Europe's natural habitats. One of the key commitments in this strategy is to provide strict protection to all remaining primary and old-growth forests in the EU. This means that these forests should be left undisturbed, free from logging, infrastructure development and human interference that could harm their ecological balance.

Additionally, the strategy sets the target of planting at least three billion trees by 2030 to restore degraded ecosystems and enhance forest cover. However, the emphasis is not only on planting trees but also on planting the right trees in the right places, ensuring that these efforts support biodiversity and climate adaptation.

The EU Forest Strategy for 2030, adopted by the European Commission in July 2021, complements the Biodiversity Strategy by focusing on the sustainable management and restoration of forests. It aims to enhance the resilience of EU forests to climate change and promote practices that benefit both the environment and local communities. This includes supporting sustainable forest management to balance economic needs with ecological preservation; encouraging the use of wood products from sustainably managed forests while protecting old-growth ecosystems; and promoting alternative economic activities, such as ecotourism or the production of non-wood goods like honey or medicinal plants, which can provide sustainable livelihoods while keeping forests intact.

The strategy also emphasises the importance of monitoring and reporting on the health of forests. To support this, the EU is working on a law to establish a forest observation framework. This will help ensure that data on forest health, biodiversity and management practices are consistently gathered and shared across EU countries, enabling better policy decisions.

It is not possible to effectively protect ancient forests without significant financial investment. That's why the EU has established a number of funding mechanisms to support conservation efforts. At the heart of EU environmental funding is the LIFE programme, the EU's flagship funding initiative for the environment and climate action. Since 1992, LIFE has co-financed over 5 500 projects across the EU, focusing on biodiversity, nature restoration and climate adaptation.

When it comes to ancient and old-growth forests, LIFE funds initiatives aimed at restoring degraded forest ecosystems and improving biodiversity, combating threats like illegal logging, forest fires and invasive species, and supporting research and innovation in sustainable forest management.

Another key funding tool is the Common Agricultural Policy. Although its primary focus is agriculture, the CAP also provides financial support for agroforestry, a sustainable land use practice that integrates trees into agricultural landscapes. This approach not only helps to increase biodiversity but also enhances soil quality and water management.

The CAP's rural development funds also encourage forest owners to adopt sustainable forest management practices and to invest in actions that prevent deforestation and promote

biodiversity. For example, funding is available for planting native species, controlling pests and restoring degraded forest areas.

The EU's Horizon Europe programme, dedicated to research and innovation, also provides funding for projects aimed at understanding and improving forest ecosystems. These projects include studying the impact of climate change on ancient forests, developing innovative forest management techniques and advancing the science of biodiversity conservation.

Protecting Europe's forests is not just the responsibility of Member States. It is a shared commitment at EU level. The European Parliament is at the centre of these efforts as a strong advocate for preserving primary and old-growth forests.

Parliament played a key role in shaping the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030, which sets the ambitious goal of strictly protecting all remaining primary and old-growth forests in the EU. It has also called for sustainable forestry practices to be promoted with the aim of preventing large-scale deforestation.

In April 2023, Parliament adopted rules to ensure goods imported into the EU have not contributed to deforestation or forest degradation anywhere in the world. Initially set to take effect in December 2024, the application of the deforestation law has been postponed by one year to allow businesses to adapt. In February 2024, MEPs backed a new law, which requires all EU countries to work towards restoring natural habitats.

In addition to legislation, the European Parliament closely monitors the implementation of conservation policies and its Committee on the Environment regularly assesses progress, ensuring that protection measures translate into real action.

Since adequate funding is crucial, Parliament has played a vital role in securing financial support for biodiversity protection. It has been pushing for increased investment in nature conservation through EU programmes such as LIFE, Horizon Europe and the Common Agricultural Policy.

As the EU moves forward with measures that help protect ancient forests, the goal is to ensure these rare ecosystems remain untouched and continue providing their essential environmental benefits. Because safeguarding nature is not just about conservation – it is about securing our future.

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