

SPEECH

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure to welcome you here to the Square. The eyes of Europe are upon us, as we consider its most vital resource – **its nature**. I am sure we will all be doing our utmost to make this day a memorable success.

Today marks another big step in the fitness check of the Birds and Habitats Directives. It is one step in a long journey - one that I feel that we have embarked on together. Today we mark a pause. We are taking stock of progress, and considering the path ahead.

Over the past year I have travelled to 16 Member States. I have learned a lot, and seen at first-hand how much nature means to people.

I have noticed that policy makers rarely consider the full relevance of nature. The countryside can too often be taken for granted. But when most Europeans think of nature, they think of a favourite place of outstanding natural beauty. They think of real experience, of feeling and of connection. They think of memories and associations, perhaps even of **majesty**.

This is what I felt in the Cies Islands near Vigo, Spain, the harbour of Kiel in Northern Germany, and Ireland's Galway bay

– just some of the places I've visited in the last year. And these are the places where EU legislation is successfully applied.

Our setting today is more humble, but we are still on a journey. I am glad that we are travelling together, because we have a common destination in mind. I'm sure I speak for us all when I say; Europe's nature needs the best protection we can afford.

My mission as Commissioner is not limited to protecting the nature that remains. Remedial action will not be sufficient. I need to do more. Not simply because of nature's outstanding beauty – but because it forms the essence of everything around us. The task entrusted to me is to ensure that our legal mechanisms in place afford nature **the best possible proactive protection.**

That is why the Commission has embarked on this fitness check. It is not because we have a different destination in mind. It is because most of our navigation instruments suggest that we are heading off-course. We need to know whether our centrepiece legislation – a crucial part of our equipment –is still reliable. We need confirmation that we are taking the **most effective route - And we need the best assurance that we will arrive at our destination on time.**

More than 20 years ago now, the Natura 2000 network was signed into law. Two decades on, it is still the centre of our

efforts to protect Europe's nature and our own wellbeing. We need reassurance that our current framework remains the best version possible.

If circumstances change, the rational person adapts **in the light of current and future reality.**

Ladies and gentlemen, I believe that today's reality requires bold decisions. Decisions that I am prepared to take, but decisions that I cannot take alone. I need your input. I am sure we can find ways to improve our instruments so that we can arrive at our safe haven by 2020.

Similar evaluations to ours have been carried out for Europe's freshwater and waste legislation. Other exercises are on-going in parallel to the Nature Directives. But this review is special.

I say special because it has revealed an unprecedented level of interest. More than 500 000 citizens and practitioners replied to the public consultation – a record for any consultation conducted by the Commission. Recognising the sensitivity and importance of the exercise, we have done our utmost to reach out to you. Leaving no stone unturned, we have sent targeted questionnaires to key stakeholders and carried out in-situ visits to Member States. The response was no less impressive, allowing us to gather a wealth of detailed evidence, with reports, studies and other data and information.

And today, we are starting to see it all come together. Looking around the room I see further confirmation of the significance of this Fitness Check, for a great variety of interests, across society and across our 28 Member States.

So many interests! And yet every response to this consultation bears witness to an individual connection with the natural world. It provides more testimony to the **strength of emotion** connected with this exercise. It proves the significance of our connection with Europe's nature.

From the outset I have been at pains to ensure that this exercise acknowledges all interested parties. Today's conference is another indication of that transparency. I can assure you that all the contributions to the consultation will be available for your scrutiny.

Three major reports have already been published this year. The State of Nature report, the State of the Environment Report and the Mid-Term Review of the Biodiversity Strategy. All these show biodiversity in the EU to be exposed to increasing **pressures**. More than four in every five habitats and three in four species do not enjoy favourable status at EU level. Habitat loss and degradation remain very serious concerns.

As we become increasingly aware of the scale of nature's importance for our own economic wellbeing, this picture of decline is a cause of ever-growing concern. In the simplest possible terms, it tells us that we are off course.

But there is no need to follow business as usual. These reports tell us another simple truth – "**where there's a will, there's a way**".

A number of EU protected species are showing **positive trends**. This is clearly the result of targeted action supported by adequate resources. For example, our rather modest LIFE Programme. This is what we need.

We now have EU legislation to tackle the second biggest threat to biodiversity in Europe – **Invasive Alien Species** – and we will soon be feeling its effects.

On land, our Natura 2000 network is almost complete, and we have recently seen significant progress by several Member States to expand it at sea.

Ladies and gentlemen, **the will to change things** is there.

But today's conference is not really about the will. Today we concentrate on **the way**. The initial findings you will be discussing point to a number of challenges that must be

addressed. Most are familiar – others are new. I would like to highlight a few.

We asked about **effectiveness**, and how the objectives of the Directives were being met. Several key points have emerged. First of all, progress has been hindered by the slow designation of sites. In particular we have been hampered by a lack of plans for the management of the network. With only half of all Natura 2000 sites having adequate management plans, there is still a long way to go. And this is without considering the effectiveness of our approach to the 80 % of EU land, and 90 % of EU marine territories that *are not* covered by our nature legislation.

The weight of evidence strengthens our belief that without the Directives, the state of nature in the EU would be considerably worse than it is today. There is little doubt that our society and the economy would be a lot weaker. And yet we know that with the existing instruments we are still likely to deliver less than the original aim.

Therefore I put this question to you – how can our framework be improved to strengthen implementation?

We asked about **coherence**, and the extent to which nature policy is complementing policies in other areas. Here too there

is good progress to report, but other areas that still need further attention.

The Commission has developed solid guidance to help a number of sectors carry out their activities sustainably. This has been in ways that can allow our daily business and nature to prosper together. Wind energy, and estuaries are cases in point.

But there is still a need for greater clarity in others. We need approaches that will **support SMEs** without imposing an unnecessary burden. And we must **work more closely with farmers**. They are the guardians of so much vital biodiversity. We must ensure that EU policies safeguard both their livelihoods and the long-term viability of the nature upon which we all depend. I very much believe that our farming communities must be part of the response to address today's challenges. These are not easy challenges, but tackling them together is essential. We must find a way.

Ladies and gentlemen, today's conference is a vital step. But we must keep a sense of proportion, and keep our eye on the **most important goal**. The nature Directives play a central role in our **biodiversity strategy**, and they are critical instruments.

But taken in isolation, these two Directives will not enable us to halt the loss of biodiversity and ecosystems by 2020.

This brings me to another pertinent question – the international dimension. We talk about global warming, carbon pricing and alternative energy, but what about the global cost of biodiversity decline? How is this reflected in global debates and international exchanges?

As we look for solutions to improve the health of our ecosystems, we must recognise that by far the greater part of our biodiversity lies outside the Natura network. Despite the relevance of our legislation, a great proportion of our natural wealth is still in need of urgent recognition.

This is a message that must be spread far more widely. Protecting nature cannot stop at the boundaries of Natura 2000. It cannot stop at EU boundaries. We are not in competition with nature, and enhancing it must become instinctive at all levels of our decision making. It should be built into the DNA of our social and economic thinking, and reflected in genuine accountability at local, national, EU and international levels.

The most recent data available shows that more than four out of five Europeans consider the effects of biodiversity loss to be serious. More than half think they will be personally affected by biodiversity loss. This is strong evidence that citizens across

Europe want – and expect – us to achieve our biodiversity objectives. Such interest is by no means a coincidence. It sends a very strong message acknowledging our dependence on our ecosystems for the diverse services they provide to businesses, the health of our labour force and society at large.

All of which brings us back to the business of this conference. I hope I have made it clear to you that the Commission is still in listening mode. At this point in the evaluation, I am not in a position to draw conclusions about how the results of this work will be taken forward. But I remind you of the words of Vice-President Timmermans back in June:

"I want to emphasize our strong commitment to nature protection and biodiversity. If we don't protect our biodiversity and nature, then we will lose out as a society, but also lose out economically, because we would weaken our living conditions across the European Union.

I do believe we need a health and fitness check on this legislation as some of it dates back to 1975. But let me underline once again that this means keeping our high standards of environmental protection in place. Better regulation is not lowering standards".

Our commitment and our objectives are clear.

One thing is certain. There is **no room for complacency**. We cannot simply carry on as before and hope for the best. We must seize the opportunities presented by events like today, and seek the best possible solutions.

For we seek nothing less than our own long-term survival, as a species that is part of an extensive living ecosystem – an ecosystem that nourishes our society and economy.

On this note, I would like to call on everyone here today to deliberate with foresight and honesty. Are we confident enough to agree together that today's legal framework is adequate and sufficiently future-proof? And if not – I am listening carefully to understand where the solutions may lie.

We know **where** we want to go. But we won't reach our destination **without the right map**.

My heartfelt thanks to all of you who have contributed evidence, provided views and opinions, and taken the time to participate today, whether in person or via video link. I look forward to our discussions, and to hearing the conclusions drawn by our consultants, which will inform the Commission's own fitness check report early next year.

Thank you.