

# Post COVID 19: unique opportunity to shape a new society in harmony with nature

*“The COVID-19 pandemic should be a wake-up call”, stressed Jane Madgwick, Wetlands International CEO. “Rather than putting the response to the ongoing environmental and climate crises to the side and loosening environmental safeguards in favour of boosting the economy, now is the time to plan and develop along pathways that promote both social and ecological healing”.*

*“Protecting the right to a healthy environment is the best way to protect human health. Environmental degradation, including ecosystem and biodiversity loss, can lead to animal-human viral transmission that has repeatedly resulted in epidemics”<sup>1</sup>. Our use of nature today will determine how future generations will live their future.*

*“Safeguarding and restoring wetlands are increasingly looked to as the premier Nature-based Solution to rebuild society’s resilience, securing clean water supplies, reducing the impact of floods and droughts, enabling food security and buffering people against the ravages of climate change”<sup>2</sup>. Healthy wetlands, either pristine or restored, some of Europe’s most important environmental assets, can contribute to the achievement of the European Green Deal, in particular the 2030 EU Biodiversity Strategy. This would also be in line with the UN call for increased global cooperation to restore degraded and destroyed ecosystems in the next 10 years (2021-2030)<sup>3</sup>.*

## **Wetlands International Europe and its members call on the EU and its Member States to:**

- 1) mainstream environmental, biodiversity and climate change objectives in all European funds and programmes and consider nature and climate systems as key elements for resilient societies and economies;
- 2) urgently implement the One Health approach that encompasses the challenges facing ecosystems health, veterinary health, and human health;
- 3) refrain from applying old recipes such as extensive grey infrastructure works and softening of environmental regulations for public and private works;
- 4) avoid splitting funding streams between "flood risk protection" on the one side and "ecological restoration" on the other, as in the past, in European Structural and Investment Funds;
- 5) reinforce conditionality in the CAP to better implement an "environmental and biodiversity proofing of the EU budget;
- 6) invest in large scale ecological restoration measures to benefit from the ecosystem services provided. This should also include the Common Agricultural Policy and European Structural Funds currently under discussion.
- 7) To pay equal attention in terms of grants and subsidies to the environmental sector as social ones. That means subsidies to cover general operating expenses;
- 8) allocate specific recovery funds to environmental Civil Society Organisations and increase co-funding rates of European funded projects (LIFE/Interreg) since private donors will slow down support under the foreseen economic crisis;

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.un.org/en/observances/earth-day>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.wetlands.org/news/act-now-to-build-back-the-bond-between-people-and-nature/>

<sup>3</sup> UN Decade for Ecosystem Restoration (2021-2030) <https://www.decadeonrestoration.org/what-decade>

- 9) encourage Member States to provide financial support to environmental causes and enable survival of environmental organisations;
- 10) reinforce the concept of cross-border unity more than ever and prioritize supra-national projects led by supra-national entities;
- 11) reinforce support to innovation and research to increase expertise and technological innovation for rising knowledge on management and restoration of aquatic ecosystems

The European Green Deal must be the corner stone of the economic recovery but needs to put much more emphasis on Biodiversity and on Nature-based Solutions. It is imperative that we reconsider the basis of economy in equilibrium with ecosystem conservation and biodiversity. The resilience of our economy is not possible without resilient societies respecting and valuing nature.

That is why it is so important that the **recovery strategy focusing on investments in large scale renovation, renewables, clean transport, sustainable food and nature restoration will be even more important than before**, as pronounced by the European Commission's President, Ursula von der Leyen<sup>4</sup>.

This crisis may provide an opportunity for humankind to rethink the global model of society, based on a damaging and unsustainable economic growth, that we have built, both in Europe and Worldwide. **This is a unique opportunity to shape a new society in harmony with nature.**

We should not forget that biodiversity and climate crisis is a much bigger and long persistent challenge or humanity than COVID-19. It is our duty to prepare and mitigate for the growing climate emergency and ensure the conservation of our natural resources for new generations. This includes protecting and restoring vital wetland habitats, such as rivers and peatlands. Our determination to work across all boundaries remains undimmed and we will continue to reach out to deliver eel recovery.

Restoring freshwater and coastal ecosystems delivers many societal benefits, including cost-effective climate and biodiversity protection,<sup>5</sup> and also provides ecosystem services such as food provisioning, water quality improvements, Nature-based Solutions for coastal defence and supporting commercial fisheries as well as helping to mitigate climate change as carbon sinks.

In our field of activity this is a once in a lifetime opportunity to really change pace.

**Wetlands International Europe** is an association of **10 European organisations**<sup>6</sup> from 6 different countries. Our members' work is focused on different topics: Wetland protection and restoration (including rivers, lakes, coastal wetlands, peatlands), Eel species recovery, as well as the promotion of Nature-based Solutions. However, we all have the same aim to safeguard wetlands.

**For additional info on:**

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<sup>4</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech\\_20\\_675](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_20_675)

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.eea.europa.eu/highlights/restoring-floodplains-would-improve-state>

<sup>6</sup> Centro Ibérico de Restauración Fluvial (CIREF), EuroNatur Stiftung, Centrum Ochrony Mokradel (CMok), Fondation Tour du Valat, Sustainable Eel Group (SEG); Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust (WWT); Zoological Society of London (ZSL); Centro Italiano per la Riqualificazione Fluviale (CIRF), Michael Succow Stiftung, Fundación Global Nature





## ANNEX- Actions to be implemented to boost green recovery

EU should commit to adopt a Nature Investment Plan with clear targets, and actions for Member States. It is key to invest in the implementation of the European Green Deal, which, according to the Executive Vice President of the EC, Timmermans, is *not just a way to confront the climate crisis and the biodiversity crisis, but also a way to give Europe a growth strategy that is a winning strategy, not just for Europe itself but also globally.*<sup>7</sup>

**Only around 40% of monitored wetlands such as rivers, lakes, transitional and coastal waters are currently in good ecological status.<sup>8</sup> Rivers are increasingly disconnected due to dams and other hard infrastructure.**

- Restoring freshwater and coastal ecosystems delivers many societal benefits, including cost-effective climate and biodiversity protection,<sup>9</sup> and also provides ecosystem services such as food provisioning, water quality improvements, nature-based solutions for coastal defence and support commercial fisheries as well as helping to mitigate climate change.
- Integrating conservation measures for freshwater Natura 2000 sites into River Basin Management Planning to more effectively tackle catchment-scale pressures
- Incentivising nature-based solutions which help restore ecological functions, longitudinal connectivity for sediment transport and natural water flow;
- Establishing compensation and economic diversification funding to mitigate the socio-economic impacts of land use changes on existing livelihoods and businesses;

**Peatlands have been drained for agriculture, forestry and peat extraction. 99% of EU peatland emissions are caused by 16 of the 28 EU Member States. Drained peatlands contribute to more than 25 % of total emissions from agriculture<sup>10</sup>.**

- Phasing out traditional adverse agricultural practices on peatlands and introduce climate-adapted and sustainable wet-agricultural production techniques such as **paludiculture**.

**Urban wetlands including watersheds, floodplains, constructed wetlands and ponds, combined with related blue-green infrastructure measures such as roofs and bioswales, increase the resilience of cities: they can temporarily store stormwater and mitigate peak river flows and urban drainage runoff. If designed correctly, they can also serve as habitats and maintain ecological connectivity for biodiversity, alongside many other benefits for climate change adaptation and mitigation, health and culture.**

- Fund at least 100 €5 million+ projects in cities that invest in conservation, improvement or construction of urban wetlands as part of their climate change adaptation strategies;
- Create a special funding line in the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIFs) or other mechanism to provide core funding and co-funding for urban wetland planning, conservation, creation and management

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<sup>7</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/commissioners/2019-2024/timmermans/announcements/introductory-remarks-frans-timmermans-european-parliaments-envi-committee-meeting-21st-april-2020\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/commissioners/2019-2024/timmermans/announcements/introductory-remarks-frans-timmermans-european-parliaments-envi-committee-meeting-21st-april-2020_en)

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.eea.europa.eu/publications/state-of-water/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.eea.europa.eu/highlights/restoring-floodplains-would-improve-state>

<sup>10</sup> Policy Briefing **PEATLANDS IN THE EU. COMMON AGRICULTURE POLICY (CAP) AFTER 2020**, Greifswald Mire Centre, Wetlands International European Association and National University of Ireland, Galway, March 2020

## FOR MORE INFO

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