

Restoration of lakes and wetlands as a priority in Europe – Article 4 and Article 9.4

We are reaching out to you as EU parliamentarians to call for a strong Nature Restoration law that puts in place restoration measures that together shall cover all ecosystems in need of restoration by 2050. A strong law that restores degraded wetlands, reverses the decline of pollinators, and improves the biodiversity of agroecosystems and forest ecosystems. This file will be key to achieving healthy wetlands, which are crucial to delivering both European and International commitments in the European Green Deal, the EU biodiversity strategy for 2030, the Paris Agreement, and the Convention on Biological Diversity. All actors must significantly increase their efforts so that lakes, wetlands and other surface waters in moderate, poor or bad ecological status will be successfully restored. To plan and implement such actions, challenges such as eutrophication, acidification, pollution, water abstraction, and hydrological and morphological alterations must be addressed immediately and more efficiently.

We urgently need specific legally binding targets and obligations for nature restoration to secure water supply for Europe and to reach the targets of the EU Green Deal. We therefore welcome the agreement of the EU Council on the proposal for a nature restoration law. We strongly encourage the EU parliament to positively vote for the EU Nature Restoration Law on July 12th 2023.

Situation of European lakes and wetlands

The loss of lakes and wetlands in Europe is a significant environmental concern with wide-ranging impacts on ecosystems, biodiversity, water resources, and human well-being. Over the years, Europe has experienced the degradation and loss of many lakes and wetlands due to various factors, including urbanization, agriculture, drainage, pollution, and recently climate change. Between 75% (Netherlands) and 90% (e.g. Ireland) of wetlands in EU member states have been lost. Of the wetland area converted to other land uses between 1990 and 2000, 2 % were artificialized (e.g. urban areas), 7 % became agricultural, 12 % water bodies, and 79 % forest and semi-natural areas (EEA, 2009). The EU Habitats directive did not lead to change this trend. Wetlands are still exploited and converted in EU member states.

Less than 50% of water bodies in the EU are in good ecological status. The last three assessments performed by all EU Member States in 2009, 2015 and 2021 did not indicate enough improvement to fulfil the objective stipulated by the Water Framework Directive to achieve good ecological status in all EU water bodies. Reaching this goal by the next assessment in 2027 will be very challenging as the measures implemented so far are not taking effect to an adequate degree.

Key aspects regarding the loss of lakes and wetlands in Europe with substantial impact on humans and nature:

Habitat Loss and Biodiversity Decline: Lakes and wetlands are among the most biodiverse ecosystems on Earth, supporting a wide array of plant and animal species. As these habitats are lost or degraded, there is a corresponding decline in biodiversity. Loss of lakes and wetlands leads to the disappearance of unique and specialized species, including endemic and migratory species,

disrupting ecological balance and reducing overall ecosystem resilience. The severe consequences of biodiversity loss on pollination in agriculture and other ecosystem services are in the meanwhile well understood.

Water Quantity and Quality Issues: Lakes and wetlands play a crucial role in regulating water quantity and quality, as well as for irrigation in agriculture and ground water restoration. They act as natural reservoirs, storing and releasing water during dry and wet periods. The loss of these ecosystems already today contributes to water scarcity in certain regions and exacerbates flooding events in others. Furthermore, the absence of wetlands can result in decreased water filtration, purification, and nutrient cycling, leading to the degradation of water quality, sinking groundwater levels, reduced availability of drinking water and the loss of other important ecosystem services.

Climate Change Impacts: Lakes and wetlands are vulnerable to climate change, with rising temperatures, altered precipitation patterns, and sea-level rise affecting their hydrology and ecological dynamics. Climate change impacts, such as increased droughts, wildfires, and extreme weather events, can further accelerate the loss and degradation of these ecosystems. Additionally, the destruction of wetlands releases stored carbon dioxide, contributing to greenhouse gas emissions and exacerbating climate change.

Agricultural Expansion and Drainage: The expansion of agriculture has led to the drainage and conversion of wetlands for cultivation purposes. Drainage activities, aimed at reclaiming land for agricultural use, disrupt the natural hydrological regimes of wetlands, leading to the loss of water-dependent habitats and associated biodiversity. Unsustainable agricultural practices, such as the excessive use of fertilizers and pesticides, can also result in water pollution and further degrade these ecosystems. The lack of wetlands today has a strong impact on the water retention potential of landscapes, leading to water scarcity and droughts in many EU countries.

Urbanization and Infrastructure Development: Rapid urbanization and infrastructure development have resulted in the loss of lakes and wetlands, primarily through land conversion and fragmentation. Urban areas and infrastructure projects, such as roads, buildings, and dams, encroach these ecosystems, altering their natural functions and connectivity. Fragmentation disrupts migratory pathways and isolates animal populations, leading to decreased genetic diversity and increased vulnerability to environmental changes and stochastic extinction processes.

Pollution and Contamination: Lakes and wetlands are susceptible to pollution from various sources, including industrial activities, agriculture, and urban runoff. Nutrient runoff, such as excessive nitrogen and phosphorus from fertilizers, can lead to eutrophication, causing harmful algal blooms and oxygen depletion in water bodies. Chemical pollutants, including heavy metals and pesticides, can accumulate in these ecosystems, posing risks to aquatic organisms and human health.

Significance of European lakes and wetlands for economic development

Wetland restoration is therefore a necessary investment in improving food security and mitigating and adapting to impacts of climate change. Member states might have certain flexibility within the frame of jointly agreed ambitious restoration objectives. As a prerequisite, member states must make sure that wetland deterioration is being stopped on EU level and beyond.

The awareness in the business sector regarding the importance of biodiversity and related ecosystem services as a basis for economic activities is increasing as well as the compromise to reduce negative impacts. More than 100 of Europe's largest businesses of the food sector, finance, and energy sector, including Nestlé, Unilever, SPAR and Iberdrola, support the EU Nature Restoration Law. Nature restoration is not a burden for farmers, fishers or renewable energy development – as certain

political parties are arguing. On the contrary: The EU nature restoration law generates benefits for farmers and their livelihoods and environment by improving soil health, restoring water cycles and increasing biodiversity.

Healthy wetlands and grasslands offer enormous potential to drastically reduce GHG emissions while acting as carbon sinks. They also offer the potential for more biodiversity-rich habitats by improving water cycles and quality as well as preventing floods or water scarcity. Wetland restoration will also benefit more resilient populations facing rising hazards (floods, droughts, fires, etc.).

The member organisations of ELLA as well as the members of the International Living Lakes Network are open to discuss our requests and contribute further to the elaboration of the final EU Nature Restoration Law.

Signed by the member organisations of the European Living Lakes Association ELLA e.V.

- Global Nature Fund, Germany
- Fundación Global Nature, Spain
- Lake Constance Foundation, Germany
- Lake Balaton Development Coordination Agency, Hungary
- German Environment Action, Germany
- Peipsi Center for Transboundary Cooperation, Estonia
- Association of Civil Organizations of Lake Balaton, Hungary
- Ecological Society ETNA, Poland

Contact:

ELLA e.V. Secretariat

Dr. Thomas Schaefer

Global Nature Fund

schaefer@globalnature.org

The European Living Lakes Association (ELLA) is a non-profit foundation dedicated to the protection of lakes and wetlands. ELLA is part of the international Living Lakes Network, which includes 112 lakes from all over the world represented by 135 organizations (June 2023).

The member organizations of ELLA have long-term experience in the protection, restoration and management of lakes and wetlands. Our work is based on technical knowledge, ethical commitment, and innovation. Our activities include the realization of practical restoration projects, awareness raising, training and involvement of stakeholders such as companies and local authorities, exchange of experiences and best practice on sustainable lake management and lobbying for an improved political framework to enhance protection and restoration of lakes and wetlands.