

Northern Sparsely Populated Areas' (NSPA) views on the EU's Nature Restoration Law - the importance of a regional dimension

The Northern Sparsely Populated Areas network, NSPA, represents the interests of the four northernmost regions of Sweden (Norrbotten, Västerbotten, Jämtland Härjedalen and Västernorrland), the seven eastern and northernmost of Finland (Central Ostrobothnia, Kainuu, Lapland, North Karelia, Northern Ostrobothnia, Pohjois-Savo and South Savo), as well as the two northernmost regions of Norway (Nordland, Troms & Finnmark).

THE NSPA POSITION IN BRIEF

- The NSPA welcomes the initiatives to protect and improve ecosystems with lost or impaired function and finds it positive that the aim is wide and include all the ecosystems across the Europe.
- The NSPA would like to highlight the importance of ensuring that the conditions of all regions in Europe are considered, including the NSPA regions and the Arctic in general. All initiatives need to be executed with great respect in relation to local knowledge, local economies, and cultural context. The NSPA question if detailed and legally binding goals are the most efficient way to achieve nature restoration, whether the starting situations and different conditions of the member states and regions should be better taken into account.
- The NSPA highlights the need to balance the environmental, economic, social, and cultural sustainability of areas under restoration. Sustainable economic functioning of ecosystems must continue to be enabled while supporting biodiversity and environmental health.
- The NSPA stresses the importance of respect and acknowledgement of the forest sector's continued efforts in regards of improving forest management practices in a manner that promotes biodiversity while utilizing the forest-based resources in correspondence with its net-growth. Efforts to develop and implement carbon-wise forest management and farming techniques must continue in the future.
- Furthermore, including indigenous peoples' knowledge, expertise and needs is vital for their livelihood, culture and for the cooperation in the Arctic regions. In addition, when discussing restoration and conservation of land areas in the Arctic, the reindeer herders must be included in the process from the start.
- This extends to marine ecosystems as well. Research on forest on land and in the ocean needs to be both included in the implementation process and should furthermore be reflected in future project opportunities within EU programs such as Horizon Europe.
- The NSPA believes that the total percentage of restored nature should be the overall aim, and that it is important that the yearly target does not become a hinder for those regions who already have a large percentage of healthy forest ecosystems and marine ecosystems.

Northern Sparsely Populated Areas and nature restoration

The NSPA regions kindly remind that the regional and Arctic dimensions need to be taken into account when developing the EU's nature restoration law. The NSPA regions play a key role in the goal of the proposal. Therefore, the NSPA highlights its stance on the Nature Restoration Law.

All three NSPA regions are placed in the European Arctic with unique conditions that needs to be considered. Apart from large, forested areas, the area's climate is harsh and experience the impact of climate change three times faster than the rest of the world. This means that the biodiversity is changing, as both the earth and air are warming constantly. Another aspect that is affecting the ecosystem negatively is the melting permafrost in the area. This also includes the marine ecosystems, with fish, crabs and other species shifting further to the north as the ocean temperature gets higher. This means that a restoration in many cases is not possible, due to the changing conditions.

More than 70 percent of the land mass in the NSPA regions is covered by forests. The Northern regions of Sweden, Finland and Norway are some of the most forest dense regions in Europe, and among the largest exporters of forest industry products in the world. These products are already substituting products and energy based on fossil fuels all over the EU. As a result of this industrial activity, large amounts of by-products are available within the EU. Those by-products may be processed into new biobased products such as green chemicals, bioplastic, smart packaging, and transport fuels, all needed to reach the targets of self-autonomy and the European Green Deal.

The NSPA regions are proud of their on-going forest growth, voluntary depositions of protected forests, sustainability certifications and the work on enhancing biodiversity. The NSPA regions have already protected larger forest areas than other EU countries. Almost 80 percent of the Finland's protected areas are located in the Northern part of Finland. The share of protected forests and grasslands in East & North Finland is about 16 percent. In North Norway, 15% of the land area is protected, compared to 3,6% which is the national average. When it comes to forests, protected forests make up twice as much area in North Norway compared to national level.

As the NSPA regions are having such a large percentage of forest, it is beneficial to have an implementation system focusing on improving performance based on the total target, instead of a yearly percentage. The regions that are already performing well within the targets of the nature restoration law should not be penalized for being ahead.

The NSPA further stresses the impact of the energy and food crises caused by the war in Ukraine, global economic instability, and extreme natural conditions, while deciding on the timing and flexibility of restoration measures. The right scale should also be recognized: particular attention should be placed on European regions at risk of forest fires, desertification, and land degradation.

The NSPA calls on the European Commission to utilize local knowledge while identifying and determining ecosystems with good condition. Ecosystems are diverse depending on different regions, therefore the standards for the six indicators for forest ecosystem condition mentioned in the proposal should be flexibly applicable to natural local conditions. It is important to target the restoration measures to the right places where threatened habitats or species occur, also to address restoration cost-effectively.

Forest ecosystems

The NSPA stresses that carbon-wise forest management and farming techniques must continue to be developed also in the future. Thus, restoration measures should be based on the creative application on a case-by-case basis and using local and regional knowledge. Furthermore, any additional costs and administrative burdens arising from restoration measures should be avoided or come with substantial monetary compensation. Restoration should not lead to a situation where forest owners can no longer cultivate their forests economically. In addition, the NSPA is concerned about the impact of restoration measures on private forest owners.

The NSPA stresses that to ensure sustainable forest management in the future, EU forestry related policy and decision making should stay on the member states level. Also, any new legislation applied needs to work in accordance with current national land legislation, legal ownership rights, and municipalities' way of self-governing in regards of land use.

Marine ecosystems

The UN has established 2021-2030 as the decade of restoring ecosystems, and marine ecosystems is a topic of importance for the NSPA. However, it is of importance that restoration and development can function together. North Norway is a region with a long history of, and competence on marine ecosystems, and has a lot of experience in balancing exploitation and sustainable development of marine ecosystems.

Sustainable use of the ocean is important to both minimise conflict, and to increase innovation and development. The marine business sector within aquaculture, fisheries, and algae, are dependent on updated and forward-looking spatial planning strategies for the ocean, but to achieve this, more knowledge about the ocean is necessary. Nordland County in North Norway aims to be a front runner in these processes, ensuring that all stakeholders are included in the process. For marine ecosystem restoration measurements, processes including the local and regional level is vital, including indigenous peoples' perspectives



Another important area for marine ecosystems is freshwaters. Restoration of human activity in freshwaters and water sources have had several positive effects. Among them biodiversity, recreation, and health, as well as decreasing risk of flood.

Blue growth and increased exploitation of the sea's resources are on the agenda in both Norway and Europe. Algae is a resource that can be used for many purposes, from replacing soy in animal feed production and oil in plastic production, to bioenergy, carbon capture, food, textiles, and medicine. Especially within carbon capture, algae can be a gamechanger for energy-heavy industries. Sustainable algae production can therefore be an important part of the green transition for whole the of Europe. It is therefore important that the Nature Restoration Law does not prohibit these kinds of sectors and productions.

To conclude, the NSPA regions have considerable expertise on marine ecosystems, and sustainable development and restoration of these areas. It is therefore vital to include these perspectives when setting the targets and measures for the restoration of marine ecosystems.