How to measure the condition of Europe's ecosystems?

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Biodiversity — Ecosystems

Healthy forests, soils, seas and other ecosystems form Europe’s ‘natural capital’, which is vital for our well-being and the economy. The European Environment Agency’s (EEA) new analysis, published today, looks at how to measure the condition of Europe’s natural capital and provides a first overview of the state and trends of Europe’s ecosystems. The report also highlights the need for better data on the condition of ecosystems in Europe.

The EEA report ‘Natural capital accounting in support of policymaking in Europe’ presents the EEA's work on natural capital accounting and discusses the use of such analysis in support of policymaking. The accounting methodology helps to organise ecological data and provides a better basis for spatial analysis. The report also reflects on the intrinsic value of biodiversity, which needs to be respected in addition to the economic benefits from nature.

The report states that the distribution and location of ecosystems in Europe is generally stable. However, urban areas and other infrastructure are expanding at the expense of farmland and semi-natural ecosystems. For water quantity and fish biomass, the EEA has developed accounts that analyse the use of renewable water resources and marine fish stocks. Both of these are heavily exploited and need to be closely monitored. Further work is also required to better measure the condition of Europe’s land and sea ecosystems.

Overall, there is a clear lack of data to reliably account for the condition of European ecosystems, the EEA report states. Investments in these data are necessary for a sustainable management of Europe’s natural capital. According to the report, this requires more targeted monitoring of biodiversity in combination with satellite observations and other statistical data. Together, these approaches would provide better knowledge for the management of ecosystems in Europe.

The need to conserve and enhance natural capital is an explicit policy target in the EU's Biodiversity Strategy to 2020 and the 7th Environment Action Programme.