

Science for Environment Policy

What does 'wilderness' mean? The challenge of defining an emerging concept in Europe

How do we define 'wilderness'? This is an eagerly debated question emerging from wilderness protection in European biodiversity policy. Conservation researchers are discussing the meaning of wilderness in reality and as a concept, to support the management of protected areas in Europe.

Few truly untouched areas of nature remain in Europe. The European Parliament Resolution on Wilderness in Europe¹ of 2009 emphasised wilderness's significance to our heritage and highlighted its economic, cultural and environmental benefits for society. It called for the Natura 2000 network to offer greater protection of Europe's remaining wild areas and asked the European Commission to provide a definition of 'wilderness' that encompasses its ecosystem services and conservation value. A clear, policy-relevant definition of what 'wilderness' entails can help ensure that protection objectives are met.

Defining 'wilderness' is not as simple as may first appear. A recent analysis explains that the difficulty arises because it is a 'relative' concept, which can vary from person to person and is hard to define precisely and scientifically. As habitats cross national and continental boundaries, there is also a need to coordinate policy beyond Europe itself.

Various policy definitions have been proposed around the world, which can act as a starting point for a European definition. For example, the US's Wilderness Act stipulates a minimum size for wild areas, without human habitation or noticeable human influence, but such areas would be hard to find in Europe. One of the IUCN's two definitions of a wild area, 'Category 1b', allows some slight modification, with 'little' human habitation and suggests it should be managed to preserve natural conditions.

A separate study² contributes to the development of a 'wilderness' definition. Researchers conducted a wilderness opinion poll among visitors to a national park in Germany. For the visitors, 'wilderness' was considered a good label for places with natural features, few human traces, little infrastructure and few people, and which provide a sense of 'solitude'. The results also confirmed that perceptions vary, with younger and more educated respondents placing more emphasis on the absence of human intervention.

In response to Parliament's request for increased wilderness protection, the Commission has contracted Eurosite, Pan Parks and Alterra to help develop guidelines for wilderness management in [Natura 2000](#), and the EU's recently announced [2020 strategy](#) to reverse biodiversity loss calls for more protection of wilderness in forested areas.

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1. See: www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+TA+P6-TA-2009-0034+0+DOC+XML+V0//EN

2. Lupp, G., Höchtl, F., Wende, W. (2011) "Wilderness" – A designation for Central European landscapes? *Land Use Policy*. 28(3): 594-603. DOI: 10.1016/j.landusepol.2010.11.008.