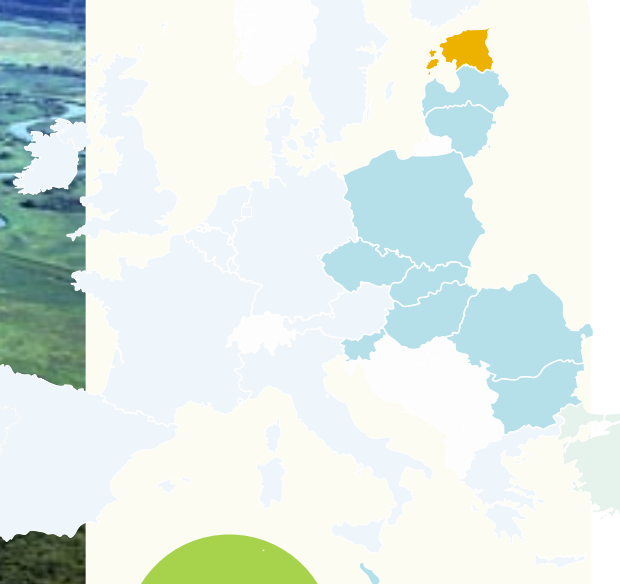




photo 1: © Henrik Lukk courtesy of Estonian Fund for Nature



# Estonia **Baltic archipelago**

Bordering the shores of the **Baltic Sea** and the **Gulf of Finland**, and sharing borders with Russia to the east and Latvia to the southwest, landscapes in Estonia range from a plethora of Baltic Sea islands and endless coastal areas to continental landscapes traced by rivers, streams and other inland waterways.

## Baltic archipelago

For such a small country, measuring scarcely 240 km from tip to toe, Estonia has a remarkably long coastline stretching a total of 3,794 km. The exceptional length is mostly due to the more than 1,500 islands that belong to the country. The largest of the islands, **Saaremaa** (2,900 km<sup>2</sup>) and **Hiiumaa**, separate the **Gulf of Riga** from the Baltic Sea. New islets and coastal wetlands are created by a constant land rise of up to 3 mm per year.

Estonia's archipelago, together with the coastal areas of the mainland, serve as major stop-over sites for migrating birds. An estimated 50 million water and coastal birds use these attractive coastal wetlands on their way to and from the arctic each spring and fall. Almost the whole population of 10-20,000 **Berwick's Swans** pass through Estonia. Other bird species include huge flocks of **Common Cranes**.



photo 2: © WWF/Mauri Rautkari

The area covered by forests and woodlands has almost doubled in size during the past half-century as a result of land abandonment and disruption of traditional agricultural practices, both under Soviet rule and since the fall of the Iron Curtain. Forests now cover nearly half of Estonia's surface area – one of the highest densities of forest cover in Europe.

The forests, mostly dry pine and temperate spruce, provide havens for an abundance of wildlife, including relatively large numbers of **bears, lynx** and **wolves**. Though rare and strictly protected in other parts of Europe, these carnivores are still relatively plentiful in Estonia (100-250 wolves; 400-600 brown bears; and as many as 1,000 lynx). Beavers and otter are also relatively common. Large, uninterrupted tracts of old forests are also home to **flying squirrels** and **black storks**, which unlike their white cousins shun contact with humans, preferring the seclusion of deep forests. Unfortunately, intensifying economic

pressure and intensive forestry practices are causing Estonia's old growth forests to rapidly diminish.

## Bog land

Because much of the land in Estonia is flat and wet, large land areas are unsuitable for agriculture. Particularly under the Soviet system of collective agriculture, many of the most productive agricultural areas were intensively

**Area:** 45,226 km<sup>2</sup> (approximately the size of The Netherlands or Denmark).

**Terrain:** marshy, lowlands; flat in the north, hilly in the south. Baltic Coast with archipelago of islands.

**Elevation extremes:** lowest point: Baltic Sea 0 m, highest point: Suur Munamagi 318 m.

**Land use:** arable land: 25%, permanent crops: 0%, permanent pastures: 11%, forests and woodland: 44%, other: 20%, especially bogs and wetlands (1996 est.).

**Protected areas:** 4 National Parks and 10 Nature Reserves (217 protected areas). 1 internationally recognised biosphere (West Estonian Islands Biosphere Reserve).

**Population:** 1,423,316 (July 2001 est.) – approximately one tenth of that in The Netherlands. Population density ca. 33 km<sup>2</sup>.

**Capital:** Tallinn – population 365,305.

farmed using heavy chemical inputs. But many other areas remained relatively untouched. As a result, bogs, wooded meadows, wetland forests and several other landscape types that for the most part have been destroyed in the rest of Europe, have survived in Estonia relatively unscathed.

### Cold War dividend

Soviet rule of Estonia left a mixed environmental legacy. About a tenth of the country's territory, particularly sensitive coastal areas, was classified as a restricted military zone. The Soviet military indiscriminately dumped toxic and hazardous waste



photo 3: © WWF-Canon/Mauri Rautkari

Wooded meadows with poor soils on limestone bedrock contain some of the greatest diversity of plant communities in Europe. The main threat to many of the semi-natural meadows, which are valuable habitats for a wide variety of flora as well as for migrating birds, is undermanagement and abandonment, rather than overexploitation.

Wetlands cover about a fifth of the country. Many of the rivers remain in a relatively natural state and serve as excellent feeding and breeding grounds for waterfowl and fish alike. Estonia is probably the principal breeding ground for the **Corncrake** (*Crex crex*), a bird that is threatened elsewhere in Europe.

Marshes and bogs, concentrated in the central and eastern parts of the country, presently take up 6% of the country's territory. **Soomaa National Park**, known as the "bog land", is home to impressive bogs with peat layers as much as seven metres thick. Many valuable wetland areas were damaged by drainage for agriculture in the early Soviet period. No major drainage projects have been carried out for more than a decade, but pressure from the peat extraction industry remains a threat to many areas.

in some areas, leaving behind a series of environmental "hotspots" with contaminated soil and groundwater. At the same time, though, restricted access to large areas of the country had the beneficial effect of preserving many natural features. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, many of these areas, including much of the coastline, were transformed into protected areas. As a result, large stretches of the Estonian coastline have been relatively untouched, though development pressure is now growing.

As in a number of other Central and Eastern European countries, the beginning of the environmental movement in Estonia is closely connected with the country's movement for independence from the Soviet Union in the 1980s. Protests directed against the planned opening of phosphorite mines in the late 1980s led to the "Singing Revolution" that eventually ended in Estonian independence.

Today, one of the chief environmental concerns facing Estonia is connected with the country's continuing heavy dependence on oil-shale, found in the north-east of the country, for its energy needs. Reliance on oil-shale, which is a major source of pollution to the air, water and soils, is planned to be steadily reduced as part of the country's accession to the European Union.

### For further information contact:

#### Estonian Fund for Nature

P.O. Box 245  
Tartu 50002  
Estonia

Tel.: +372 7 428 443

[elf@elfond.ee](mailto:elf@elfond.ee)  
[www.elfond.ee](http://www.elfond.ee)

#### Useful links:

Estonian Ministry of the Environment  
[www.envir.ee](http://www.envir.ee)

Estonian Environment Information Center  
[www.envir.ee/itk](http://www.envir.ee/itk)

Estonian Fund for Nature  
[www.elfond.ee](http://www.elfond.ee)

Regional Environmental Center Estonia  
[www.recestonia.ee](http://www.recestonia.ee)

Estonian State of the Environment  
[nfp-ee.eionet.eu.int/SoE/index\\_en.htm](http://nfp-ee.eionet.eu.int/SoE/index_en.htm)

Soomaa National Park  
[www.soomaa.ee/?setlang=eng](http://www.soomaa.ee/?setlang=eng)

Estonia - Wide Web portal  
[www.ee/www/Regions/welcome.html](http://www.ee/www/Regions/welcome.html)

Estonian Ecotourism Association  
[www.ecotourism.ee](http://www.ecotourism.ee)

Estonia - Nature and sights  
[www.vm.ee/estonia/kat\\_207/1169.html](http://www.vm.ee/estonia/kat_207/1169.html)

Photo 1: Alam-Pedja River.

Photo 2: Northern Estonia.

Photo 3: Baltic seashore in northern Estonia.

