

World Environment Day 2024: Land and nature restoration in Europe

Key messages

- Europe's economy, unique landscapes, and traditional food are threatened by accelerating climate change and nature loss, with over 80% of Europe's nature being in poor condition
- Land and nature restoration is a solution to mitigate and adapt to the challenges that our continent is already facing.
- Heat, water shortages, wildfires and floods put at risk Europe's food staples, such as Italian pasta and rice, French baguette, Spanish olive oil. The future of dishes such as famous Italian risottos or the Spanish tortilla de patatas is endangered.
- Extreme climate-related disasters are already causing economic losses of over EUR 12 billion annually in the EU. In 2021, such economic losses were estimated at EUR 59.4 billion and in 2022 at EUR 52.3 billion.
- Every EUR 1 invested in nature restoration adds between EUR 8 to EUR 38 in economic value. In the areas where nature was restored, local communities benefit from flourishing tourism, improved ecosystem services such as water purification or flood protection, and immense health benefits.
- Opponents of measures to restore nature are at odds with public opinion after a recent poll revealed that the EU Nature Restoration Law is supported by 75% of citizens in countries currently not backing the law.

This year's World Environment Day, an annual event bringing together millions of people on the 5th of June, celebrates land restoration as its leading theme. We are almost halfway through the UN Decade of Restoration. Still, so far we have mainly had the chance to witness the consequences of our lack of action on land restoration which overshadow the positive and hopeful examples from around Europe. World Environment Day is a key moment to reflect on our relationship with nature and how investing in its restoration could preserve Europe's heritage while boosting our economy and security.

The [top four](#) global long-term risks are all related to advancing climate change and biodiversity loss. The world as we know it today, including our unique natural landscapes and traditional food rooted in our culture, is fighting to survive in front of our eyes. The interlinked climate and biodiversity crises threaten Europe's heritage, from the way we eat to the way we live in the era

of 'global boiling'. Scientists warn us of cascading [tipping points](#) but also point at a solution. It lies in our land and nature.

Europe's most loved places and food are at risk

Europe is the [fastest-warming continent](#) in the world, with temperatures increasing twice the global rate. In recent years, our continent has witnessed multiple climate records being broken on a yearly basis. This has far-reaching implications for Europe's ecosystems, economy and financial stability, people's livelihoods and health, and food security, to name just a few. Restoring our land and nature is a solution to mitigate such increasing risks.

Every place in Europe is in some way affected by accelerating climate change. However, some places face increased risks and have been called '[hotspots for multiple climate risks](#)' by the European Environment Agency. One such place, the Mediterranean part of Europe, is primarily threatened by heat, water shortages and wildfires. When these climate risks are combined with unsustainable farming practices, it is a recipe for disaster that jeopardises Europe's most traditional [food staples](#), including Italian pasta and rice, French baguette, Spanish olive oil or potatoes. This in turn could put at risk Europe's most popular dishes such as famous Italian risottos, the Spanish tortilla de patatas, or the Polish pierogi - the dishes deeply rooted in the heritage of European countries.

The Institute for European Environmental Policy's [report](#) highlights that increasing temperatures together with alternating droughts and downpours are already impacting key crops around Europe cultivated in conventional agricultural practices. The production of Europe's staples such as wheat, potatoes, and olives, fell sharply in recent years due to droughts and heat. Only in 2022, the production of olives for oil in the EU fell by 38% due to extensive droughts, while for crops such as grain maize, sunflower and soybean the production declined by 5-10% on average.

While southern Europe is primarily threatened by droughts and heatwaves, Europe's low-lying coastal regions are the second hotspot for climate risks. These areas, often densely populated, are at risk due to floods, erosion and saltwater intrusion. In 2021, heavy rainfall and subsequent flooding in Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany [resulted](#) in EUR 44 billion in damages and over 200 deaths.

Adapt, mitigate and keep the economy going with large-scale restoration

The EU, with its long-term climate and biodiversity goals, have been pushing for policies to address the issues that the continent is facing due to increasing climate risks. In 2022, it published a long-awaited proposal for the Nature Restoration Law. It is the first European-wide law setting legally binding targets to restore degraded ecosystems and attempt to protect



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Europe's precious landscapes and biodiversity from further deterioration or even disappearance.

While this law might not be perfect, especially after gruelling negotiations and far-reaching [compromises](#) to bring everyone on board, it is a positive initiative showing how important coordinated action at the EU level is to tackle climate change-related challenges. If at last adopted, the law will oblige all Member States to contribute to the restoration of at least 20% of the EU's land and sea areas by 2030 and repair all ecosystems in need of restoration by 2050. It will be a game-changer for our nature, people and economy as the impact assessment from the European Commission [highlights](#) that every EUR 1 invested in nature restoration adds between EUR 8 to EUR 38 in economic value. In the EU, the benefits of restoring nature outweigh the cost by almost 10 times.

In focus: savings and benefits of nature restoration

In **Poland**, nature restoration can bring annual benefits valued at EUR 5981 million a year with estimated costs valued at EUR 545 million a year. The impact assessment estimates the average cost per Polish citizen at EUR 14, with benefits per citizen at EUR 158.

In **Italy**, nature restoration can bring annual benefits valued at EUR 2424 million a year with estimated costs valued at EUR 261 million a year. The impact assessment estimates the average cost per Italian citizen at EUR 4, with benefits per citizen at EUR 41.

In **France**, nature restoration can bring annual benefits valued at EUR 14 618 million a year with estimated costs valued at EUR 2060 million a year. The impact assessment estimates the average cost per French citizen at EUR 31, with benefits per citizen at EUR 217.

In **Spain**, nature restoration can bring annual benefits valued at EUR 7939 million a year with estimated costs valued at EUR 1451 million a year. The impact assessment estimates the average cost per Spanish citizen at EUR 31, with benefits per citizen at EUR 168.

In **Germany**, nature restoration can bring annual benefits valued at EUR 2595 million a year with estimated costs valued at EUR 190 million a year. The impact assessment estimates the average cost per German citizen at EUR 2, with benefits per citizen at EUR 31.

In **Sweden**, nature restoration can bring annual benefits valued at EUR 5881 million a year with estimated costs valued at EUR 638 million a year. The impact assessment estimates the average cost per Swedish citizen at EUR 61, with benefits per citizen at EUR 567.



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Investing in restoration also leads to job creation and economic growth in regions where the environment has been degraded or even completely destroyed. In post-industrial regions and landscapes, nature restoration can help boost the local economy through employment and tourism opportunities, restoring the social fabric of the region and providing locals with a healthier environment to live in. Take the example of [RivierPark Maasvallei](#) on the border of Belgium and the Netherlands where EUR 1 invested in nature restoration brings EUR 10 in benefits to the local community. Thanks to the investment in restoring the Maas river and surrounding landscapes, the local communities reap the benefits of flourishing tourism, improved flood protection, and increased biodiversity in the area.

In Romania, the formerly degraded wetlands at Mahmudia, in the Danube Delta, were restored to benefit biodiversity as well as the local community (as they became a tourist attraction). Before the restoration of the wetlands, there were almost no tourists remaining in the area, as they were heading towards other popular spots in the Delta. However, since the project was concluded, many guest houses have appeared, especially catering to demand from ecotourists who marvel at the extraordinary diversity especially when it comes to bird species. Despite these positive developments, the area now risks being converted back to agricultural land, highlighting the urgent need for government intervention and especially EU-wide legislation on nature restoration.

Back in Belgium, a recent study [showed](#) that every euro invested in nature restoration in the Belgian Demerbroeken reserve yields 8 euros in benefits. Restoration efforts play a particularly crucial role in protecting nearby residential areas with EUR 1.19 million in flood damage avoided annually. The study also calculated that EUR 12.8 million is saved annually in healthcare costs thanks to the presence of nature areas, proving immense health benefits of restoration.

As numbers show, ignoring the benefits of restoration can be costly for European society. Not only can we miss out on the economic benefits of restoration but we will also pay a high price for our inaction. Economic losses from weather- and climate-related extremes in the EU were estimated at EUR 59.4 billion in 2021 and EUR 52.3 billion in 2022. From 1980 to 2022, Member States [lost EUR 650 billion](#) and it is unlikely that by 2030 economic losses will scale down. It is up to our elected representatives, including in the European Parliament, to choose if Europe will invest in nature or will pay the price of continued inaction.

Opponents of restoration are loud but at odds with public opinion

Despite countless evidence of the [climate](#), [health](#), and [economic](#) benefits of nature restoration, the proposed law to restore nature in the EU met unprecedented opposition from conservative policymakers. Last year, the European People's Party (EPP) group, under the leadership of Manfred Weber, launched a full-scale, months-long campaign to reject the law in the European Parliament. To justify their opposition, they used false arguments about the impact of the legislation, most notably on the agricultural sector, which were [debunked](#) by over 6000



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scientists. Multiple stakeholders defended the law, either by [exposing](#) questionable statements from the EPP group or by [calling](#) on EU decision-makers to adopt the law. Despite several attempts by the EPP group to reject the law in the European Parliament, in the end the majority of Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) voted in favour of it. The high-profile campaign to scrap the law [failed](#).

The outspoken opposition to legislation such as the Nature Restoration Law is even more surprising in light of the public support for tackling widespread nature loss across Europe. A [recent poll](#) conducted in May this year showed that the Nature Restoration Law is supported by 75% of citizens in six countries still blocking the law's adoption (The Netherlands, Finland, Hungary, Italy, Poland, and Sweden). Only 6% of those surveyed disagreed that the law should be adopted. Similar surveys in two countries abstaining from the vote, Austria and Belgium, show that 77% of the Austrian population wants nature to be consistently protected and restored, and 82% of Belgians are strongly in favour of more nature restoration.

The poll's results reveal a stark contrast between what citizens want for nature and what their elected representatives stand for, both in national and EU politics.

Nature can't vote but people can

Over [80% of Europe's nature is in poor condition](#), putting our continent and its unique heritage at massive risk. One of the simplest things EU citizens can do to help nature's recovery is to vote in the upcoming European elections. The European Parliament, made up of over 700 elected representatives from 27 EU Member States, is one of the key places where the fate of Europe's nature is decided. This is the best moment to remind European decision-makers that protecting our lands, forests, and water means protecting our territory, our culture, and our traditional food as part of it.

The anti-Nature Restoration Law campaign by conservative decision-makers is a good reminder that actions speak louder than words. Ahead of the European elections, five leading environmental NGOs analysed voting records of MEPs over the last five years. With their [interactive tool](#), citizens can get an overview of the voting performance of their national political parties and European Parliamentary Groups on key climate and nature law.

For more information

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