“I URGE PEOPLE EVERYWHERE TO RAISE YOUR VOICES AND DEMAND LEADERS MAKE PEACE WITH NATURE.”

ANTÓNIO GUTERRES, UN SECRETARY-GENERAL
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nce again, our annual report must start with the sad reminder that the previous year broke ever more dangerous records, with 2023 now confirmed as the hottest year on record. European cities baked under fierce heat waves, our rivers ran dry, and our forests burned in unprecedented wildfires. To compound matters, we are still grappling with war on our borders and in the Middle East, and a cost of living crisis driven by our fossil fuel dependency.

As the political cycle in the EU draws to a close, we’re getting first glimpses of what the next one could have in store for environment and climate policies. Populism and extremism are on the rise. We are seeing narratives based on fear: of wolves, of reducing consumption, of NGOs, of any form of change - giving the illusion that we can find simple answers to the complex multi crises we’re living in.

Climate and environment have been used as tools to polarise and to fuel cultural wars. The epic fight on the EU Nature Law was “spiced up” by disinformation campaigns, fake news about driving food insecurity in Europe, or tearing down villages and making Santa Claus homeless. While the law survived, other initiatives, such as the promised EU Food Systems Law, did not. Such populist and misleading tactics have hardly ever been seen before in the EU bubble, and they gave us a first taste of what we may have to expect as parties are moving into full-blown elections campaign mode in 2024.

Despite all of this, at WWF EU we remain hopeful that change can and must continue. On the policy side, we kept the needle moving in 2023. Some would argue that progress is too slow, that efforts are not ambitious enough. Yet, the opposition we encountered only strengthened our determination to push EU decision makers to accelerate the green transition, to fill implementation and funding gaps and to keep delivering on the European Green Deal commitments.

Our annual report reminds us of some key successes in 2023. WWF and its NGO partners played a key role in keeping alive the vision of a first EU Nature Restoration Law despite desperate attempts of the political right to kill the initiative, and a deal was finally struck at the end of the year. The new Renewable Energy Directive was adopted, increasing the EU’s 2030 target for renewables in our energy mix. Attempts to legalise destruction of Spain’s Doñana national park were abandoned after years of campaigning by NGOs. Five years after the first proposal, a revised EU regulation to monitor fishing activities was finally agreed, positively reflecting WWF’s priorities. The EU’s first ever deforestation law - a key success of our 2022 campaign - entered into force.

In this more volatile and unpredictable context, we have had to adapt our advocacy, communications and campaigning strategies, using innovative tactics to create media attention, debunk disinformation, and reach our objectives. One of these included the unprecedented move of taking the European Commission to court over labeling nuclear and gas as ‘green’ under the EU taxonomy.

Partnerships have been key especially when the going got tougher. Thank you to all colleagues in civil society, in our sister green NGOs, especially to the Green 10, which I chaired for the second time in 2023. Thank you to all WWF colleagues across Europe and our global network who work tirelessly with us to keep pushing for ambitious EU policies. To our donors who continue trusting the value added and quality of our European work. To the progressive corporates who supported our calls for the speedy sustainable transition of our economy.

2023 marked my 5th anniversary as WWF EU Director. I am proud that we have developed a stronger focus on collaboration, on learning, and on innovative ways of creating impact. Thank you to my team at WWF EU for your determination, creativity and your capacity to adapt. It is a privilege to be able to work with you every day.

We are ready for 2024. The year will see the European Parliament elections (and the 6th elections campaign for me), and the stakes for our planet, EU citizens and democracy have never been higher. As WWF, we set ten key political demands ahead of the elections, calling to put people and nature at the heart of EU politics.

Together with our partners and supporters, we will continue pushing EU and national decision makers, media, and businesses to craft compelling and hopeful narratives advocating for the necessary and fair changes in our societies, to counteract disinformation and denialism, and to dismantle fears. Onwards.
There is no hiding the fact that 2023 was a tough year in the fight for the climate and nature. Cracks appeared in the consensus underpinning the historic EU Green Deal, with some political figures cynically stoking fears that ambitious climate and environmental action poses a threat to jobs and prosperity.

The international context was marked by geopolitical volatility and fragmentation. Brutal conflicts, including Russia’s ongoing invasion of Ukraine and the crisis in the Middle East, inflicted a terrible human and environmental toll.

Powerful vested interests that benefit from the status quo have been emboldened in their efforts to frustrate positive change. In many countries, democratic institutions are being undermined and space for civil society is being squeezed.

That may paint a bleak picture, but it is precisely when the going gets tough that the work of NGOs like WWF is most essential. Now more than ever, the world needs strong voices to stand up for civil society and keep the pressure on policy makers to deliver on the clear desire of the vast majority of Europeans: a greener, more sustainable future.

We are at our best when we work together, combining the diverse strengths of NGOs, civil society groups and philanthropies to create a cohesive front for positive change, grounded in a vision for a fairer and more democratic society.

Through this collaborative approach, we secured some important victories last year. WWF’s smart and tireless campaigning was vital in navigating the landmark EU Restoration Law through strong political headwinds. Protecting nature is essential to combatting climate change.

By prioritising the health of ecosystems for carbon sequestration and climate resilience, the EU can demonstrate to the world just how intertwined environmental stability and climate mitigation truly are, setting a precedent for others to follow.

I am proud of the ECF’s partnership with WWF across a range of other important EU policy issues, including accelerating the transition to renewable energy, decarbonising our industries in a just manner, and ensuring large corporations take responsibility for the human and environmental impact of their value chains.

WWF has been integral to the important work – which we must continue in 2024 – to take forward the EU Green Deal through the next political cycle, ensuring policy makers across the political spectrum appreciate its central importance to Europe’s security, competitiveness and improving everyday life for EU citizens.

2024 will be another challenging year and a major test for European democracy itself. But I firmly believe that, working together, we can continue to move the needle in the right direction and build a greener, more democratic Europe.

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LAURENCE TUBIANA
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER
EUROPEAN CLIMATE FOUNDATION

WE ARE AT OUR BEST WHEN WE WORK TOGETHER, COMBINING THE DIVERSE STRENGTHS TO CREATE A COHESIVE FRONT FOR POSITIVE CHANGE TO A FAIRER AND MORE DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY.
A coalition of NGOs and experts, including WWF, launched an “Independent Science-Based Taxonomy”, assessing and adjusting criteria included in the EU Taxonomy that were deemed unscientific. WWF and Belgian chef Elliot Van de Velde take decision makers on a journey to explore the EU’s food system with all their senses at the event “Get a flavour for sustainable food policies”.

Led by WWF, almost 300 trade and civil society organisations sign a public letter calling on President Ursula von der Leyen to present a strong proposal for an EU Food Systems Law.

To celebrate Earth Hour, 35 MEPs from across political groups and Frans Timmermans joined our photo action to express their support for a strong Nature Restoration Law.


In a new public engagement action, citizens send personalised messages and photos to national ministers and MEPs, urging them to support a robust EU Nature Restoration Law.

WWF criticises the outcome of the revision of the Renewable Energy Directive as EU institutions fail to close the loopholes on biomass energy.

WWF’s online tool ”Food Choices Exposed” shows that many factors influence our food choices, often leading young people to consume unsustainable and unhealthy food.

To fight the increasingly aggressive disinformation campaign targeting the Nature Restoration Law, WWF publishes a comprehensive FAQ debunking the false claims spread by the opponents of the law.

European businesses release a statement in support of a strong EU Nature Restoration Law. By the end of 2023, over 100 companies add their voice.

WWF criticises the weak public participation in National Energy and Climate Plans.

WWF and other NGOs take the European Commission to court over labelling fossil gas-fired power as ‘sustainable’ in the EU Taxonomy.

WWF provides recommendations for a new EU programme to combat wildlife trafficking, emphasising the need to integrate anti-corruption, financial crime, and the work of rangers within the scope.

A WWF briefing provides scientific evidence that shifting to sustainable production is the best chance to ensure European food security.

A WWF report uncovers that nearly US$143 million of potential income was lost in the South West Indian Ocean annually between 2015 and 2021 as a result of illicit shrimp and tuna fishing.

On three international press trips to Belgium, Sweden, and Austria, journalists get to experience first hand the benefits of large-scale nature restoration to local communities.

The European Commission’s Retail Investment Strategy aims to help retail investors to understand the impact of investments, but fails to put forward more ambitious measures.

More than 55 companies, including Danone and Euro Coop, call on the European Commission to propose a strong EU Food Systems Law.

A WWF assessment reveals that Mediterranean Member States are significantly lagging behind in applying an ecosystem-based approach to the long-term management of the sea basin.

The #RestoreNature coalition galvanises support by businesses, 6000+ scientists, progressive farmers, hunters, financial institutions, mayors, faith leaders, climate activists, and more.

WWF presents its checklist on how to make the National Climate and Energy Plans (NECPs) fit for the climate emergency.

After our years-long #Together4Forests campaign, the EU Deforestation Law officially enters into force.

WWF calls on Member States to use this powerful tool to stop EU-driven deforestation.

WWF and four NGOs call on the EU to help save the Doñana nature reserve. A petition signed by 260,000+ people was handed over to European Commissioner Sinkevičius in person.

WWF and other NGOs call for more EU funds for external action to tackle escalating the climate and food crises, and to honour international climate and biodiversity commitments.

Almost 1.2 million signatures and messages for a strong Nature Restoration Law are collected through various campaigns supporting the #RestoreNature coalition.

A tight majority of MEPs vote in favour of the Nature Restoration Law, standing strong against the unprecedented disinformation campaigning by conservative politicians and anti-nature lobbies.

WWF publishes its priorities for the EU Carbon Removal Certification Framework.
SEPTEMBER

In an open letter to President von der Leyen, WWF criticises the spread of misleading information regarding wolves in Europe and launch of a non-transparent consultation process.

A new WWF report shows that EU policies are driving meat over-consumption and neglecting sustainable and healthy food production.

More than 20 youth organisations from across Europe publish a manifesto on sustainable food systems, calling for strong EU legislation to make sustainable food more accessible.

WWF publishes a policy brief highlighting alarming levels of gender disparity in the EU offshore wind energy sector and in EU policy making.

WWF’s report on “Water for nature, water for life” finds that people and nature are increasingly suffering from water scarcity due to mismanagement and climate change.

During the mid-term review of Global Europe, WWF calls for comprehensive EU finance for biodiversity protection, and at least €1.5 billion per year for the Global Biodiversity Framework.

WWF hosts a meeting of the Universal Ranger Support Alliance in Brussels to strengthen the professional, accountable, and equitable ranger workforce.

The EU high-level expert group on sustainable finance in low and middle-income countries, including WWF, emphasises the need for a new model of strategic engagement between the EU and partner countries.

OCTOBER

The EU adopts its new Fisheries Control Regulation after over five years of revisions and negotiations, during which WWF had advocated for better fisheries transparency and seafood traceability.


A new WWF report highlights the lack of consistency of EU policies with the EU’s climate goals.

A coalition of six NGOs including WWF calls for a new EU Water and Climate Resilience Law which prioritises nature-based solutions instead of more heavy infrastructure.

WWF, together with more than 100 other organisations, sends an open letter to the European Commission urging an end to EU financing for new hydropower projects.

WWF provides recommendations for the establishment of an adequate framework to monitor and evaluate the execution of the EU Action Plan against Wildlife Trafficking.

NOVEMBER

A trilogue deal is struck on the historic Nature Restoration Law following relentless campaigning of the #RestoreNature coalition.

Following public and EU-level pressure, the Andalucian authorities in Spain drop a law that would have severely threatened the future of the Doñana nature reserve.

The new EU Environmental Crime Directive strengthens and harmonises the criminal law response across the EU, marking a significant stride toward better protecting our environment and society.

DECEMBER

WWF’s new Low-impact Fisheries Assessment Tool offers a pioneering methodology to assess current impacts of an EU fishery, identify and address shortcomings, and evaluate progress towards more sustainable practices.

At a hearing in the European Parliament’s Committee on Women’s Rights and Gender Equality, WWF calls for an equal place for women in the offshore wind energy transition.

WWF strongly criticises the proposal of President von der Leyen to downgrade the protection status of wolves under the Bern Convention and calls for EU countries to reject it.

The outcome of COP28 marks a step forward with a transition away from fossil fuels, but it failed to commit to a full phase out.

The Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive deal allows financiers to continue neglecting the environmental and human rights harms their activities contribute to.

The new EU Energy Performance for Buildings Directive will encourage banks to better finance energy renovations, but Mortgage Portfolio Standards that WWF had advocated for remain voluntary.

Ahead of the 2024 European elections, WWF publishes recommendations for EU policy makers, which serve as a roadmap for addressing the challenges posed by climate change and biodiversity loss.
IT WAS DRAMATIC AND SEEMED NEARLY IMPOSSIBLE, BUT THANKS TO MASSIVE MOBILISATION WE SAVED THE FIRST-EVER EU NATURE RESTORATION LAW!

#RESTORENATURE

The #RestoreNature campaign is still running but it’s already one for the books. Together with citizens, businesses, scientists, activists, and civil society, we saved the Nature Restoration Law from conservatives’ attempts to kill it.

- Almost 1.2 million signatures and messages for a strong Nature Restoration Law were collected through public engagement actions launched by the #RestoreNature coalition of NGOs and campaigning organisations.

- WWF, together with BirdLife, the European Environmental Bureau (EEB) and ClientEarth, built a powerful NGO movement with over 200 organisations supporting the #RestoreNature campaign.

- Over 100 businesses supported the call for a robust and ambitious law and actively defended it from an unprecedented disinformation campaign.

- WWF organised three international press trips to show journalists the benefits of large-scale nature restoration for the local communities around Europe.
“Despite enormous setbacks, the EU is close to adopting its first-ever law to restore degraded ecosystems and it couldn’t be more timely. Nature is our best ally in the era of global boiling, and large-scale nature restoration will protect us all from the worst consequences of floods, droughts, wildfires and record-breaking temperatures. By bringing nature back, we are literally saving ourselves.”

SABIEN LEEMANS, SENIOR BIODIVERSITY POLICY OFFICER
It is no news that we are losing nature at an unprecedented rate, both globally and in Europe. Numbers showcasing frightening biodiversity loss have been making headlines, yet meaningful action is lagging. We face the reality of the continued degradation of vital ecosystems and emblematic species threatened with extinction. We risk cutting off the lifeline that provides for our own existence.

Against this backdrop, in June 2022, the Commission published its long-awaited proposal for a Nature Restoration Law - the first EU-wide law setting legally binding targets to restore degraded ecosystems, in particular those with the most potential to capture and store carbon and prevent and reduce the impact of natural disasters.

We entered 2023 knowing this law is our once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to bring nature back to Europe. After tragic floods in Western Europe in 2021 and dramatic droughts and wildfires happening across Europe a year later, we believed everyone understood that our living environment was crying for help. What we didn’t expect is that 2023 would see the Nature Restoration Law become a victim of political power play ahead of the EU elections that would trigger massive support coming from different corners of our society to defend the law.

NEW YEAR, NEW AMBITIONS

Thanks to the ambitious draft report prepared by MEP César Luena, lead rapporteur in the European Parliament, we entered 2023 on a high note. This report strengthened the Nature Restoration Law proposal where needed to ensure that it can fulfill its potential, and WWF called on all MEPs to support it.

The new year also brought a fresh angle to Earth Hour, the world’s largest grassroots movement for the environment initiated by WWF. With the call “Switch off. Give an hour for Earth”, we used the event to shine a spotlight on nature restoration in Europe. Besides numerous activities on the topic organised by WWF offices across the continent, we invited MEPs to join our photo action and express their support for the EU Nature Restoration Law and a total of 35 MEPs from across political groups and Frans Timmermans, European Commission Executive Vice-President for the European Green Deal at the time, followed our invitation.

Earth Hour also marked the launch of our public engagement action in which citizens could send personalised messages and photos to their national environment ministers and MEPs, urging them to support a strong EU Nature Restoration Law and to adopt it by the end of 2023.

For over four years, WWF has been advocating for legally binding targets to restore Europe’s degraded nature. After a fierce battle to make this vision reality, we are now within touching distance of the first-ever Nature Restoration Law!
MASSIVE MOVEMENT FIGHTING DISINFORMATION

But all good things come to an end. While preparations for Earth Hour were ongoing and our #RestoreNature movement grew with ever more organisations, the opponents of the law - spearheaded by the leader of the EPP group in the European Parliament Manfred Weber - resorted to using disinformation. A wave of fake news, driven by conservative politicians and anti-nature lobbies, started to increasingly flood social media, threatening the future of the long-awaited Nature Restoration Law.

Luckily, our #RestoreNature movement was ready to fight back and we were joined by numerous stakeholders eager to defend the law. In April, over 35 European businesses published a statement in support of a strong EU Nature Restoration Law. This powerful plea followed a series of growing industry calls to restore natural habitats in the EU. By the end of 2023, over 100 companies voiced their support for the law.

To fight the increasingly aggressive (and often outright absurd) disinformation campaign targeting the law, we published a comprehensive FAQ on nature restoration, debunking the false claims spread by the opponents by providing scientific evidence and case studies.

In May, we hosted an event on ‘Restoring nature as driver for resilient food systems’ which gathered policy makers, business representatives, academics and the NGO community. Only two days later, we condemned the EPP’s official rejection of the Nature Restoration Law, calling it an outrageous move that will have long-term consequences for the future of the EU Green Deal, Europe’s food security and biodiversity.

While it was devastating to see the biggest group in the European Parliament going openly against the much-needed Nature Restoration Law, their shocking move opposing the EU Green Deal sparked truly massive mobilisation to defend it. In the following weeks, the law received support from the wind energy and solar industry, over 6,000 scientists, the progressive farming community, European hunters, financial institutions, European mayors, over 100 companies and business associations, faith leaders, climate activists, European youth, and more. Many of these stakeholders publicly debunked the disinformation spread by the EPP and its allies.
One of the goals of our campaign was to highlight the huge benefits of large-scale restoration across Europe. To make these benefits more tangible and present concrete examples, we invited journalists to three press trips in May and June, each to a unique existing nature restoration site in Belgium, Sweden, and Austria, and hosted by the national WWF offices.

First, journalists explored RivierPark Massvallei in Belgium, where ongoing river restoration projects co-exist with agriculture, gravel extraction and tourism. There, we learned that €1 invested in the restoration project brings €10 in benefits to the local community. A few weeks later another group of journalists headed to Tiveden, Sweden, a region where Closer-to-Nature-Forestry and tourism coexist to the benefit of local inhabitants. Thanks to WWF-Sweden, the group discovered the benefits and challenges of the ongoing forest restoration project.

In June, we headed to Austria where yet another journalist group witnessed how the re-introduction of grazing by a herd of semi-wild horses has helped turn around negative biodiversity trends in ‘Auenreservat Marchegg’, WWF-Austria’s natural reserve. On the same day, journalists toured the newly restored side branches of the Danube in the national park ‘Donauauen’. Each press trip brought a unique insight into restoration efforts across Europe, targeting various vital ecosystems.

Meanwhile, things were truly heating up in Brussels and other capitals, with numerous stunts and protest rallies organised, sometimes quite spontaneously, both in Brussels and in other countries.

While the situation in the European Parliament became more and more challenging, with three Committees voting against the law, we were relieved to see EU Member States coming out in favour of the law during the ENVI Council in June. It became clear that the Nature Restoration Law’s fate will be decided during the Parliament’s plenary vote in July.

July marked the decisive stage of the battle to save the Nature Restoration Law. The #RestoreNature coalition gathered over 1 million messages and signatures through several email actions (including by Avaaz and WeMove), organised a high-level media briefing ahead of the plenary vote, carried out two successful Twitter storms, and, most importantly, was highly visible in the public and online sphere before the plenary vote in Strasbourg. These efforts were supported by climate activists and Greta Thunberg, who travelled to Strasbourg for the vote.

And the tables have finally turned! A tight majority of MEPs voted in favour of the law in the Parliament’s plenary session in July, in a massive victory for Europe’s nature and the EU Green Deal. However, the win came at a very high cost. To reach a compromise, MEPs sacrificed many critical obligations and targets, ending up with a position that is far from what science tells us is necessary to tackle the climate crisis and biodiversity loss.

The Saga Continues

From September to November, we were closely following the final negotiations (so-called ‘trilogues’) on the Nature Restoration Law between the three EU co-legislators. In October, once again we brought together 200 NGOs supporting the #RestoreNature campaign and released an NGO statement, urging decision makers that Europe needs a Nature Restoration Law fit for purpose.

On the run-up to the final trilogue in November, another Twitter storm targeted key decision makers, this time in a cinematic style. The work on the Nature Restoration Law had been so eventful that we treated the law as a saga and the upcoming final trilogue as a blockbuster sequel. Posters with the faces of our actors, meaning key decision makers from three institutions, appeared all around social media.

Finally, in the late evening of 9 November, a deal on the historic law was struck between the three institutions. While we were pleased to see restoration targets for agricultural ecosystems, including peatlands, back in the law, the compromise also included ample flexibility for Member States and far too many exemptions, which will weaken the ability of the law to tackle the climate and biodiversity emergencies. This agreement was subsequently supported by the Parliament’s Environment Committee later in November.

At this moment, we are only two steps away from the Nature Restoration Law becoming a reality: the last plenary vote in the European Parliament, scheduled for late February, and the formal approval by the Council in March. When voted in, it will be the best gift we can imagine for 2024 – a green light for restoring nature all across Europe.
35 MEPs from across political groups participated in our Earth Hour photo action to express support for a strong Nature Restoration Law.

WWF organised three press trips for journalists, each to a unique existing nature restoration site in Belgium, Sweden, and Austria.
In addition to our campaign on nature restoration, WWF fought to face off ferocious attacks of conservative politicians against the European Green Deal. Main events included:

• WWF – supported by youth groups and progressive companies – continued advocating for a strong EU Food Systems Law, and to raise awareness of how ‘food environments’ influence our choices.

• Following relentless campaigning from WWF and other NGOs, the Andalucian government dropped a controversial law to legalise illegal farms in Doñana National Park.

• A new WWF report on water scarcity emphasised the need for an EU Climate and Water Resilience Law to improve our resilience to climate impacts.

• The EU Deforestation Regulation entered into force in June, and WWF is working to ensure its strong implementation.

• A deal on the new EU Environmental Crime Directive will strengthen and harmonise the sanction levels across the EU.

• In a politically motivated U-turn, Commission President von der Leyen started a misguided full-on attack on wolves in Europe.
“The attacks of conservative groups and vested interest to withdraw the idea of a European Green Deal changed the political discourse on files related to conservation and land-use.”

ANDREAS BAUMÜLLER, PROGRAMME DIRECTOR
Over the last year, rising food prices have squeezed the incomes of many families in Europe.

FOOD & AGRICULTURE

Despite strong political resistance, WWF continued to campaign for a strong EU sustainable food systems law - and the fight will continue in 2024.

LEAVING NO STONE UNTURNED

In 2023, the European Commission was set to present its proposal for an EU legislative framework on sustainable food systems - a unique opportunity to integrate sustainability into all food-related policies and help make healthy and sustainable diets more affordable for everyone. However, the publication of the law was delayed following a concerted attack by some stakeholders against sustainable food policies, with false claims that such efforts would put Europe’s food security at risk.

Against this backdrop, WWF published a briefing providing scientific evidence that the opposite is true: shifting to sustainable production is the best chance to ensure European food security. Furthermore, we also commissioned a poll on food consumption which showed that 3 in 4 Europeans believe that sustainable food should cost less or at least not more than food that is not environmentally friendly.

As part of our efforts to advocate for the new law, we coordinated two public letters in February and September urging European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen to stick to the agreed timeline and present the proposal by the end of the year. Almost 300 trade and civil society organisations from across Europe endorsed these letters, making it clear that the transformation of the EU food system is a top priority for Europeans.

In addition, WWF EU joined forces with dozens of organisations under the European Food Policy Coalition and presented a number of policy recommendations to create comprehensive legislation that brings together all food system sectors and actors, from production to consumption.
EXPLORING THE FOOD SYSTEM THROUGH THE SENSES

In January WWF EU organised the immersive event ‘Get a flavour for sustainable food policies’. Hosted by chef Elliot Van de Velde, one of the leading figures on the Belgian culinary scene. This event took 30 decision makers on a journey to explore the EU food system through their senses. Seasonal and plant-based dishes lit up their palate, as a prominent panel of speakers explored the opportunities that sustainable food policies offer. The key takeaway from this immersive experience was clear: making our food system truly sustainable is not only possible, but absolutely necessary.

The ongoing cost-of-living crisis has affected thousands of families, with many households unable to afford even a calorie-sufficient diet. But who determines the cost of food? Is cost pushing us to consume unhealthy and unsustainable food? To find out, WWF commissioned research looking into the impact of government policies on the cost of food. This report showed that EU policies are driving meat overconsumption and neglecting sustainable and healthy food production.

To launch the report, in September 2023, WWF EU organised another innovative event. Entitled “Have your cake and eat it: making sustainable food more accessible”, this event featured wall projections and interactive presentations to reflect on the future of the EU food system.

YOUTH AND PROGRESSIVE COMPANIES, ON BOARD WITH AN EU LAW

Many factors affect our food choices, often leading young people to consume unsustainable and unhealthy food, and WWF’s online tool ‘Food Choices Exposed’ raises awareness of how our ‘food environments’ influence our choices. This was developed as part of the EU funded #Eat4Change project, translated into six languages and widely disseminated in Europe.

In addition, WWF helped coordinate a youth manifesto on sustainable food systems, which underlines the challenges that young people are facing to access sustainable food. This was endorsed by a number of youth organisations, including the European Young Socialists, Generation Earth, and Junges Bioland e.V.

Many progressive companies also support strong EU legislation on food systems, and WWF EU helped make these voices heard. More than 55 companies, including big business players such as Danone and Euro Coop, issued a statement showing that retailers and processors believe that sustainable food production and consumption is as essential to protecting nature as to ensuring a prosperous economic future.

Unfortunately, the Commission failed to present its promised legal proposal in 2023. Instead, Commission President Ursula von der Leyen announced the launch of a “strategic dialogue on the future of agriculture” involving all actors in the food supply chain, in particular farmers. WWF will step up its efforts next year to ensure that the transformation of the EU food system remains a top priority during the next Commission’s mandate.
DOÑANA GETS A REPRIEVE, BUT THE FIGHT FOR ITS PROTECTION WILL CONTINUE

Doñana, a unique and vital wetland nestled in a corner of Southern Spain has long been fighting to continue existing. The World Heritage Site has already lost much of its pond network due to human activity, and many of the ecosystems protected by the EU Habitats Directive are degraded as the aquifer they depend on continues to be pumped dry by strawberry farmers. In fact, in 2021, Spain was condemned by the Court of Justice of the EU for excessive groundwater extraction in Doñana.

In April, Doñana’s fate took a turn for the worse when the regional government of Andalucia voted to apply an “emergency procedure” to legalise farms without legal land or water pumping permits. WWF urged the Andalucian government to drop the law and apply the Court of Justice ruling.

In June, we teamed up with four NGOs and civil society organisations - WeMove Europe, Ecologistas en Acción, Salvemos Doñana and SEO/BirdLife - to launch a petition which gathered 260,000 signatures from concerned citizens in Europe. In July, we delivered the petition to EU Commissioner Sinkevičius, asking for more EU support to prevent the destruction of the nature reserve. Simultaneously, we continued to support WWF-Spain in fighting the Andalucian government’s proposed law.

By November, following public and EU-level pressure, the proposed law was dropped, saving Doñana from being sucked dry. While this immediate threat has been warded off, WWF will continue to push for better protection of one of Europe’s most threatened and vital wetlands.

WATER SCARCITY: BUILDING RESILIENCE

In the context of increasingly devastating floods and droughts across Europe in 2023, WWF EU launched a new report on water scarcity. The report, called “Water for Nature, Water for Life” found that people and nature across Europe were increasingly suffering from a lack of water - a situation caused by decades of water mismanagement and ecosystem degradation. It called on the EU to prioritise nature-based solutions to protect Europeans against climate hazards like drought. It also urged for the swift adoption of the EU Nature Restoration Law to keep water in the landscape through free-flowing rivers and restored wetlands and floodplains.

Shortly after, in September, the European Commission announced that it would present an initiative for water resilience in March 2024, as one of its three priorities for
the year under the European Green Deal. The Initiative will take stock of achievements, flag challenges and propose recommendations to the next European Commission.

CALL FOR A NEW EU CLIMATE AND WATER RESILIENCE LAW

Taking this opportunity, WWF EU, along with the Living Rivers Coalition, published a joint position paper asking for a new EU Climate and Water Resilience Law. This would create a network of natural water reserves to protect water supplies and their catchments in water-stressed areas, provide finance for restoring ecosystems and set water efficiency and abstraction targets.

This also came as a reaction to various calls from stakeholders, MEPs and the European Economic and Social Committee for an EU “Blue Deal” focusing on engineered rather than natural solutions to the water crisis.

HYDROPOWER IS NOT GREEN

WWF EU, together with more than 100 other organisations, also sent an open letter to the European Commission on the role of hydropower in the deployment of renewable energies in the European Union. This was in response to a Commission letter which had contained several inaccuracies and misconceptions.

THE EU MUST PRIORITISE NATURE-BASED SOLUTIONS TO PROTECT EUROPEANS AGAINST CLIMATE HAZARDS LIKE FLOODS AND DROUGHT
In 2023, the EU Deforestation Law finally came into force - a law which WWF and the #Together4Forests campaign had spent years advocating for. Now, we are on a mission to ensure the law works on the ground and truly stops EU-driven deforestation.

EU-DRIVEN DEFORESTATION? NO, THANKS

At the end of 2022, EU decision makers struck a historic political agreement for a world-first law to stop deforestation, and this deal was endorsed by the European Parliament and Member States in 2023.

The EU Deforestation Law presents a unique opportunity to fight climate change, help stop the destruction of the world’s remaining rainforests, and protect indigenous peoples and local communities. However, WWF made clear that the real success of the law will depend on making it work on the ground: Member States need to create the right conditions for rigorous enforcement, including thorough controls paired with strict penalties to make the law effective in tackling deforestation.

2023 was therefore all about getting ready for implementation, application, and transitioning the law from theory to practice while ensuring that ambition and rigour are not lost in the process. In June, on the day that the EU Deforestation Law officially entered into force, we launched another appeal to Member States to treat the implementation of the law seriously. Unlike the promising but poorly implemented EU Timber Regulation, the EU Deforestation Law must live up to its immense potential.

WWF will work to ensure that the European Commission and the EU Member States get ready to make full use of the law, finally tackling the EU’s responsibility for driving deforestation worldwide.

Throughout the year, we also continued to insist on the need to include “other wooded land” (such as savannahs) in the law, the key issue that had been dropped during the trilogue negotiations. Such ecosystems are under immense pressure - mostly from being converted into agricultural land - which puts at risk their ability to act as crucial carbon stores and a refuge for animals, as well as provide livelihoods for indigenous people and local communities.

MONITORING EU FORESTS? YES, PLEASE

Nearly half of the EU is covered in forests or other wooded land, but in addition to deforestation, our forests are massively threatened by the impacts of climate change and biodiversity loss. In November, the European Commission published a proposal for an EU Forest Monitoring Law that aims to collect and analyse information on the status of forests at the EU level. WWF welcomed the proposal as a good basis to assess the situation of some of our most precious ecosystems, which could help ensure Europe’s forests stay healthy and resilient.

As the proposal moves to the co-decision process in the European Parliament and the Council, WWF calls for its further strengthening to successfully tackle the challenges that our pressured forests face across the continent. It should be a priority for the current and next political mandate to adopt a robust EU Forest Monitoring Law.
The EU Environmental Crime Directive revision, which WWF had worked on for two years, was finally completed in November 2023 with a deal reached between the EU institutions. This updates the existing law which dates back to 2008, was very outdated and had very limited effects on the ground.

The final deal strengthens and harmonises the criminal law response across the EU, marking a significant stride toward better protecting our environment and society. The new Directive covers more than twenty offences, including wildlife crime, deforestation, waste trafficking, or water abstraction, among others. We welcomed the high integrity and overall ambition of the final text, especially in light of the significant challenges that the co-legislators faced in finding common ground, navigating through their different perspectives, which ranged from a good Commission proposal, a conservative Council general approach, to an extremely ambitious Parliament report.

A notable aspect of the law is the introduction of common sanction levels for both natural and legal persons, this is key to deter offenders and support cross-border cooperation. However, due to the Council’s resistance, the agreed sanction levels fall short of expectations. In particular, certain offenses are only punishable by a maximum term of imprisonment of at least three years which will limit authorities’ capacity to properly investigate and prosecute these crimes. In addition, the fines for legal persons remain insufficiently dissuasive, with varying calculation methods hindering harmonisation across EU Member States.

WWF had long advocated for the introduction of common sanction levels for both natural and legal persons, which is key to deter offenders and support cross-border cooperation. Having harmonised sanction levels across the entire European Union is a step in the right direction, but the current levels are not reflecting the gravity of environmental crimes. Thanks to the determination of the European Parliament, the inclusion of a qualified offense covering the most severe environmental crimes, punishable by higher sanctions, adds teeth to the law and will provide competent authorities with a new tool in their arsenal.

The revised law will provide a more comprehensive framework to fight against environmental crimes, including provisions on resources, training, data collection, strategy, and even specialisation of competent authorities. The list of offences is also updated, but due to resistance of Member States, Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fishing did not make it into the main text of the law.

The formal adoption of the compromise text is expected in March/April 2024.
COMBATTING WILDLIFE TRAFFICKING

In April 2023, WWF started to engage with the European Commission’s Directorate-General for International Partnerships in the development of a new programme to combat wildlife trafficking. WWF shared recommendations for the programme with the Commission as well as those international organisations that will coordinate the implementation of the new programme. In particular, WWF emphasised the need to integrate anti-corruption, financial crime, and the work of rangers within the scope of the programme, and insisted that all counter-wildlife trafficking actions must consider human rights and gender. WWF’s report on gender and illegal wildlife trade was quoted several times in the multi-annual plan released by the European Commission for the new programme in November 2023.

As a contribution to EU discussions on the keeping of wildlife as pets, WWF published a short briefing paper in April 2023.

Since the adoption of the new EU Action Plan against Wildlife Trafficking in November 2022, WWF has been following up on its implementation, including by developing and sharing with the European Commission recommendations for the establishment of an adequate framework to monitor and evaluate its execution (in October 2023).

WWF continued to engage with the EU and its Member States at CITES. At the Standing Committee meeting in November 2023, for the first time in CITES history, the EU was recognised as non-compliant with CITES rules by the Parties regarding the captive-breeding of Appendix-I species for commercial purposes.
Wolves have been making a remarkable comeback to Europe’s landscapes, largely due to the legal protection they are granted. But in the last days of 2023, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, in an unprecedented and politically motivated U-turn, proposed to downgrade the wolf’s protection status in the Council of Europe’s Bern Convention, despite the lack of scientific evidence to support such a significant move.

BIG BAD WOLF?

The story of human-wolf coexistence in Europe in recent years is not the easiest one, to say the least. After being extirpated from most of Europe, wolves started to recover in the 1970s and are now present in most of the EU Member States, making it one of the major conservation success stories in Europe. However, wolves are still far from having a favourable conservation status across our continent. As the last IUCN assessment shows, six of the nine transboundary wolf populations in the EU have a vulnerable or near-threatened status, proving that the species must continue to be strictly protected.

The return of the wolf comes with coexistence challenges and we also witness how wolves are being used as scapegoats for wider socio-economic problems in an ever more polarised debate. WWF has long been promoting and supporting the use of preventive measures to protect livestock from wolf attacks, such as electric fences or guard dogs, which have been proven effective, in combination with financial support and compensation for damages for farmers. The 'Euro Large Carnivores' project, led by WWF-Germany, collected over 70 stories from all across Europe proving that with such measures in place, coexistence is indeed possible, and scalable.

Sadly, this understanding is not shared by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and her political allies. WWF and its partner NGOs were alarmed by misleading claims by the President in September that wolves had allegedly become potentially dangerous for humans - and we communicated this concern in an open letter, in which we highlighted that Europe had in fact not seen any fatal attacks on humans in the 21st century. We also denounced a non-transparent and irregular consultation process on the wolf population and their impacts launched by the Commission, which violated its own rules.

Shortly after, we followed up with a press conference "Why are wolves in the political spotlight" in which our experts discussed how the measures to coexist with wolves are used in the EU and shed light on the hidden intentions behind the Commission’s initiative. We also published a compilation of facts about wolves in Europe.

POLITICALLY MOTIVATED U-TURN

Right before Christmas, President von der Leyen proposed to the EU Member States to downgrade the strict protection status of the wolf in the Council of Europe’s Bern Convention, deliberately sacrificing decades of conservation work for her political gain. This would open the path to wolf hunting in Europe at a time when only three out of nine wolf populations in Europe are classified as ‘least concern’, meaning that they are widespread and abundant.

We immediately criticised the proposal, calling it a politically motivated U-turn as only a year previously, the EU had rightfully rejected a similar proposal by Switzerland to downgrade the wolf’s protection status. The main argument against the Swiss proposal was that, based on the latest data, the wolf had not reached a favourable conservation status in most EU Member States. Until now this situation has not changed.

The Commission’s move flies in the face not only of science, but also public opinion: a recently published survey on rural communities’ perceptions of large carnivores shows that 68% of rural inhabitants think that wolves should be strictly protected and over two-thirds (72%) agree that they have a right to co-exist.

Following this unprecedented and unscientific Commission proposal, we are ever more motivated to continue our work with the European WWF network and our partner NGOs to protect wolves in Europe. The first step will be to ensure that the EU Member States will not support the proposed downlisting of the wolf’s protection status.
The climate emergency intensified in 2023, with the EU’s Copernicus climate monitoring service confirming that it marked the hottest year on record by a large margin. Against this background we saw the EU trying to wrap up the Fit for 55 package and other climate and energy legislation before the European Parliament elections in 2024.

- World leaders met in Dubai for the COP28 climate talks in December and acknowledged that “transitioning away from fossil fuels” was required, but failed to agree on a phaseout date for fossil fuels.

- Most Member States submitted their draft revised National Energy and Climate Plans (NECPs), but it is yet unclear if the efforts will suffice to meet the EU’s 2030 targets, and many missed the June deadline.

- Negotiations continued on proposals to speed up the deployment of clean industry, but with too strong a focus on unproven technologies such as CCS and nuclear fusion.
“As this European Commission’s term draws to a close and EU policy makers rush to finalise legislation before the European Parliament rises, the stakes couldn’t be higher for the global climate. Much faster action to cut emissions is needed in the EU and elsewhere to head off disaster.”

ALEX MASON, HEAD OF CLIMATE AND ENERGY
Early in the year, the European institutions finalised the revised Renewable Energy Directive (RED) and decided on a higher renewable energy target of 42.5% of the EU energy mix by 2030. While this is a significant step forward, it failed to be accompanied by stricter rules on the use of bioenergy counting towards those targets, giving Member States “carte blanche” to burn more trees and crops, even though it has been demonstrated that this will typically increase emissions compared to fossil fuels.

In better news, in October the European Commission also announced its Wind Power Action Plan, in an attempt to further fast-track the deployment of wind energy and prevent bottlenecks in its supply chains. WWF’s timely report on the state of play of wind energy in the EU had showed that while Member States’ projections on wind energy were on track to meet the new renewable energy target (see above) many obstacles and a big expansion of the sector lay ahead, and even bigger efforts are needed to limit global warming to 1.5°C.

WWF nevertheless welcomed the announcement of the Wind Power Action Plan, in particular the inclusion of criteria in wind auctions other than just the cost, a focus on skills and more efficient and transparent permitting processes, and better financing through the innovation fund.

Over the past year, the EU has built on the EU Green Deal and the subsequent ‘REPowerEU’ response to the energy crisis to boost the deployment of renewables and enlarge their share in the overall energy mix.
EUROPE’S PATH TOWARDS INDUSTRIAL DECARBONISATION

In the face of major investments by the US to accelerate the transition to a clean energy economy and the growing dominance in clean tech by China, the EU was playing catch up on its green technology industry last year. To this end the European Commission proposed two new laws - the Net-Zero Industry Act (NZIA) and Critical Raw Materials Act (CRM) - to boost the EU’s clean technology industries and reduce its dependence on imported raw materials. However, the Commission’s proposals are a blunt instrument that could do a lot of unnecessary damage along the way, especially to nature and biodiversity, as addressed below.

WWF supports efforts to boost the European manufacturing of clean technologies in order to accelerate the transition towards climate neutrality, but has been pushing for a strong focus on those key green technologies which can create swift and cheap decarbonisation at a large scale, such as wind and solar. A broadening of the list to expensive and unproven technologies, such as nuclear fusion and carbon capture and storage (CCS), risks wasting taxpayers’ money and endangering achievement of our 2030 climate targets, the main goal this act was created for.

Currently the Net Zero Industry Act is going through the final round of negotiations between the EU institutions. An agreement is expected early in 2024.
TACKLING NATURE AND CLIMATE GOALS IN PARALLEL

Linked to the expansion of green industry and the rapid development of renewables, a narrative has been developing in some EU circles which pits climate and nature goals against each other. WWF sought actively to counter this narrative and emphasise that the climate and nature crises need to be tackled together for both to be addressed successfully.

Regrettably, the acts and directives mentioned above (RED, NZIA and CRM), all contain parts on weakening environmental protection rules whether for Renewable Acceleration Areas, Industry Valleys or mining projects.

However, environmental rules are not to blame for slow deployment - instead, the EU should focus on the real bottlenecks: insufficient staffing and inadequate spatial planning at Member State and local authority level. WWF will keep striving for an energy transition and industrial decarbonisation which minimises negative impacts on nature and biodiversity, knowing that nature is our best ally in fighting global warming.

HOW CONSISTENT ARE THE EU’S OWN POLICIES WITH ITS CLIMATE TARGETS?

October saw the European Commission’s presentation of the yearly State of the Energy Union report, which pointed out very clearly that Member States need to cut emissions much faster if they are to meet the EU’s 2030 emissions target and put us on track to climate-neutrality. Unfortunately the Commission failed to assess whether EU policies themselves were consistent with that objective, despite its obligation under the EU climate law to do so.

Fortunately, WWF EU carried out exactly this analysis, and published its own report on policy consistency the same month, highlighting those EU policies (such as the Common Agricultural Policy, but also others) which are actively hindering the EU reach its climate targets. The report received widespread interest and media coverage across the EU and beyond.
NATIONAL ENERGY AND CLIMATE PLANS: THE ROADMAP TOWARDS ACHIEVING EU CLIMATE TARGETS

Member States were supposed to present updated drafts of their National Energy & Climate Plans (NECPs) by June 2023. These plans are important because they serve as a detailed road map for citizens, investors and civil society on which actions Member States will take and how they will reach their 2030 targets. And they are in dire need of an update following the increased targets agreed in the Fit for 55 package and other European Green Deal legislation.

WWF published its own NECP checklist, setting out what Member States needed to do to make sure their plans were stronger, more comprehensive, and built on robust data and participative processes - and we will assess the draft updated NECPs accordingly. WWF strongly believes that the planning of the fundamental reforms, which will directly affect the way of life of millions of European citizens, cannot take place in ivory towers. Citizens and stakeholders must be consulted and participate meaningfully in the development of the updated NECPs for them to be a success.

After receiving feedback from the European Commission, EU Member States are now expected to submit their final revised plans by 30 June 2024.

THE EU’S INTERNATIONAL ROLE

The EU must also play a strong role at the international level. Based on scientific advice presented by the European Scientific Advisory Board on Climate Change, WWF is calling on the EU to take its responsibility for historical emissions into account by achieving climate neutrality by 2040 and by setting revised targets (and NDCs) for 2030 and 2035 accordingly. The European Commission is expected to publish recommendations on the 2040 climate target in early February.

Just like every year, the EU also made its appearance at the UNFCCC COP28, where finally the first pledges were being made to fill the Loss & Damage Fund, created at last year’s COP27. Further pledges were made to move away from fossil fuels. While a fossil fuel phase-out was not explicitly endorsed, the global acknowledgment of an unsustainable future for fossil fuels and the need to transition away from them marked a significant step forward. At COP28, WWF organised several events and information sessions around climate change and the importance of nature-based solutions as a means to slow it down and cope with its effects.
Throughout 2023, WWF continued advocating for measures to hold financial institutions and corporations accountable for environmental harm, redirect investments from destructive to sustainable activities, promote “green” renovations, and ensure future financial rules are science-based.

• WWF and other NGOs started the process of taking the European Commission to court over its decision to label fossil gas-fired power as ‘sustainable’ in the EU Taxonomy.

• WWF advocated for a revised Energy Performance of Buildings Directive to enhance financing for energy-efficient renovations. Although the final deal lacks mandatory bank mobilisation measures and introduces loopholes, it offers positive guidelines for future developments.

• WWF worked on the Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive, which will require large companies to set up climate targets and transition plans, but fails to meaningfully address corporate environmental abuses, and allows the financial sector to continue neglecting sustainability in their financial activities.
“The progress made by the EU in 2023 towards promoting a sustainable economy is very encouraging but a lack of ambition reduces the potential impact of numerous initiatives. This dilution undermines the essential transformations urgently needed to realise a truly sustainable financial system.”

SEBASTIEN GODINOT, SENIOR ECONOMIST
2023 saw important developments in the pathway towards a sustainable economy, but building a future where big financial decisions are accompanied by conscious efforts to mitigate negative environmental impact inevitably comes with steps forward and steps back.

From corporate responsibility to sustainable renovations and the continuous fight against the “green” label on fossil fuels, 2023 was rather impactful.

EU TAXONOMY STILL OFF-BALANCE

In 2023, the EU Taxonomy, the EU’s guidebook providing clarity on which economic activities are environmentally sustainable, stayed central to WWF’s work. While it serves as a powerful instrument empowering companies to transition their operations toward environmentally sustainable practices, a coalition of NGOs and experts, including WWF, criticised the EU Taxonomy for including criteria that were developed as a result of corporate lobbying rather than science. To counteract this, we released an “Independent Science-Based Taxonomy” in January 2023, assessing and adjusting criteria included in the EU Taxonomy that were deemed problematic while preserving the structure of the original file.

The delegated act on the ‘green taxonomy’ as adopted by the Commission in 2022 sparked grave concerns notably regarding the inclusion of gas. Despite an Internal Review Request, the European Commission refused to remove the “sustainable” label from fossil gas-fired electricity and heat in February 2023. The disheartening result left WWF more determined than ever to keep battling this issue which clashes with other EU laws and commitments, and explicitly contradicts climate science, as recently underlined by the EU climate Advisory Board.

In April 2023 several NGOs including WWF took the highly unusual step of taking the European Commission to court by filing a case in the European Court of Justice on the grounds that it jeopardises climate goals and increases dependence on gas-producing nations, therefore exposing the EU to energy supply crises and financial strain. By taking legal action, we hope that the judgement, which can be expected in 2024-2025, will force the Commission to review or remove the Complementary Delegated Act.

On a more positive note, the third taxonomy delegated act on environment and climate, introduced in June of 2023, was partly welcomed by WWF, as it signalled urgency for a transition to sustainable practices, placed direct emphasis on the six environmental objectives of the Taxonomy and excluded biodiversity offsetting from the criteria for biodiversity conservation and restoration activities. WWF remains determined to push for reforms to the EU Taxonomy in order to expand its framework to more categories (including intermediate and harmful activities), and further refine and complete its criteria to reflect science and truly benefit the environment and society.
SUSTAINABLE AND ENERGY EFFICIENT HOUSING FOR EUROPEAN HOMES?

WWF advocated for the revision of the Energy Performance of Buildings Directive (EPBD), pushing specifically for the inclusion of innovative financing mechanisms, such as Mortgage Portfolio Standards (MPS), to help households access finance in order to renovate their homes. These standards would mandate banks to set specific energy efficiency targets for their mortgage portfolios. This would, in turn, encourage them to increasingly develop financing solutions for clients looking to renovate. The initial proposal by the Commission introduced these standards, receiving support from the Council, and the European Parliament subsequently endorsed them with higher ambition in March 2023. Following extensive trilogue negotiations, the three institutions finally reached a consensus in December 2023.

WWF regrets that the adopted MPS remain voluntary. The final agreement, while a positive step forward, falls short of fully unleashing the Directive’s potential and fails to comprehensively address critical financial aspects necessary for funding renovations, which would be a key requirement for achieving the objectives of the EU Renovation Wave and the EU 2030 energy efficiency target. Nevertheless, WWF welcomes the introduction of an EU-defined MPS and the establishment of a delegated act to encourage financial institutions to increase lending volumes for energy performance renovations, although it remains a voluntary initiative. This serves as an initial guidance for banks, and WWF encourages its further strengthening, urging for its mandatory nature in the coming years.

Finally, WWF welcomes the new phase out of fossil fuel boiler subsidies from 2025; however, it suffers loopholes which will weaken its impact.

CLOSING THE GAP ENHANCING TRANSPARENCY IN RETAIL INVESTMENTS

In May the European Commission published its long-awaited Retail Investment Strategy (RIS) aiming at protecting consumers and presenting a unique opportunity to promote sustainable investments. Given that a significant majority of retail investors (ranging from 60% to 80%, as indicated by various studies) express a will to invest sustainably, it is imperative to eliminate impediments within the EU’s regulatory framework and fix the current market failure.

While the Strategy displays an unprecedented opportunity for consumers to access reliable information and advice on matters including sustainable investments, there are still significant gaps. A crucial part of the strategy is the
review of the Markets in Financial Instruments Directive and Insurance Distribution Directive which requires the strengthening of financial advisors’ sustainability expertise. At the same time, there were several important points missing, including a requirement to ensure the offering of sustainable funds by default to retail investors who want to invest sustainably, as well as a delegated act clarifying how financial advisors should ask retail investors about their sustainability preferences.

WWF believes that these developments will allow retail investors to understand the sustainability impact (positive or negative) of their investment, and will help channel substantial amounts to sustainable projects and sectors. WWF will continue to push for a more ambitious framework that will empower individuals to access relevant and accurate information in order to make sustainable investments.

THE PURSUIT OF CORPORATE ACCOUNTABILITY

The corporate sector carries a massive responsibility to help address the climate and nature crises, and companies must actively prevent and minimise social and environmental harms and risks in their operations and value chains.

To address this need, WWF worked on the Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD), which aims to cease the corporate activities that harm the environment and violate human rights. To unlock the full promise of the law, WWF’s advocacy work focused on several key imperatives.

Primarily we worked to ensure that financial institutions such as banks, insurers, and investors identify and mitigate environmental and human rights harms in their financial activities and portfolios.

Simultaneously, our advocacy efforts focused on urging large corporations from across all sectors to adopt and implement climate targets and transition plans in order to align their business model with the 1.5°C objective of the Paris Agreement. Extending the focus on this priority, we also advocated for mechanisms to link directors’ pay to the achievement of the targets and transition plans.

Finally, to guarantee thorough corporate responsibility, WWF stressed the importance of defining the environmental harms companies have to tackle in due diligence using broad environmental categories, thus preventing gaps.

WWF helped provide targeted technical support to the different EU institutions and negotiators, and amplify public support for these priorities. Some examples include coordinating a joint multi-stakeholder briefing on linking sustainability matters to directors’ paychecks, and a report that highlights three instances of environmental harm associated with EU financiers, illustrating how the law can be instrumental in mitigating harmful financial practices in each case.

Unfortunately, while the European Parliament was sympathetic to our arguments and adopted a progressive position, a strong pushback from the Member States on the same issues complicated the negotiations. In mid-December 2023, after half a year of trilogue negotiations, the legislators reached a political agreement.
Overall, the CSDDD is a step forward in corporate accountability and sustainability practices, as companies are required to address their negative impact on human rights and the environment. As the biggest win, companies are required to adopt and implement a climate target and transition plan ‘compatible’ with a 1.5°C scenario. Companies must also provide financial incentives for the relevant management-level personnel to implement these plans.

Unfortunately, the law also has significant shortcomings, which will have to be addressed in further revisions. For example, the financial sector’s core business, including lending, insuring, and investing activities, is excluded from due diligence obligations, allowing financiers to neglect the sustainability harms they are contributing to.

Furthermore, the environmental harms that companies have to tackle in due diligence cover only a fraction of all environmental matters, as the definition is limited to violations of a narrow set of international treaties, which in many cases cover already restricted or banned issues and which also excludes the Paris climate Agreement.

Despite this setback, WWF remains dedicated to pushing for these loopholes to be addressed and rectified. This commitment is vital for the EU to genuinely safeguard the environment and human rights, and avoid that the financial sector keeps supporting harmful projects and industries.

WWF Called for a Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive Which Would Stop Corporate Activities From Harming the Environment and Violating Human Rights
ENFORCEMENT OF EU LEGISLATION IS KEY TO TAKING CLIMATE ACTION, SAFEGUARDING NATURE, AND PUTTING LEGAL AND SUSTAINABLE SEAFOOD ON OUR PLATES

The EU has strong policies in place to secure sustainable fisheries and seafood, a renewable energy transition, nature recovery and sound planning of our seas, but action on the ground (and in the water) continues to be a challenge. WWF is working with EU and Member State decision makers as well as industry players to make use of the right tools for the job, and to develop new tools and strategies where needed.

In 2023, this included:

• Facilitating discussions on the digital transformation of EU fishery.

• Developing a methodology to assess a fishery’s environmental and socio-economic impact, identify shortcomings, and measure progress towards sustainability.

• Identifying links between illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing in international waters and seafood available in the EU market.

• Assessing the success of Mediterranean Member State strategies to adopt an ecosystem-based approach when planning maritime activities.

• Advocating for nature protection and offshore renewable energy development to go hand in hand.

• Uncovering gender disparity in EU offshore wind energy policymaking.
“Our environmental, energy, maritime and fisheries policies must be made more coherent. We need an overarching ocean framework for EU laws to be fit for preserving, protecting and restoring nature, and for more resilient life below water. This should have an ecosystem-based approach at its core and be better aligned with the European Green Deal.”

ANTONIA LEROY, HEAD OF OCEAN POLICY
Better Control over EU Fishing Activities

More than five years after the first proposal for a revised EU regulation to monitor fishing activities (the so-called ‘Control Regulation’), 2023 began with the EU institutions concluding their negotiations with a provisional agreement. WWF worked with a coalition of eight other NGOs and in close cooperation with its network of European offices on the revision of this ‘rulebook’, and all key priorities of WWF’s advocacy work over the last five years were positively reflected.

In June, the European Parliament Fisheries Committee approved the provisional agreement just a few days after Member State representatives did; and in October, the full European Parliament adopted the EU’s new system for ensuring fisheries rules are effectively applied. The new EU Fisheries Control Regulation entered into force on 1 January 2024.

Measures that will boost sustainability standards for seafood sold in the EU market include: cameras on vessels that have been identified as being at high risk of breaking the rules (based on previous infringements), electronic logbooks, satellite tracking for the entire EU fishing fleet by 2030 (including for around 50,000 small-scale vessels), a digital information sharing system to ensure illegal seafood imports are stopped, a minimum level for fines to harmonise sanctions across the EU, improved data collection for recreational fisheries and, of particular significance, the move from a paper-based system – where more than 250,000 paper catch documents for seafood products were arriving at EU borders annually – to a digital one.

Digital Tools and Low-Impact Practices for Sustainable Fisheries

In February, the European Commission published its assessment of how the EU Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) and EU Common Market Organisation have been implemented since their last reform in 2013. It found that the EU’s failure to achieve the objectives of the CFP is a
A sustainable, inclusive and profitable sector that offers social and economic benefits for current and future generations, such as good working conditions and a fair standard of living, will encourage many young people, particularly women, to spend their days at sea.

**A PERFECT MATCH**

“Right gear, right place, right time”; low-impact fishing is the subtle art of finding the tailored combination that works best for the fish, the fisher and everything around and in between.

**MONEY IS WHERE THE (SUSTAINABLE) FISH IS**

Fishers can benefit financially from restored ecosystems and sustainable fishing practices. And financial support should encourage this transition. Harmful subsidies, such as those supporting fossil fuels, should be redirected to support such funding streams, which are currently scarce. “Fish and easy access to funding is crucial.”

**COMMUNICATION IS KEY**

Common goods – common responsibility. Inclusive stakeholder engagement is crucial to ensure management measures are politically coherent, supported by the industry, informed by scientists, understood by fishers and adequately funded and enforced by authorities. At WWF, we call it together possible.

**FROM VICIOUS TO VIRTUOUS**

By distributing catch quotas in a way that favours those trying to fish the most sustainably, authorities can create a virtuous circle where increased sustainability means access to catch more fish. Balancing social, environmental and economic objectives when making these decisions is of utmost importance.

Finally, in December, WWF published its Low-impact Fisheries Assessment Tool (LIF tool), a methodology to assess the current impact of a given EU fishery, identify and address its shortcomings as best as possible, and evaluate progress towards making practices more sustainable. The responsibility to transition to low-impact fisheries, as required under the CFP, lies with EU and Member State decision makers as much as it does with fishers. Extending far beyond the CFP, the ripples of achieving environmentally sustainable, economically viable and socially responsible fisheries also aligns with the EU Biodiversity Strategy, the UN 2030 Agenda and COP15 commitments, to name but a few.

As water temperatures continue to rise, and marine ecosystems struggle to recover against the dual forces of climate change and overfishing, WWF is advocating for rethinking the way we fish as a crucial piece of the climate action puzzle and essential for the future of fishers. It’s now essential for the CFP to be effectively implemented across all Member States and to embrace the digital tools available for the sector to become more sustainable.

In September, with stakeholders from DG MARE, the European Data Protection Supervisor, Low-Impact Fishers of Europe, Global Fishing Watch and the EMODnet Secretariat, WWF hosted a conference exploring how EU regulations, including the new EU Fisheries Control Regulation, can best support the sector’s digital transition and how digital tools can help deliver more sustainable fisheries management.

WWF organised an event at the European Parliament in June where policy makers, researchers and civil society explored the existing use of digital tools in small-scale fisheries (i.e. vessels under 12 metres long) and opportunities to improve both benefits to fishers in an era of climate change and the enforcement of monitoring, control, and surveillance measures.

A sustainable, inclusive and profitable sector that offers social and economic benefits for current and future generations, such as good working conditions and a fair standard of living, will encourage many young people, particularly women, to spend their days at sea.

WWF organised a series of events focusing on tools that fishers and policy makers alike can use to better implement the CFP and secure more sustainable fishing practices.
MILLIONS LOST TO ILLICIT FISHING IN THE SOUTH WEST INDIAN OCEAN

Ahead of the Indian Ocean Tuna Commission (IOTC) meeting in May, WWF launched a study on the financial losses tied to illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing of tuna and shrimp species in the South West Indian Ocean (SWIO) – the regional waters off the coasts of Kenya, Madagascar, Mozambique, South Africa and Tanzania. It found that as much as US$142.8 million of potential income was lost from the region every year between 2015-2021 as a result of combined potential IUU fishing activities linked to the two species. Between 2016 and 2021, around 36% of all fishing effort in the area was potentially IUU fishing.

WWF used the report findings to urge the EU delegation to the IOTC meeting – as EU Member States are responsible for some of the highest levels of fishing effort in SWIO waters and represent some of the region’s primary shrimp and tuna trade partners – to call for strong and binding measures to ensure legal and sustainable activities by both local and foreign fleets.

Notable resolutions adopted at the meeting in line with WWF asks include standards for electronic monitoring systems on industrial fishing vessels to more accurately monitor the volumes and species caught, and a long-awaited proposal – at least five years in the making – to improve compliance mechanisms.

POOR MARITIME STRATEGIES IN THE MEDITERRANEAN

In June, WWF published the next report in its series assessing ecosystem-based maritime spatial planning (MSP) in the EU, this time looking at the Mediterranean. Only four Member States (France, Malta, Slovenia and Spain) were able to be assessed, as the other four (Croatia, Cyprus, Greece and Italy) were under infringement procedures by the European Commission for their failure to prepare their national maritime plans by the legal deadline of March 2021.

The region is significantly lagging behind in applying an ecosystem-based approach to the long-term management of the sea basin and urgent action is needed to deliver on key European Green Deal targets such as renewable energy and nature conservation.
WWF is advocating for the establishment of a dedicated regional working group to focus on the integration and implementation of an ecosystem-based approach to MSP. This would help ensure that neighbouring EU and non-EU countries are jointly aligned in their commitments to address the climate and biodiversity crises, and safeguard maritime livelihoods for generations to come.

**PUSHING FOR PROPER PLANNING**

WWF continued to champion the need for robust, long-term ecosystem-based planning across EU seas at a number of relevant conferences and meetings throughout the year, including the European Maritime Day conference, the WindEurope Annual Event, the 24th Meeting of the Member States Expert Group on MSP, North Sea Advisory Council workshop on MSP and the EMODnet Open Conference.

At a high-level event WWF co-organised at the European Parliament to discuss the role of offshore renewables in the EU’s energy transition, we stressed that nature protection and offshore renewable energy development can go hand in hand. Success depends on designating areas for development in a participatory way, adopting an ecosystem-based approach to MSP and shifting away from price-based energy project tenders.

**NO WOMEN IN WIND ENERGY**

For WWF, part of planning a sustainable blue future means taking radical steps to address the alarming levels of gender disparity in the offshore wind energy sector and in EU policy making.

A WWF briefing showed that in the EU energy sector overall, the gender wage gap is nearly 20% and **women only occupy up to 21% of roles** across in all competences and levels of seniority. At the decision-making levels, only four women sit in the European Council while less than 10% of European Parliament climate and energy legislative files are led by women, despite 40% female Parliament membership.

Gender equality is a foundational principle of the EU which also has a Gender Equality Strategy for 2020-2025. WWF is advocating for the EU’s shift to a clean energy system to affirm the social values we want for our future society, including the fundamental human right of gender equality. To achieve this, radical efforts are needed to promote the entry of more women into renewables.

EU offshore renewable energy capacity is anticipated to grow by 625% between 2022 and 2030. Improving gender balance will not only attract the additional talent urgently needed to achieve growth in this sector, it’s an integral part of the solution to the wider climate, energy and social challenges we currently face, and a fundamental condition to ensure a better future for all.
REVving up for the 2024 EU elections

To tackle the growing climate and biodiversity crises, we must end our dependence on fossil fuels while prioritising people and nature. In preparation for the 2024 EU elections, WWF has laid the groundwork for an impactful electoral campaign, aiming to inform citizens about the critical choice ahead and ensure policy makers consider the climate and the environment as a top priority.

In 2023, this included:

• Strategising with prominent civil society organisations to mobilise citizens to cast their votes in June 2024.

• Providing policy makers with policy recommendations for tackling the climate and biodiversity crises while leaving no-one behind.

• Engaging with European and national parties to understand and analyse their stance on crucial climate and environmental policies.

EU AFFAIRS & GOVERNANCE
“The last EU elections triggered the inception of the Green Deal, a positive step towards a greener and fairer Europe. Yet, we cannot take that momentum for granted. As the election campaigns heat up, we must ensure the focus is on both sustaining and advancing the progress made over the next five years.”

TYCHO VANDERMAESEN, POLICY & STRATEGY DIRECTOR
European elections are critical for EU policy-making: not only do they determine the composition of the European Parliament for its next mandate, but they also mark the beginning of a new European Commission, whose programme will set the scene for all legislative initiatives for the coming five years. As such, the outcome of the 2024 elections will greatly impact environmental policies and laws.

In 2023, WWF laid the groundwork for its electoral campaign to inform citizens of the importance of their choices in the upcoming elections, and ensure that the new EU leadership prioritises climate and environment in the next five years. This campaign encompasses diverse activities, led by WWF as well as an ad-hoc coalition of environmental NGOs. Our approach has involved collaborative efforts, policy recommendations and strategic actions.

BUILDING IMPACTFUL ALLIANCES

Creating and strengthening partnerships has been at the core of our efforts. From the outset, we have been collaborating closely with national WWF offices across Europe, engaging with them not only to define the strategy and content, but also the execution of the campaign. This inclusive approach allowed us to tailor our initiatives to the specific needs and concerns of diverse national contexts.

To amplify the impact of our work around the elections, WWF has joined forces with four influential NGOs: BirdLife Europe, Climate Action Network Europe, European Environmental Bureau and Transport & Environment— with a combined 45 million supporters across Europe.

Together, we are engaging and mobilising with other civil society actors and progressive businesses, to ensure strong expressions of support for continued climate and environment action at EU level.

PROVIDING RECOMMENDATIONS FOR TACKLING THE CLIMATE AND BIODIVERSITY CRISIS

In December 2023, WWF published recommendations for EU policy makers, which serve as a roadmap for addressing the challenges posed by climate change and biodiversity loss. The recommendations emphasise three central actions: ending fossil fuel dependence, with the adoption of a target to achieve climate neutrality by 2040 to keep the objective of 1.5°C within reach; prioritising nature for safety and resilience, including by fixing our broken food system and making sustainable food available for everyone; and ensuring an inclusive sustainable transition that involves restructuring the EU’s economy. This requires redirecting all harmful and wasteful national and EU public expenditure away from fossil fuels and nature-damaging activities towards the green transition.

Our recommendations also include ten concrete sets of proposals in the following policy areas: climate and energy, biodiversity, water, forests, food and farming, wildlife crime, oceans, sustainable finance, governance, and international partnerships. These proposals tackle issues like the need for new laws, increased funding, stronger enforcement of EU laws, closing loopholes in legislation, and enhancing monitoring and reporting.
These recommendations are instrumental in advocating for the inclusion of climate, environment, and pollution references in the European Council’s next Strategic Agenda, set to be formally approved in June 2024.

In order to help citizens and journalists understand where the parties’ electoral promises stand regarding critical climate and environmental policies, WWF sent a questionnaire to all European political parties, as well as national parties from 14 EU countries, in November. The questionnaire provides a platform for political parties to express their views and propositions to tackle the twin climate and biodiversity crises in the next legislature, addressing the topics of climate, energy, biodiversity, agriculture, food, and sustainable finance. After analysing the results, WWF will publish a report comparing parties’ answers to our own recommendations for the next five years.
In 2023, the EU conducted a mid term review of NDICI-Global Europe and the Multiannual Financial Framework, revealing budget challenges jeopardising climate, biodiversity, and international commitments.

- Despite WWF recommendations, proposed budget cuts and performance shortfalls raise concerns about the EU’s ability to fulfil promises, respond to crises, and maintain global partnerships.

- Flagship initiatives, such as NaturAfrica and the EU Deforestation law, show progress, but the EU faces challenges in meeting climate and biodiversity targets.

- WWF contributed to NaturAfrica, an integrated approach to biodiversity conservation and socio-economic development, whose people-centred approach is fully aligned with our Africa Conservation Strategy.

- Efforts to scale up sustainable finance and the role of CSOs are crucial elements requiring attention to align EU international cooperation with environmental and sustainability commitments.
“The expanding gap between the EU’s global aspirations and the resources at hand underscores the precariousness of insufficient funding, putting in danger the EU’s capacity to honour international commitments, address crises, sustain global alliances, and make meaningful contributions to the 2030 Agenda.”

KATARINA MACEJAKOVA, HEAD OF EU INTERNATIONAL PARTNERSHIPS
In 2023, the EU embarked on a comprehensive evaluation of its financial instrument for Neighbourhood, Development, and International Cooperation, known as NDICI-Global Europe, alongside a thorough review of its long-term budget - the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF).

**MID-TERM REVIEW OF THE NDICI-GLOBAL EUROPE**

In the context of the mid-term review (MTR) of the EU's Global Europe instrument, WWF joined several consultations and developed recommendation papers focused on the Global Challenges and regional programmes. Specifically, we have called on the EU to provide comprehensive finance for biodiversity protection and commit to at least €1.5 billion per year until 2030 under NDICI-Global Europe to reach the financing targets under the UN Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework adopted in 2022. The EU has to substantially and consistently increase support to partner governments to implement their National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans and scale up technical assistance and capacity building to national authorities that are responsible for overseeing the sectors that drive biodiversity loss and associated harmful subsidies.

In June, the Commission proposed a €10.5 billion increase to the envelope covering external action under its Multiannual Financial Framework (Heading 6 - Neighbourhood and the World). WWF, along with other NGOs, urged Member States and the European Parliament to reinforce the allocation to effectively tackle emerging challenges, particularly in the face of escalating climate and food crises, and to honour international climate and biodiversity protection commitments. Despite the European Parliament’s support, the Council in December instead suggested cuts of €4.5 billion to existing programmes and reductions in vital funds for global action. EU leaders are determined to push through this package in early 2024.

The European Parliament’s December resolution on the NDICI implementation also notes the widening gap between the EU’s global ambitions and available resources. Insufficient funding jeopardises the EU’s ability to fulfil promises, respond to crises, maintain global partnerships, and contribute to the 2030 Agenda.

Additional concerns arise over the EU’s commitment to climate and biodiversity spending targets. The 2023 external action report reveals shortcomings in the Commission’s 2021 and 2022 performance, with climate change commitments reaching only 21% against the 30% target and biodiversity protection at 5.6% instead of the pledged doubling to 10%. Urgent action is needed to enhance financial commitments and strategically allocate resources to bridge the gap between aspirations and achievements in climate and biodiversity protection. The upcoming decisions on the MFF revision will be pivotal in shaping the EU’s environmental and sustainability commitments globally.

**NDICI-GLOBAL EUROPE IMPLEMENTATION**

The EU kick-started many NDICI financed initiatives aimed at addressing biodiversity loss, climate change, and environmental challenges in 2023. The implementation of the NaturAfrica initiative continued with new actions in several African countries. The EU endorsed the deal for an EU deforestation law, while concurrently initiating the implementation of programs under the Forest Partnerships. The Switch Asia programme, dedicated to advancing sustainable consumption and production, has initiated a new phase emphasising green transition initiatives, promoting sustainable food systems and fostering a circular economy.

Throughout 2023, the WWF network made substantial contributions to NaturAfrica, the EU’s integrated approach
to biodiversity conservation and socio-economic development, which adopts a people-centred approach fully aligned with WWF’s Africa Conservation Strategy. In collaboration with EU Delegations and technical consultants, WWF supplied crucial indicators, data and technical expertise. These inputs facilitated the enhancement of NaturAfrica landscapes, an in-depth understanding of key stakeholders, and an analysis of dominant value chains and trends within the Congo basin, East Africa, Southern Africa and South-West Indian Ocean regions.

The custodians of NaturAfrica landscapes are the ranger workforce, and the Universal Ranger Support Alliance (URSA), co-founded by WWF, supports their professionalisation, harmonisation, and capacity. WWF hosted a URSA consultative meeting in Brussels in September with strategic partners such as ILO, UN, OHCHR, IUCN, EU, and CSOs to strengthen the professional, accountable, and equitable ranger workforce, aligning with the Global Biodiversity Framework’s goals, including the 30 percent conservation target by 2030. Discussions emphasised supporting an inclusive ranger workforce recognising indigenous peoples, local communities, and women, while focusing on upholding professional conduct and a rights-based approach, thereby enhancing the EU’s collaborative support for conservation.

INCLUSIVE CONSERVATION IN DZANGA SANGHA

For more than 30 years, WWF has worked in Dzanga-Sangha, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, partnering closely with the government of the Central African Republic (CAR) and local communities to support the management of natural resources in this incredible forest ecosystem where gorillas, elephants, and people coexist. The ethos that nature and people can thrive together is driving conservation here, and an approach based on long-term community engagement and bolstered by EU financial support, Dzanga-Sangha stands as a model of enduring conservation in a region fraught with conflict.

With the latest EU financial support, WWF is poised to strengthen its inclusive nature conservation approach in Dzanga-Sangha. The primary objective is to continue to safeguard the region’s natural resources while simultaneously enhancing the livelihoods of local and indigenous populations living in the landscape. To this end, WWF will continue to provide support for anti-poaching initiatives, establish income-generating activities, facilitate scientific research, and support local civil society organisations. We will also build on past achievements by promoting tourism, and enhancing access to electricity through solar power infrastructure.

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE EU DEFORESTATION LAW

The EU approved the landmark Deforestation Regulation (EUDR) in May 2023 to prevent products linked to global forest destruction from entering the EU market (see more on p.20-21) The EU is tasked with a coordinated approach with producer countries, developing a comprehensive ‘Strategic Framework’, encompassing partnership and cooperation mechanisms focusing on conservation, restoration, sustainable forest use, as well as roadmaps facilitating the transition to sustainable production.
The MTR of NDICI programmes is a significant opportunity to align EU international cooperation with EUDR, redirect technical and financial resources to support partner countries’ compliance, raise awareness among key actors and support the implementation of the EUDR. The Strategic Framework should establish minimum objectives for supply-side partnerships, addressing deforestation drivers, human rights violations, poor governance, law enforcement, and supporting the transition to sustainable agriculture and forestry, including resilient livelihoods for smallholder farmers.

Partnerships with producing countries are vital for unlocking EUDR’s potential, ensuring smallholders and local communities aren’t financially burdened. We appreciate the Team Europe Initiative (TEI) on deforestation-free value chains launched at COP 28 (highlighting collaboration and a demand-driven approach), along with the signing of the roadmap for implementing the EU-Congo Forest Partnership during the 3 Basins Summit in October (outlining measures to safeguard Congolese forests and ensure compliance with EUDR). As part of the roadmap for the Guyana-EU Forest Partnership signed in July, WWF Guianas, in collaboration with the EU and the French development agency, initiated the Sustainable Forest Livelihoods program. This program focuses on indigenous and local communities, aiming to improve governance and natural resource management in the Amazon basin.

**SCALING UP SUSTAINABLE FINANCE FOR EU PARTNER COUNTRIES**

In 2021, the EC adopted its Strategy for Financing the Transition to a Sustainable Economy, committing to developing a strategy for scaling
up sustainable finance in partner countries, particularly Low- and Middle Income Countries (LMICs). The High-Level Expert Group (HLEG), of which WWF is a member, was established in 2022 to support the Commission in this endeavour. The majority of the HLEG’s activities took place in 2023, culminating in the release of its preliminary recommendations in September, which emphasised the need for a new model of strategic engagement between the EU and partner countries, transforming sustainable development challenges into mutual opportunities for inclusive growth. In this context, we welcome the Commission’s intention to set up a Sustainable Finance Advisory Hub to support LMICs as they develop credible sustainable finance frameworks and the announcement of the Global Green Bond initiative, aiming to facilitate the flow of private capital from institutional investors into climate and environmental projects in EU partner countries, thereby enhancing their access to capital. The HLEG is set to publish its final report in Q1 of 2024.

MALAYSIA’S INDIGENOUS GUARDIANS OF THE FOREST

WWF-Malaysia, in collaboration with the Perak State Park Corporation and the Tiger Protection Society Malaysia, is currently implementing an ambitious EU-funded project aimed at empowering local indigenous communities to become guardians of the Royal Belum State Park. This park is home to some of the world’s most endangered mammals and serves as the last stronghold for the Malayan Tigers. The project’s main objective is centred around improving the socio-economic status of the local indigenous people, specifically the Jahai people, through various capacity-building programs, awareness initiatives, and sustainable livelihood projects.

WWF-Malaysia’s ongoing conservation effort within the larger Belum Forest Complex aligns with the EU’s vision of engaging with local civil society, emphasising the crucial role of local communities and indigenous people in the management of protected and conserved areas. Activities such as community engagements, working groups, awareness campaigns, and livelihood initiatives are being implemented by WWF to ensure a more concerted and inclusive conservation effort. Simultaneously, these efforts aim to safeguard the well-being of the local indigenous communities.

EU FUNDS FOR CSOS

The role of CSOs in EU international cooperation programmes and funding has been impacted by changes in recent years. According to the 2023 Concord study, conducted in collaboration with WWF, under the NDICI-Global Europe, partnership practices and funding mechanisms no longer enable CSOs to effectively contribute to all EU international cooperation programmes. The EU’s increasing adoption of ‘indirect management,’ delegating a significant part of the NDICI budget to Member State agencies and international organisations, along with current regulatory frameworks, hampers CSOs’ right of initiative and their effective contribution to EU programmes, including environmental protection and climate initiatives. To address this, the EU needs to establish new CSO funding mechanisms tailored to new geographic programmes that recognise the diversity of CSO actors and encompass initiatives like the Team Europe approach and Global Gateway.
The success of WWF’s policy work at EU level depends on external funding, a coordinated and supportive network and strong alliances with key stakeholders and partners.

**WWF NETWORK**

Throughout the year, many WWF offices provided WWF EU with their expertise and advocacy support. We are particularly grateful to the 18 network offices which contributed financially to our policy and communications activities and campaigns. This support makes it possible for WWF EU to engage in a broad range of policy and legislative processes and represent the voices and concerns of millions of WWF supporters around Europe and the world.

**FOUNDATIONS**

WWF EU is supported both financially and in terms of policy development by major foundations. We are grateful for the continued support from the European Climate Foundation, the KR Foundation, the Walton Family Foundation, Oceans 5, the Ocean Azul Foundation, the Laudes Foundation and the Flotilla Foundation.

**CIVIL SOCIETY**

WWF EU works with other organisations in various alliances: as a member of the ten biggest EU environmental NGOs in Brussels (Green 10 coalition), the European NGO confederation for relief and development (CONCORD), the Climate Action Network (CAN Europe), the Sustainable Europe coalition, the Living Rivers Europe coalition, the European Habitats Forum (EHF), and the Offshore Coalition for Energy and Nature. WWF is also a member of the EU IUU Fishing Coalition and the EU Fisheries Control Coalition.

We also contribute to the following organisations: Fédération des Associations Européennes (FAIB), Market Advisory Council, North Sea Advisory Council, the Coalition for Energy Savings, Renewables Grid Initiative, Seas At Risk, the European Food Information Council (EUFIC), and the European Environmental Citizens Organisation for Standardisation (ECOS).

**EUROPEAN COMMISSION AND DEVELOPMENT AID AGENCIES**

We receive an operating grant from the EU Climate, Infrastructure and Environment Executive Agency (CINEA) through the LIFE Programme. In 2023, we also received project funding via the Research Executive Agency (REA); the Development Education and Awareness Raising Programme (DEAR); and the German Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ).

During the financial year 2023, the WWF European Policy Office has received EU funding through the following grants:

- European Climate, Infrastructure and Environment Executive Agency (CINEA). Project 101058915 — LIFE21 NGO/BE/WWF EPO
- Research Executive Agency (REA). Project 101060707 — MSP4BIO
- Research Executive Agency (REA). Project 101060879 — FISH-X
- Raising public awareness of development issues and promoting development education in the European Union under Grant Agreement number: EuropeAid/160048/DH/ACT/MULTI — Eat4Change
- Research Executive Agency (REA). Project 862480 — SHOWCASE
- Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme. Project 894345 — LEVEL EEI
INCOME AND EXPENDITURE 2023

TOTAL INCOME € 5,665,141
- WWF Network € 2,781,603 49%
- Trusts & Foundations € 1,538,974 27%
- European Union & Public Sector Partnership (PSP) € 1,296,249 23%
- Other Income € 48,315 1%

TOTAL EXPENDITURE € 5,475,704
- Leadership € 159,994 3%
- Operations € 724,667 13%
- Public Affairs € 262,961 5%
- Communications € 274,169 5%
- EU International Partnerships € 308,547 6%
- Climate & Energy € 643,433 12%
- Forests € 371,682 7%
- Fresh Water € 218,581 4%
- Food & Agriculture € 381,322 7%
- Biodiversity € 455,500 8%
- Oceans € 578,447 11%
- Sustainable Finance € 743,021 14%
- Global Projects € 353,380 6%

23% WWF NETWORK
27% TRUSTS & FOUNDATIONS
49% EUROPEAN UNION & PSP
1% OTHER INCOME
6% GLOBAL PROJECTS
14% SUSTAINABLE FINANCE
11% OCEANS
8% BIODIVERSITY
7% FOOD & AGRICULTURE
4% FRESH WATER
3% LEADERSHIP
5% OPERATIONS
5% PUBLIC AFFAIRS
5% COMMUNICATIONS
6% EU INTERNATIONAL PARTNERSHIPS
12% CLIMATE & ENERGY
7% FORESTS
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The WWF European Policy Office is made up of a truly international team representing 18 nationalities, with expertise ranging from biology to finance, from forestry to communications, from political sciences to accounting.

We are united in our passion and dedication to help take Europe firmly on a path to environmental sustainability.
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WWF is an independent conservation organisation, with more than 38 million followers and a global network active through local leadership in over 100 countries.

Our mission is to stop the degradation of the planet’s natural environment and to build a future in which people live in harmony with nature, by conserving the world’s biological diversity, ensuring that the use of renewable natural resources is sustainable, and promoting the reduction of pollution and wasteful consumption.

The European Policy Office contributes to the achievement of WWF’s global mission by leading the WWF network to shape EU policies impacting on the European and global environment.

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Climate march, Brussels, December 2023. © Louis Lambrechts / WWF European Policy Office

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OUR MISSION IS TO STOP THE DEGRADATION OF THE PLANET’S NATURAL ENVIRONMENT AND TO BUILD A FUTURE IN WHICH PEOPLE LIVE IN HARMONY WITH NATURE.