



Q&A: Time to put nature at the heart of what we do

A rising number of businesses is making the case for nature-based solutions already, but it is time to progress from early movers to a broad movement, says Jean-Eric Paquet, the European Commission's Director General for Research and Innovation.

10 September 2021 - By KATHY TZILIVAKIS

Nature's back in business! Investing in nature-based solutions – using nature's own resources to tackle environmental challenges – is a promising means to a climate resilient future, according to the European Commission's top research official.

Addressing the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) [World Conservation Congress in Marseille](#), France on 3 September, Mr Paquet highlighted the EU's commitment to work with nature rather than against it.

'Nature-based solutions need to find their place in everybody's toolbox for addressing environmental, social and ecological challenges,' he said.

Held jointly by the French Government and the IUCN under the theme 'One Nature, One Future,' the 3 to 11 September Congress is the last high-level opportunity to frame ambitions for the post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework. According to Mr Paquet, it is crucial that nature-based solutions feature in the [Post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework](#), which will be approved at the Fifteenth meeting of the Conference of the Parties (COP15) to the Convention on Biological Diversity.

'Nature-based solutions play an important role in making our cities and landscapes more liveable, improving well-being and health,' Mr Paquet said in an interview with Horizon Magazine on the sidelines of the Congress. 'This is why I believe the post-pandemic national recovery and resilience plans are a once in a lifetime opportunity for a nature-based recovery.'

Edited excerpts of the interview follow.

The planet is now facing massive loss of animal and plant species plus the threat of climate change. How do experts gathered in Marseilles for the IUCN World Conservation Congress aim to combat these threats?

The IUCN Congress has one interesting feature: it brings together actors from all parts of society. For example, you have citizens and civil society and a number of NGOs that have mobilised on biodiversity, environmental protection and animal protection. But you also have high-level politicians in attendance, which also shows the mobilisation across national political systems and administrations.

For example, addressing biodiversity loss and investing in nature-based solutions is central in French climate and environmental policies, included in the context of the European Recovery Fund. You also have economic players because the loss of biodiversity is now much better understood by society and businesses also realise the impact and the benefits in terms of their own operations, not least in terms of their image to be more proactive on these matters.

A congress like this is particularly interesting because it allows these various actors with their various perspectives and their different solutions to come together to debate the issues. It's of course happening now in September to provide a last input into the COP15 meeting which will start in a few weeks.

The stated purpose of the Congress is to drive action for decades to come. What form do you think this should take over the short-term and long-term?

The Congress calls for action to bring nature onto the path of recovery in the next decades. One such action is to invest into nature-based solutions: using nature to provide us with solutions for our main challenges – healthy ecosystems provide us with clean air and water, protect us from floods, store carbon, increase our health and wellbeing.

Nature-based solutions need to find their place in everybody's toolbox for addressing environmental, social and ecological challenges. So, one of the recommendations of the Congress is that we need to protect and restore nature more rapidly, and at larger scale than before, in rural and urban environments.

In the short-term, it is crucial that nature-based solutions feature in the Global Biodiversity Framework to 2030, to be approved at the Convention on Biodiversity's COP15 starting next month. Equally important is that their role is acknowledged and promoted at the Climate COP26 in November.

In the longterm, we will only succeed by working together. IUCN is well placed, thanks to its members and partners, to promote nature-based solutions worldwide, and to help overcome the barriers to deployment.

This summer European citizens faced extreme weather events resulting in devastating flooding in Belgium and Germany and catastrophic fires across the Mediterranean region. How can the EU become more resilient while adapting to a changing climate?

On their own, nature-based solutions do not fully cover all aspects of resilience to a changing climate. However, these solutions are a fundamental part of the action needed to build our resilience and tackle challenges linked to disaster risk reduction.

Some countries, like France, already integrate nature-based solutions in their climate mitigation and adaptation strategies. The benefits go well beyond disaster risk reduction, and climate and biodiversity relief. They cover health and wellbeing, green job creation and urban regeneration.

Europe has enormous scientific and technical capability and world-leading researchers who can develop nature-based solutions to ensure the clean air and water and other ecosystem services that we depend on. How is the EU promoting these nature-based solutions, which deliver a wide range of such ecosystem services?

Firstly, nature-based solutions, but also ambitious climate and biodiversity solutions, are part of the EU's strategy at the highest level. The European Council, the Commission and the European Parliament have put the fight against climate change – now including the dimension of biodiversity – at the heart of its policy framework.

The [Green Deal](#) put forward by the Commission two years ago, and endorsed by the Parliament and the European Council, is essentially saying that Europe's policy framework – delivered through activities across the Member States, in regulations, investments, but also in societal measures taken up at the local level and nurtured by citizens – needs to be dealing with climate and biodiversity.

So the Green Deal is much like Europe's new compass and the green transformation is Europe's new economic and development policy.

In this context, nature-based solutions feature prominently in the EU Climate Pact and the Fit for 55 package, the EU Climate Adaptation Strategy and the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030. The European Union made nature-based solutions one of its priorities in Horizon 2020, through an investment of more than EUR 240 million in 28 projects, with a leverage effect on investment and job creation. Projects test and showcase the benefits of nature-based solutions in more than 70 cities in the EU and beyond.

The new R&I [research and innovation] funding instrument, [Horizon Europe](#), will keep up efforts to deliver and scale up innovative nature-based solutions.

Horizon Europe's first Work Programme for 2021-2022 will foster further research on the economics of nature-based solutions for more inclusive communities, education, restoration of wetlands or nature-based therapy.

One of our key tools to engage with society are our [Missions](#) on adaptation to climate change, on oceans, on soil health and food, and on cities. I imagine that nature-based solutions could feature in all Missions – and I count on IUCN's involvement in taking nature-based solutions forward, for example in the Mission on adaptation to climate change.

How can regional or sub-national governments working at the local level support nature-based solutions to extend them across Europe?

The delivery of nature-based solutions is local or regional. It cannot be national and European.

The frameworks and the instruments that exist at European level complement national instruments and resources. But the actual work is taking place at regional and local level.

The Missions have this particular feature in that they work across all levels of governance. We will work very closely in deploying the Missions with regions and cities. For instance, the idea for climate-neutral cities is to find 100 cities in Europe which will aim at climate neutrality. This is a very tall order!

And once these 100 cities are selected, they will then be directly supported with knowledge and EU resources but they will of course also deploy their own resources, national resources and work within their city context with nature-based solutions as well.

Similarly with climate adaptation, we hope to find 100 or maybe 200 regions that are ready to deploy nature-based solutions.

So the Missions are really anchored in this local reality. This is especially the case for nature-based solutions because it concerns your immediate environment, this is where you live. There is a very strong drive for

citizens and civil society, so you need to create ownership for change.

We worked with citizens to devise the Missions. Now in the implementation and delivery of the Missions, we will support and establish a platform to provide the methodology so that citizens can devise solutions which they will own and implement.

How can business contribute to nature-based solutions and what role will this play in the European Green Deal?

Businesses will certainly be part of the deployment of nature-based solutions. Businesses are more and more aware of their reliance on nature-based services. And therefore they will want within their own business to also look how far nature-based solutions can enhance their bottom line or the quality of their product. The efficiency of their production can be correlated to nature-based solutions.

More and more companies, see that their bottom line cannot just be financial. They want to ensure they are playing their part in society and with that comes also investments in sustainability, nature-based solutions and the like.

A rising number of businesses is making the case for nature-based solutions already, but it is time to progress from early movers to a broad movement. Hence, while nature-based solutions are already being delivered, are visible and credible, we need a greater dissemination of knowledge and know-how to encourage uptake through the policy framework offered by the Green Deal.

I see more and more companies keen to invest in nature-based solutions.

From our analysis of climate change and related policies and biodiversity loss, we believe that many solutions will also come from innovation, hopefully disruptive innovation. So we're also working with start-ups, and smaller companies through the European Innovation Council to provide support for green solutions.

I think this is a distinct feature in Europe's innovation ecosystem – our startups and innovators also want to make a difference around green challenges. Of course technologies play an important part, but it's also innovation in the broader sense, including social innovation. This is where start-ups can play an important part.

The Covid-19 pandemic made it even clearer how much human health and wellbeing depend on a harmonious relationship with nature. Is the post-pandemic recovery an opportunity for greater environmental, economic and social sustainability?

I think when the first lockdowns were enforced in 2020, we were all really thinking how to change consumer behaviours. But I don't think this was maintained entirely over time. This is also normal because change doesn't happen overnight. But I think what is very visible is that no one in Europe believes we can recover from Covid-19, both economically and socially, by ignoring the need to invest in the Green Deal and the measures and investments needed on climate and biodiversity.

At the heart of Europe's Recovery and Resilience Facility is the central need to invest into Green Deal solutions.

There is now a clear understanding, which has come to the fore following debates sparked by the pandemic, that we as human beings and as a society are dependent on nature. I think this is a new discussion in society that was much less visible before.

I believe the national recovery and resilience plans are a once in a life-time opportunity for a nature-based recovery. The potential for local job creation is tremendous, with local actors having a key role in unlocking this potential. The European Commission will therefore continue to invest, through Horizon Europe, in the delivery and upscaling of innovative nature-based solutions.

Nature-based solutions in EU R&I

- The European Commission has invested more than EUR 240 million in research and innovation on nature-based solutions over recent years, thus placing the EU as leader in innovating with nature to achieve more sustainable and resilient societies.
- The Horizon 2020 projects portfolio on nature-based solutions (28 EU R&I projects) brings together a community of more than 600 European and international innovators and influencers. Nature-based solutions are being delivered on the ground, in more than 25 urban areas across Europe, further cities around the globe (together 70 cities) and 14 landscape-scale demonstration sites.

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