

Strasbourg, 5 November 2013  
[Inf37e\_2013.docx]

**T-PVS/Inf (2013) 37**

CONVENTION ON THE CONSERVATION OF EUROPEAN WILDLIFE  
AND NATURAL HABITATS

**Standing Committee**

33<sup>rd</sup> meeting  
Strasbourg, 3-6 December 2013

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# **INTRODUCTORY REPORT ON NATURE CONSERVATION IN BELARUS**

*Document prepared by  
the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Protection of Belarus*

## **BIOLOGICAL AND LANDSCAPE DIVERSITY CONSERVATION IN THE REPUBLIC OF BELARUS**

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Natural complexes and ecological systems of the Republic of Belarus occupy 11,891.6 thsd.hectares, or 57.3 percent of the country territory (20,759.8 hectares). Forest ecosystems in Belarus occupy about 40 percent of the country's territory. In Belarus, there is a steady upward trend in forested lands share. The average age of forests is 51.5 years. Grassland and wetland ecosystems amount more than 10 percent of the country. Among ecosystems the most valuable for biological diversity conservation are deciduous, broadleaf- spruce and alder forests, wet or seasonally flooded meadows, fens and bogs, lakes and ecosystems of valleys and river beds. Flora consists of about 12 million species, about 2.1 million of which are higher plants and more than 9 million - are algae, lichens and fungi. Fauna includes 472 species of vertebrates and more than 30,000 species of invertebrates. Ichthofauna includes 63 species. 13 species of amphibians were detected. 7 species of reptiles were found. 316 species of birds were recorded, 227 of which are nesting.

### ***Factors posing main threats to biological diversity in Belarus:***

- changing existing land use;
- overgrowing of open natural meadows and fens with bushes;
- fragmentation of habitat due to urbanization of separate regions and intensive development of transport communications;
- changing of natural hydrologic regime, reducing areas of forest stands with complex structure ;
- forest and peat fires;
- climate change and invasive alien species.

### ***Main directions of state policy in field of biological diversity conservation determined in the following legal acts, approved by the President and the government:***

- Strategy for conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity in 2011 - 2020;
- Strategy for implementation of the Convention on Wetlands of International Importance Especially as Waterfowl Habitat;
- National Strategy on development and management of protected areas system till January 1, 2015;
- State program on development of protected areas system for 2008-2014 and others.

### ***Belarus legal framework:***

- Laws enabling state policy in field of biological diversity conservation in the Republic of Belarus: "On Environmental Protection", "On Fauna", "On Flora", "On Specially Protected Natural Territories."

### ***The Republic of Belarus is a party of:***

- Convention on Biological Diversity;
- Convention on Wetlands;
- Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora, CITES;

- Convention on Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals;
- Convention for Protection of Wild Flora and Fauna and Natural Habitats in Europe (since July 2013).

***Authorized state agencies:***

- Ministry of natural resources and environmental protection,
- Ministry of forestry,
- Ministry of agriculture and food,
- Local executive and administrative authorities.
- Ministry of natural resources and environment protection coordinates activities of state bodies and other organizations in this field.

***Mechanisms for biological diversity conservation:***

- Keeping Red Data Book of the Republic of Belarus, identification and transfer under protection habitats for wild animals and plants, which are listed in the Red Data Book of the Republic of Belarus. Red Data Book of the Republic of Belarus contains 481 species (188 species of wild animals and 293 species of wild plants). For comparison, Red List of the International Union for Conservation of Nature includes more than 17,000 species. To save rare species about 1400 habitats for rare wild animals and 1,200 ones for wild plants were legally transferred under protection in the Republic of Belarus.
- Establishment and maintenance of:
  - ✓ system of protected areas of national and local importance;
  - ✓ national Ecological Network;
  - ✓ biosphere Reserves;
  - ✓ rare habitats and landscapes.
  - ✓ System of specially protected natural territories:
    - ✓ reserve;
    - ✓ national park;
    - ✓ zakaznik (sanctuary);
    - ✓ monument of nature.

Total area of protected natural territories amounts in 7.6% (1 569.65 ha) of country's territory. By 2015 it is planned to increase total area of protected territories up to 8.3 percent.

Berezinski Biosphere reserve. Pearl of the territory, the unique beauty of landscape is Berezinski Biosphere Reserve - the oldest among protected territories, composing natural heritage of Europe. It was founded in 1925 for protection and reproduction of beaver, species almost exterminated by that time. Special role of the reserve in nature conservation repeatedly pointed at the international and national levels. It is listed among the first biosphere reserves designated by UNESCO in 1979. For many years, the reserve is a full member of European Federation of National Parks, it was awarded by Diploma of the Council of Europe.

***National parks:***

- ✓ «Belovezhskaya Pushcha» (more than 150 thsd. ha, Brest and Grodno Regions),
- ✓ «Narochanski» (87 thsd. ha, Minsk, Grodno and Vitebsk Regions),
- ✓ «Pripyatski» (more than 88 thsd. ha, Gomel Region),
- ✓ «Braslavskie ozero» (more than 64 thsd. ha, Vitebsk Region).

Belovezhskaya Pushcha - one of the oldest reserves in the world. As a protected area Belovezhskaya Pushcha is known from the XIV - XV centuries., when Grand Duke Jagiello announced its conservation.

In 1992 UNESCO Belovezhskaya Pushcha was included in UNESCO World Cultural and Natural Heritage, in 1993 it was given the status of a biosphere reserve, and in 1998 - the status of bird area of international importance.

National Park «Pripyatski» characterized by exceptionally high biodiversity resources of floodplain landscapes, where vast open grasslands, interspersed with a mosaic array of shrubs, swampy lowlands areas of woodland, single old-growth trees, numerous oxbow lakes.

National Park "Narochanski" characterized by a wide landscape, biological and structural diversity. Forests occupy 40% of the territory, about 60% of the vegetation are in natural conditions. There are 43 lakes within the Park's territory, including largest in the country - lake Narach. Lakes, rivers and streams occupy more than 17% of the total Park's area, and belong to basins of Neman and Western Dvina rivers.

#### ***Zakaznik (Sanctuary):***

- Landscape or complex;
- Biological;
- Wetlands;
- Hydrological.

In Belarus there are 333 zakazniks, 85 of which are of republican importance and 248 are of local importance.

Natural territories under special protection regime (occupy about 15% of the country's territory):

- protective zones and coastal strip of water bodies;
- riparian forests, protection forests, forest areas with special protection;
- habitats of rare and endangered species of wild animals and plants;
- bogs , swamps , which are origins of water courses;
- habitats for wild animals and plants species, included into Red Data Book of the Republic of Belarus;
- biosphere reserves;
- National Ecological Network;
- rare biotopes and natural landscapes;
- other territories, for which special environmental regime was established.

#### **Biodiversity conservation Mechanisms:**

- conducting state ecological expertise and environmental impact assessment for economic and other activities, which may have adverse impacts on biological diversity;
- issuance permits for use of wildlife;
- setting limits on natural resources exploitation, restrictions on use tools, methods, terms and quantitative parameters for retrieval of flora and fauna objects;
- realization of compensatory measures (compensations) under implementation economic and other activities which have adverse impacts on biological diversity and other mechanisms.

### **Cooperation perspectives: Conservation and sustainable use of European bison**

Since 1994, Belarus has implemented "metapopulation model" for conservation of European bison. The gist of it is to maintain existence of European bison in form of "spotted" spatially distributed number of isolated micropopulations (at least 12 micropopulations), numbering in 50 individuals or more in each, and together forming a single Belarusian population of European bison. This model referred in Programme for bison conservation, use and resettlement in Belarus (1994-2000), and in Action plan for conservation and sustainable use of bison (2010-2014).

As a result of undertaken measures, today in Belarus formed 9 micropopulations free-lived bison, totally numbering in 1,134 individuals, what is comparable to the number of bison that lived in Belovezhskaya Pushcha in the end of XVIII century.

However, despite the success of implementation of these programs and plans, due to absence of selection and breeding work, the growth in number of animals forming Belarus micropopulations related with inbreeding processes and consequences. It inevitably leads to the impoverishment of gene pool in created micropopulations.

To improve this situation, it is necessary to move from simple extension of Belarusian bison numbers to judicious crossing with consideration pedigrees and genetic diversity of different micropopulations. Implementation of these approaches is prescribed in Concept of conservation and sustainable use of bison in the Republic of Belarus, which was approved by the Government in 2012 and covers the period up to 2030.

In this regard we see necessity for closer cooperation between Belarus, Russia, Poland, Ukraine and other countries.

Belarus jointly with Russia forms application for funding this work in framework of Union State. At the same time, we see need to engage mechanisms of the Berne Convention and to involve more and more countries in this movement, what will ensure the maximum effect.

### **Conservation and sustainable use of wolf**

Another species, which receiving special attention in Europe is a wolf.

In Belarus, wolf is a usual animal, numbering in more than 1,300 individuals, while optimal number - about 500 individuals.

In European Union, wolf is an endangered species and protecting by Berne Convention as well as by other documents.

By Regulation of European Council, dated 9 December 1996 number 338/97, ban for import of Belarusian wolf hunting trophies was established in 2004.

For Belarus, export of wolf hunting trophies is one of the key direction in development of hunting tourism.

Taking into account fact that number of wolves in Belarus several times higher than optimal, and strict control of state on hunting and game management, we applied to European Commission with a request to consider cancellation of this ban. We have developed management plan for wolf population in the territory of the Republic of Belarus, it was agreed with Latvia, Ukraine and Russia. Poland has a number of remarks, which are not supported from our side. Lithuania for several years did not provide an opinion on the management plan.

We are asking to consider status of wolf population in the Republic of Belarus by appropriate group of experts of Berne Convention.

### **Protection and sustainable use of eel**

In 2007 based on conclusions of European Commission and recommendations of International Council for Exploration of the Sea (ICES), EU Council has issues Regulations, adopted on September 18, 2007 № 1100/2007, which established system for protection and sparing use of European eel (*Anguilla anguilla*) in Community waters . It was concluded that resources of the fish do not meet safe

biological limits, and that eel fishing is not sustainable. As a result, European Union decided to stop export of glass eel in third countries, including Republic of Belarus.

Belarus inland waters is a part of eel trophic habitat, where it came naturally from the Baltic Sea on Western Dvina and Neman rivers, before their streams were being controlled. Eel habitat is lakes, while rivers are served mainly as a migration paths.

Totally from 1956 to 2008 59 million eels individuals were freed in Belarus. Currently, annual share of migrating silver eel from Belarussian lakes is about 10 % of the existing eel population.

In order to preserve this species in Belarus waters, we are interested in purchasing of glass eel as seeding material. Belarus has created capacities for it rearing and subsequent release into lakes.

In this regard Belarus asked to assist in cancellation of EU ban on purchase of eel larvae (glass eel) in 2014 solely for the purpose of retaining of the species in Belarus.