



ENHANCING CLIMATE RESILIENCE THROUGH THE PROTECTION OF NATURAL AREAS

Policy Brief

Name of Indicator: Percentage of natural areas

Field of Application: Planning & Finance

This policy brief is part of the ClimEmpower policy recommendations, available from climempower.eu. It translates evidence and project findings into practical guidance for regional and local policymakers seeking to strengthen resilience to climate and other systemic disruptions. It focuses on natural and semi-natural areas and the ecosystem services they provide in regulating water, mitigating heat and buffering climate hazards.

The main recommendation is to protect and enhance natural and semi-natural areas through spatial planning and conservation strategies. This reinforces their function in regulating water, mitigating heat, buffering hazards and supporting adaptive capacity across the territory, rather than treating them as residual land available for development.

Protection of Natural Areas



Key Challenges

- Natural and semi-natural areas continue to be lost to development and land-use change
- Their role in regulating water, mitigating heat and buffering hazards is undervalued in planning
- Protection and restoration measures are not always coordinated across sectors



Good Practices

- Assessment and monitoring of ecosystem services provided by natural areas
- Nature-based solutions integrated into climate adaptation strategies
- Coordinated protection and enhancement measures across governance levels



Priority policy actions



Assess natural areas and the ecosystem services they provide

Establish an evidence base on the extent, condition and services delivered by natural and semi-natural areas.



Identify priority zones for protection and restoration

Use the assessment to target the areas offering the greatest resilience benefits for protection or restoration.



Embed protection into spatial planning and conservation strategies

Integrate priority natural areas into binding spatial plans and conservation strategies, rather than treating them as residual land.



Develop regulatory frameworks and incentives

Establish rules and incentives that discourage conversion of natural areas and reward their protection and restoration.



Promote nature-based solutions

Scale up approaches that combine ecosystem protection with adaptation functions such as water regulation and urban cooling.

Implementation Roadmap

1

Phase 1 — Assessment and prioritisation

Assess natural areas and the ecosystem services they provide, and identify priority zones for protection and restoration.

2

Phase 2 — Planning and regulatory integration

Integrate priority natural areas into spatial planning and conservation strategies, supported by regulatory frameworks and incentives.

3

Phase 3 — Coordinated implementation

Coordinate action across sectors and governance levels, and implement protection and enhancement measures on the ground.

4

Phase 4 — Scaling nature-based solutions and monitoring

Promote nature-based solutions combining ecosystem protection with climate resilience, and monitor ecosystem condition and outcomes over time.

Funding

LIFE Programme

Can support nature protection and restoration projects.

European Regional Development Fund (ERDF)

Can finance green infrastructure and climate adaptation investment.

Nature Restoration Law financing mechanisms

Provide the regulatory and funding basis for restoration measures.

Horizon Europe

Can fund research on ecosystem services and nature-based solutions.

National and regional conservation funds

Can further support protection and restoration at local level.



Conclusion

Protecting and enhancing natural areas improves wellbeing and access to green spaces, supporting recreational and health benefits for local communities.

It also preserves biodiversity, enhances ecosystem connectivity and strengthens the natural regulatory functions that underpin long-term climate resilience.