



European Natura 2000 Award

8th edition

Rules of Contest

1. Introduction

The European Union's commitment to nature conservation is enshrined in the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030¹ and implemented through its core legislative instruments, in particular the Birds Directive², Habitats Directive³ and the Nature Restoration Regulation⁴.

At the heart of this framework lies the Natura 2000 network⁵ – the world's largest coordinated network of protected areas, comprising over 27 000 sites, and covering 18% of the EU's land area and approximately 9% of its marine territory. The network safeguards Europe's most valuable and threatened species and habitats and provides a wide range of ecosystem services, such as opportunities for ecotourism and agricultural products. Restoring degraded ecosystems and achieving favourable conservation status of Natura 2000 sites could generate significant employment opportunities, estimated at around 140 000 jobs⁶. Overall, the economic value of the Natura 2000 network is estimated at between €200-300 billion per year!⁷

2. Objectives of the Award

Since its launch in 2014, the European Natura 2000 Award (hereafter, 'the Award') has celebrated excellence in nature conservation. It recognises the outstanding efforts of those who manage Natura 2000 sites for the benefit of nature, local communities and businesses. It demonstrates that thriving ecosystems and thriving economies go hand in hand.

The Award aims to showcase the wide variety of approaches to protecting and managing Natura 2000 sites, and to raise awareness of the multiple benefits of the Natura 2000 network. With over 27 000 sites across EU land and sea, every site is unique. Yet site managers often face similar challenges and opportunities. The Natura 2000 Award highlights and promotes existing success stories, to inspire others and to encourage the replication of effective approaches for overcoming shared challenges.

Applying for the Award means more than competing for a prestigious title. Finalists and winners also become ambassadors for the Natura 2000 network, showcasing the many ways that Natura 2000 serves businesses, communities and the environment.

¹ https://environment.ec.europa.eu/strategy/biodiversity-strategy-2030_en

² https://environment.ec.europa.eu/topics/nature-and-biodiversity/birds-directive_en

³ https://environment.ec.europa.eu/topics/nature-and-biodiversity/habitats-directive_en

⁴ https://environment.ec.europa.eu/topics/nature-and-biodiversity/nature-restoration-regulation_en

⁵ https://environment.ec.europa.eu/topics/nature-and-biodiversity/natura-2000_en

⁶ European Commission. (2019). Report from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. Review on the Progress on implementation of the EU Green Infrastructure. Brussels.

⁷ IEEP. (2011). Estimating the Overall Economic Value of the Benefits provided by the Natura 2000 Network. Brussels.

3. Award categories

The Award is organised across five thematic categories. For the 8th edition of the Award, the categories are:

- Conservation on land,
- Marine & coastal,
- Towns & cities,
- Community benefits,
- Public engagement.

In addition to the five categories, all finalists automatically qualify for the European Citizens' Award, the winner of which is determined through an online public vote.

More information about each category, and the Citizens' Award can be found on the [Award website](#).

4. Character of the 8th edition of the Award

The Award recognises and promotes the work of those who protect and manage Europe's most valuable natural sites, species and habitat types, exemplified in the Natura 2000 network.

Participation in the Award brings concrete benefits at every stage of the contest.

All applicants receive targeted visibility by the European Commission. An overview of each eligible application is published on the dedicated [Award website](#), and the results of each call for applications are disseminated in the [Award newsletter](#) and on European Commission social media channels, where relevant and feasible.

All finalists also receive:

- Public recognition and promotion by the European Commission through the Award website, relevant newsletters (European Commission or stakeholder), European Commission social media channels, press releases or news items, and at the official (livestreamed, recorded) Award Ceremony,
- Promotion via the Europe-wide public vote campaign to select the winner of the Citizens' Award,
- Tailor-made visuals for use in their own networks,
- Dedicated social media training (webinar) to help promote their application,
- An invitation to the Award Ceremony in Brussels, including a half-day networking event with fellow finalists and European Commission representatives (including reimbursement for travel and accommodation for up to two persons per finalist application).

Award winners receive the above, plus:

- Formal distinction, trophy and certificate presented at the Award Ceremony,
- Targeted promotion through an additional European Commission press release or news item, and social media channels,
- Support from the Secretariat in organising a local event at or near their Natura 2000 site, attended by a European Commission representative (see also section 9.5 below).

5. Overview of key dates

The indicative key dates for the 8th edition of the Award are:

- 21 May 2026: Launch of the 8th edition of the Award
- 17 June 2026: Online applicants' workshop (webinar)
- 30 September 2026: Deadline for submission of applications
- March 2027: Announcement of finalists
- March - April 2027: Public voting phase
- May/June 2027: European Natura 2000 Award Ceremony

Please check the [Award website](#) regularly or sign up to the [Award newsletter](#) for updates.

6. Eligibility

Eligibility of applicants

The Award is open to any entity or group based in the European Union (with a few exceptions; see below). There is no restriction on the size or type of applicant. Eligible applicants include, but are not limited to:

- individuals,
- businesses,
- non-governmental organisations,
- public authorities,
- landowners,
- hunters and fishers,
- tourism and recreational organisations,
- media,
- research institutions,
- educational bodies.

Partner applicants based outside the EU may be included where they bring clear added value to an application.

The following applicants are not eligible to apply:

- any entity or individual involved in the management of the current Award edition,
- current employees of the European Commission,
- previously winning applications,
- organisations, including businesses, in the process of being wound up,
- applications that do not cover at least one Natura 2000 site,
- two or more applicants applying for the same principal site under the same category in the same edition – in such cases, a joint application must be submitted.
- applications submitted after the deadline.

Eligibility of applications

The key eligibility that applications are required to fulfil are as follows.

- All applications must be directly linked to the Natura 2000 network and must have impacts on at least one Natura 2000 site, designated as a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) or Special Protection Area (SPA).
- Applications to the Conservation on land and Marine & coastal categories must focus on at least one species and / or habitat type(s) for which the principal site is designated. The targeted species or habitat type should appear in the Standard Data Form (SDF) of at least the principal site. Where the SDF has been recently updated or is in the process

- of being updated, a supporting letter from the competent authority should be provided.
- Targeted species and habitat types must be listed under Annex I or II of the Habitats Directive, or under Annex I of the Birds Directive (or be a regularly occurring migratory species).
 - Applications to the Towns & cities, Community benefits and Public engagement categories do not need to focus explicitly on a species or habitat type. However, if they do, it must be one for which the site is designated (see above).
 - Applications for the 8th edition of the Award should be based on activities and / or achievements carried out between 1 September 2021 and 30 September 2026 inclusive. However, if activities started before this date, an earlier start date can be entered. Activities can still be ongoing at the time of application.

[See the full Eligibility criteria.](#)

7. How to apply

Applicants must follow the steps described below to submit an application form.

- Request an application form on the [Award website](#) using the official registration form. The registration form allows applicants to request the application form in any of the EU official languages. Please note that receiving the link to the application form may take up to 5 working days. Therefore, it is recommended to request the application form well in advance of the deadline.
- Duly complete all sections of the application form according to the instructions in the application form⁸ in an official EU language⁹.
- Submit the application form by 30 September 2026, 23:59 CET latest. Applications submitted after the deadline will not be considered.

Please note the following:

- Submissions are only eligible if submitted using the official application form and if submitted online via EUSurvey. Applications submitted via other venues, e.g. the Award Helpdesk or email to Commission functional mailbox(es), will not be accepted.
- Applications may be modified and saved up until they are submitted.
- Applications may not be altered once formally submitted or after expiry of the deadline of 30 September 2026 (23:59 CET) (with the exception of obvious administrative mistakes).

Information entered in the application form provides the basis for the eligibility and selection screening processes. It also includes materials and information to be used for promotional purposes (e.g. presentation of applicants, finalists and winners on the website; the public vote). It is therefore recommended to choose pictures that reflect the work of the application in an appealing way. Pictures in applications should not depict children or potentially distressing subjects; such pictures will not be published.

⁹ Bulgarian, Croatian, Czech, Danish, Dutch, English, Estonian, Finnish, French, German, Greek, Hungarian, Irish, Italian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Maltese, Polish, Portuguese, Romanian, Slovak, Slovenian, Spanish, Swedish.

8. Applicant support and Helpdesk

The [Award website](#) centralises support to applicants, including FAQs and guidance documents.

However, the Award Secretariat also maintains a dedicated Helpdesk throughout the entire Award cycle, to provide additional timely and effective support to applicants (and potential applicants). The Helpdesk provides support on the following issues:

- administrative support (e.g. questions related to different phases of the Award),
- technical issues (issues with EUSurvey platform),
- eligibility questions.

The Helpdesk does not provide support on the content of applications or quality thereof.

The Helpdesk can be contacted during regular business hours for questions that cannot be resolved with the information published on the Award website (or elsewhere). The Helpdesk is accessible through the following channels:

- a dedicated telephone **hotline** available in English, French and German¹⁰,
- the [contact form](#) on the Award website,
- a dedicated **email address** (n2000awards@adelphi.de).

All queries shall be submitted in an official EU language (see section 7 above). Replies will be provided in the language of the original request. For languages not covered directly by the Helpdesk team, please note that the translation will be generated using AI. Helpdesk responses can be expected within 2 business days.

9. Evaluation and selection process

9.1. Expert evaluation phase

After the deadline, all applications are screened for eligibility (see above). All eligible applications are assessed by an independent expert evaluation team. All members of the panel have extensive working experience in topics related to Natura 2000 management such as protected area management, habitat and species protection or biodiversity protection. The evaluators' work experience covers many EU Member States, which also allows them to assess many applications in the original EU language in which they were submitted. However, in some cases, the evaluation may have to rely on an English translation of the application.

The experts evaluate applications against **four key criteria**:

- ✓ effectiveness (weighting 50%),
- ✓ durability (weighting 10%),
- ✓ cost & benefit (weighting 10%),
- ✓ replicability (weighting 10%).

and **four bonus criteria**

- ★ originality (weighting 5%),
- ★ stakeholder involvement (weighting 5%),
- ★ socio-economic benefits (weighting 5%),
- ★ cross-border cooperation (weighting 5%).

No applicant is penalised if they fail to provide evidence of one of the bonus criteria (with the exception of applications to the Community benefits category, which can be marked down on

¹⁰ The Secretariat can be reached at +49 (30) 89 000 68 – 216. Charges may apply and must be borne by the caller.

the socio-economic benefits criterion).

Applications providing descriptive yet to the point qualitative and quantitative information are likely to score better.

[See the full Selection criteria.](#)

Details about the evaluation team can be found on the [Award website](#).

9.2. Final selection stage: high-level jury

Based on the shortlist of finalists, a high-level jury chooses the winners of the five category awards. In the past, jury members have represented the following institutions: European Commission, European Parliament, Committee of the Regions and representatives of key stakeholder organisations.

Jury members will be published on the [Award website](#).

9.3. Citizens Award and public vote

All finalists are automatically entered for the [Citizens' Award](#) in which the European public can vote for its favourite finalist application. The finalist with the largest number of votes wins the Citizens' Award.

On a dedicated webpage, all finalists are presented using photos, a short description of their application and other details such as targeted Natura 2000 site(s) and website (based on the information provided in the application form). The public vote will be promoted on the Award website and through European Commission social media channels. To receive as many votes as possible, finalists are also encouraged to promote their application widely on social media, newsletters and other means available to them.

9.4. The Award winners' announcement and celebrations

The winners of the five European Natura 2000 Award categories and the Citizens' Award are announced during the festive, official European Natura 2000 Award Ceremony in Brussels (in May/June 2027).

Representatives of each finalist application are invited to attend the Natura 2000 Award celebrations. The Secretariat will reimburse certain, predefined costs related to finalists' participation in the Natura 2000 Award celebrations (notably, travel to Brussels and accommodation for two persons). The Secretariat will contact all Award finalists in advance with more information about which costs can be covered and how to claim for them.¹¹

In addition to the Ceremony, all finalists will be invited to attend a networking event to meet the other finalists and European Commission officials working on nature conservation, which is held on the same day as the Ceremony.

After the Award Ceremony, all finalists and winners are also invited to the Award Ceremony cocktail reception.

9.5. Local events

The Award Secretariat offers support to each of the award winners to organise a local event at or near the Natura 2000 site where the winning achievements took place. The purpose of the

¹¹ Restrictions apply. Finalists will receive information from the Secretariat regarding their participation in the Ceremony and should not book their travels before receiving official notification that they should do so.

local events is to promote winning the Award in the winners' regions, to raise awareness of Natura 2000 at local and national level, and engage local citizens, decision-makers, media and environmental stakeholders.

The format of the events is flexible (suitable options are for example guided site tours, workshops, exhibitions, themed activities or school presentations) and may be integrated into an already-foreseen event if appropriate. The local events should ideally take place within one year of the Award Ceremony.

Details about the organisation of the local events will be provided by the Award Secretariat with all winners after the Ceremony.

The Secretariat covers costs of up to €1 500 (one thousand five hundred euros) related to the organisation of each event. Eligible costs include catering, printed materials, venue hire or transport and other types of event facilitation (e.g. moderator). This support budget must only be used for expenditure directly related to the local event celebrating the winner's Award. All planned expenditure must be communicated to the Secretariat in advance.

Following the event, winners are asked to provide basic documentation on the event including an attendance list, press coverage and photographs. Information about the completed events will be published on the Award website.

10. Reporting on the Award

The Award Secretariat will carry out an evaluation of the 8th edition of the Award to assess performance and propose improvements for future editions. With this in view, after the end of the application phase, everyone having registered for the Natura 2000 Award will be asked to complete a feedback form to evaluate their experience with the Award.

Findings will be included in a 'post assessment report' that will be submitted to the European Commission.

11. Data protection and intellectual property rights

The Commission is bound by Regulation 2018/1725 on the protection of natural persons with regard to the processing of personal data by the Union institutions, bodies, offices and agencies and on the free movement of such data. The Commission will process personal data from applicants in accordance with this regulation.

The European Commission shall be authorised to publish or reference the following information in any form or medium:

- the name of all eligible applications,
- the name of the lead and partner applicant(s) of all eligible applications,
- the location of all applications,
- all or parts of the completed application of all applications, including website addresses, photos and other visual materials.

Photos and videos taken by the European Commission, either in preparation of the Award Ceremony or during the Award Ceremony, are the sole property of the European Commission and may only be used in reference to the present edition of the Award and in the context of EU policies.

For more details, please refer to the [European Natura 2000 Award \(2027\) Privacy Statement](#).

12. Intellectual property rights

All photos, visuals and other footage submitted in the application will be used for promotional purposes of the Award. By uploading photos, visuals and links to videos in the application form, you confirm that you have the rights to these pictures. The European Commission reserves the right of use of the submitted material. All Award winners obtain the IPR over the results of the award of the European Natura 2000 Award title.

For more details, please refer to the [European Natura 2000 Award \(2027\) Privacy Statement](#).

13. Dispute resolution

If applicants believe that there has been maladministration, they may lodge a complaint to the European Ombudsman within two years of the date when they become aware of the facts which form the basis for the complaint (see <http://www.ombudsman.europa.eu>).

For more details, please refer to the [European Natura 2000 Award \(2027\) Privacy Statement](#).

14. Important information

Don't wait until the last minute – Complete your application sufficiently in advance of the deadline to avoid any last-minute technical problems. Problems due to last-minute submissions (e.g. congestion, etc.) will be entirely at your risk. There will be no exceptions to the communicated deadline, unless they are published on the Award website and valid for all applicants. **Consult** the [Award website](#) regularly and sign-up for the [Award newsletter](#). All updates and additional information on the call (call updates) will be published in at least these two places.

Cancellation – The European Commission reserves the right to cancel the contest or decide not to award one or of all the award titles without any obligation to compensate participants (e.g. in case there are no applications, the jury cannot determine a winner, the winner is not eligible or must be excluded, objectives have already been achieved, etc). In such a case, anyone who has registered will be informed by the Award Secretariat.

Transparency – Information about the applicants to the Award will be published and kept on the [Award website](#) for up to five years. Publication can exceptionally be waived upon a reasoned and duly substantiated request, if disclosure risks jeopardising rights and freedoms under the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights or harming commercial interests.

15. Reference documents

The following documents form an integral part of the Rules of contest:

- × [European Natura 2000 Award \(2027\) Eligibility criteria](#)
- × [European Natura 2000 Award \(2027\) Selection criteria](#)
- × [European Natura 2000 Award \(2027\) Privacy statement](#)