

Policy responses to the Ukraine crisis threaten European biodiversity

To the Editor — The Russian invasion of Ukraine is first and foremost a human tragedy. This crisis has also abruptly changed the geopolitical landscape and views on globalization as a pathway to increased wealth and security. War has always compromised incentives for collaboration¹, and in the case of Ukraine it could jeopardize hard-won gains in efforts to combat global climate change and biodiversity decline. We argue that rash changes to land-use policy currently being made in Europe in response to the invasion are ill-advised, and we call for the establishment of an independent European Biodiversity Council to help to safeguard biodiversity in the region.

The invasion of Ukraine and resulting international sanctions on Russia and Belarus have sparked a renewed European focus on energy and food security. European political leaders are aiming to make Europe independent of Russian energy (oil and gas) and food resources (mainly grain and oil seeds) within a decade, and in some countries much faster than this. This has massive implications both in Europe and worldwide.

Russia and Ukraine are responsible for around 30% of the world's wheat production; the world market has faced an 80% increase in wheat prices following the invasion², and there is a high risk of disruptions to food systems, causing famine and malnourishment³. The policy movement away from Russian gas has increased energy prices and the demand for biomass from wood and crops for heating and electricity purposes. Further, the UK faces rationing of cooking oil⁴ and Indonesia has banned export of palm oil to secure domestic supply and mitigate rising food prices⁵.

These forces will create a market pull that increase pressure on forest and open land, which risks leaving biodiversity as the loser. The ramifications of this market pressure are currently unfolding in Europe. On 22 March 2022 almost all member states of the EU (except Denmark, Germany and Italy) voted that farmers should be allowed to use fallow land to grow subsidized proteins and other crops, to avert the scarcity of feed and food. As fallow land often is less productive, farmers would — under the new EU decision — also be allowed to apply more pesticides and fertilizers. This decision



Fig. 1 | A crop field in Denmark (left) following conversion from a fallow field (right). Photograph by P. Størup¹³.

is bad news for biodiversity. Seminal vegetation types, such as fallow land, are a crucial part of the European landscape and losses of such land are a key driver of farmland bird decline⁶ (Fig. 1). Likewise, fertilizers and pesticides are some of the main drivers of biodiversity loss in Europe⁷.

Past crises have slowed the speed of green transitions⁸, and also the previous 'Great Recession' of 2008 saw environmental ambitions fall when increased unemployment negatively affected public support for environmental protections⁹. Now, as a result of the current crisis, the long-awaited EU Restoration Law proposal — which was planned to be published on 23 March — has been postponed (currently to 22 June 2022). Indeed, the Restoration Law has been championed as key legislative architecture for reversing current severe declines of nature across the EU (as evidenced by the most recent 'state of nature' report¹⁰). In addition, there are fears¹¹ that this delay could be interpreted as a potential softening of the otherwise laudable ambitions of the European Commission and Parliament through the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 and the European Green Deal.

We recognize the importance of improving both food and energy security, but we argue that it is imperative that the EU Commission and member states retain an ambitious and long-term perspective on restoring biodiversity. This will require biodiversity and land-use policies that are robust in times of crisis and shifting political priorities — the current crisis is not the first, and will not be the last. The ambitious targets of the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 lay an impressive foundation for conserving and restoring Europe's decimated nature. However, how these targets will be realized will be critical. We believe this will require land-use reforms that acknowledge the great biodiversity value of private land¹². This should include strategies for designating private protected areas as well as reforms to minimize harmful subsidies linked to production and increase conservation finance, such as through payments for ecosystem services.

The EU has this year designated members of the European Scientific Advisory Board on Climate Change: according to the European Climate Law, this advisory board will provide

independent scientific advice comment on the EU's international commitments under the Paris Agreement. We suggest that a similar institution is needed to assess and advise on EU biodiversity commitments; an independent EU biodiversity council should be introduced to serve as watchdog and provide advice on how to meet legally binding targets to the benefit of EU citizens and the global community. There is currently no overview of existing fallow land in EU countries and a first task of such an advisory council could be to investigate the extent of fallow lands and their potential to help to fulfil the ambitions of the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 and the European Green Deal. 

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Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.