Parliamentary Assembly
Assemblée parlementaire
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COUNCIL OF EUROPE
CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

Recommendation 1310 (1996)[1]
Final version

Results and follow-up to European Nature Conservation Year 1995 (ENCY '95)

Parliamentary Assembly

1. Almost thirty-five years after the Parliamentary Assembly's initiative aimed at establishing ongoing European co-operation in the field of nature conservation, the environment has become one of the key areas of work of several international organisations.

2. Important conferences such as the Earth Summit in Rio (June 1992) at a global level, and the 3rd Pan-European Conference of Ministers of the Environment (Sofia, October 1995) at a European level, have given governments the opportunity to commit themselves to policies specifically designed to conserve our resources and to guarantee the ecologically sustainable development of the planet.

3. In spite of this growing awareness, which is already a significant step forward in addressing these problems, the measures implemented by governments so far rarely match the seriousness of the threats to our resources or to commitments made in this area.

4. The Assembly firmly believes that, as in other areas, responsibility for environmental protection lies with each and every one of us and therefore that all sections of society should assume their part.

5. In this connection, raising awareness and providing information and education on environmental problems are an indispensable element of all environmental policies.

6. The Assembly therefore welcomes the fact that the Council of Europe organised a second nature conservation campaign, twenty-five years after the first, and also the fact that this campaign focused on environmental protection outside protected areas, that is, where the human activities which are the main cause of environmental degradation take place.

7. European Nature Conservation Year 1995 (ENCY '95) was a great success in the forty-two European countries which participated in the event and provided an opportunity to reaffirm the Council of Europe's leading role in the field of nature conservation. Moreover, it undoubtedly helped to raise awareness of nature conservation problems in Europe and to convince people that, as with environmental policies in general, nature conservation calls for an integrated approach and needs to become a component of sectoral policies such as transport policy or policies in the field of public works, agriculture, tourism, and industrial development.

8. It is important to ensure, however, that some of the activities undertaken and synergies created have lasting effects and make a long-term contribution to more effective nature conservation.

9. In this connection, it is important, with due regard to the powers and responsibilities of the various parties, to foster dialogue with non-governmental organisations working in the field of environmental protection so that we can draw upon their experience and expertise and also, through them, be in direct contact with society at large.

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1. Text adopted by the Standing Committee, acting on behalf of the Assembly, on 7 November 1996 (see Doc. 7696, report of the Committee on the Environment, Regional Planning and Local Authorities, rapporteur: Mr Hardy).

10. In this context, the Assembly can welcome the fact that the European Ministers of the Environment, meeting in Sofia for their third pan-European conference, approved the Pan-European Biological and Landscape Diversity Strategy which had been prepared by the Council of Europe, and that the latter was asked to implement this strategy in conjunction with the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP).

11. Nevertheless, as with ENCY '95, successful implementation of the strategy will largely depend on the synergies created through the combined action of different groups involved, be they decisionmakers, economic operators or non-governmental organisations.

12. Moreover, the Assembly is fully aware and pleased that, out of concern for efficiency, European and international organisations working in the field of the environment are sharing tasks and that the Council of Europe's pioneering role and experience in nature conservation have naturally singled it out as the body responsible for pan-European co-operation in this field.

13. However, it regrets that the role assigned to the Council of Europe in the "Sofia process" is limited to nature conservation which, in addition, is not a priority of the ministers.

14. It regrets in particular that the Council of Europe's experience of conventions, and notably of drafting instruments concerning environmental protection, has not been recognised as a possible contribution to the "Sofia process", particularly in the preparation of the convention on access to environmental information and public participation in environmental decision-making.

15. Similarly, it is equally deplorable that the governments which gave the Council of Europe the authority to prepare the Convention on Civil Liability for damage resulting from activities dangerous to the environment, which they adopted and opened for signature at the Conference of European Ministers of Justice in Lugano in 1993, have still not signed and ratified this instrument.

16. Nevertheless, the Council of Europe must carry out the terms of reference given to it by the ministers in Sofia, act, as appropriate, upon the conclusions of and the expectations raised by ENCY '95 and assert a role equivalent to that of other organisations in the implementation of a pan-European environment policy.

17. The budgetary decisions to be taken should therefore clearly reflect a determination to see the Council of Europe play an active role in its specific fields of competence and to make use of the potential represented by its long experience of working in these fields.

18. It has to be recognised, however, that, at least in the current situation, the resources made available to this sector do not seem to demonstrate this determination and that the funds which were available to these activities before they were incorporated into the strategy or before the events of ENCY '95 have remained unchanged.

19. In this connection, while reaffirming its concern to see that the Bern Convention obtains the financial resources and staff which would allow it to take on fully the role assigned to it in the Pan-European Biodiversity and Landscape Strategy, the Assembly is deeply disappointed to see that no additional resources have been made available to this convention.

20. This lack of resources is all the more regrettable given that the Council of Europe could, in keeping with its role vis-à-vis the countries of central and eastern Europe, usefully offer these countries the benefit of its experience in order to help them meet the legislative or administrative conditions needed to implement the conventions to which they are party.

21. The Assembly therefore recommends that the Committee of Ministers:

21.1. take appropriate follow-up action on the positive results of ENCY '95, in particular by fostering closer relations with non-governmental organisations so as to take full advantage of the contribution which they can make in this area and by ensuring that certain priorities of ENCY '95, such as environmental education projects, become long-term elements in the Council of Europe's work;

21.2. take the necessary measures to give the Council of Europe, within the limits of its specific fields of competence, a role equivalent to that of the other organisations involved in the "Sofia process" and, in order to achieve this:

a. increase the resources allocated to the implementation of the Pan-European Biological and Landscape Diversity Strategy in order to furnish tangible evidence of its commitment to this sector;

b. help the countries of central and eastern Europe to meet the conditions for the application of the conventions to which they are party, through specific and appropriate projects;

c. substantially increase the resources available to the Standing Committee of the Bern Convention, thereby demonstrating a real determination to make this instrument one of the key conventions in the field of nature conservation;

d. invite the governments of member states to sign and ratify the Convention on Civil Liability for damage resulting from activities dangerous to the environment, which was opened for signature in Lugano in 1993;

e. ensure that the Council of Europe actively participates in the preparatory work for the 4th Pan-European Conference of Ministers of the Environment to be held in Denmark in 1998, and particularly in the preparation of the convention on public participation in environmental decisionmaking.