

Attitudes of Europeans towards the issue of biodiversity

Summary

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Attitudes of Europeans towards the issue of biodiversity

Survey conducted by The Gallup Organization
Hungary upon the request of Directorate-
General Environment



EUROBAROMETER

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Communication

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THE GALLUP ORGANIZATION

Table of Contents

Table of Contents	3
Introduction	4
Main findings	5
1. What is <i>biodiversity loss</i>?	6
2. Information about biodiversity loss	7
2.1 How informed do EU citizens feel about biodiversity loss?	7
2.2 Becoming informed about biodiversity	8
3. Biodiversity threats	8
4. Biodiversity loss – seriousness of the problem	9
4.1 Domestic and global biodiversity issues	9
4.2 Personally affected by biodiversity loss	9
5. Recognising the importance of protecting biodiversity	10
5.1 A multitude of reasons why biodiversity conservation is important	10
5.2 Personal efforts to help preserve biodiversity	11
6. Awareness of the <i>Natura 2000</i> network	12

Introduction

The European Union (EU) is committed to the protection of "biological diversity", i.e. the variability among living organisms from all sources including, inter alia, terrestrial, marine, and other aquatic ecosystems and the ecological complexes of which they are part; this includes diversity within species, between species and of ecosystems¹. The EU has been legislating on biodiversity since the 1970s and is committed to implementing the *Convention on Biological Diversity*. Today, one of the four priority areas of the *EU's Sixth Environment Action Programme 2002-12 is nature and biodiversity*. The 2006 Biodiversity Communication on *Halting the loss of biodiversity by 2010 – and beyond: Sustaining ecosystem services for human wellbeing* contains an Action Plan which aims to pull together actors and resources at EU and national levels to implement the actions that will contribute towards achieving the 2010 target.

This Flash Eurobarometer survey on “*Attitudes towards biodiversity*” (N° 219), requested by DG Environment, asked EU citizens to clarify how familiar they were with the term *biodiversity* and with the concept of *biodiversity loss*. The survey also dealt with the following aspects relating to biodiversity loss:

- The level to which EU citizens feel informed about biodiversity issues
- The preferred information sources for learning more about biodiversity loss
- Opinions about the major causes of biodiversity loss
- The perceived seriousness of biodiversity loss at both domestic and global levels
- The expected impact of biodiversity loss
- Opinions on why it is important to stop biodiversity loss
- Personal efforts being taken to preserve biodiversity
- Awareness of the *Natura 2000* network

The survey's fieldwork was carried out between 20th and 24th of November, 2007. Over 25,000 randomly selected citizens, aged 15 years and above, were interviewed in the EU's 27 Member States. Interviews were predominantly carried out via fixed telephone, approximately 1,000 in each of the Member States except Estonia, Cyprus, Luxembourg and Malta where approximately 500 interviews were conducted.

To correct sampling disparities, a post-stratification weighting of the results was implemented, based on important socio-demographic variables. More details on survey methodology are included in the Annex of this report.

¹ Source: Article 2 of the Convention on Biological Diversity.

Main findings

- Although a majority of EU citizens had heard of the term *biodiversity*, only **35% said they also knew what biodiversity meant.**
- When the term “biodiversity” was explained, a majority of EU citizens were able to define the meaning of “biodiversity loss” in their own words. **The general public understood biodiversity loss mostly as a species-focused concept** or as a concept related to changes in natural habitats.
- **A minority of EU citizens felt well informed** about the topic of biodiversity loss.
- **Watching news and documentaries on TV**, searching the Internet and reading newspapers and magazines were the three **most typical ways of finding out more about biodiversity issues.**
- When EU citizens were asked about the **most important threats to biodiversity, pollution and man-made disasters were given equal weighting in importance.** Twenty-seven percent thought that air and water pollution were the most important causes of biodiversity loss, and the same percentage mentioned man-made disasters, such as oil spills or industrial accidents.
- Forty-three percent of respondents reported that **biodiversity loss was a very serious problem in their own country.**
- However, **biodiversity loss at a global level was considered to be more important than biodiversity loss at a national level.** Almost seven out of 10 EU citizens thought that the decline and possible extinction of animal species, natural habitats and ecosystems were very serious global problems.
- In terms of possible effects on themselves, most EU citizens saw **no immediate personal impact of biodiversity loss.** Only one in five respondents reported being already affected by the decline and possible extinction of flora and fauna (19%).
- **A majority of respondents, however, thought that biodiversity loss would have an impact in the future;** 35% of respondents expected it to have an impact in the near future (they would feel an impact) and the same proportion said that while they did not expect to be personally affected, their children would feel the consequences of biodiversity loss.
- **EU citizens were aware of the multitude of reasons why the conservation of biodiversity is important;** a plurality of respondents agreed that all of the reasons (as defined in the survey) were essential.
- Respondents seemed to see the conservation of biodiversity first and foremost as a **moral obligation.** In addition, more than half of the interviewees strongly agreed that it was important to halt biodiversity loss because **the citizens’ well-being and quality of life depended on it.**
- A slightly lower proportion of respondents agreed that the conservation of biodiversity was important because **biodiversity was indispensable for the production food, fuel and medicines,** or because **biodiversity loss would probably have economic consequences for Europe.**
- **More than two out of three respondents said that they personally made some efforts to protect biodiversity,** and half of them said they would be willing to do even more in order to counteract biodiversity loss.
- Twenty-one percent of respondents said they were **not taking any actions because they did not know what to do to stop biodiversity loss.**
- **EU citizens have little knowledge of Natura 2000;** 80% of respondents said they had never heard of the *Natura 2000* network.

1. What is *biodiversity loss*?

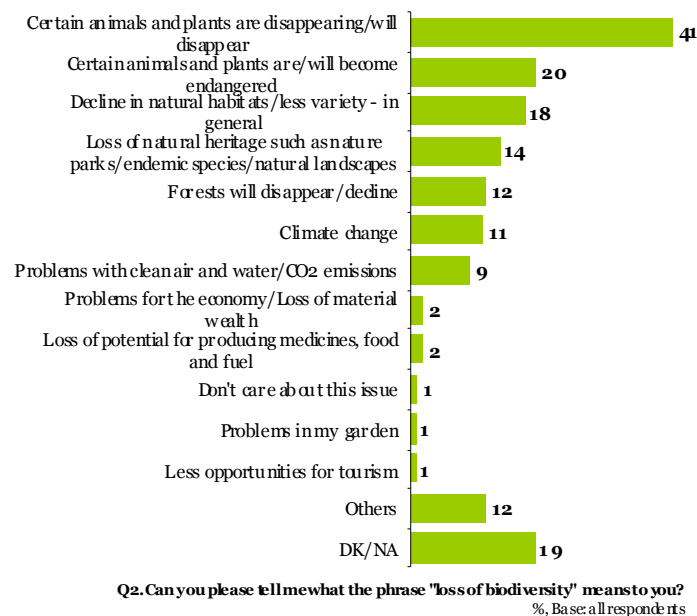
In the past few years we have seen the launch of several biodiversity awareness campaigns that aimed to demonstrate the values of biodiversity (e.g. the biodiversity campaign “*I give life to my planet!*” in Belgium or the launch of “*Notice Nature*” in Ireland). Nevertheless, only 35% of EU citizens said they knew the meaning of the term *biodiversity*, while 30% said they had heard of the term but did not know its meaning. Thirty-five percent claimed they had never heard of the term.

Before continuing the interview, respondents were presented with a short definition of the term *biodiversity*. The aim was to enable them to give more informed answers to the remaining questions about biodiversity loss.

Biological diversity – or biodiversity – is the term given to the variety of life on Earth (such as plants, animals, oceans) which forms the web of life of which we are an integral part.

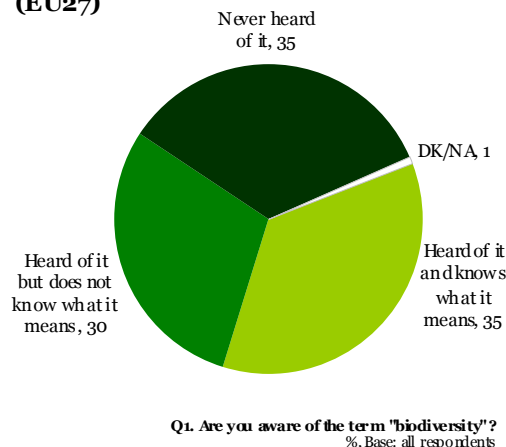
Following this definition, respondents were asked to describe what the concept of *biodiversity loss* meant to them, and their responses were categorised by topic, such as “loss of natural habitats” or “climate change”. When the term *biodiversity* was explained, a majority of EU citizens were able to define the meaning of biodiversity loss in their own words, and a large number of them were even able to sum up various aspects of biodiversity loss.

Meaning of “biodiversity loss” (EU27, % of mentions)



said something relating to the loss of natural heritage, such as natural parks and landscapes, and 12% reported that forests would disappear or that the total area of forests would decline.

Familiarity with the term “biodiversity” (EU27)



Biodiversity is a multidimensional concept and, consequently, this is also true for the concept of *biodiversity loss*. Nevertheless, the general public understood it mostly as a species-focused concept. In this survey, the largest group of respondents gave an answer that was coded as relating to the loss of species; 41% of respondents said that biodiversity loss meant that certain animals and plants were disappearing or would disappear and 20% said it meant that certain animals and plants were endangered or would become endangered.

Another group of respondents mentioned changes in natural habitats; 18% mentioned the decline of natural habitats, 14%

A smaller number of respondents mentioned causes of biodiversity loss, such as climate change (11%) and problems with clean air and water or CO₂ emissions (9%). Finally, a minority named consequences of biodiversity loss; 2% thought about economic problems and loss of material wealth, 2% mentioned a decreasing potential in the production of medicines, food and fuel, and 1% mentioned consequences for tourism.

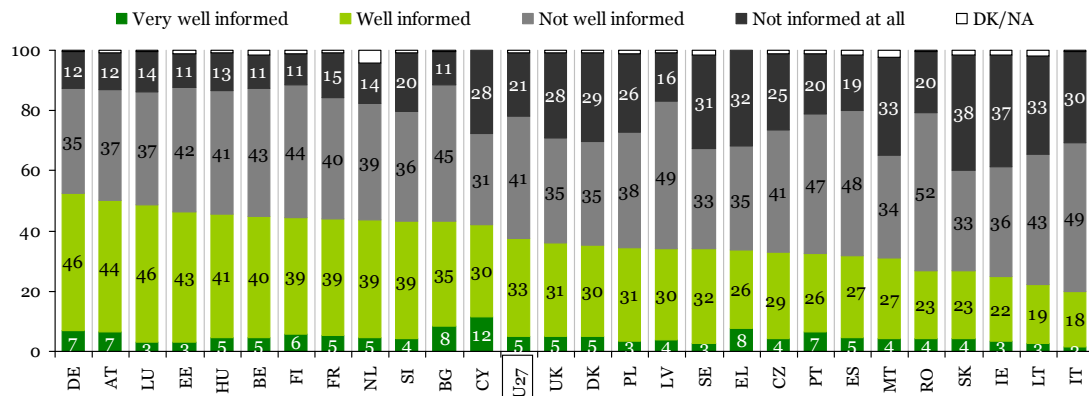
2. Information about biodiversity loss

2.1 How informed do EU citizens feel about biodiversity loss?

In accordance with the levels of awareness concerning biodiversity, we found that a minority of EU citizens felt well informed about the topic of biodiversity loss; 33% of respondents felt well informed and 5% said they felt *very* well informed. Slightly more than one in five respondents (21%) reported that they were not informed *at all* about biodiversity loss and 41% said they were not well informed.

German and Austrian citizens were the most likely to feel well informed about biodiversity loss; 7% of respondents in both countries reported being *very* well informed and 46% and 44%, respectively, felt well informed. Respondents in Italy and Latvia, on the contrary, felt the least informed about biodiversity loss, with less than one in four feeling well informed or *very* well informed about the topic. However, Slovakian and Irish interviewees were the ones that most frequently said they did not feel at all informed about the topic of biodiversity loss (38% and 37%, respectively, selected this possibility). Finally, Romanian respondents (52%) were the most likely to feel not well informed.

Being informed about biodiversity loss, by country



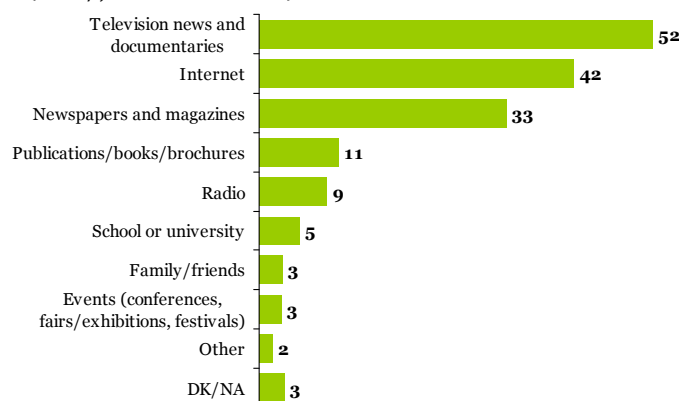
Q3. How informed do you feel about the loss of biodiversity?
%, Base: all respondents by country

The level of feeling well informed about biodiversity loss increased with age, educational attainment and occupational status of the respondents. Men were slightly more likely than women to report that they felt well informed about biodiversity loss and the urban inhabitants were again slightly less likely than residents of rural or metropolitan areas to feel well informed about the topic.

2.2 Becoming informed about biodiversity

In all EU Member States, watching news and documentaries on TV, searching the Internet and reading newspapers and magazines were the three most typical ways of finding out more about biodiversity issues, such as the causes of biodiversity loss. Slightly more than half of EU citizens (52%) said they would find information about biodiversity through watching TV news and documentaries; 42% mentioned the Internet and one-third of respondents mentioned newspapers and magazines.

Primary sources of information about biodiversity (EU27, % of mentions)



Q9. Where would you get information about biodiversity such as threats, losses etc?
%, Base: all respondents

Reading publications, such as books and brochures, and listening to the radio were mentioned by, respectively, 11% and 9% of respondents as the preferred method of learning about issues relating to biodiversity. Only 5% of respondents mentioned that they had learnt more about biodiversity in their classes at school or at university, and just 3% of respondents mentioned family and friends or attending an event, such as a conference, an exhibition or a festival.

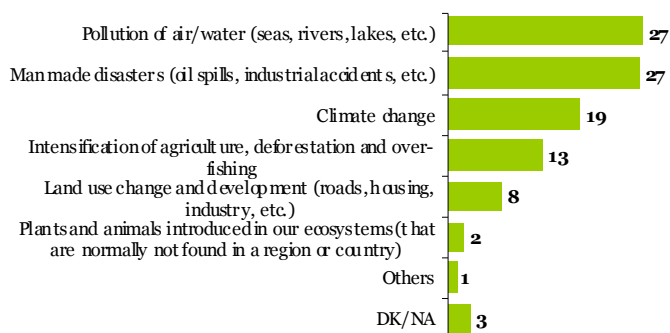
Older respondents, the less educated ones, manual workers and non-working respondents were more likely than their counterparts to watch TV news and documentaries to get more information about biodiversity and were less likely to use the Internet. Older respondents were, however, more likely than younger ones to say that they would read newspapers and magazines, or books and brochures, when looking for more information about biodiversity loss and its causes.

3. Biodiversity threats

The main causes of biodiversity loss are due to intensive agricultural production systems, over-exploitation of forests, oceans, rivers, lakes and soils, construction and development, invasion of alien species, pollution and global climate change. Respondents were presented with this list of main threats to biodiversity and were asked to select the one that they considered the most important.

Water and air pollution, man-made disasters and climate change were selected as the three most important threats to biodiversity in most EU countries. Slightly less than three out of 10 respondents (27%) thought that air and water pollution were the most important threats to biodiversity. The same percentage mentioned man-made disasters, such as oil spills or industrial accidents, as the most important causes of biodiversity loss. One in five respondents (19%) selected climate change as the most important threat to biodiversity.

Most important threats to biodiversity (EU27)



Q7. I will read out a list to you. Please tell me, from the following list, what threatens biodiversity the MOST?
%, Base: all respondents

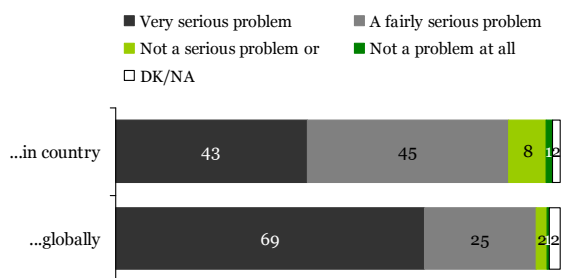
Thirteen percent selected the intensification of agriculture, deforestation and over-fishing, and 8% selected changes in land use and the creation of more roads, houses or industrial sites. Only 2% of respondents thought that the introduction of plants and animals into our ecosystems was the main reason for biodiversity loss.

4. Biodiversity loss – seriousness of the problem

4.1 Domestic and global biodiversity issues

A majority of EU citizens thought that the decline and possible extinction of animal species, flora and fauna, natural habitats and ecosystems was a serious problem in their country; 43% reported that biodiversity loss was a *very* serious problem in their country and 45% said it was a *fairly* serious problem.

Seriousness of biodiversity loss (EU27)



Q5_A/B. How serious is the decline and possible extinction of animal species, flora and fauna, natural habitats and ecosystems in your [COUNTRY]? And how serious is the problem globally? It is a...? %; Base: all respondents

Only a minority said that biodiversity loss was not a serious problem (8%) or that it was no problem at all in their country (1%).

This survey also found that biodiversity loss at a global level was considered to be even more important than biodiversity loss at a national level. Almost seven out of 10 EU citizens thought that the decline and possible extinction of animal species, flora and fauna, natural habitats and ecosystems was a *very* serious *global* problem and one in four said it was a *fairly* serious *global* problem.

Biodiversity loss as a domestic problem

Only 10% of interviewees thought that biodiversity loss was a serious problem in Finland, 11% in Estonia, 15% in Latvia and 18% in Denmark. The level of concern increased significantly as we looked further south: respondents in Greece (70%), Portugal and Romania (both 67%), Bulgaria (61%), Cyprus (58%) and Italy (57%) were the most likely to report that the decline and possible extinction of animal species, natural habitats and ecosystems was a *very* serious problem in their respective countries. This geographical pattern of differences, in opinions about the seriousness of biodiversity loss at a national level, was similar to other survey results that had collected opinions about other environmental issues, such as the seriousness of climate change.

Seriousness of biodiversity loss at a global level

In all EU Member States, global biodiversity loss was considered to be a more serious problem than biodiversity loss at a national level. Respondents in Portugal and Greece were not only the most likely to think that biodiversity loss was a serious domestic problem but also that it was a *very* serious global problem (87% and 82%, respectively). At the lower end of the distribution – where respondents were less likely to find biodiversity loss to be a *very* serious global problem – it was noted that Finnish and Estonian respondents were not only the least likely to think that biodiversity loss was a serious domestic problem but also that it was a *very* serious global problem (49% and 53%, respectively).

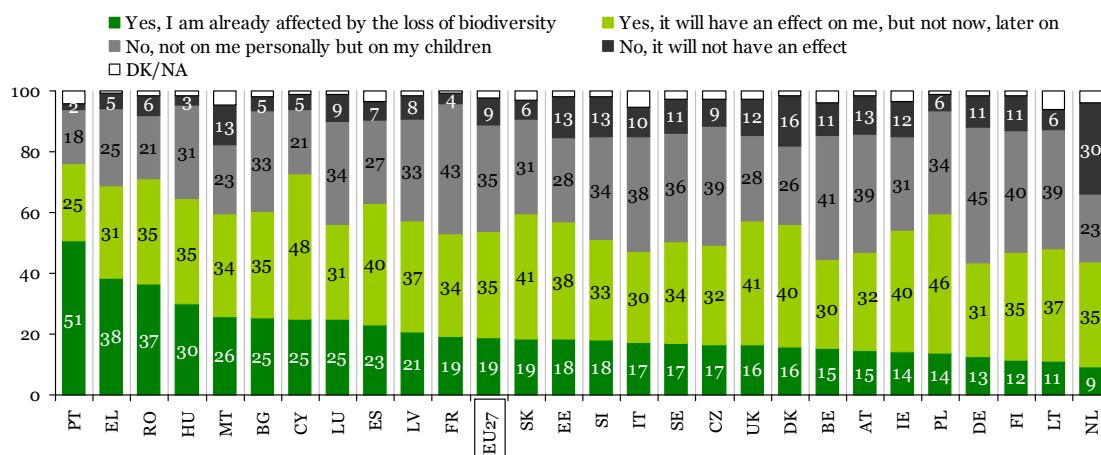
4.2 Personally affected by biodiversity loss

In terms of being affected by biodiversity loss, most EU citizens saw no immediate personal impact. Only one in five respondents reported being already affected by the extinction of flora and fauna (19%). A majority of respondents thought that biodiversity loss would have an impact in the future; 35% of respondents expected biodiversity loss to have an impact in the near future (they expected to be affected personally) and the same proportion said that they did not anticipate being personally affected but that their children would feel the consequences of biodiversity loss.

More than half of the Portuguese respondents (51%) said they were already being personally affected by the extinction of flora and fauna. Other countries at the higher end of the scale were Estonia and Romania (38% and 37%, respectively). On the contrary, only about one in 10 respondents in the Netherlands (9%), Lithuania (11%) and Finland (12%) said they felt personally affected by the decline and possible extinction of fauna and flora.

Respondents from Cyprus and Poland were the most likely to say that they would feel the impact of biodiversity loss in the future (48% and 46%, respectively) and Portuguese citizens – as would be expected due to the previous findings – were the least likely to expect an impact in the future (25%). The percentage of respondents who answered that their children would feel the impact of biodiversity loss in their lives was the highest in Germany (45%) and France (43%) and the lowest in Portugal (18%), Romania and Cyprus (both 21%).

Impact of biodiversity loss, by country



Q6. Do you think that the decline and possible extinction of animal species, flora and fauna, will have an impact on you personally?
%, Base: all respondents by country

We found that the younger interviewees were more likely to foresee a personal impact from biodiversity loss, while older respondents expected an impact on future generations. We also found that respondents with higher levels of education were more liable to say that they either already felt affected by the impoverishment of flora and fauna or that they expected to be personally affected in the near future. An inverse trend was observed in regard to the impact on future generations; the less educated citizens more frequently said that, although they would not be affected themselves by biodiversity loss, their children would feel its impact.

5. Recognising the importance of protecting biodiversity

5.1 A multitude of reasons why biodiversity conservation is important

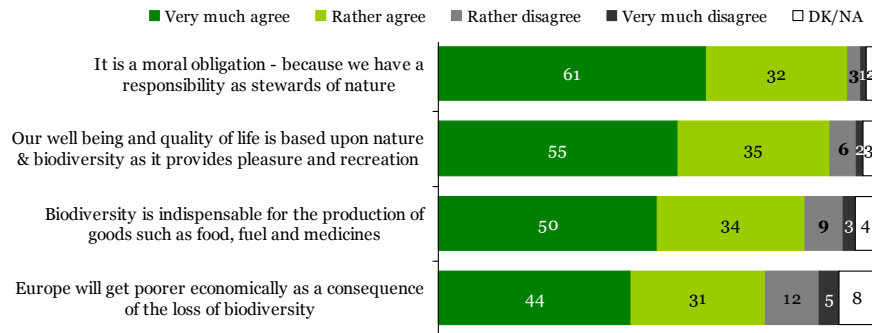
EU citizens' opinions on why it was important to halt biodiversity loss were also analysed. Respondents were presented with a list of possible reasons why this was an important topic and asked to point out if they agreed or disagreed with each of them. The responses indicated, first of all, that EU citizens were aware of the multitude of reasons why the conservation of biodiversity was important; a plurality of respondents agreed that all of the reasons (as defined in the survey) were essential.

Respondents seemed to see the conservation of biodiversity, first and foremost, as a moral obligation; 61% of respondents strongly agreed with this concept and 32% agreed to a lesser extent. Secondly, more than half of the interviewees (55%) strongly agreed, and 35% agreed, that it was important to halt biodiversity loss because citizens' well-being and quality of life depended on it.

A slightly lower proportion of respondents agreed that the conservation of biodiversity was important because biodiversity was indispensable for the production of goods, such as food, fuel and medicines,

or because biodiversity loss would probably have economic consequences for Europe (half of the interviewees strongly agreed with the statement about the production of goods and 44% strongly agreed with the statement about the economic consequences for Europe).

Reasons why it is important to halt biodiversity loss (EU27)



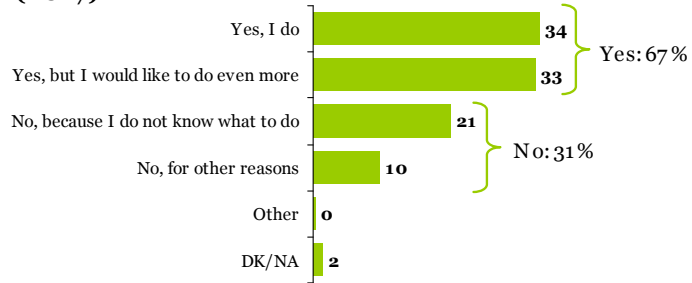
Q4. I will read some statements to you why it can be important to halt the loss of biodiversity, and please tell me how much do you agree or disagree with them: % Base: all respondents

5.2 Personal efforts to help preserve biodiversity

More than two out of three respondents said they personally made some efforts to protect biodiversity (67%), and half of them said they would be willing to do even more in order to counteract biodiversity loss (33% of all respondents replying 'yes').

Thirty-one percent of respondents answered that they were not making any attempts to protect biodiversity. However, two-thirds of these respondents said this was because they did not know what to do to stop biodiversity loss (21% of all respondents replying 'no'). One in 10 respondents gave other reasons for not protecting biodiversity.

Personal efforts to protect biodiversity (EU27)

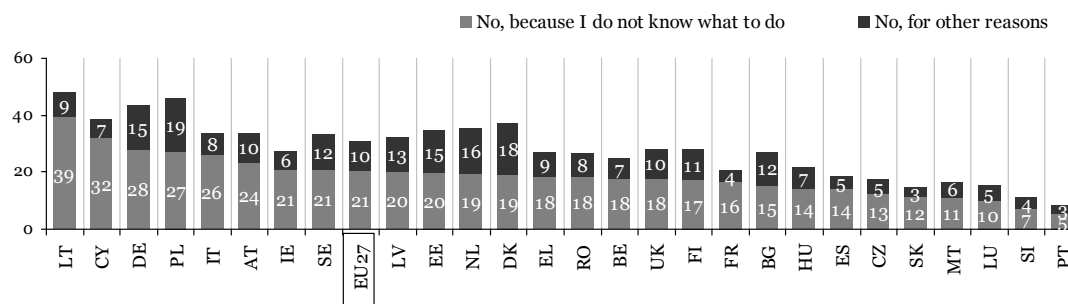


Q10. Would you say that you personally make an effort to protect biodiversity? % Base: all respondents

The country specific results indicated that respondents in Portugal, Slovenia and Luxembourg were the most committed to the conservation of biodiversity; in these countries almost nine out of 10 respondents said they were making efforts in this regard. Respondents from Germany (55%), Poland (53%) and Lithuania (48%) were the least likely to say they were making active efforts to slow down biodiversity loss.

The provision of more information on how one could help protect biodiversity would be most welcome in Lithuania and Cyprus. Respondents from those two countries were the most likely to report that they were not making any efforts to protect biodiversity because they did not know what actions to take (39% and 32%, respectively).

No efforts to protect biodiversity, by country



Q10. Would you say that you personally make an effort to protect biodiversity?
%, Base: all respondents by country

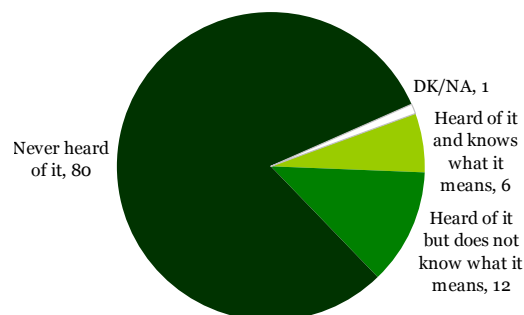
Respondents that reported making personal efforts to protect biodiversity were more likely to be female, older and living in rural areas. They were also more likely to be self-employed or working as employees. When looking at those respondents who declared they were willing to do even more for biodiversity conservation than they were currently doing, the same patterns for gender and occupational status emerged; there were again rather more women, and more self-employed respondents or employees, that expressed a willingness to enhance their efforts to help protect biodiversity. However, unlike the earlier observations, this willingness to enhance their efforts to help protect biodiversity was more often reported by younger respondents, by the better educated and by respondents from urban areas.

6. Awareness of the *Natura 2000* network

Most EU citizens are unaware of the existence of *Natura 2000* – an EU-wide network of nature protection areas established under the 1992 *Habitats Directive* and the 1979 *Birds Directive* with the aim of ensuring the long-term protection of Europe's most valuable and threatened species and habitats. 80% of respondents said they had never heard of the *Natura 2000* network.

The results also showed that respondents who were familiar with the term *Natura 2000* did not necessarily know the actual meaning of the term; slightly more than one out of 10 respondents (12%) said they had heard of the *Natura 2000* network but did not know exactly what it was. Only a handful of respondents (6%) answered that they had heard of the *Natura 2000* network and that they also knew what it represented.

Awareness of the *Natura 2000* network (EU27)



Q8. Have you heard of the *Natura 2000* network?
%, Base: all respondents