CRITERIA FOR ASSESSING NATIONAL LISTS OF pSCI
AT BIOGEOGRAPHICAL LEVEL

The EU Habitat Directive is proposed as an important contribution by the European Union to the Convention on the Biological Diversity through **the conservation in a favourable status of selected habitat types and species** of Community interest.

The designation of Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) for those habitat types and species shall contribute significantly to this aim (the Natura 2000 Network, together with the designated SPA) and provided the designation is accompanied by **the establishment of the necessary conservation measures for the habitats and species**.

Sites of Community Importance (SCIs)to be designated as SACs shall be identified by the Commission (in the framework of the biogeographical regions and in agreement with Member States) on the basis of the National Lists proposed by Member States. Together these agreed sites will constitute the Community List mentioned in article 4.2 of the Habitat Directive.

The first Community exercise on this matter, in which the European Environment Agency (EEA) is engaged through the European Topic Centre on Nature Conservation (ETC/NC), involves the building of a Community List responding to three basic requirements:

1. It shall host a sufficiently large and representative sample of each habitat type and species to enable the maintenance of favourable conservation status **at the level of the EU <u>and</u> biogeographical level,** provided the supporting conservation measures within and outside the sites are in place.

2. It must **only** include sites of Community importance **at EU <u>or</u> biogeographical level**.

3. There should be a proportionate response, so that for those habitats and species of community interest which are rarest a high proportion of the resource will be included within the SAC series, while for those which are more abundant there will be a lower proportion of the resource within the SAC series.

Annex III of the Habitat Directive provides "criteria" for the two following stage :
i. selecting eligible sites **at national level** (Annex III, stage 1)
ii. assessing the Community importance of sites **at EU or biogeographical level** (Annex III, stage 2), which will be obviously useful for establishing the Community List.

However, Annex III stage 2 does not include criteria strictly speaking, but rather lists site attributes related to the pSCI which must be considered when assessing them at supra-

national level. The ETC/NC has developed some additional specifications to facilitate their application in a practical way based on the content of pSCI datasheets, as well as on the reference data available through the "NatRef" EUNIS' module.

This paper sets out a process to be applied in the preparation of the EU list of SCIs. This is focused primarily at the level of the individual biogeographical regions and it is recognised throughout that some flexibility of approach will be required to take account of the ecological character of the habitats and species (including aspects such as abundance, distribution and ecological requirements for their continued survival), their conservation requirements and the varying level of current scientific knowledge.

Phase 1. <u>Analysis of representation of a habitat type or of a species</u>

The contribution towards favourable conservation status for a given species or habitat type through the designation of a given list of SACs will not only depend on the intrinsic quality of those sites, but also on the intensity of the current or proposed conservation measures for each habitat or species including actions outside designated areas.

The expected assessment must be based on the intrinsic value of the proposed sites for each species and habitat type, taking into account their potential contribution to the defined conservation goal.

It is clear that the factors relevant to assessment of "conservation value" for each species and habitat type will vary very significantly from one case to another, depending on different factors. A scientific-based description of such requirements is highly desirable. It would not be realistic to try to establish one single quantitative criterion equally valid for all habitats and species in all situations.

The expected assessment of site lists for the biogeographical region must be based on a case-by-case discussion, taking into account additional information on different parameters related to each species and habitat type.

Two requirements can be expected to be met by a representative list of sites to be considered as sufficient to enable a favourable conservation status for a given species or habitat type at biogeographical level:

- it should be well-adapted to the specific conservation needs, in particular to those related to the distribution patterns (endemicity, degree of isolation/fragmentation, historical trends) and to the human pressures, threats, vulnerability, etc. of the considered species or habitat type; <u>and</u>

- it should reflect the ecological (and in the case of species genetic) variation of the habitat or species within the biogeographical region.

In order to make the expected assessment easier in the short available period of time available, a <u>preliminary "pre-selection" phase</u> has been envisaged before dealing with the <u>case-by-case analysis for each habitat or species</u>.

Preselection phase

The following procedure is not proposed as a strict numerical mechanism for deciding, on the basis of a predetermined percentage, about the sufficient or insufficient level of representation of each one of the habitat types and species in the whole of pSCI for a biogeographical region. Rather it is proposed as a mechanism for selecting those habitats or species where further scrutiny of the national site lists may be appropriate.

1.- Well represented elements

> *Species or habitat types for which the whole of the proposed sites for a biogeographical region host more than 60% of the total population (or area) in the same region will be considered as **a low priority for case by case scrutiny**.*

60% is an arbitrary limit. However, this percentage has been chosen on the hypothesis that in many cases, it is likely to cover the two mentioned requirements of distribution and variation in relation to any species or habitat type. In practice, the implementation of the appropriate conservation measures in a sample of designated sites covering 60% of the population of a given species (or 60% of the area of distribution of a given habitat type) should ensure in most of cases the maintenance of *favourable conservation status* as defined in the Habitat Directive.4

However exceptions to this general rule could be identified on a scientific basis, as for example habitats or species found only in one very restricted geographical area or where the habitat or species is rare and recent decline means that an increase of the resource is required to maintain favourable conservation status. In this case, the habitats and species would be submitted to case-by-case analysis.

2.- Elements requiring priority scrutiny

> *Species or habitat types for which the whole of the proposed sites for a biogeographical region host less than 20% of the total population (or geographic distribution surface) in the same region will be **a priority for further scrutiny**.*

20% is also arbitrary. For certain aquatic species covered by Article 4.1, priority habitats and species affected by Article 4.2 and a number of habitats and species which are widespread, extensive and show a limited range of ecological or genetic variation less than 20% of the resource within the SCI series could be judged as adequate.

3. Case-by-case discussion

> *Species and habitat types for which the whole of the proposed sites for a biogeographical region hosts between 20% and 60% of the total species population (or habitat area) in the same region will be submitted to an individual analysis.*

This analysis of each biogeographical region will involve:

- comparison between the geographical distribution of the sites submitted by the member states for a given habitat type or species and its known distribution patterns;

- comparison between the range of habitat or species variation of the whole of pSCI series relative to the described ecological and genetic variations of the habitats or species;

- an assessment of the trends of distribution and abundance of the habitats and species related to natural and anthropogenic factors;

For some countries most of data needed for this assessment are or will be available from the inventories carried out under the LIFE programme. For the rest, the EUNIS' "NatRef" module (supplied by the EIONET National Reference Centres and other relevant sources[1]) is supposed to provide the mentioned reference data. The analysis will also be supported by a check of the scientific literature and advice of experts.

Phase 2. **Interpretation of criteria for the selection of SCIs from the national lists of sites**

As mentioned above, Annex III-2 specifies the site attributes to be considered for assessing their Community importance at EU or biogeographical level of sites submitted by the Member States. Some of these attributes are related to the national assessment of pSCI for each habitat type and species, and the relative importance of the sites themselves at national level.

The following proposed criteria for identifying the pSCI to be included in the Community List do not involve any modification of Annex III-2, but an interpretation of the criteria in practical terms compatible with the detail of the data fields in the Natura 2000 datasheets.

These criteria are suggested for "undivided" pSCI's. In the case of fragmented pSCI (distinct and separate sub-sites), the application of these criteria may require adjustment on a case by case basis.

1. "Priority" criterion

> *pSCI qualifying at a national level for at least one priority habitat type or species.*

As indicated in the Habitat Directive, these pSCI will be automatically included in the Community List. However, in some cases the priority habitat or species will be of low intrinsic value due to i) a poor representation of typical features, small area of poor development and conservation of structure and function in the priority habitats or ii) a small or transient population or poor development of features required by the species for survival.

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[1] International Organisations, CORINE Biotopes Database, scientific literature, experts advise

In these cases automatic selection may not be appropriate. In such cases, the limits of the pSCI could be revised[2].

2. "Uniqueness" criterion

> *pSCI containing the only significant example of a non priority habitat type or species on a Member State's list.*

3. "High-quality" criterion

> *pSCI having a high national value for at least one non-priority habitat type or species.*

"To have a high national value" for a given habitat type means that the concerned pSCI has been globally assessed as **A** (excellent value) and:

- the representativity, the relative surface and the conservation status values have been assessed with an "**A**"; or

- the representativity and the relative surface values have been assessed with an "**A**", and the conservation status value with a "**B**"; or

- the representativity value has been assessed with a "**B**", and the relative surface and the conservation status with an "**A**".

The application of the "high quality" criterion for habitats is reflected in the following table:

Option Parameters	1	2	3
Global assessment	A	A	A
Representativity	A	A	B
Relative surface	A	A	A
Conservation status	A	B	A

For special cases of underground or very steep slopped habitats (ie cliffs, ravines etc) the estimation of the area could prove difficult. A case by case evaluation of the "high quality" criterion should be made then.

"To have a high national value" for a given species means that the concerned pSCI has been globally assessed as **A** (excellent value) and at least one of both, population and conservation values has been also assessed with an "**A**". There is likely to be variation between Member States in the scoring allocated to sites of similar quality given the subjective nature of many of the assessment required. Some sites scored below these thresholds by Member States may therefore merit selection.

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[2] In case of merging two or more sites, the resulting new site will be given a new code number. Those of merged sites must be abandonned.

The application of the "high quality" criterion for species is reflected in the following table:

Option Parameters	1	2	3
Global assessment	A	A	A
Conservation	A	B	A
Population	B	A	A

4. "High-diversity" criterion

pSCI containing a significant number of non-priority habitat types and/or species, even if their respective national values have not been considered as high under the high quality criterion.

Since there is considerable variation in the variation in the diversity of habitat types in Annex I and species in Annex II present in each biogeographical region, this "significant number" can not be established at EU level and must be established on a case by case basis at the level of the biogeographical region.

5. "Network coherence" criterion

pSCI playing a relevant role to ensure the coherence (as well structural as functional) of the Natura 2000 Network.

"To play a relevant role" means to be included in at least one of the following categories:

- pSCI situated in a migration route of one or more species in Annex II and identified as indispensable for its maintaining in a favourable conservation status;

- pSCI representing a "relic" localisation for habitat type or species

- pSCI acting as "ecological corridors" between other identified SCI hosting priority species which are now endangered due to their fragmentation;

- sets of pSCI covering a continuous ecosystem situated on both sides of one or more internal Community frontiers;

- pSCI bordering a major protected area situated outside of EU borders;

- pSCI where the proposed restoration measures for at least one priority habitat or species have been identified by a Member State as indispensable to maintain a favourable conservation status, at biogeographical level, for at least one priority habitat type or species.

6. "Safeguard clause" criterion

When a site, according to the five first criteria, is not considered as of community interest, it is necessary to check if its elimination do not jeopardize the evaluation as sufficiently represented for the habitat type or/and species existing on that site.