



European Parliament Forum on Recreational Fisheries and Aquatic Environment

REPORT

Cormorant: management needed across the borders

Co-chaired by MEP Annie Schreijer-Pierik and MEP Werner Kuhn

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European Parliament

Norica Nicolai (ALDE, Romania) and **Chair of the RecFishing Forum**, explained that for many European citizens the management of the cormorant's population is very important. From a country perspective, she explained that people in Romania are increasingly confronted with the negative impact of the population on the fish stock, especially in the Danube delta.

She stressed that the interests of the fishermen and of the fish stock need to be protected along with the interests of the bird.

She welcomed the debate on cormorant management as it is very needed and could bring concrete insights for policymakers.

Annie Schreijer-Pierik (EPP, The Netherlands) recalled that in July 2017 a delegation of Fisheries Committee's members visited the fisheries and aquaculture sectors in Germany. From these visits, a common concern emerged about the cormorants' damages on fish stock and a common call on EU policymakers for a prompt solution.

She recalled that cormorants are having catastrophic effects on fish stock in fisheries ponds, rivers and natural reserves. Despite that, certain animal and environmental activists have been denying the need for managing the cormorant for years.

She then explained that the European Parliament in its resolution of 2008 launched a call to the Commission to establish a European management plan for cormorants in order to reduce their damages on the fish population, thus taking a clear stance already 10 years ago. However, the European Commission has refused to set up such a plan. She then explained that the European Commission in 2009 and 2010 has mainly be engaged with exchange of information and with the organisation of meetings with the Member States.

In its 2017 resolution on an Action plan for nature, people and economy the Parliament has again requested an adapted population management plan of water birds. Therefore, Ms Schreijer-Pierik asked the Commission to finally provide the Member States with clear indications and actions since the mere exchange of information is not sufficient to avoid damages. This issue has been going on for



too many years and DG ENVI should coordinate its action vis à vis Member States, which neglect their duty in this area.

Niels Jepsen, DTU Aqua gave an overview of the development of the cormorant conflict in Denmark, the predation studies DTU has carried out in coasts, lakes and rivers, and a brief explanation of the Danish cormorant management plan. He argued that documenting the impact of cormorant predation is very difficult either because often the fish already have disappeared from an area or because such data are subject to a high year-to-year variation. Other difficulties are represented by the statistical confidence and estimates and by the low access to research funding mainly because this subject falls right in between fisheries and bird protection.

He explained that in Denmark the number of birds (2016) varies from 15 000 to 250 000 in the autumn. Since 1980 the breeding stock went from close to zero straight up to 40 000 pairs in the 90s before stabilising between 30 000 and 35 000 in recent years. The main affected sectors are commercial pound-net fishermen, recreational net fishermen and anglers. Biodiversity is also affected with some species being threatened by cormorants (grayling stocks). He observed that in the Danish coast the eelpout and cod have largely disappeared while there is a documented impact on flounders, eel and salmon.

In 2002 he took part in the EU funded project FRAP, a 3-year study that included tagging of 10 000 eels (then released in Ringkøbing fjord), 64 000 salmon (then released in Skjern River), and 4000 flounders. As part of the project, he also collected pellets from the only cormorant colony at that time and estimated that between 100 to 500 salmon smolts were eaten per day by the cormorants. Through otolith analysis from pellets, he also estimated that one colony ate 1.4 million flounders per year. The final estimates of the project are that 25% - 45% of tagged salmon smolts were eaten during the 3 weeks smolt migration period, 40 – 50% of tagged eel were eaten in one year, 100% of tagged flounders were eaten in 15 days.

Moving on to the rivers, he argued that cormorants were not a problem until two cold winters in 2009 and 2010 that brought cormorants to the rivers. This heavily impacted the grayling and brown trout populations, whose catches by electrofishing in a 2-km stretch went from 412 in 2009 to 6 fish in 2010. As for the cormorant predation on lake fish, DTU found more than 1000 PIT tags - used for tagging roach, bream perch and pike - in one colony 13-20 kilometres away from the site. In terms of selectivity of the bird, results showed that larger perch and mid-size pike were more vulnerable to cormorants than roach and bream. Following this documentation, he argued that predation from cormorants is now the main regulating factor for many fish stocks in rivers, lakes and coasts. The effects include an economic loss for commercial and recreational fishing, a cultural loss as small harbours that used to have a lot of tourists and where you can buy fresh fish are closing down, a biodiversity loss, and problems in reaching the Water Framework Directive requirements.

Denmark has a national cormorant management-plan in place since 1997. Management tools include egg oiling, prevention of new settlements, protective shooting and regulation outside breeding season in rivers. The plan is based on the “adaptive management” approach (i.e. a systematic approach for improving resource management by learning from management outcomes, which involves exploring alternative ways to meet management objectives, predicting the outcomes of alternatives based on the current state of knowledge, implementing one or more of these alternatives, monitoring to learn about the impacts of management actions, and then using the results to update knowledge and adjust management actions). The legislators provides the legislative framework, while the Ministry of Environment is management responsible. A Cormorant Group of stakeholders, managers and experts



provides advice.

He concluded that conflicts remain, with no clear effects of the regulation e.g. due to a high immigration rate of cormorants from other countries. Therefore, an EU plan is needed to help management.

Markus Lundgren, Sportfiskarna, European Anglers Alliance (EAA) introduced a regional strategy for the Nordic countries wished by Nordic angling associations to improve the cormorant management. He explained that current problems in the Nordic regions are represented by hydropower stations, which are barriers for migrating fish, and stock overexploitation in the Baltic Sea, Kattegat and Skagerrak. The eutrophication problems in the Baltic Sea also causes large-scale negative effects on the ecosystem, probably including recruitment problems for several fish species. Looking at the cormorants, he argued that faeces from colonies devastate the region and kill the green plants around the colony. Moreover, cormorants also affect other birds and biodiversity. The biggest problem is the growing cormorant populations and their large predation on many fish stocks.

He then introduced the Swedish '[Roxen report](#)' (2014), about lake Roxen.that the first cormorant colony in the area was established in 1992. In 1999, 908 pairs were nesting in that colony. The report confirmed that both species composition and size distribution of the fish - mainly perch and pike - have changed. As a result, angling was heavily restricted during those years through a bag limit and nowadays there is only one commercial fisherman left. The report also asserted the recommended outtake of fish - based on the nutrient level of the lake - was 3-6 kg/ha; however, commercial fisheries took out 0,85 kg/ha, while cormorants took out 7,50 kg/ha. From this finding, the Roxen report concludes that cormorants are probably the main reason that most of the fish don't reach reproductive size.

The importance to improve the management is due to the fast expansion of the continental cormorant (*Phalacrocorax carbo sinensis*) in Europe (e.g. Finland between 1996-2002 went from 10 breeding pairs to 16 007), to the significant impact on the recovery of the local fish stocks, and to management uncertainties within and among Member States.

In 2017, a cooperation between Nordic countries (Danish, Swedish, Finnish and Norwegian anglers' associations) published a position paper on "*Continental Cormorant in the Nordic Countries*", showing that - despite great efforts to restore wetlands and to provide spawning habitat - the cormorant issue cannot be handled on a local level, as the geographical distribution of this bird implies a comprehensive regional approach.

He concluded that the protection of weak fish stocks and threatened fish species shall be considered more important than the protection of a species with a favourable [conservation status](#) like the cormorant, without affecting the bird's favourable conservation status. Moreover, in areas of importance for fisheries, especially angling and angling tourism, more concrete actions shall be carried out if the cormorants are causing considerable damage on the fish stocks, including limiting or eliminating colonies.

The national authorities handling cormorant management in the Nordic countries shall be given the responsibility to survey and follow up the effect of the cormorant populations on the fish stocks while national councils or boards should be set up along the lines of what has been done in Denmark. The final goal should be to devise a European strategy based on best practices and bottom-up approaches.

Olaf Lindner, Deutscher Angelfischerverband e.V., European Anglers Alliance (EAA) asserted that the protection of the great cormorant in Europe is an impressive success story and that the cormorant is



one of the best studied bird species in the world. He explained that since the 1980's the population has increased dramatically in whole Europe and - as these birds are highly migratory - local or national legislation might not be efficient.

Looking at the current situation, cormorants are protected under EU's Birds Directive, which, however, allows Member States to make use of so-called "derogations". Derogations can be established either by national or regional authorities and their use may vary over time.

He then examined several cormorant management tools and questioned their effectiveness:

- Scaring cormorants away from a fishery: aversive conditioning can occasionally and locally displace cormorants but the high mobility and migration behaviour of cormorants makes it easy for them to refill the area.
- Protecting the fish through netting or wiring is only feasible for small ponds (fish farms). Indeed, other birds are also caught in overhead wires/nets and these techniques lead to negative press releases and legal dispute for fish farmers. Nets also disrupt the natural appearance of water bodies (many fish-farms are located in Natura 2000 sites).
- Reducing fish availability to cormorants in terms of fish stock management or habitat modification. On the habitat restoration, studies reveal that it does not protect fish from cormorant predation. On the fish stock management techniques, threatened fish species can often not be stocked because of lack of material.
- Reducing cormorant numbers ("breed and shoot") is questionable as it makes no sense to let a massive cormorant population breed and shoot them afterwards during bird migration.

Looking at the regulation, he explained that since the Birds Directive allows Member States to make exceptions, Germany can, for instance, argue that the responsibility belongs to federal states, meaning that there are 16 different cormorant management plans that can always vary after every electoral mandate.

He then recalled that all EU Member States have signed the Convention on Biological Diversity in 1992 in Rio de Janeiro, a multilateral treaty that protects not only species themselves, but also the genetic diversity of the species. In this regard, overwhelming cormorant populations are threatening the genetic diversity of endangered fish species (e.g. Grayling *Thymallus thymallus*). At present, this is a loss-loss situation since every year more cormorants and fish are killed, and more aquaculture-farms are closed.

He then mentioned that bird conservation organisations are buying properties in Germany with breeding colonies, which are protected. However, once cormorants leave their breeding colonies, they get displaced across Europe and eventually killed.

Despite several environmental and bird protection organisations admit the need for cormorant management measures, those measures are entirely carried out by anglers, hunters and fishermen. This is a real challenge for fish farmers, who have to spend up to 30% of their work force for deterrent measures.

Another challenge is that this major negative impact on threatened fish is disconnected from the cormorants' breeding habitats and that the lack of awareness on this subject leads to ineffective, costly and conflictual local management.

In his words, cormorants have a "European lifecycle". The only viable solution is a holistic, proactive, European management approach, which manages cormorants based on a population model rather than on a "breed and shoot" approach.

As the cormorant reached favourable status long ago, he invited the Commission to reevaluate the



protection status with the transfer of cormorants to Annex IIa of the Birds Directive, thus allowing Member States to decide themselves if the cormorant should be managed as a huntable species in their countries.

On his final remarks, he stressed that this conflict creates a feeling of mistrust towards politics. Anglers, fishermen and fish-farmers have no interest in shooting cormorants for its own sake and nobody is questioning that a sustainable cormorant population should be present in Europe. Rather, anglers' associations are calling for the same right for healthy wild fish stock and the protection of threatened fish species.

Micheal O'Briain, Deputy Head of Unit, DG Environment, European Commission – replaced Director-General Daniel Calleja Crespo. Mr O'Briain stated that the European Commission is concerned with the conservation of all forms of nature, species and habitats. The Commission is not only committed to the conservation of cormorants but also to the conservation of fish species. As an example, salmon and grayling are protected under the Habitats Directive.

The European Parliament resolution of 2008 was important and despite the fact that the Commission has been criticised for not delivering a management plan, many positive things have been achieved. As an example, a cormorant platform was established to bring together the different stakeholders and inform the Member States.

The Commission has been promoting an effective implementation of the Birds Directive. Cormorant was removed from Annex I in 1999 but there have been no requests from Member States to put the species on Annex II. According to him, this would not represent a solution. The derogation system is a more appropriate mechanism to deal with this issue and the Commission has been working to promote the flexible system included in the Directive.

The scientific knowledge about the species is also something the Commission has been working on. The population has stabilised in some areas and has increased in some others such as Finland. The European Commission is in contact with and has visited the authorities of the concerned Member States and works with all stakeholders. The Commission underlined that sometimes it is just a question of lack of information about the possible derogations. Some Member States such as France are making full use of the derogations.

Concerning a European management plan, he stated that not all management plans have been successful and there was no support for such a plan under the Convention on Migratory Species (Bonn Convention). The European Commission is committed to exploring new ways of cooperation and it is actively promoting cooperation between the Member States in a biogeographic context.

To conclude, Mr O'Briain reiterated the need for Member States to make full use of the derogations included in the Birds Directive. According to him, even if a European Management Plan is established, Member States will remain responsible for its implementation.

Debate

Jean-Yves Colleter (FEAP) stated that from a few thousand in 1980, Europe now has more than one million cormorants. In France, the cormorant population has increased from 4,000 in 1970 to more than 180,000 in recent years. It is clear that in 20 years the French and European situation have become catastrophic. At present, fish farming in ponds, European rivers, professional fishing activity as well as angling in freshwater record considerable economic losses and for the first time in their history these activities struggle to survive.



Furthermore, the abandonment of ponds and lack of river management generate considerable ecological impacts (loss of biodiversity, drying up of wetlands, etc.) but also a real loss of identity of the territories and of investment of citizens in the management of these remarkable environments. In addition, the predation pressure of the cormorants has serious consequences for highly valuable species such as eels or salmon, even though the latter are the subject of management plans.

By consuming around 400 to 600 g of fish per day, the cormorant population in Europe captures more than 300 000 tonnes of fish each year in European waters.

For 20 years different ground solutions have been tried in France: methods of deterrence, protection, shooting and specific brigades, management of nests and eggs. France now has to cope with breeding bird populations that reproduce very rapidly, populations of migrating birds that are increasingly important, and the proliferation of sedentary colonies. If authorised shootings can reduce the population of about 31,000 cormorants per year, they are immediately replaced by new populations from northern Europe. He also stressed that the cormorant is much more problematic than many species classified as Invasive Alien Species. Why isn't the cormorant included on that list?

To conclude, Mr Colleter reiterated the need for a Europe-wide management plan and asked to resume the initiative launched in 2008 by the German MP Heinz Kindermann.

Angela Popovic (FACE) reiterated that the population of cormorants within the EU has increased significantly and these birds are causing damages to commercial fisheries, aquaculture and sport-fishing activities.

The derogation system under the Birds Directive is being used by many Member States, however, there are significant differences in the way this is done, both in terms of the choice of sites where control actions are undertaken and on the methods used. FACE often hears that protection mechanisms do not work effectively. This is because actions are very site-specific and local, with little coordinated management and control of cormorants between Member States. Derogations can also have a high administrative burden and may apply for 100 km of the river but not for the rest of the river which may be located in a different region or district.

FACE is aware that fishermen and anglers lose their motivation and interest for fishing and carrying out biodiversity projects to enhance water quality and habitats. Furthermore, if a private wants to rent out his fishing area (river, lake), he cannot make a good price with the anglers' clubs because there are not many fish.

FACE considers that an international management plan would be an appropriate measure to address the problem, and, also, proper national management plans. This could be done in conjunction with the African Eurasian Migratory Waterbird Agreement (AEWA).

EU Member States would still be obliged to follow Article 9 of the Birds Directive of course, which would mean that certain conditions would have to be followed before management takes place. However, FACE believes that there is enough flexibility within Article 9 of the Birds Directive for the development of a coordinated approach to Cormorant management.

MEP Jörn Dohrmann stated that the way in which governments are dealing with this issue is part of the problem. It would be important to estimate how many cormorants are present in an area as this is a question that could be applied also to other species.



Fred Bloot, EAA President, mentioned the Eel Management Plan and underlined how the EU established targets that need to be reached by Member States. The same should be done for cormorants so that Member States actions can be coordinated with the aim to achieve the same goal.

Jean-Yves Paquet, Natagora (Birdlife Belgium), said that he was surprised not to hear about the INTERCAFE and REDCAFE projects as they were interesting actions undertaken in Europe. Of course, fish need to be protected but today we are looking to only one problem. Fish population can be in a bad state for many reasons and cormorant is not the only factor. At local level, Article 9 can be used and Natagora in Belgium is working with the authorities to use derogations when needed.

Cécile Dragon, WWF, asked what the cormorant population levels were prior to World War II.

Niels Jepsen replied that Member States tried to use all the derogations but often it is a problem of resources. In Denmark, millions of Kroner (DKK) have been used just to protect one area, yet the operations were largely unsuccessful.

He also stated that he has been part of INTERCAFE and REDCAFE and while they have been interesting projects, the results are not very relevant for his work. However, once again, the discussed measures have been unsuccessful. Denmark is often looked at as a success story because of the big amount of resources spent; but this is not the case and conflicts persist.

Finally, he replied that before World War II there were very few cormorants in Europe because they were hardly fought against.

Micheal O'Briain stated that Annex II of the Bird Directive is meant for recreational hunting and as such it has its limitations. In the view of the European Commission, the derogation system allows for much more flexibility as it is not limited in time and number. Annex II is not a solution and if we open this discussion, it won't concern only cormorant but many other species. He concluded by saying that there are many interesting projects such as INTERCAFE and REDCAFE that have been funded by the EU. There are good practices out there and new and improved ways of cooperation can be found. We can do it from a European perspective but ultimately the solution lies with the Member States making full use of the derogations.

Markus Lundgren, Sportfiskarna (EAA) pointed out that anglers don't want to affect the favourable conservation status of the cormorant and are not asking to move cormorant to Annex II. The EAA is asking for a European management plan.

Fred Bloot reiterated that anglers want to reduce the damages cormorant cause in different fields such as fisheries and aquaculture. Derogations are a good instrument but there is no pressure from the EU and Member States are free to act the way they want.

Bruna Campos, Birdlife, invited fish farmers and anglers to further discuss this issue in the framework of the Aquaculture Advisory Council. Everyone has a different view on the issue but it would be important to continue the discussion with all stakeholders, including bird experts.



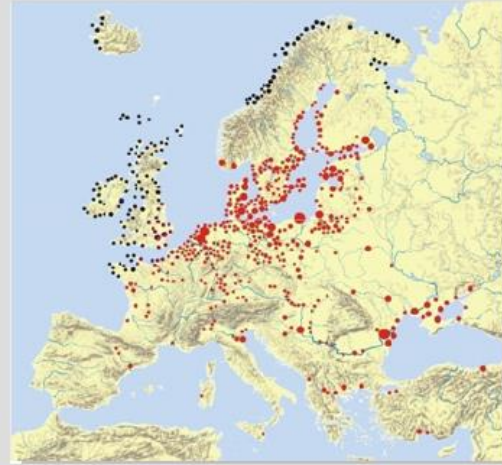
Regional Distribution of Breeding Colonies

Maps are based on a multitude of sources

1965/70



2007/08



- *Ph. carbo carbo* ⇒ stays within same regional range
- *Ph. carbo sinensis* ⇒ massive expansion between 1990 and 2008 (since then the range stayed relatively stable in the north, but expanded significantly in Spain, where until 2012 the birds founded about 15 new colonies)



European Anglers Alliance (EAA)

Taken from our presentation: [How many Cormorants in Europe? - A Documentation of EAA, Author: Franz Kohl \(ÖKF\); Sept. 2015](#)