

Press release – 4 June

For the conservation of natural forest heritage values

Portucel Soporcel Group undertakes Biodiversity Project with the World Wide Fund

The Portucel Soporcel Group is currently in the process of obtaining certification for around 48% of the 100,000 hectares of natural forest that it owns. This certification would classify this specific area as a High Conservation Value Area Landscape (HCVAs). This is one of the conclusions of a report that was recently presented to a number of organisations as part of the Biodiversity Project, which the Group is undertaking in partnership with the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF). The Project's aim is to identify High Conservation Value Areas (HCVAs) among the vast range of forest assets managed by the Group, along with measures to conserve them.

The Biodiversity Project involves the total 100,000 hectares of managed assets, for which the Group is seeking forest certification in accordance with the internationally recognised principles and criteria of the Forest Stewardship Council's (FSC) certification programme. The Project is designed specifically to apply the FSC's High Conservation Value Area concept to the Portucel Soporcel Group's forest assets. The underlying approach was developed by the WWF and is founded on the knowledge that on a landscape scale, spatial structure has an impact on both the diversity and abundance of species and ecosystems and the interactions between them. One of the results of the first phase of the Project is the conclusion that 48% of these assets meet the criteria for classification as High Conservation Value Area on a landscape scale.

The partnership with WWF

The first partnership between the Portucel Soporcel Group and WWF MedPO (Mediterranean Programme) began in 2005. The objective of this six-month project was to establish and develop the Biodiversity and Public Participation themes as part of a wider cooperation to draw up a Group Policy and Guidelines on Biodiversity.

It was decided that the management plan should include and implement specific measures to ensure that conservation-related attributes are maintained and/or improved, and that this would be monitored annually and the resulting information would be made public.

In order to follow up the work that had been done in the first phase of the project, which was completed in April 2006, the Group and the WWF agreed on a new phase of their partnership. The purpose of this second phase is to address the themes of biodiversity and the approach to High Value Conservation Areas, and to fulfil the various requirements in relation to these two issues. In this second phase the Biodiversity Project's terms of reference provide for work to be done over a period of two years, beginning last October and lasting until September 2008.

In the first six months of this second phase the Project analysed the conservation values at the Landscape Unit level. It is now carrying out the analysis at the level of the management units within each Landscape Unit. The pilot areas for this analysis are within the Southeast Alentejo and Monchique LU. This phase also involves a number of training initiatives for the specialists in the Group's Forestry Department.

In its second year the Project intends to implement a High Value Conservation Area evaluation system. This will not only look at various aspects of biodiversity, but also at some other conservation values (e.g. social and cultural). This process will use the Landscape Outcomes Assessment Method (LOAM), which involves consulting landowners on a local scale. The practical part of the management models, which the organisation will adopt in these areas with conservation value, will also be completed. The overall assessment of this approach will entail drawing up a final report on the Project – a process that will also involve monitoring and consultation by independent external specialists.

Portucel Soporcel Group consults biodiversity specialists

As part of the specialist consultation process that is included in this Project, the Portucel Soporcel Group presented the results of the ongoing Biodiversity Project to specialist staff from a variety of public and private organisations. The organisations consulted were very interested in this initiative and in the work that has been done to date. They have participated in it quite actively and have offered suggestions that will be incorporated into the Group's methodology.

The organisations that attended the meeting included the Institute for the Conservation of Nature and Biodiversity (ICNB), the Directorate-General of Forest Resources (DGRF), Lisbon University's Faculty of Sciences (FCUL), the Agronomy Institute (ISA), the Centre for Studies on Iberian Avifauna (CEAI), the Nature Protection League (LPN), QUERCUS, and AmBioDiv-Valor Natural, among others. In addition to making comments and recommendations, their specialists encouraged the work that the Group has been doing in the environmental field, and they all said they hoped that both this Biodiversity Project and the forest certification process itself would carry on to the very end and be held up as good examples for other companies and bodies to follow. It is also worth noting that some of the organisations were interested in the possibility that the Project's results could contribute to future partnerships and serve as a stimulus for similar initiatives to identify and preserve special conservation values.

At the end of the meeting the Board Director in charge of the Forest Operations Department, Eng. Pedro Moura, thanked all the specialists for their "valuable contribution". He went on to restate the Group's "firm undertaking to respect the practices and values that ensure the sustainable development of its business" and "the commitment made to the conservation of biodiversity as a part of the Group's sustainability policy".

This undertaking by the Group to invest in the biodiversity field is in harmony with the initiatives the Portuguese Government and the Portuguese Presidency of the European Union are promoting in order to reduce biodiversity loss by 2010.

Other Portucel Soporcel Group biodiversity conservation initiatives

The Portucel Soporcel Group is also engaged in a complementary project with AmBioDiv. This project also seeks to conserve natural values in the different areas of the assets managed by the Group, and the approach it is taking is both compatible and coordinated with that taken in the joint project with the WWF. In this case expedite methodologies are being developed for identifying natural values that need to be conserved and an action plan for conserving them, which will be incorporated into the Group's forest management plan. It also involves training the Group's in-house team of biodiversity specialists and providing a framework for nature conservancy issues that arise in the course of the Group's business.

The Portucel Soporcel Group is also working with the Centre for Studies on Iberian Avifauna (CEAI) on a LIFE-Nature project for the "Conservation of Bonelli's Eagle in Southern Portugal". Its participation in the project, which is co-funded by bodies like the ICNB, the National Electrical Network (REN), and Tavira and Almodôvar Municipal Authorities, was planned by the CEAI.

This project's priority objectives include ensuring that forest management is compatible with the conservation of Bonelli's eagle. The project will take place in the Special Protection Zones (ZPEs) for birds that already exist in the south of the country. The Group owns a great deal of land (around 700 hectares) in this region, where the nature conservation requirements imposed by the impacts of the activities that result from the management of the forests, have led to the Group's involvement in a vast range of actions that will impact upon the normal management of its eucalyptus stands. In summary, the Group is funding the project, and from a technical point of view its forestry team is restricting its operating activities in the areas in question.

The Group is also going to help with the publication of a book on "Bonelli's Eagles in Portugal", not only in financial terms, but also by providing data on its real, operational involvement in the conservation of this species.

The Group is also involved with the WWF in the Cansino project, the objective of which is to promote the management and restoration of significant watercourses in areas in the southern region of the country where man has intervened in the natural environment. The participants in this project also include private landowners, public bodies in this sector, and the Commission for the Coordination and Development of the Algarve Region (CCDRA).