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## European Wilderness Definition

Wilderness represents a vital element of Europe's natural and cultural heritage. Still, there was no common understanding what Wilderness actually is. That's why the European Wilderness Definition was developed.

In addition to its intrinsic value, Wilderness offers the opportunity for people to experience the spiritual quality of nature in the widest experiential sense – beyond mere physical and visual attributes, in particular through its psychological impact. They also provide important economic, social, and environmental benefits, including ecosystem services, for local communities, landowners and society as a whole. Wilderness performs several functions better than modified landscapes. Among these are:

- Conserving Biodiversity
- Protecting Ecosystem Services
- Connecting Landscapes
- Capturing and Storing Carbon Dioxide
- Building Knowledge and Understanding of Natural Processes
- Inspiring People

The concept of Wilderness has gained considerable momentum in Europe during the last 15 years. A milestone was the adoption of the "European Parliament Resolution on Wilderness in Europe" in February 2009, which calls on the European Commission to:

- Develop a clear definition of Wilderness.
- Mandate the European Environment Agency to map existing Wilderness areas in Europe.
- Undertake a study on the values and benefits of Wilderness.

- Develop an EU Wilderness strategy.
- Stimulate the development of new Wilderness areas through restoration.
- Promote the values of Wilderness together with NGOs & local communities.

## How the European Wilderness definition was developed

The EU Member States were invited to exchange 'best practices' in managing Wilderness, develop a code of conduct for tourism in Wilderness areas, and ensure the best protection of Wilderness areas. In February 2009, the Wild Europe Initiative (WEI) started a collaborative effort to promote the Wilderness concept amongst several European nature conservation organisations, such as PAN Parks, EUROPARC, WWF, BirdLife International, IUCN, UNESCO, Institute for European Environmental Policy (IEEP), European Centre for Nature Conservation (ECNC), and Rewilding Europe, alongside the involvement of personnel from the European Commission and the Council of Europe.

In May 2009, more than 230 representatives met in Prague at the "Conference on Wilderness and Large Natural Habitat Areas". A key outcome was the "Message from Prague", which contained 24 recommendations from the participants on policy, research, awareness raising, and partnerships concerning Wilderness. A definition of Wilderness had been formulated for the Conference, and the Wilderness Working Group (WWG) generated a first draft paper: the "Discussion Draft: A Working Definition of European Wilderness and Wild Areas".

In the run up to the WILD10 Conference in Salamanca in 2013, the feedback of several members of the WWG, NGOs, and government organisations, plus the practical experience gathered during the initial application of these criteria in several test sites, led to an update of the criteria. This was especially needed as Germany had developed an alternative definition to meet its objective of dedicating 2% of the landmass as Wilderness. In addition, Scandinavian countries, as well as Scotland, amongst others had difficulties implementing and identifying Wilderness areas meeting the WEI criteria.

## European Wilderness Definition

Wilderness is for the purpose of the European Wilderness Quality Standard and Audit System 2.0 defined as:

### Wilderness Definition

Open ended undefined natural processes govern Wilderness core zones meeting the European Wilderness Quality Standard and Audit System "Gold- or Platinum Standard". They are composed

of native habitats and species, and large enough for the effective ecological functioning of natural processes. They are unmodified or only slightly modified and without intrusive or extractive human activity, settlements, infrastructure or visual disturbance.

## Wild Area Definition

Wilderness core zones meeting the European Wilderness Quality Standard and Audit System “Bronze- or Silver Standards” are wild areas that have a high level of predominance of natural process and natural habitat. They tend to be individually smaller and more fragmented than the “Gold- or Platinum Standard” Wilderness areas, although they often cover extensive tracts. The condition of their natural habitat, processes and relevant species is however often partially or substantially modified by past human activities such as livestock herding, hunting, fishing, and collecting berries and mushrooms.

### Wilderness thus means:

- No human extraction e.g. hunting, logging, mineral extraction, mining, deadwood collection
- No human intervention e.g. disease or alien species control, restoration measures, permanent human infrastructure
- Open ended undefined natural dynamic processes

The full European Wilderness Quality Standard and Audit (2.0) process consists of:

- 10 Principles
- 57 Criteria
- 130 Indicators
- 12 – 14 day field audit
- 6 months of research and desk work
- Development of a 150-200 page Wilderness Audit Report, as a basis for a Wilderness Stewardship Plan, including a detailed SWOT analysis with site-specific recommendations for action
- Detailed site-specific recommendations
- A Wilderness Quality categorisation valid for a period of 10 years
- Comprehensive communication and marketing support with public relations and promotional material
- Development of a monitoring and evaluation plan
- Certification and labelling valid for 10 years with a free monitoring audit after 5 years

It is a European-wide, habitat independent, and solution-oriented basis for Wilderness stewardship plans with continuous controls and audits, backed up by an offer of great marketing to support the constituent Wilderness and Wilderness Areas.



Please also read: [Wilderness Frequently Asked Questions](#)

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## 6 thoughts on “European Wilderness Definition”

### Vlado Vancura

📅 February 13, 2014 at 11:23 🔗 Permalink

Dear Alexander,

thank you very much for your interest and support!

You know well how challenging is to find wilderness area in Europe completely fitting to the quality standard. We obviously will focused on that, but simultaneously we also communicate and involve much larger audience of potential wilderness areas throughout the Europe. Wilderness Action Plan is an important element of this approach.

Thank you very much for your feedback.

Wild regards, Vlado

### Max A.E. Rossberg **Post author**

📅 February 12, 2014 at 18:46 🔗 Permalink

Hi

Your concerns are valid. For the first time a basic list is published without which no area even needs to bother to apply. In accordance with the audit a Wilderness Action Plan will be developed which will be more encompassing and detailed as well as long term than any prior system.

You will witness how the new system will increase the quality of wilderness in Europe first

hand...

Cheers

## Alexander Zinke

📅 February 12, 2014 at 13:47 🔗 Permalink

Dear Max, dear Vlado, thanks for your replies! I honestly appreciate and support your efforts, as I somehow was (as PAN Parks verifier) part of the “14 years of experience by the leading wilderness advocates”. I still see a difference between your words/ambition and the presented quality standard. In some aspects it may be a language issue, in others I maintain my concerned comment. Sorry!

## Vlado Vancura

📅 February 12, 2014 at 12:17 🔗 Permalink

Dear Alexander,

Thank you for comments. We very much understand your concern!

EWS Wilderness Quality Standard is developed at the base of ‘A Working Definition of European Wilderness and Wild Areas’. A definition formulated by the Wilderness Working Group (WWG). See the text of that definition in the paragraph ‘What is wilderness’.

The objective of that process was to produce a standardized and practical definition of wilderness for Europe. Being one of the key authors of the prior standard and very much incorporated I guaranties that the key elements are incorporated into our final text.

We are now in the phase of the implementation of that quality standard. All lessons learnt from the previous years are carefully considered and applied in the new strategy. There are two main points worthy to mention in this moment: 1. we clearly communicate and highlight top wilderness quality (where, who, how). 2. We involve as many as possible existing but also potential wilderness areas to this process. Assessment process on one side invites and encourages wilderness managers to join a network and simultaneously put pressure on them to improve quality of their own wilderness areas. The result will be either improvement of wilderness quality standard or enlargement of wilderness area/s.

I want just confirm statement of my colleague Max that the important element of this stepwise approach is requirement to develop and implement a Wilderness Action Plan...

I guess that you know very well how difficult is to identify in this time a wilderness perfectly complied with the top wilderness quality standard described in definition. We are aware that there are some areas like that and we definitely will use them as a motivation and examples for others.

I hope that my answer satisfy your quest for knowledge at least a little bit. Please let you know if you have any further question...

### **Max A.E. Rossberg** Post author

📅 February 12, 2014 at 11:14 [🔗 Permalink](#)

Dear Mr. Zinke,

Thank you for comments. The key criteria like 'No Human Intervention' and 'No Extractive Use' are now even stricter enforced. The 85% relates to several of the other criteria and here it means that at the beginning not all of them must be met fully of and only if a Wilderness Action Plan is put in place to addresses on how they will be met in the long term. The focus is now more process oriented and much more based on regular audits. The existing systems did audit the compliance as thoroughly as warranted. Please rest assured that these criteria are a set that really secures long term viability of wilderness based upon 14 years of experience by the leading wilderness advocates. The new criteria also minimizes the issues that were never resolved in the past.

Please contact our Director of Wilderness Development Vlado Vancura who was instrumental in developing the old standards and has now poured all of his know how and experience into the new criteria for more information.

### **Alexander Zinke**

📅 February 12, 2014 at 10:35 [🔗 Permalink](#)

Thanks for publishing this! First comment: This standard is in many criteria and by means of the summary criterion (75% to be met) very soft, easy to meet even in disturbed and dissected "wilderness" areas and much below the PAN Parks standard. It reflects a low ambition towards wilderness quality. I really hope this will still be improved!

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