



IUCN Wetlands International Cormorant Research Group

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Open letter to the Members of European Parliament about the initiative report (2021/2189(INI)), and in particular its paragraph 56 on cormorant management

Dear Members of the European Parliament,

On 12 July 2022, the Committee on Fisheries (PECH) adopted the initiative report on “striving for a sustainable and competitive EU aquaculture: the way forward” (2021/2189(INI)). Paragraph 56 of this report is calling the Commission to “prepare a proposal for a EU Great Cormorant Management Plan that could properly and definitively address the problem the aquaculture sector is facing since many years” and “urges the Commission to prepare, as an immediate action, a guidance document on how to apply derogations provided for in article 9 of the Birds Directive, and to assess the need to modify the current legislation where preventive measures have proven insufficient and the financial and social impact does not allow for coexistence solutions.”

We undersigned, a group of scientists, members of the IUCN & Wetlands International Cormorant Research Group, would like to respectfully draw the attention of the Members of the European Parliament that this paragraph 56 of the report wrongly suggests that the situation regarding the European Great Cormorant population has not changed during the last decades and that no scientific progress has been made recently regarding the fisheries-cormorant conflict. On the contrary, based on numerous recently peer-reviewed papers on the subject and several interdisciplinary projects during the last 20 years, we would like to point out the following facts:

After a well-described population increase, from the 1980s to the mid 2000s, the population of Cormorants in Europe is clearly levelling off since mid 2000s and in some regions even declining. This is due to the combined effects of environmental factors, such as:

- the successful combat against water eutrophication in western Europe, leading to less productive waters and smaller (but more diverse) fish stocks, leading in turn to a lower reproduction in Cormorant colonies, at least in western Europe.
- the existence of clear density-dependent effects which naturally regulate the Cormorant population both during breeding and wintering seasons (see projects CorMan, Cormo Dist).
- an increasing pressure of natural predators in the core breeding area of North and Central-west European range, which limit reproductive rate: Red Fox, Pine marten, (van Eerden & van Eerden 2021) and White-tailed Eagle (Bregnballe, Tofft *et al.* 2022).

A previous resolution of the EU parliament calling for a pan-European management plan in the core breeding areas in Europe resulted in several initiatives, including a guidance document on how to apply Article 9 of Birds Directive in the case of cormorant¹ and a scientific study on cormorant dispersal outside the breeding season (CormoDist project). This European-wide analysis of ringing data shows that, because of the strong mixing of birds in winter originating from different breeding populations, a pan-European population regulation plan is highly unlikely to have effect on local conflicts (Frederiksen, Korner-Nievergelt *et al.* 2018). Moreover, in practice, shooting in wintering areas has proven to be ineffective with respect to regulating overall numbers within the region in question; e.g. in France and Bavaria, the number of cormorants was rapidly filling up according to the surface area of natural open waters present (Marion & Bergerot 2018, case studies in Russell *et al.* 2012). Because shooting (even over many years) is demonstrably ineffective in regulating cormorant numbers, the French government decided to stop shooting in open waters from 2022 on.

We have long accepted that the ‘conflict’ between fisheries and cormorants is as much, if not more, a societal one than a biological one. Much of the conflict is fuelled by differences of opinion which are often persistent and entrenched. There is thus a clear need for a “reframing” of the issues as a positive step towards conflict management and resolution amongst those actors involved (Carss 2021). Coupled with co-developed experimentation to increase the scope and geographic coverage of management activities, such an adaptive management approach may well be the most fruitful - and biologically meaningful - option in the future.

In summary, after the resolution voted by the European Parliament the 4th December 2008 on “the adoption of a European Cormorant Management Plan to minimise the increasing impact of cormorants on fish stocks, fishing and aquaculture”, several initiatives were conducted including the creation of a European platform² and several scientific studies have

¹ See https://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/pdf/guidance_cormorants.pdf

² https://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/cormorants/home_en.htm

been undertaken. Adding to that, the cormorant ecological situation, in line with the well-documented, shifted and dynamic situation of aquatic ecosystems in Europe, has also changed. We urge the Parliament to take stock of these environmental changes, to tackle the challenges of fisheries and aquatic ecosystems as a whole and not only through the inappropriate and inaccurate prism of perceptions of the predation effects of a single species.

We therefore call on the Members of the European Parliament to modify paragraph 56 of this report, to promote the implementation of existing solutions and to ensure follow up of scientific research to solve conflicts. There are no easy answers or 'one-size-fits-all' solutions to this situation. We also understand that this is a sensitive and complex topic and so would be more than happy to clarify points or discuss things further any time if it would be helpful to you.

Sincerely,

The signatories:

Mennobart van Eerden, chair of the IUCN - Wetlands International Cormorant Research Group, Lelystad, The Netherlands

Thomas Bregnballe, IUCN - Wetlands International Cormorant Research Group, Aarhus, Denmark

David Carss, IUCN - Wetlands International Cormorant Research Group, Edinburgh, UK

Loïc Marion, IUCN - Wetlands International Cormorant Research Group, Chairman of the National Committee for Nature Protection, Rennes, France

Jean-Yves Paquet, IUCN - Wetlands International Cormorant Research Group, Namur, Belgium

Rosemarie Parz-Gollner, IUCN - Wetlands International Cormorant Research Group, Vienna, Austria

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Stefano Volponi, IUCN - Wetlands International Cormorant Research Group, Ravenna, Italy

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