



Supporting e-learning  
and capacity building  
for Natura 2000 Managers

# Layman's Report

April 2018 to July 2021

# Capacity building for Natura 2000 & Nature

The [LIFE e-Natura2000.edu project](https://www.e-natura2000.edu), “Supporting e-learning and capacity building for Natura 2000 Managers”, is financed under the LIFE Programme of the European Union. Called LIFEedu for short, the project ran for 40 months, from April 2018 to July 2021.



Over three years, six European partners worked together to develop new approaches to create dedicated capacity building programmes tailored for Natura 2000 managers.

# eNatura2000



This report is a project deliverable of the LIFE Preparatory project LIFE e-Natura 2000.edu (LIFE17PREDE003). The project is funded by LIFE financial instrument of the European Community and is implemented by EUROPARC Federation with the support of five partners: ProPark, Fungobe/EUROPARC-Spain, TESAF-University of Padova, the European Landowners Organisation, and the Kullberg Nature Reserve.

The opinions expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the European Commission.

# About LIFEedu

The project's overall goal was to demonstrate the need for and value of creating competence-based continuous professional development programmes directly linked to EU priorities for nature.

The main aim of the project was to produce and test a flexible mix of blended learning tools and methods, designed to build and develop the specific competencies required for effective Natura 2000 management practices.

This report presents the project's experiences, main conclusions and a set of recommendations important for future competence-based learning initiatives. Throughout the report, quotes are included to reflect some participants' experiences. The post-project future is also described and links to other sources of information are provided in the 'tips and tricks' section to inspire ideas for others engaged in capacity building for nature managers.



“ The project underlined dimensions of communications, aspects that sometimes might seem to be obvious, but in reality are more important. ”

[europarc.org/life-e-natura2000-edu/](http://europarc.org/life-e-natura2000-edu/)



# Our approach

The key premise for the project was to design, develop and apply a competence-based approach to capacity building for Natura 2000 managers. The starting point involved a comprehensive analysis of the Nature Directives to identify a set of core or common functions typically required to be delivered by Natura 2000 managers. Based on the [IUCN Global Register of Competencies for Protected Area Practitioners](#), partners then completed a detailed assessment of those specific competencies which Natura 2000 managers need to perform these functions.

**The competence-based approach was central to the project's capacity building objectives and applied to benefit more effective (stronger and improved) practical implementation of the Nature Directives.**

As Natura 2000 is as much a network of people as it is of special places, from the outset, all partners acknowledged the central role of competent, well-trained managers to the inclusive management processes required and applied on a daily basis in sites across Europe.

To demonstrate this, the project developed and tested a flexible capacity building programme, creating new purpose-built tools and learning approaches, to improve the effectiveness of Natura 2000 management practices in a broad range of settings.

The main delivery phase of the LIFE e-Natura2000.edu project coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic. However, thanks to the flexibility of project partners and participants and rapid contingency planning, implementation challenges for planned activities were resolved to meet the project objectives and deliver its results. In fact, the corresponding proliferation of online meetings, webinars, and other learning and communication techniques during the pandemic gave the project an unexpected new pilot function: especially for participants from large, public organisations, the project precipitated online working and increased familiarity in the use of the various online tools.



Capacity building is about building the professional capacity of people by encouraging them to engage in **lifelong learning processes** by using diverse **learning modes**.

# How LIFEedu worked

## Project participants

From the outset, the project recognised the fundamental diversity of types of Natura 2000 site managers. Purposefully, we included managers that do not necessarily belong to or work for organisations with Natura 2000 management responsibilities, namely private landowners of Natura 2000 sites.

**A small group of 75 managers in both private and public sites were selected to join the project.** Demand for places was high, but the project objectives were to work with a limited intake so that the tools and approaches could be thoroughly tested and evaluated.

When considering different modes of learning to be used in the project, it was important to gauge previous familiarity with (or resistance to) online learning and tools. Replies to the call for applications showed a generally **positive perception to online learning, especially amongst younger conservation professionals.** However, practical field trips are still highly valued and considered essential for nature managers. It is reasonable to expect that the trend towards increased online learning will grow but acceptance will never be 100%. As such,

**mixed approaches in the form of blended learning courses can provide a way forward particularly as this can significantly increase access for greater numbers of nature managers seeking to build their skills and knowledge.**



Also, **flexibility of approach is important:** for example, when working online, recording **synchronous learning events**, such as webinars and Zoom meetings, means that these can be viewed later, at times which suit individual needs. What is more, experience gained throughout LIFEedu, for example through organising the project's Summer School as a virtual event, confirms that transforming face-to-face events into partially blended events helps to achieve a wider audience among Natura 2000 professionals.

As evidenced by the project evaluation results, all learning components and tools presented achieved very high levels of recommendation: participants' feedback was extremely positive with 96% saying that they either are or were shortly planning to apply their learning in their work.

# New Tools

As a LIFE Preparatory project, a key goal for LIFEedu was to pilot its methods and tools and make results available to all interested in ways to improve the effectiveness of Natura 2000 management. Also, the project partners encouraged the core group of participants to share their learning with their colleagues: this generated a significant multiplier effect through the project.

Also, a large number of **networking actions**, both formal and informal, have been completed throughout the project in local, national and international forums. In addition, special attention was given to the **production of a consistent set of reporting deliverables**, which guarantee that detailed and coherent information on all actions and results are available for future use. Links to these project reports are provided throughout this report.

In addition, two specific actions were implemented to explore various means of broadening the circle of nature managers, professionals, stakeholders, and landowners potentially involved in the project: a specific **Smartphone App** and a **university-based 'Summer School'**.

## App users' experiences include that:

- 46% find it very easy to use and 54% quite easy to use;
- The majority (69%) use the app at least weekly;
- The 'top three' purposes for using the app are to:
  - Find useful contents and inspiration (92%);
  - Improve knowledge about Natura 2000 (85%); and,
  - Connect with peers (62%).

Information about the App, launched in September 2020 and downloadable in both android and Apple formats, can be found here [europarc.org/news/2020/09/e-natura-2000-app](http://europarc.org/news/2020/09/e-natura-2000-app). A report of the project's 'Natura 2000 in Practice' virtual Summer School can be found here: [europarc.org/news/2021/08/virtual-summer-school-report-on-the-natura2000-in-practice](http://europarc.org/news/2021/08/virtual-summer-school-report-on-the-natura2000-in-practice)



Another project action involved the development and testing of an online **Natura 2000 Training Needs Analysis tool** (the TNA). By using the purpose-built TNA, all individuals that have Natura 2000 management responsibilities can self-assess their training needs, generate a personal report and use the results to plan better their future professional development actions.

The online tool for Training Needs Assessment (TNA) is free for use and available via the following link: [propark.ro/individualtna](http://propark.ro/individualtna)



# Project Courses

The project designed three innovative capacity building courses in English, Spanish and Romanian using both online and face-to-face methodologies.

The opportunity to mobilise external experts is highly valuable and all LIFEedu partners are well-placed to secure their inputs and involvement to benefit project actions. A wide variety of content and multiple online tools were created and applied.

All expected project outputs were exceeded – see the Dashboard in the following pages for some examples of what the project produced to run the three courses. According to the participants' evaluated experiences, **short video tutorials and group-work lectures were identified as the most valuable resources for online learning.**

Technical aspects involved in the design and production of learning videos require specific attention in order to achieve required quality. **Specific tips on this aspect and practical guidance on how to design a training course are provided at the end of this report.**

“All the digital documents, presentations, references, videos have been very useful. I am already sharing and using them as working materials for other projects.”

## PROJECT IN A NUTSHELL

*LIFE e-Natura2000.edu:*  
*supporting e-learning & capacity building for Natura 2000 managers*

(LIFE17PREDE003)

**Total budget:** € 845 k

**Period:** April 2018 to July 2021

**6 partners from 6 countries**

Participants from across the EU

16 project actions & 23

deliverable outputs including

**3 blended-learning** courses in

English, Spanish and Romanian

Participants' feedback reveals the main project benefits as being:

- Refreshed knowledge and helped better understanding about Natura 2000's role.
- Focus on personal competencies, in particular practical communication tools, techniques and approaches, helped to improve conversations with partners.
- Increased confidence to look for 'next steps' and management solutions, without getting stuck in the past.
- Was a great resource for future personal, professional actions and a strong base to build on further.

# LIFEedu *Dashboard*

What LIFEedu achieved...

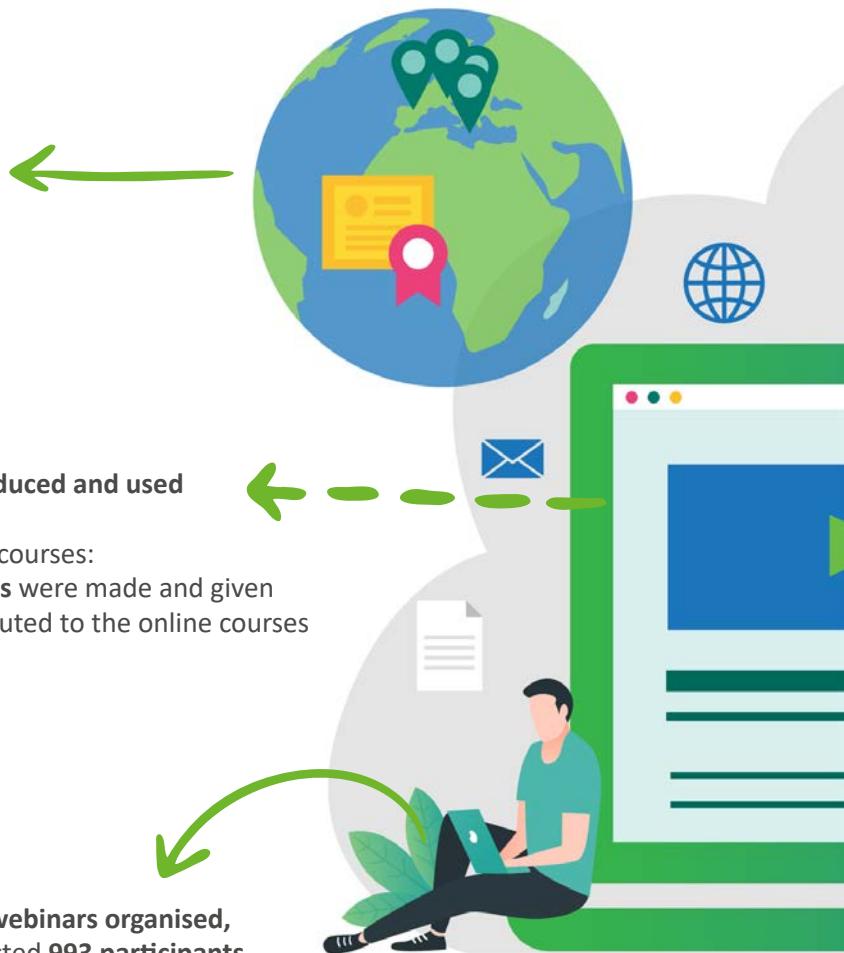
**75 participants with various levels of experience and different backgrounds, from 19 countries joined the project.**

High demand to participate – 189 applications received for 60 (originally planned) places.

**4 Moodles produced and used**

For the courses:  
**78 online presentations** were made and given  
**27 external tutors** contributed to the online courses

**5 'public' webinars** organised,  
which attracted **993 participants**





For the Virtual Summer School, 'Natura 2000 in Practice' organised by TESAF and EUROPARC:

**2 virtual field-trip videos produced**  
**6 external tutors**

More than 130 applications for 20 places generated within 2 weeks.



**1,038 active users of the LIFEeNatura App.**

[Download it here](#)

**2 podcasts made**  
**25 video demonstration clips created**

# Project Conclusions

To a large extent, the future of Europe's most precious habitats and species depends upon competent and confident nature managers. Their work to protect, maintain or restore nature merits continuous investments now for the future.

In order to ensure the quality of future professional capacity building programmes, it is essential to provide competence-based learning so that technical expertise and knowledge can be applied effectively: technical knowledge is not in itself enough.

The premise for LIFEedu was that, in order to be truly effective, capacity building must start from an assessment of competencies specifically required for work. As a LIFE Preparatory project, **LIFE e-Natura2000.edu was designed to develop new tools and test diverse innovative approaches to build capacity and improve nature management practices** by means of implementing a competence-based approach.

For participants and partners, the experience gains from the project will continue to have a lasting legacy. The need for and value of the online (net-)working and practical capacity building for nature managers have been demonstrated - without doubt, blended learning is here to stay. Of course, both online and face-to-face learning methods should be considered when planning Natura 2000 training and capacity building programmes: their respective advantages and shortcomings should be evaluated in terms of budgetary and logistical limitations, target groups, numbers of people to be reached, and specific aspects of the contents to be delivered.

“ We don't have to focus on all the negative aspects from the past, but rather to focus on what we would like to achieve in the future.”



The **online Training Needs Analysis tool** is an important product of the project and one which holds significant potential for development in future. The project partners are committed to exploring how the tool can be used within organisations and also at national levels to support the development of organisational and national capacity development programmes for nature managers.

LIFEedu's main aim was to provide inspiration, together with practical information and advice, for broader capacity building initiatives in future.

A new project, **LIFE ENABLE: Establishing the European Nature Academy for Blended LEarning** will take LIFEedu's results to a whole new level and reach even more Natura 2000 and Protected Area managers through the planned European Nature Academy (see in the following pages).



The project has evidenced the opportunity for and merits of developing dedicated capacity building programmes tailored for Natura 2000 managers and designed to support the achievement of EU priorities for nature – as a direct outcome of LIFEedu, the value of creating continuous professional development programmes directly linked to EU priorities for nature can be envisaged.

# Recommendations for future capacity building projects



The main learning gains as a result of the project enable a set of recommendations for future new initiatives and more ambitious future capacity building programmes. Specifically, the LIFEedu project has led to the development of [Guidelines for Replicability](#) and a new, ambitious project (LIFE ENABLE) to deliver a capacity building programme for nature managers, implemented on a Pan-European scale. As part of LIFEedu's lasting legacy, direct incentives to encourage competence-based approaches for capacity building across relevant project streams, with targeted and dedicated funding, include:

- Promote the integration of the competence-based approach and guidelines generated by LIFEedu for use within other project applications focusing on capacity building for nature conservation managers.
- Develop national level, comprehensive approaches and strategic plans for Natura 2000 management to promote greater efficiencies, increase consistency of management practices and enable effective use of resources allocated to capacity building.
- Integrating LIFEedu's approach into specific University modules and other academic programmes
- in future as a means to contribute to the training of future Natura 2000 managers in various academic and professional contexts.

Based on LIFEedu's experience, additional recommendations stem from the benefits of conducting regular and routine assessments of training and capacity needs.

Scaled-up, this can be useful to provide sound, evidence-based building blocks to address real needs of capacity development across the Natura 2000 network. Specifically in this regard and on the basis of the tools and approaches created, piloted and tested in LIFEedu, the following recommendations are made:

- **Develop a 'Natura 2000 Competence Register'** to serve as a guiding document which can be tailored to the specific capacity building needs of all Natura 2000 site managers across a wider range of Natura 2000 management contexts according to needs in different countries and natural regions.
- **Further develop the online TNA tool** to become a useful resource for all involved in Natura 2000. Individuals can self-assess their training needs and, for nature management teams and organisations, the results can be used to plan better future training and professional development actions.
- **Conduct regular and routine assessments of training and capacity needs** at all levels to provide sound, evidence-based foundations to address capacity development needs consistently across the Natura 2000 network.

# LIFEedu's legacy

## Scaling up towards a Pan-European Natura 2000 capacity building programme

The integration of a competence-based approach to capacity building for application across the EU and Europe, by all actors involved, will increasingly become central to the achievement of progress towards priorities for nature. **Understanding competencies and how they can be developed will help to contribute to increased recognition of the benefits and gains to be realised from cohesive, evidence-based approaches to capacity building;**

Based on LIFEedu's work to identify and assess specific competencies required for effective management of Natura 2000, concrete steps can be taken at European and national levels to develop capacity building programmes tailored to the specific context of each country. Building further on LIFEedu's results, it is possible to envisage the **creation of a dedicated capacity building initiative for the professionalisation of Natura 2000 and protected area management.**



“The plan is to share my learning and this whole experience with the rest of my colleagues (19 in total) during a presentation followed by a workshop.”

## Where next?

LIFEedu's results will be immediately put to work in **LIFE ENABLE**: Establishing the European Nature Academy for Blended Learning. This new project will establish the **European Nature Academy** as the means to develop further training projects and capacity building programmes at a Pan-European scale.

As a logical development and extension of LIFEedu's tested experiences, the European Nature Academy will:



Establish a European training hub to deliver widely accessible and tailor-made learning experiences for Natura 2000 managers.

Develop, test and implement innovative and accessible training activities that will support the delivery of EU policy by improving nature management practices in an extended protected area network that incorporates Natura 2000 sites.

Be open to all nature managers, but recognising the volume of habitat and specific management challenges involved, there will be a focus on forest and marine managers.

Boost individual, organisational and national capacities for Natura 2000 management by providing learning opportunities for individuals to train as trainers, mentors or facilitators of the project's learning experiences.

Achieve this by mobilising external expertise and utilising the best advice and recommendations provided by newly formed collaborative platforms, which bridge academia and site management experience.

Create a body of replicable courses and tailor-made learning activities, making use of the full range of face-to-face, blended, and online possibilities.

Establish continuous evaluation and innovation of the various components of the training system, both at European and national levels: this would aim to deliver a pragmatic balance between an ambitious large-scale training system and the quality and "freshness" of each course, workshop, or learning activity.

Working across individual, organisational and national levels, such an approach will provide the basis for the development of a network of European training sites, supported by a network of trained trainers.

As such, LIFE ENABLE will apply practical development and delivery mechanisms to revise and update content and learning approaches on the basis of participants', tutors' and external experts' feedback as part of continuous professional development programmes purpose-built for Europe's nature and its managers.

# LIFEedu – Project Library

To preserve the project's legacy, the LIFEedu partners found it important that all project reports serve a practical purpose. To help achieve this, the following section provides some tips and 'how-to-do' advice based on the project's experiences and results. And of course, all project reports and more information can be found from the project webpages: [www.euoparc.org/life-e-natura2000-edu/](http://www.euoparc.org/life-e-natura2000-edu/)  
[www.euoparc.org/news/2021/08/life-e-natura2000-edu-socio-economic-impact-assessment-report/](http://www.euoparc.org/news/2021/08/life-e-natura2000-edu-socio-economic-impact-assessment-report/)  
[www.euoparc.org/news/2021/08/life-e-natura2000-edu-final-report/](http://www.euoparc.org/news/2021/08/life-e-natura2000-edu-final-report/)



## How to build a training course

### 1

### Design

- Designate a 'Course Director' / Coordinator to be the overall lead contact person
- Confirm themes & core competencies to be covered
- Identify and brief tutors (internal and external experts)
- Decide the basic programme structure – *e.g. course period and duration, number of modules, time-line schedule*
- Plan the production of course contents, including tools and learning methods
- Confirm roles and responsibilities – *e.g. who will develop specific modules' content, create delivery tools and gather support materials etc.*
- Agree and appoint a lead contact per module, as well as a support coordinator and online platform (technical) administrator (which may be the same person).



# 2

## Delivery methods

There are three main options – face-to-face, online & blended (a mix of the two).

Face-to-face

- Typically run over three consecutive days – this avoids excessive time away for participants, especially if long travel times are involved.
- Identify the trainers, confirm the content and develop the programme (*including pre-production planning of content and tools*)
- Mobilise local expertise for practical advice, local transport and as guides for field trips.

Online

- Choose a ‘fit for purpose’ platform – *e.g. Blackboard, Moodle, MOOC* – usually determined by number of target participants
- Source an external provider (*often a commercial company*) or install it in your server
- Select an online meeting system – *e.g. ZOOM, GoToMeeting, MeetingBUrner, Cisco WebEx, Fuze etc.* Many offer free services, but often paid-for version provide much needed additional functions and facilities.
- Duration of courses can be anywhere between 3 to 5 weeks, but can be more
- Phase course modules over (on average) double the training period – *e.g. 5 taught module weeks would be ideally run over a 10-week period.*
- At the mid-point, schedule one (minimum) ‘review moment’ to gather feedback from participants/ ask how they are finding the course.
- Allow sufficient time for ‘own learning’
- Build-in high levels of group learning to retain enthusiasm

- Identify and select (rent) a venue – remember to take into account:
  - Available budget/ costs/ participants fees (where appropriate)
  - Travel logistics and times to get to and from the training location – provide a list of possible travel options
  - Accommodation for trainers and participants
  - Locations for field trips, selected for what the practical learning experiences they add to the programme.

- Mix and match a variety of online delivery tools to maintain interest
- Integrate time for trainers/ tutors to interact with participants, answer questions, provide guidance etc.
- Plan practical exercises, tasks and assignments for participants to complete in their own time.
- Build-in sufficient time for tutor assessments and feedback of participants’ work – aim to provide this as quickly as possible after a submission deadline.

In advance:

- Set required participation levels – typically 75% of taught time as a minimum.
- Ask participants to provide a signed statement of their intention to fully participate and commit their time to the course.
- Throughout, check levels of attendance, issue reminders/ alerts where necessary and remove individuals from the course if they are not able to comply with their participation agreement.

Blended

- Typically 3 to 5 online weeks with a mix of theory + practical assignments
- A high volume of interactive group working is highly desirable – this makes face-to-face time more productive as participants already know each other.

- Integrate (at least) one (typically) 3-day face-to-face (mainly) practical workshop.
- Schedule practical exercises, tasks and activities throughout the course and require 1 final assignment (online).

# 3

## Delivery activities

Online

- Identify and develop the activities for each online module - the more variety, the better!
- Decide which activities will be synchronous (run at pre-set times for the whole group) and which can be done asynchronously (in participants own time)
- In both synchronous and asynchronous activities, build-in the need for (small) group work – develop tasks and assignments that require team-working and information sharing
- Present all activities per module just in advance of delivery - this avoids overwhelming participants
- Confirm module activities throughout and send reminders via announcements in the chosen learning platform – not only does this help to ensure that participants are up-to-date, but that they continue to visit and become familiar with their learning platform.
- Determine which activities are mandatory and/ or optional (e.g. further reading)
- Present theoretical learning via pre-produced videos and/ or presentations and follow-up with a practical task/ group work activity to confirm understanding.

### Consider when best to use:

- Forums/ chats/ video-conferences/ webinars, etc
- Wikis (especially for collaborative working)
- Practical work and assigned tasks – also consider whether or not these should be shared with other participants
- Additional complementary materials – e.g. links to relevant resources, videos, news, etc. and/ or background reading and reference materials, such as pdfs, journals, scientific papers, links to useful websites etc.
- Pre-determine assessment methods (each module), as well as submission and feedback procedures
- Where appropriate, consider tutor's grading methods – pass/ fail is generally the least helpful option: think about feedback methods which are more constructive to facilitate improved learning.
- An end-of-course final assignment is normal and often expected by participants – announce this well in advance and encourage participants to pre-plan their work. A useful preliminary step can be to invite participants to submit an outline proposal about one-month in advance of the final assignment submission date.

Face-to-face

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- Normally in the form of a three-day practical workshop, with content related to the online modules
  - Group dynamics with plenary sessions
  - Field-trip

## 4

### Applications

- Take time to pre-plan, design and use a comprehensive application process, including the application form.
- The application form (e.g. google docs) should hold the information you need to:
  - Enable selection of applicants
  - Ensure balance and diversity of representation within the group
- Establish a baseline of participants' expectations and current levels of experience, useful for the evaluation process (in due course).
- Develop and apply consistent and transparent selection procedures and communicate outcomes as soon as possible
- Once participants are selected, remember to obtain necessary permissions for use of personal details, photographs (including ZOOM meetings etc.) and emails.

## 5

### Evaluation

- Develop in advance the evaluation process, but be prepared to apply it flexibly
- Identify 'project moments' for evaluation – e.g. at end of a training module, completion of assignments etc.
- Use a mix of ante and post surveys (online), as well as structured interviews etc.
- Protect confidentiality/ anonymity
- Routinely gather data and report findings throughout the evaluation process – don't wait until end of project.

## 6

### Get ready to start

- Create course participants' accounts: provide students & tutors with login details and an initial password (which they can then change).
- Send a "welcome e-mail" to the students with user/password and general instructions
- Ask participants for a short self-introduction as a first assignment – encourage creativity.
- Phase the release of each course module
- Just before the course starts, "Open" the first module resources
- Provide general instructions for each module just prior to it being opened
- Encourage learning together - ensure dynamic content & interactive group activities
- Allow time for questions and answers – e.g. to resolve doubts, provide clarifications etc.
- Monitor learners' progress and allow time for direct interventions (if necessary)

Immediately  
before

## Face-to-face phase

- Plan, prepare and plan again!
- Cover all possible logistics well in advance
- Make sure all instructions are clear and understood
- Tutors should arrive in advance to make last minute preparations (e.g. room set-up, equipment checks etc.)
- Coordinate delivery of contents according to agreed programme – be flexible within limits of time, but stick to the overall plan.

## How to make ‘green screen’ videos

Throughout the project, short educational videos were produced for different training activities. The practicalities of designing, producing and launching these videos were central to achieving the project’s objectives.

A mix of video-making techniques was used. This included the use of chroma (“green screen”) sets for video recordings. This relatively simple technical resource proved very useful, but at the same time little practical aspects could be frustrating if not properly handled – for example, lighting, sound and editing processes. These are all much more time-consuming than expected, so do not underestimate these in the production planning process!

### In general ...

- Keep videos short, no longer than 10 or 15 minutes, or split in two or more consecutive parts which can also be viewed as independent videos.
- Provide other types of resources and activities to complement videos, such as discussion forums, reading materials, links to external resources, etc.

**You can find more practical advice and guidance at:**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wY3jLeq9aX0>

# What worked well?

LIFEedu has demonstrated that there are common needs and competence-based learning opportunities. Three courses were developed to meet the needs and expectations of the respective core groups of participants. It should be pre-requisite that capacity building programmes can be applied according to local circumstances, needs and within prevailing cultures.

In LIFEedu, the importance of and need for better sequencing of project actions in phases – planning, development, delivery and evaluation – were recognised quickly, but only after the project had started. Re-thinking LIFEedu, enabled a stronger and more cohesive project to be implemented which actually better achieved originally planned objectives.

- Project's coordination and partner's cooperation, including the participatory development of the list of core Natura 2000 competencies.
- The adaptability, flexibility and problem-solving creativity of project partners in responding to COVID-19 situation.
- The inclusive approach to recruitment of project participants for the core groups, made up of individuals with diverse professional backgrounds and levels of experience, based in national and regional locations, from various types of organisations (public and private, GO and NGO), as well as gender and age.
- Flexible design and delivery of the courses to meet the needs of the three core groups.
- Participants' active involvement and personal commitment whilst dealing with COVID changes in their professional and personal lives.
- Development of the first App about Natura 2000 and protected area management and favourable reviews.

“ The project was an unforgettable experience. COVID-19 sealed this time and the online course has been a very positive distraction! ”

The 'flexibility and desire to align the whole content with the situation we are still facing (COVID-19)' was particularly appreciated.



# What could have been improved?

- Although each course was broadly consistent in terms of delivery time and period, dealing with the sudden realities of COVID meant that an element of coordination was (inevitably) lost.
- Whilst the adaptability and flexibility achieved were necessary and positive elements of LIFEdu, at the same time the differences between the three courses demonstrate the challenges of meeting national and regional capacity building needs within a European framework.
- Future capacity building programmes will need to cross-reference courses to improve consistency; agreeing on common standards at an early stage of a future project will help to ensure that a 'common language' can be applied across project learning experiences.
- Use of agreed standards to test how learning is applied whilst being adapted according to individual (site-level, organisational or personal needs) should be incorporated as core features of the assessment processes in future projects.
- Had COVID allowed, exchange and interaction among participants of different countries and courses were not foreseen in the original project proposal, but would have been a valuable and worthwhile activity within LIFEdu.

## Regarding the APP:

- Timing and COVID prevented better integration of the App across other project actions, in particular the three courses.
- To keep within available resources, the App was not able to include ArcGIS or tablet support - while tablets account for only 5 percent of users, ArcGIS would have provided some interesting additional options.
- COVID also meant that planned promotional 'pushes' for the app were not possible – for example, at Forum For Agriculture 2020 and in 2021, as well as dissemination events across Europe and Brussels.

## Regarding Moodle:

- Whilst each partner leading a course has gained experience of working with Moodle, it has limitations as a learning platform – for example, there are (limited) standard data reports, limits in terms of structure which make users' experience of working with content not particularly intuitive (e.g. cumbersome to navigate etc.)
- In general, more videos and less descriptive texts should be produced.
- The timescales to develop, obtain approval for and publish a scientific paper are impossible to predict and long. Editorial outcomes are also outwith the control of project partners.

## Regarding the TNA:

- The TNA would benefit from being translated into multiple languages – although this would have been a significant cost and was clearly not possible within the resources available for LIFEdu, it merits investigation in future. This is also true for course content.

## Networking

Distance learning proved to be tough for some and a challenge to maintain motivation. A preference for face-to-face interaction remains, especially as it is more familiar, but also as a learning environment where people can develop their skills, share their experiences directly with each other and create deeper bonds.

However, whether online or face-to-face, the opportunity to connect with peers is particularly valued.

One participant commented that it has been ‘a privilege to learn with a group of like-minded people, listening to and learning from different perspectives’.

The opportunity ‘to share and learn from others and have the possibility to exchange or create a team force for future projects related to Natura 2000 conservation and participatory actions’ has been particularly valuable.

## Course content (tools & modules)

The courses not only helped to improve skills, the learning was ‘a great accelerator in the European dimension of an area I am also still exploring locally/nationally’.

“My wife asked if I was doing another online Masters!”

Although quite long and intensive, the time given to support the participants was genuinely appreciated. Other comments about the courses and how they were structured and paced include:

- Incredibly organized modules, clear and friendly tools
- Useful and valuable information, presented by inspirational experts
- Very interesting, very high level! The course got better and better from one module to the next.
- Competent and inspiring organisers - I have learnt simply by listening and observing all of you. For me, learning by example from people is very important.
- The techniques will help with writing proposals and making reports on environmental conservation related to Natura 2000 management.
- Friendly and well prepared organisers.

## Applying their learning!

Participants reported that the learning experiences are being directly applied to help produce the next national park management plan. Also, they reported:

Being a lot more confident co-working with communication specialists who support the management teams.



That a significant multiplier effect was achieved from sharing their learning experiences with their colleagues and teams.

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This report is a project deliverable of the LIFE Preparatory project LIFE e-Natura 2000.edu (LIFE17PREDE003). The project is funded by LIFE financial instrument of the European Community and is implemented by [EUROPARC Federation](#) with the support of five partners: [ProPark](#), [Fungobe/EUROPARC-Spain](#), [TESAF-University of Padova](#), the [European Landowners Organisation](#), and the [Kullaberg Nature Reserve](#).

The opinions expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the European Commission.

“ For many years I did not do any real training in my work. I spend most of my time implementing projects and projects and projects... How silly not to invest in communication competencies all those years! ”





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