REPORT

Meeting: **Stakeholder consultation on the draft European Cormorant Management Plan**
Parties: **EIFAAC, stakeholders**
Date: **25 April 2025**
Location: **MS Teams**
Chair: **Raymon Van Anrooy (NFIFO, EIFAAC)**
Rapporteur: **Kateryna Urbanovych**

1. Welcome and opening remarks

Cathal Gallagher (Chairperson of EIFAAC) welcomed participants to the meeting discussing the first draft of the European Cormorant Management Plan. The plan addresses growing cormorant population and its impact, as documented by extensive research and experience within the EIFAAC community.

The plan was compiled as an output of a request from DG MARE, which provided funding to EIFAAC to support work on cormorants.

2 Impact of cormorant predation on fish populations, fisheries, aquaculture and food security

Dr Niels Jepsen (DTU Aqua) noted that the conflict between increasing cormorant populations and declining fish stocks has affected human activities for decades, starting with pound-net and coastal fishers in the north, later extending to recreational fishers, aquaculture, anglers, and biodiversity conservation efforts with local fish stocks declining due to predation.

Scientific evidence mainly documents impacts in rivers and streams; studies on coastal waters, estuaries, and fjords are fewer but show substantial effects. Research gaps are likely due to political sensitivities and limited funding.

Danish research, where cormorants are present year-round, reflects global EU trends. Following the Birds Directive, the bird's population increased exponentially, later shifting from coast to rivers as coastal food supplies declined. This coincides with the collapse of small-scale coastal fisheries from 1995 onward. In 2000, EU-funded FRAP research found heavy predation in estuaries, with telemetry and pellet analysis confirming significant fish losses. Similarly, coastal studies showed cormorants consuming around 15 million cod annually in the western Baltic, comparable to or exceeding total recruitment figures (4–17 million cod/year). Research in rivers and lakes has also shown serious impact, particularly on grayling and other native species since 1997.

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It appears that cormorants are a major regulating factor for fish populations across rivers, lakes, and coasts, driving biodiversity loss, economic and cultural decline, and hindering crucial EU conservation targets. There is currently no natural balance between predator and prey. Despite 30 years of efforts, conflict remains high. Article 9 of the Bird Directive permits regulating bird populations but has had limited effect, in part because cormorants are highly mobile and interconnected across Europe. In this context, a coordinated EU-wide management plan is urgently needed, as explicitly requested by the European Parliament.

Dr Raymon van Anrooy (EIFAAC, NFIFO) presented the impacts of cormorants on fisheries, aquaculture, and food security.

Commercially important coastal fish stocks predation (cod, eel, eelpout, flounder, and perch) appear to be suffering from cormorants. Inland freshwater fisheries have also declined sharply, with production down by 43% across Europe. Despite mitigation efforts, such as reduced commercial fishing, a shift to catch-and-release practices, and increased fish stocking by angling clubs, growing cormorant predation remains a major cause of fish stock decline. The EEA and EIFAAC are conducting a joint study on the economic impact on recreational fisheries, with estimated losses exceeding €100 million annually.

Aquaculture is similarly affected, with predation costs estimated at €250 million per year. Measures like pond netting, reduced stocking, more extensive farming, and shifting to alternative livelihoods have been applied but with limited success.

Cormorants also pose a challenge to food security: while the average human consumes 22 kg of fish per year, a single cormorant consumes about 180 kg.

Although international and EU-level policies exist to manage cormorant populations, past management and action plans have failed mostly due to lack of application or implementation.

A European Cormorant Management Plan has been formally requested three times by the European Parliament, EIFAAC, and major stakeholder groups across aquaculture, recreational and commercial fisheries, and both bird and fish conservation communities.

2.1 Q&A

Participants provided comments and feedback, reflecting on the presented information:

- **BirdLife Europe and Central Asia**: Opposed any type of intervention in cormorant populations, arguing that broader ecosystem pressures are the main cause of fish declines. Warning was made against the use of *streetlight bias* – blaming visible predators like cormorants and seals without addressing deeper *invisible* problems like predatory fish and habitat degradation.
- **National Association for Protection of Water, Coasts and Rivers** in France: Emphasized that fish stocking is largely ineffective and mainly benefits cormorants. Highlighted the urgent need to focus on protecting biodiversity, noting the eradication of endemic grayling populations by cormorants.

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- **Seas at Risk**: Questioned the focus on cormorants as a primary cause of fish declines in the Baltic Sea, where habitat degradation is the predominant issue. Stressed that correlation does not imply causation, and other factors must be prioritized.
- **Sweden MS**: Highlighted the need for including solid evidence in the Plan showing that reducing cormorants improves fish stocks.
- **Danish Fish Producers Organisation**: Noted that good cod recruitment still occurs despite habitat issues but young cod disappear after reaching 20-25 cm. Pilot projects were suggested as a way forward to test the factual impact of cormorants on cod.
- **Wetlands International Europe**: Expressed concerns about the plan's biased framing, which appears to blame cormorants for all fishery issues. Additionally, inquires were made on whether the plan targets endangered species or merely supports recreational/commercial fisheries and fish farms. Additionally, need to align the plan with existing frameworks like the Birds Directive and the Bern Convention was emphasized.
- **Hungarian Aquaculture Interbranch Organization**: Highlighted that cormorant predation in freshwater aquaculture has broader impacts beyond production losses, as fish farms now serve as important wetland habitats, contributing significantly to ecosystem services and biodiversity.

3. Draft European Cormorant Management Plan

Ian Cowx (Angling Trust/ Hull University) presented an overview of the first chapters of the draft European Cormorant Management Plan.

Cormorants are highly mobile, forming a single, interconnected population migrating north-south across Europe. They consume large quantities of fish daily, cause scars and wounds to fish, and influence fish behaviour, forcing fish into refuge areas. Beyond impacts to coastal and inland fish stocks, as well as aquaculture ponds, large nesting and wintering colonies also cause substantial damage to forests and terrestrial ecosystems, leading to local biodiversity declines, including reductions in amphibian populations.

Cormorants are protected under Article 5 of the Birds Directive, but derogations allowing control measures, including non-lethal and lethal methods, are possible to prevent serious damage to fisheries and aquaculture. Several management measures have been proposed, notably through the INTERCAFE project, which developed a toolbox of potential methods: scaring, exclusion techniques (e.g., netting), habitat modifications and stocking adjustments, and compensation schemes (existing, but uneven across MS). Each method faces limitations.

A major challenge is the lack of consistent application: few Member States actively use Article 9 derogations, and there is no coordinated control across Europe. National efforts vary greatly, and without cross-border coordination, management remains fragmented and ineffective. Hence, a pan-European management plan is needed. This plan does not aim to eradicate cormorants but to manage their impacts based on scientific evidence. The plan is adaptive, flexible, and evidence-based, aiming to balance conservation, fisheries, aquaculture, and biodiversity goals. It will:

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- Base decisions on robust scientific data.
- Promote collaboration among all stakeholders.
- Ensure compliance with EU directives and international agreements like the Bern Convention.
- Apply the precautionary principle to avoid ecological or economic harm.

The primary objective of the plan is to reduce cormorant abundance to a level where their predation no longer has substantial negative effects. Defining what constitutes a "substantial negative effect" is crucial to this goal. Other key objectives include:

- Protecting vulnerable fish species from cormorant predation while supporting EU Water Framework and Birds Directive targets.
- Strengthening inland/coastal fisheries and aquaculture viability.
- Updating and improving methods for reducing cormorant numbers and supporting sustainable fisheries, as current methods are largely ineffective on a pan-European scale.
- Ensuring continuous, up-to-date data on cormorant populations, fish stocks, and economic/social impacts across borders.
- Promoting cross-border collaboration for harmonized monitoring and data-sharing.

The plan follows a project cycle, which operates over a five-year period:

1. Set objectives with specific targets.
2. Assess systems to set the scene.
3. Formulate management policies for action.
4. Implement, monitor, evaluate, and adapt measures as needed.

Stakeholder participation and consultation are essential at every stage to balance the needs of all actors.

The first step is to standardize data collection and monitoring protocols for cormorants and fish across Europe. Although substantial data exists, it needs to be integrated into a consistent framework, covering cormorant distribution, breeding success, migration, fish populations, and ecosystem impacts. Ecosystem impact assessments are also beeded to quantify ecological, economic, and social effects.

Clear objectives, with defined reference points and key performance indicators, will guide management actions. The plan aims to protect overall biodiversity, not just cormorants, ensuring a balanced approach across species and habitats.

Current cormorant control measures are fragmented and largely ineffective. Non-lethal methods require further development, and any population reductions must be coordinated at the European level, with thresholds set to achieve population control. Lethal control, where necessary, should be zonal and and based on documented impacts to avoid unnecessary population control.

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Decision-making will involve reviewing cormorant-fish interactions and using models to predict outcomes and trade-offs.

Finally, compensation schemes for damage caused by cormorants need to be fairly distributed across countries. A systems for damage reporting and compensation assessments needs to be established, ensuring that all information is open access, enabling stakeholders to engage and make informed claims.

The project cycle will be supported by an organisational framework. The European Commission, Parliament, and EIFAAC, will oversee the implementation process, with a Cormorant Management Advisory Group coordinating efforts, supported by a Compliance Committee and a Secretariat. The Advisory Group will focus on data collection, monitoring, cormorant control actions, and plan assessments. Sustainable financing is crucial, with potential funding from the EU and individual countries. This structure would be implemented over the next 2-3 years, with countries reporting to the Secretariat for mid-term reviews.

The plan will be adaptive, with progress evaluated every five years. Outcomes will be assessed against set targets, and based on new information, adjustments will be made to the management actions. If control methods are ineffective, alternatives will be explored.

3.1 Discussion

Participants put forward comments to Cowx's presentation:

- **Swedish Research Council – FORMAS:** Queried about the mentioned bias in the studies reviewed regarding cormorant population impacts on vulnerable species and requested clarification from the authors.
- **Swedish MS:** While the management plan is well drafted, the psychological aspect must be considered. There needs to be an agreement on a lower threshold for cormorant populations. If this threshold is exceeded, adaptive management should be allowed, with acceptance from all sides to avoid conflict.
- **Finland MS:** Raised concerns about inconsistencies in EU legislation, particularly the Eel regulation and NRL, which require habitat restoration but are hindered by environmental legislation that prevents alleviating pressure from cormorants. This creates a conflict for MS aiming to restore fish populations.
- **BirdLife Europe and Central Asia:** Expressed concerns about the plan's limited references and the omission of major EU projects (INTERCAFE, REDCAFE) conclusion of limited benefits of a global approach to cormorant management. Reducing cormorant populations would be a short-term solution, failing to address the underlying socio-economic and ecological factors causing fish declines.
- **Wetlands International Europe:** Inquired about the rationale for setting "favorable populations" and annual culling numbers. The legality of the proposal under Article 9 was questioned and how documentation requirements would be met, particularly in cases like the Netherlands where is not allowed.

In response to the mentioned biases, Jepsen noted that conflicts are clear in the literature. Some studies show minimal impact, but field-based studies support the claims of fishers and

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anglers, confirming that cormorants are indeed impacting fish populations. However, cormorants are not the primary issue everywhere. Cowx added that much of the evidence is in grey literature, especially in old reports and studies, also performed by bird experts.

On favourable population numbers, Jepsen noted that estimations have been based on stable populations prior to the Birds Habitat Directive. The draft is still being developed, and estimates are being refined as part of the management-driven process involving governments. Additionally, a full reference list will be added in the Annex once the plan is finalized.

4 Next steps

- **Until 7 May, 2025:** Stakeholders are invited to submit comments on the first draft, especially corrections and additions to Chapters 1–3 (goals, objectives, actions, and implementation structure).
- **21–22 May:** The second draft will be circulated to stakeholders.
- **3 June:** A conference on management advice to reduce cormorant predation impacts will be held, hosted by Polish EU Council presidency.
- **Until 17 June:** Further comments on the second draft are welcome.
- **Early July:** EIFAAC/FAO will formally submit the management plan to the European Commission for further processing and adoption.

EIFAAC will continue to support the process beyond submission, given its broader membership beyond the EU.

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