

Angelo Salsi speech at the LIFE OZON launch, 11 October 2013, Hoeilaart, Belgium

Since 1997, every day when I wake up I see the Forêt des Soignes or Zoniënwoud. I am one of these thousands of commuters that every day go into Brussels... I promise I never killed a single animal, but I saw quite a number of them that were killed.

We had a very fierce discussion in the panel meetings. In that moment we were confronted with this project and we thought these guys have understood everything. First you have understood that we are talking about Natura 2000. Unfortunately if you go around Europe Natura 2000 flies so-so; it's there, they know about it, but if you go and ask EU citizens about a nice protected place in the world they would say Yellowstone; if you ask them about a monument that would say Tour Eiffel or Coliseum without any problem. So we don't share a common natural heritage in Europe.

Natura 2000 is also trying to do this, so we would have a single passport, a single currency, a single many things, and possibly also share a common natural heritage, which is our land. The moment we reach that level, probably we will be true Europeans in the bottom of our heart.

You understood Natura 2000, but you understood that Natura 2000 is not just a set of protected sites, it's a network, and if it's a network it must be connected, otherwise these are islands in the middle of an urbanised area. And so you want to reconnect them.

The ambition of what you want to reconnect, the visibility in terms of what you are doing, because you are in the capital of Europe, it was amazing, so we had no problem whatsoever to pass it, and we passed it with great expectation. And when I say great expectation, we are not the bank with a pot of money we give out and forget about it. Usually I try to say to our beneficiaries that the European Commission is a partner - we want to finance the project because we believe in the project, because we think that project is going to help us implement the Union policy.

Normally when we come there it is because we want to see what you are doing and come back and tell to our colleagues and the rest of the world that we are doing this together - you are helping us do Natura 2000.

LIFE is a support to Natura 2000 and really the leading thing for us is Natura 2000 and our biodiversity strategy.

We have a creature in our hands, which is the European Union, which is stronger, like our boys that are growing up and are becoming big with life and you feel they are really going through life. At the same time it's also a very weak creature - it has taken generations to build it up. We did it for one purpose: peace; then we added freedom; then we added economy, it was not the main reason why we wanted this. And I feel that today there is a tendency of letting this flag fade away a little bit. Maybe you don't feel it here in Brussels, we are so close, and in Belgium so close to the hearts. Down there in my home country, a country of euro-supporters, ignorant because they didn't know what Europe is about in Italy - ignorant, but supporters; now they are eurosceptics, ignorant as before, but they turn into eurosceptics. And this sort of superficialism about a creature which is so important for all of us, makes me feel really afraid.

Your project is a tiny little drop in this big game of keeping Europe running, but we have to keep Europe running and we actually need much more Europe than we have today - there is no other way. We will count zero in the world in 20, 30 years time unless we are Europe. Each country by itself will not be invited any more to the G8, G20, whatever. And if we are not invited to these meetings, we can't bring forward our ideas, our way of living and things like this, including Natura 2000. So please keep the flag up and count on us as partners in this particular game of life.