

EUROWA: a European mutual assistance system for oiled wildlife emergencies

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ABSTRACT

In an incident where thousands of marine animals may be affected by an oil spill, the effectiveness of an international oiled wildlife response operation may be crucial in the successful rescue and professional treatment of such animals, notably birds. Having immediate access to work forces of professionally trained responders can help in dealing with oiled animals arriving on the shore, while more trained and experienced resources are mobilised from further away or abroad, if needed. Rather than having to invest nationally into a preparedness level that can deal with large and complex spill scenarios, countries can collaborate so that they can blend their limited national resources to create an *ad hoc* multi-national system that can work on larger scales and tailored to the needs of an incident, including the more extreme and rare scenarios. This is the philosophy behind EUROWA, a regional European mutual assistance structure and capacity for wildlife emergencies that builds on Authority-NGO relationships.

EUROWA is based on mutual trust amongst its NGO members, who cooperate on joint international response and a collective process of creating tools, procedures, guidelines and training materials which improve the ability of the group to respond and to pass knowledge onto

local responders. This cooperation, underpinned by the EUROWA Charter, provides a work force of trained and aligned responders, as well as an equipment stockpile, who can mobilise internationally for an emergency and work alongside local in-country responders educated to the same standards.

While the concept of mutual assistance was already applied for years by some pioneering organisations in the early years of the new millennium, EUROWA was born and has continued to develop via funding support from the EU Civil Protection Mechanism. The latest project developed a range of new educational tools for governments on oiled wildlife preparedness and response, has incorporated sea turtle expertise into the network and added new course modules to the EUROWA training portfolio. This paper will describe how EUROWA operates, outline its main objectives, its political lobby over the years, and explain how EU-funding has helped further the achievement of those objectives, so moving Europe forward in its collective preparedness for marine wildlife emergencies and encouraging national authority – NGO partnerships.

INTRODUCTION

In an incident where hundreds or even thousands of marine animals may be affected by an oil spill, the effectiveness of an international oiled wildlife response operation may be crucial in conserving local or regional populations of animals, notably birds. Oil spills can cause significant long-term effects on populations, a risk which can only be countered by having immediate access to resources and work forces of professionally trained responders. This is the philosophy behind EUROWA (EUROpean Oiled Wildlife Assistance), a regional European mutual assistance structure and capacity for wildlife emergencies, which builds on NGO-authority relationships. Rather than

having to invest nationally into a preparedness level that can deal with large and complex spill scenarios, countries work together so that they can blend their national resources to create an *ad hoc* multi-national system that can deal with extreme and rare challenges. National investments can be targeted towards building core preparedness which can then be complemented by international expertise.

EUROWA is based on mutual trust amongst its NGO members, underpinned by the EUROWA Charter. Members cooperate on joint international response and collectively create tools, procedures, guidelines and training materials which improve the ability of the group to respond and to pass knowledge onto local responders. This cooperation provides a work force of trained and aligned responders, as well as an equipment stockpile, who can mobilise internationally for an emergency and work alongside local responders educated to the same standards. The EUROWA network is currently made up of 12 organisations in 11 European countries (see Figure 1), as well as a number of technical experts who form part of the pool of expertise. The Secretariat of the network is provided by the Sea Alarm Foundation.

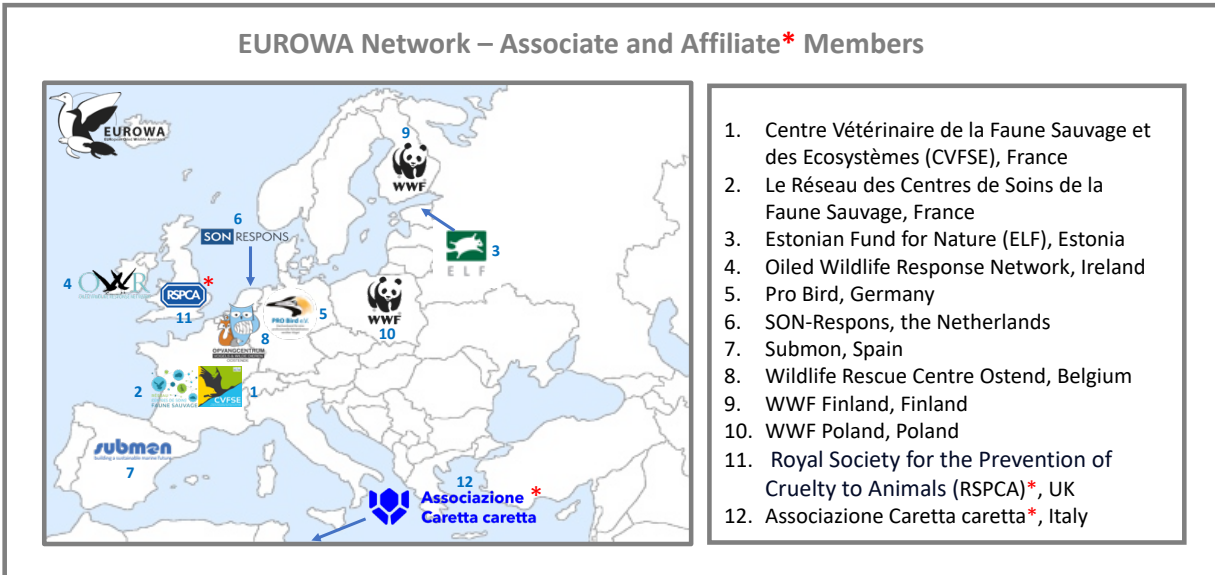


Figure 1 – EUROWA Network Associate and Affiliate Members

The spirit and will to cooperate amongst European oiled wildlife response organisations were born out of several major oil spills in European waters from 2002 to 2008 where expert groups mobilised themselves abroad to join the response effort, working side by side with responders from other countries and local NGO groups. The collaboration was successful, but the expert groups realised that they needed to be better prepared for these situations and started to meet regularly, to exchange methodologies and best practices. This created a sense of community and started the development of common technical principles for international oiled wildlife response.

These processes were boosted by EU-funded projects and from 2009 onwards these joint efforts started to materialise into concrete standards. EUROWA was created in 2015 with support provided by the European Union’s Civil Protection Mechanism, which allowed European wildlife groups to establish themselves as the EUROWA network – a formal mutual assistance system that European authorities can call on for assistance in case of an incident. The latest round of funding

supported the EUROWA-2 project, which not only boosted the network's capability to provide mutual assistance in Europe, but also the integration of this system into existing mechanisms of the European Commission and Regional Agreements.

METHODS

EUROWA is an established network of European wildlife response experts and organisations which is self-governed. The EUROWA network has responded together in the past to various oiled wildlife incidents in different European countries. They realised that their effectiveness in oiled wildlife incidents could only be truly successful if they agreed on joint international standards of good practice, and if they would invest into collaborative efforts to develop and implement those standards. While many of the organisations that constitute the EUROWA network have worked together for many years, the cooperation became formalised in 2015 under an EU funded project. Sea Alarm Foundation provide the Secretariat of the network and are responsible managing the day-to-day activities.

The EUROWA network is available to assist European authorities during emergency situations. Qualified experts from the EUROWA network organisations can join together to form a team of experts and a stockpile of equipment that can be mobilised 24/7 to complement the capability or capacity of a local wildlife response. EUROWA can assist authorities and other parties in the affected country with the design, setup and management of wildlife response, the collection and treatment of oiled wildlife, training on-site for responders and veterinarians and advice on how to integrate the wildlife response into the overall pollution response.

EUROWA Charter

In 2020, an important milestone was reached with the signing of the EUROWA Charter. The Charter is a core principle of this cooperation and all organisations must sign it in order to become an official Associate Member. The aim of the Charter is to clarify what EUROWA is, how it is organised and how it can be integrated into national emergency response systems. It emphasises reinforcing the bonds between organisations and the leading authorities in their countries and enables EUROWA to become an integrated and recognised professional service available to governments and NGOs in Europe. The Charter outlines EUROWA's vision and mission and the organisational structure of the network. The full Charter can be found [here](#).

EUROWA Governance

The EUROWA network has three levels of governance: the General Assembly, the Governance Committee, and Technical Committees. The Governance Committee is the main decision-making body of the network responsible for overseeing the implementation of the Charter. It oversees the content and implementation of the Charter, produces a draft 2-year Work Programme of EUROWA activities, and takes strategic and policy decisions in accordance with the Charter.

The General Assembly is made up of all the Associate Members, plus Affiliate Members as observers (further information below). At the General Assembly, the Chair and Vice-Chair of the Governance Committee are elected, the 2-year work programme is also discussed and reviewed, and an agreement taken on the associated activities. Work Programme activities are grouped into 9 categories:

- Governance & network management
- 24/7 readiness
- Equipment
- Training
- Exercises
- Accreditation
- Standards
- Communications and PR
- Advocacy and political activities

The Technical Committees are made up of qualified experts who ensure the quality of EUROWA technical standards and protocols, being responsible for any updates as well as managing the quality and improvement of the EUROWA training portfolio. They also have oversight of the readiness of the network's equipment stockpile.

EUROWA Membership

Two levels of membership apply in EUROWA: Associate (full membership) and Affiliate membership. The Affiliate Membership category was introduced in 2022 to allow participation of organisations who may not have the possibility to commit as a full member. This category of membership was also created to open up the EUROWA network beyond the traditional NGO base to other types of organisations, such as universities, scientific institutions, veterinary clinics or authorities. Across Europe, there are many organisations like this who could bring a valuable contribution to an oiled wildlife response. Their expertise is also valuable to further develop and create technical standards and response protocols. Affiliate Members do not have full voting rights but have access to EUROWA standards and trainings and can be part of their updating and improvement. They can also be part of the pool of experts to be mobilised during a response.

Equipment stockpile

The EUROWA network has its own wildlife response equipment stockpile, currently stored in a warehouse in Belgium which is offered as an in-kind contribution by the Belgian authorities. The stockpile consists of a number of items which would be needed for an oiled wildlife response, such as pools, water pumps, veterinary equipment, among others. While it is a very useful stockpile of equipment, it is only a subset of what would be needed for a full wildlife response, so more equipment would need to be purchased in the country where the incident happens. Different scenarios might also lead to different response needs - and therefore different equipment. Regular equipment maintenance inspections are carried out.



Figure 2 – EUROWA equipment stockpile under inspection. Copyright: Sea Alarm

The EUROWA Standards Series

Under the two EUROWA projects funded by the European Commission, the network has developed and adopted a series of EUROWA standards to assist authorities and wildlife response organisations to get prepared for an oiled wildlife incident. The set of standards (see Figure 3) includes Standard Operating Procedures and technical guidance on a range of

elements such as rehabilitation protocols, scientific impact assessment protocols and how to equip, design and manage rehabilitation facilities.



Figure 3 – The EUROWA standards series

Part A, the EUROWA Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) was developed in two versions: the external version for authorities who may mobilise the network to assist in an oiled wildlife incident and the internal version which describes the joint working procedures that the network follows when responding together. The SOPs detail how EUROWA can be activated by a governmental authority via the European Commission’s Emergency Response Coordination Centre (ERCC). The ERCC is the hub of EU Civil Protection Mechanism (UCPM), which enables coordinated assistance from the UCPM Member and Participating States to victims of natural and man-made disasters in Europe and elsewhere (European Commission, 2023; EUROWA, 2022).

Further details on the EUROWA standards series are available on the EUROWA website [here](#).

EUROWA Training

EUROWA network members have over the years built up a portfolio of professional oiled wildlife response training based on their collective knowledge, experience and insights. Trainees can follow a career path to develop their skills from BASIC responder up to Oiled Wildlife Response Manager, and a separate path is available for veterinarians. Courses are in a modular format, combining lectures, hands-on training, skill labs, exercises and evaluation of individual skills. Some of the higher-level courses follow a life-long learning philosophy, as the depth of knowledge and skills required can only be achieved over a period of time through a range of learning methods. A EUROWA database has been developed that keeps a central registration of individuals who have successfully qualified. This guarantees quality control as a EUROWA qualification is only valid when the qualification has been registered in this database. For hands-on training, the network's expertise has traditionally been focussed on aquatic birds, but via the EUROWA-2 project, the pool of experts has recently been expanded to include individuals specialised in the care and treatment of oiled sea turtles. Also new course modules have been added including curricula for scientists involved in risk and impact assessment, evaluating and advising authorities on the effects of marine pollution incidents on seabird populations. A full list of the available EUROWA training qualifications is available on the EUROWA website [here](#).

The EUROWA-2 project also gave a big boost in 2021 and 2022 to the pool of expertise in Europe, through the delivery of a significant number of training events to roll out existing and new EUROWA training packages (see Figure 4). A key strength of EUROWA is that people are being

trained to the same standards, which makes it easier for them to work together in an international mobilisation.



Figure 4 – Increase in the pool of experts and expertise during the EUROWA-2 Project

RESULTS/DISCUSSION

Oil spills are complex and like Pandora’s box, once opened, problems will keep on jumping out and authorities need to be prepared to handle these in a professional way. EUROWA is a unique network of oiled wildlife response experts and organisations who have pioneered new professional standards for wildlife response in Europe. A fundamental element that EUROWA has developed and represents is professionalism. The success of a wildlife response can be directly linked to the level of professionalism in which it is carried out – from trained experts to the equipment and setup of the response, professionalism is key.

EUROWA in action – the Bow Jubail Incident

The value of EUROWA as a professional European mutual assistance system was demonstrated in the Bow Jubail incident in the Netherlands in 2018, where EUROWA experts were heavily involved in designing and operating a temporary facility where over 500 oiled swans were successfully rehabilitated. EUROWA experts, together with responders from the Global Oiled Wildlife Response System (GOWRS), were able to collectively work with local Dutch oiled wildlife response groups (with many individuals that had also undergone EUROWA training) according to available international guidelines (including EUROWA standards) and so could quickly develop an effective work force, provide an immediate structure for cooperation and decision-making and give leadership to volunteers.



Figure 5 – First release of swans after the Bow Jubail incident with EUROWA involvement. Copyright: Sea Alarm

Oiled Wildlife Preparedness in Europe and tools EUROWA has developed to help it improve

EUROWA regularly engages with European authorities to encourage and assist them in getting better prepared for a professional oiled wildlife response, both at national level and also via the Regional Seas Agreements. EUROWA is recognised across Europe within the activities and policy

frameworks of the Regional Agreements, which demonstrates that authorities acknowledge the good standards, professionalism, and usefulness of EUROWA. EUROWA/Sea Alarm have observer status in both the Bonn Agreement (North Sea) and the Helsinki Convention (HELCOM) and EUROWA can also be activated through a Sea Alarm MoU with REMPEC (Barcelona Convention), (Nijkamp and Sessions, 2014). Furthermore, EUROWA is specifically mentioned in the pollution response manuals of both HELCOM and the Bonn Agreement as the only currently existing system for oiled wildlife response mutual assistance in Europe. Having this presence in all three Regional Seas Agreements in Europe emphasises that the value of EUROWA is understood and appreciated by the authorities in these Agreements.

Nevertheless, there is more to do. The level of preparedness for oiled wildlife incidents in Europe still varies. Several countries have developed oiled wildlife response plans which are at different stages of development and implementation (via investment into resources, training and exercises), (Sea Alarm, 2023).

The last round of EU Civil Protection funding supported the EUROWA-2 project (2021-23), coordinated by the Sea Alarm Foundation and assisted by project partners WWF Finland, Submon (Spain) and Royal NIOZ (the Netherlands). EUROWA-2 delivered a range of products that will help coastal states to develop plans and preparedness systems for oil impacted wildlife. One of the project's main objectives was on working with governments and Regional Agreements in Europe to provide them with educational tools via workshops, exercise packages and guidelines to help ensure that wildlife incident scenarios are better understood and better prepared for as part of existing national and international response preparedness systems. The project made concrete what integrated preparedness and management of wildlife response in European marine pollution

incidents means, and how it can be implemented via planning, training and exercises. Tools developed to assist EU authorities under EUROWA-2 are shown in Figure 6, some of which are expanded on in the sections below.



Figure 6 - EUROWA-2 tools and guidelines developed for authorities

WildX Tabletop Package

In May 2023, the EUROWA network launched the brand new WildX tabletop package at a workshop for marine pollution authorities from across Europe and EUROWA wildlife experts. The authorities and EUROWA network members played the tabletops together which covered a range of strategies at local, national and regional levels. The tabletops were played using a set of various maps, posters and card decks. The use of playful but informative games has proven a very

useful tool to engage different authorities, encourage out-of-the-box thinking and to help authorities understand the complexity of wildlife response and the need for preparation.

The Future of Professional Oiled Wildlife Response in Europe

To coincide with the end of the EUROWA-2 funding period, the Network launched their [Proposal](#) for the future of professional wildlife response in Europe, calling on authorities to get better prepared for an oiled wildlife incident. The document was launched to mark the 5-year anniversary of the Bow Jubail incident and is a strategic outline for a path forward to improve preparedness in Europe. It explains 12 reasons why wildlife response should be professional and provides an outline for a national wildlife response plan. The proposal also explains the rationale behind developing a wildlife response plan and highlights that it is a joint initiative with all interested stakeholders and must be implemented through investment into trainings, exercises and response work force resources. This is important to make sure that a plan will work, and is not merely a document sitting on the shelf gathering dust. **Error! Reference source not found.**

CONCLUSIONS

EUROWA is a unique initiative in that it is a collaboration of professional NGOs whose joint vision is to ensure that European countries can deal effectively with emergencies that threaten and affect marine wildlife. This can be achieved when each country has developed and adopted an integrated marine wildlife response plan and invests in training and exercising the actors of that plan, in cooperation with neighbouring countries for purposes of cost-efficiency and mutual

assistance. Wildlife response is not a singular issue, only dealt with by wildlife experts. It requires collaboration from a range of stakeholders, from authorities to local citizens and therefore integration into the wider pollution response is imperative.

The Bow Jubail incident was an important reminder to all countries that although oiled wildlife incidents do not happen regularly, when they do, they can have a devastating impact on societies, economies and on wildlife. The incident was also a reminder of the importance of using joint response standards, effective collaboration and trust amongst the people working together for a response. The EUROWA Network facilitates this trust and a familiarity between NGOs, experts and authorities who would have to come together during a response, like during the Bow Jubail incident. Organising trainings is also fundamental to building this trust and effective collaboration.

The EUROWA-2 project also marks an important milestone in the development of oiled wildlife preparedness. It boosted the network's capability to provide mutual assistance in case of incidents through targeted new training modules and standards as well as increasing numbers of trained responders. The wildlife response groups and organisations who make up the EUROWA network were supported through the project with the tools to deepen relationships with their national authorities and engaging them in the need to devote more attention to preparedness for wildlife emergencies. In general, EUROWA has been a successful initiative, unique in its form and function and able to assist national NGOs, authorities and other stakeholders to apply professionalism in an oiled wildlife response. However, Europe still has much work ahead to get fully prepared for a professional oiled wildlife response as outlined in the Proposal document. Looking to the future, to ensure the long-term survival and development of the network it is essential that national governments or authorities dedicate funding to their national organisations

to maintain the EUROWA network, actively engage experts in exercises and continue to train responders who can assist oiled wildlife response professionally.

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