



## Article

# Natural Protected Areas within Cities: An International Legislative Comparison Focused on Romania

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**Abstract:** Urbanization occurs now more rapidly than before, due to the development of compact cities or urban sprawl, threatening quasi-natural areas, especially those protected within/near built-up ones. Europe lacks laws dedicated to natural protected areas within built-up areas, which are subject to the same provisions as natural protected ones, or a legislative vacuum. This research aimed to find the best planning approach for resiliently conserving and developing these areas and establishing grounds for a new tool used for planning the proximity of natural areas within cities. The methodology involved selecting two groups of countries, Nordic and eastern European, and treating these areas differently. The choice was based on specific political history. The study analyzed the legislative and planning framework and compared the approaches of 11 analyzed countries to pinpoint the basic aspects accounted for and applied to other European territories, in order to preserve the characteristics of urban morpho-typology and the particularities of local landscapes. The comparison results suggest solutions such as adopting specific regulations for urban protected areas and their adjacent zones through legal documents, completing/detailing environmental legislation in Nordic countries, adopting laws dedicated to protected natural areas within and/or close to built areas, and changing the approach to protecting natural areas with urban planning or land use tools.

**Keywords:** urban protected areas; environmental legislation; urban planning; biodiversity conservation; Nordic countries; eastern European countries



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## 1. Introduction

The conflict between the morpho-typology of urban tissue and quasi- or semi-natural areas is becoming more and more acute. This conflict is stronger in old human settlements that have developed organically, and in the current context, in ever faster urban sprawl and the development of systems, relationships, and specific connections at the territorial level. The most frequent conflicts of this type are found in rural–urban areas, located at the confluence between the urban tissue and its neighboring agricultural lands, but also in areas placed between the urban tissue and green spaces inside the cities. The second category is more problematic, considering the generally insular morphological layout of green spaces in relation to urban fabric. Protected urban areas are sometimes called “protected islands” due to their isolation from their surrounding environments [1]. All the borders and separation areas between these two types of tissues are most often areas of conflict that require careful management from the point of view of urban planning.

Unplanned urban development failing to preserve local character, without a coherent eco-sustainable and resilient strategy, represents a real threat to the conservation of biodiversity worldwide [2]. This statement is valid in particular in areas valuable from this point of view, such as natural protected ones [3]. Biodiversity conservation can have a considerable impact in terms of increasing ecosystem services [4]. Currently, urbanization follows two main trends: increases in building density (to create compact cities) and the expansion of peripheral areas through urban sprawl [5]. In this context, the ability to support the persistence of species in natural areas within cities becomes a conclusive and, at the same time, a difficult objective for maintaining long-term conservation [6]. Additionally, the competition for occupying space that occurs between activities such as agriculture and nature protection is one of the most obvious human imprints [7]. A major problem from this standpoint, evident especially in Europe, is the fragmentation of ecosystems [8], a major threat to nature conservation [9].

The urban planning process should also take into account natural protected areas, and land use regulations should complement and strengthen these natural protected areas and even be a pillar of biodiversity conservation, especially for land without a protection regime, but representing a special landscape feature with a high conservation value [10]. A common misconception sometimes also addressed by urban planning is that the term “protected area” designates a wild area devoid of human influence [11], but in reality, ecological systems (especially urban ones) are in an intense interaction with urban and social ones, thus facilitating an interdisciplinary research and planning framework, with the aim of ensuring the maintenance of biodiversity in urban areas [12]. These are so-called socio-ecological systems (SES), complex systems that take into account social and ecological variables [13].

Urban planners and political decision makers have experienced solutions that take into account both social and economic concerns, as well as environmental concerns, interconnected in a complex trans-disciplinary sense [14] to reduce environmental impacts [15]. Ecosystem services are crucial, especially those of urban green infrastructure [16]. In order to safeguard the values and natural resources of their territory, municipalities are mandated by European urban planning laws to draft “municipal green infrastructure plans” [17]. Urban planners are challenged to understand, temporally and spatially, ecosystem services [18]. Unfortunately, they are often underestimated and difficult to quantify, considering the lack of a complex integration of systems for monitoring the biodiversity and values of ecosystem services in natural protected areas [19]. Therefore, urban planning in accordance with the augmentation of ecosystem services becomes very difficult, especially given the limited guidance on how ecosystem services should be used in the context of land use and environmental planning [20]. Additionally, very few of the many publications have provided a structured analysis of the contribution and use of this concept in urban planning [21].

Therefore, the literature review highlights limited knowledge of urban planning in terms of developing multi-disciplinary or even trans-disciplinary approaches with ecology. It is important to consider that the creativity in the urban landscape stems from the ability to sensitively perceive space and surrounding landscapes, influenced by the unique perspectives and perceptions of each specialist [22]. Moreover, the analysis of previous studies identified no urban planning tools with the role of valorizing ecosystem services from the viewpoint of spatial relations. No tools were identified even for just analyzing/quantifying the compatibility between built urban tissue and the quasi-natural one. Additionally, no clear and specific recommendations were identified regarding what exactly this tool should analyze.

This research originated from the problem of lacking specific theoretical information about areas adjacent to natural protected ones in cities, from the viewpoint of urban development. Against the background of this theoretical void, the absence of planning guidelines is also noticeable. These guidelines could direct the planning process to support

the interdependence between quasi-natural fabric, specific to natural protected areas, and its adjacent built fabric.

The purpose of this study is to provide a set of recommendations for urban planning in accordance with the needs of urban areas close to natural protected ones. These recommendations refer to quasi-natural areas in urban environments, with the most urgent need for correlation with their proximities. Such recommendations can substantiate an urban planning instrument aimed at reducing urban pressures on natural protected areas by adopting appropriate planning methods for the areas adjacent to sensitive natural ones lacking a conservation value.

In this sense, a comparative analysis of some urban planning models, selected for being as different as possible, can pinpoint the different approaches to the urban planning of areas close to protected urban natural areas. Therefore, we compared two types of approaches to urban planning and legislation dedicated to natural protected areas in cities and their adjacent areas. The evaluated models are the approaches of Nordic and eastern European countries, which represent particular situations from a historical–evolutionary point of view, but also from a morpho-urban typology standpoint. The aim is to discover the optimal planning attitude for ensuring resilient conservation and the development of these areas, and create a new instrument used in the vicinity of natural areas within cities. The purpose of this study is not to create the tool itself, which can take different forms (guidelines, urban indicators, and framework structure of urban plans for these areas, etc.), but to phrase a set of recommendations substantiating the development of this tool.

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