Eurosite guidelines
Twinning natural sites

Work together, learn together
Acknowledgements

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This set of guidelines is based on an earlier edition of the guidelines, published in 1998.
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The aim of twinning:

to strengthen links between natural sites with similar habitats and similar problems to solve and to encourage the sharing of information about site management for nature conservation.
What is twinning?

In 1987 – the European Year of the Environment – the European Natural Sites Twinning Programme was launched with the financial support of the European Commission and the cooperation of nature conservation management organisations from across Europe.

In Rochefort, France, managers of 33 European sites signed an agreement to take part in a programme of technical, scientific and cultural exchanges. The basis of the agreement was twinning.

The concept is similar to the twinning arrangements set up between European towns and cities to share cultural and social experiences. The objective of the Natural Sites Twinning Programme was comparable – that is, to strengthen links between natural sites with similar habitats and similar problems to solve and to encourage the sharing of information about site management for nature conservation. Natural sites often have an important place in the minds and hearts of local communities, and so another important objective of the programme was to make the people and communities in the area surrounding a site aware of its international importance.

Eurosite was born from this Twinning Programme, and since then we have gone on to oversee the twinning of many sites across Europe.

Eurosite continues to pioneer the idea of twinning as a tool for the improvement of natural site management and we have developed a distinctive brand of twinning in the process, relying heavily on the involvement of site-based management staff for its success – the people who get their hands dirty. The result has been a symbol of excellence in information exchange that is widely recognised in the European conservation family.

This set of guidelines distils Eurosite’s many years of experience and is intended for nature conservation organisations and site managers interested in setting up a twinning, who are in need of practical guidance, or who simply want to know more about the concept of twinning.

So you want to twin?

Your objectives, your questions, your expectations

The key to an effective twinning is understanding why you have chosen to participate and what you might expect to gain from the relationship. Indeed, it has to be clear from the start to both partners what the main purpose of the twinning is.

In order to help you decide whether twinning is appropriate and effective for your site, you should consider the following questions:

- Are your objectives clear? Writing down your ideas or talking them over with a colleague (not necessarily one who knows the site) can help you clarify your objectives.

- Do your objectives for the twinning conform to the SMART test?

  Specific – Be as concise and precise as possible
  Measurable – Identify what products or outcomes will result from the twinning
  Achievable – Don’t over stretch yourself and your resources
  Realistic – Don’t attempt to save the world! Think locally
  Time scale – Specify when you and your partners will achieve your goals

- What other ways are there to achieve your objectives? Is twinning the most appropriate way of achieving those objectives?

- Are there existing sources of information available to help if you have a particular management problem?

- Is your area of research new or are there other sources of information available?
Do you have the time to commit to the twinning? Estimate the number of days you may need to spend on the twinning. Do you need extra resources for your own travel costs or to host meetings?

What can you give to the twinning?

In some cases, it may not be possible to answer the above questions precisely or set clear objectives before a twinning is set up. If this is the case, then it is probably sufficient that you are aware of the need to address and resolve these issues at a very early stage. Contact with a site manager from a different country may also help to clarify objectives and answer these questions by helping you see your site in its European context.

Once the objectives are clear, and you are convinced that you would like to twin, then the next task is to find a partner who is suitable for a twinning and is willing to be involved.

**Selecting a twinning partner**

When selecting a site to twin with you may want to consider the following criteria:

- **Security of tenure**: Does the site have a secure, legal status? Are nature conservation activities guaranteed to continue over the long term? The security of the site should be based on the following factors:
  - Land ownership - the organisation responsible for management of the site should own all or part of the land within the protected area concerned.
  - Or
  - Long term leasing - the organisation responsible for management of the site should lease all or part of the land within the protected area concerned for a period longer than 10 years.
  - And
  - Strong legal protection - the site should be protected through legislation of at least national importance.

  In the case that a secure situation does not exist, it should be likely that a secure situation will be reached foreseeable future. It is also possible that the stability of some sites may be helped by a twinning arrangement.

- **Habitats, landscape and ecology**: Is the site of European importance for fauna or flora? Is it recognised internationally for its ecological interest? At least some of its habitats and species should be listed in the Birds or Habitats Directives.

- **Management**: Has a management plan, including management objectives, been drawn up? Or is a management plan in the process of being developed? Management standards should be high, and the site management organisation should have a policy of keeping in touch with new developments in nature conservation.

- **Public access**: Is the site open to the public to some degree, and does it have a visitor centre or some other permanent facility on site or close by, which could be used for displaying information about the twinning? This is not essential for a twinning to be successful, but there are obvious advantages in terms of increasing support from the general public for the twinning, thereby increasing support for the management activities and projects on site.

  Natural sites often have an important place in the minds and hearts of local communities. It is important for the public to understand why sites are twinned and this is best achieved through direct contact with people and communities in the surrounding area. Therefore, the manager or management team involved in the twinning should also have some experience in working with local communities.

- **Evidence of benefits and resources**: Will the site benefit from a twinning arrangement? Does the organisation have sufficient resources (staff, volunteers, money) to sustain the twinning? A clear coordination team or person for the twinning will be advantageous.
Twinning:
bringing together people and natural sites to create synergies, joint working and joint learning for the benefit of Europe’s nature.
How to start your twinning

Once you have identified a suitable site or sites to partner with, then an initial approach to its managers to discuss possibilities for twinning is advisable. The level at which you make contact will vary depending on the type of organisation responsible for managing the site. However, the people who manage the site on a daily basis should be involved at an early stage. The people who make decisions about funding for the site or management policy should also be involved early on. At this stage, a site visit is recommended. There is no better way to get to know your potential partners, their interests and their sites – after all, you can’t have a good glass of wine with a computer! If all goes well, then it should be possible to decide on projects that are of mutual interest.

Publicity for the twinning

All publicity is good publicity, as the saying goes. A launch ceremony attended by those involved can be a great start for the twinning and will raise the profile of the site in the local area. You may want to consider the following when organising your launch:

- Ensure that you decide well in advance where the launch event will be held and whether you will have separate launch events at each of the sites involved in the twinning.
- Linking the launch to a special event on the site, such as the 25th anniversary of its establishment or the opening of a new visitor centre will help ensure that there is coverage of the event.
- Create space in the launch event programme for each partner to exhibit their culture, whether through music, dance or food. EuroCocktails (in which attendees bring a sample of their country’s cuisine) have been a long-standing Eurosite tradition and are always a good conversation starter!
- Publicise the launch event well in advance and use as many channels as possible to publicise it. Flyers and poster will be useful, especially if your site has a visitor centre. But even if you don’t have a large publicity budget, email and social media can still be cost-effective publicity tools.
- Contact local media outlets (newspapers, radio, TV) to cover the event.

What makes a good twinning

The recipe for a good twinning consists of many ingredients. Not all of the ones listed below are required for a successful twinning, because each situation is unique. These points are simply offered as guidance, drawn from Eurosite’s experience.

- **Similar sites with a similar set of problem:** Sites that are similar in size or have comparable habitats will experience a lot of the same issues and are therefore likely to be able to establish good links. It is not essential for the sites to be identical even if this were possible, as differences in habitat and management techniques also provoke discussion.

- **A willingness to cooperate and share information with each other:** Without the willingness to offer and receive information, the twinning will not work. There should also be an inclination to disseminate information to other natural sites, perhaps through a workshop or through a report on good practice. This ensures that others who are interested in twinning can learn from your experience.

- **Clear and realistic objectives for the twinning from all partners:** Before progress can be made, everyone involved has to be clear about what the twinning aims to achieve. Without clear objectives, momentum will quickly be lost and partners will become disillusioned. At the beginning of the twinning, site managers should have a clear idea of their objectives for the site and how they may be able to benefit from an exchange with other site managers. If you cannot identify clear objectives at the start, then you should try to do so very early on in the twinning.

- **Clearly defined areas of study, research or exchange with tangible products and benefits:** The products of the twinning need to be clearly defined. Options include:
  - Development of best practice guidance in the form of reports or case studies.
  - Collaboration on a research programme.
  - Preparation of a joint project proposal.
The key to an effective twinning:
understanding why you have chosen to participate and what you might expect to gain from the relationship.
- **A common language:** Speaking the same language makes communication and information exchange easier. This may seem obvious, but it is a fundamental consideration. Fluency is not always necessary, as enthusiasm and commitment to a joint project can help with communication. However, a special effort may be needed to facilitate communication, such as hiring an interpreter, although this increases the costs.

- **Support from within the partner organisations:** A twinning is more likely to be successful if there is support for the twinning within the organisations responsible for managing the twinned sites. Support can be in the form of simply allowing site managers a little freedom and time in their work programme to get involved. A clear policy on international relations is also a good way of establishing what the limits of involvement are.

- **Support from partners and the local community:** In addition to support from within the management organisation, it may be necessary to obtain support from key partners or those stakeholders with a strong interest in the site, such as local authorities and community groups. The value of support from the community will be invaluable, particularly as the twinning may be the beginning of something much larger. Action should be taken at an early stage to ensure that sufficient information is available to the public and that the proposals are clearly understood.

- **Based on site management:** Although staff responsible for sites at all levels of an organisation can usefully be involved in a site-based twinning, it should be very closely linked to site managers and shouldn’t just be a ‘cultural’ exchange visit. It is especially important that the staff responsible for day-to-day site management are involved. However, the ‘cultural’ aspects of a twinning are also important, not least because experiencing a different culture helps managers to see their own site problems in a new way and may help them to identify possible solutions.

- **A named contact:** Each site involved in the twinning should appoint a named correspondent or a small team to act as a contact point. This will normally be the site manager or person responsible for management on the site. The function of the contact is to:
  - Act as a channel for information flow between members of the site’s management staff and other staff in the managing organisation.
  - Help the twinning to be as effective, efficient and successful as possible, through arranging programmes for exchange visits and other practicalities.

- **Continuity of staff:** Many twinnings rely on a single enthusiastic manager who starts up the twinning and drives the process forward. If he or she leaves the organisation, then the twinning may come to a premature end. Once the relationship is formalised, then it may be sensible to spread the load across a broader base of management staff so that there is a greater chance of success. This also has the advantage that the workload will be more evenly shared across the organisation.

- **Broad involvement of management staff in an organisation:** A broad range of management and managerial staff can benefit from a twinning. Depending on the sites and the organisational structure, there is potential to involve rangers, wardens, district officers and policy staff. A broad base of staff means that the twinning is more likely to be successful and could bring other benefits, such as team building.

- **Being prepared to commit resources:** Time and money has to be set aside in budgets for essential costs associated with a twinning. Costs will vary from twinning to twinning.

- **A good start means a good finish!** Ending an agreement should not be seen negatively. A twinning may end for a perfectly good reason, such as having achieved its objectives. In this case, it is far better to remember the exchanges and friends you have made. You should always try to end a twinning on a positive note if possible.
Twinning - involve local communities

Natural sites often have an important place in the minds and hearts of local communities, and so it is important to make people and communities in the area surrounding a site aware of its international importance.
Producing a Twinning Agreement

Once you have reached the stage where you want to formalise your twinning arrangement, you may wish to draw up and agree a joint statement between the organisations involved, in a common language. This should set out what the relationship intends to achieve, the parties involved and the duration of the twinning. This document is called a Twinning Agreement.

A Twinning Agreement is valuable because it indicates that there is a serious commitment between the parties involved to make the twinning a success. It also indicates that there is strong support for the twinning within each organisation. As far as possible, the Agreement should clearly set out the purpose of the twinning and each party’s responsibilities. An Agreement is also useful as a tool for organisational planning and the allocation of resources.

What should the Twinning Agreement contain?

A Twinning Agreement is similar to a management plan for a nature reserve in that it sets out a direction, specifies how those objectives will be achieved over a defined period and sets a time for review and evaluation.

A Twinning Agreement should contain at least the following elements:

- **Clear objectives**
- **Clear responsibilities and ‘ground rules’**
- **A named contact**
- **Areas of cooperation and a work programme**

Every twinning is different and your twinning should be based on and informed by the unique needs and challenges of the sites involved. However, there are a number of elements that you may wish to include in your twinning:

- **Direct exchange of knowledge** between two or more sites about management and the effectiveness of current management practices and techniques. The specific subjects for discussion and study can also be included in the Twinning Agreement.
- **Collaboration on specific research projects** about subjects on which both partners wish to gather knowledge. It is always possible to include managers of other sites in the development or review of projects through, for example a short focussed workshop or seminar.
- **Transfer of knowledge from one site to another**, where there is a gap in knowledge in the receiving site, with the aim of improving the site’s management. Initially, there may be more tangible benefits for the receiving site than the ‘donor’ site.
- **Exchanges of staff, volunteers and students.** Secondments of staff, rangers and students can be part of the programme. Exchanges of volunteer staff can be very rewarding for those involved and can aid site management.
- **Development of mutually interesting projects** for funding from the European Commission.
- **A duration for the twinning:** Experience shows that the most effective twinnings set an initial time limit of three or four years. Agreements which do not specify a duration run the risk of meandering or losing their way. Three or four years is usually the maximum period for financial and resource planning for most organisations. So, it is only realistic to expect a twinning to last this long, at least initially.
- **A review clause:** After the agreed period of time has elapsed, achievements and progress can be evaluated and future options considered. At this time a review should be carried out to assess whether or not the twinning should:
- Continue under the same conditions or with new ideas and products.
- Bring in another partner.
- Be drawn to a close so that partners can look for a new twinning with other partners.

A clause setting out this situation will make this clear to all parties from the beginning.

- **An end clause:** Parties should not feel that they are irrevocably bound to the twinning or feel guilty if they want or need to break off the agreement. Therefore, an opt out clause for both parties is recommended so that if circumstances change for any reason there is the option to stop the agreement. Ironically, knowing that one can opt out of an agreement if the need arises can help to build a sense of security about the relationship on both sides and can contribute to the success of the twinning.

- **Financial arrangements**

**Preparing the Twinning Agreement - FAQs**

1. **Who is the Twinning Agreement for?**

   First and foremost it is for the managers of the natural sites involved. The Twinning Agreement could also be used as a public statement of the twinning relationship.

2. **Who should prepare it?**

   This depends very much on the internal structure of the organisation responsible for management. The person writing the text of the Agreement should involve those staff directly concerned with the management of the site.

3. **Who signs the Agreement?**

   This should be decided and agreed by the organisations involved. The Agreement should represent a high degree of commitment from the organisation and is therefore likely to be signed by someone at a senior level. Public support from politicians or from local community group leaders and interest groups may also be necessary, depending on the site’s administration.

4. **How should the Agreement be prepared?**

   The following steps may help to start the process:

   1. A short meeting with your own colleagues to brainstorm objectives and possible activities and projects. You will probably already have a good idea of your objectives for the twinning. The opinions of your colleagues will help to clarify them.
   2. Prepare a first draft and circulate it to colleagues within each organisation for comments.
   3. Make necessary changes based on feedback from colleagues.
   4. Agree a final draft and submit it to the organisational managers for approval.

5. **How should the Agreement be presented?**

   You should aim to make the Agreement understandable to partners and the wider stakeholder community and remember that it is being agreed on in a spirit of cooperation. Try to make sure that the Agreement makes responsibilities and obligations clear, but avoid pseudo-legal terms as far as possible.
Eurosite guidelines: Twinning natural sites
Keeping a twinning alive

Reviewing and evaluation are necessary to ensure that the twinning continues to work. Regular reviews will also demonstrate to senior managers the tangible benefits of twinning for their site and staff.

Other ideas for exchanges

- **Bird flyway twinnings:** Migratory bird routes traverse many countries and the birds use many sites for breeding, wintering or on passage. Coordinating site management work on sites along these flight paths can provide obvious conservation benefits for the species and others associated with the particular habitat type. In addition, this strong connection between sites is likely to ensure that the twinning works well. The Migratory Birds for People network has already demonstrated the success of this concept.

- **Job swaps:** Site managers of nature reserves hold conservation experience in their hands. They know best how to manage habitats and species. Training site managers is a good investment as their knowledge will be retained for a long period and can be passed on to others. Job swaps involving two site managers from different sites and/or countries can provide site managers with new experiences and knowledge that will help in their professional development, in turn impacting on the management of their site.

- **Exchanges:** Exchange visits between sites are an important part of the twinning process. However, exchanges are valuable in and of themselves and can be carried out even when a twinning is not in place and there is no immediate intention to begin a twinning. Exchanges can be one or two way (i.e. site A visits site B and/or site B visits site A) and can last anywhere between one day and a week – the emphasis is usually on a shorter time period (unlike the longer time period of a twinning).

- **Cross-border twinnings:** Natural features and sites often cross national boundaries, making integrated management difficult. Site twinning is a means of improving coordination of management and skill sharing. Cross-border twinnings can also be a way of focussing political attention on management problems.

Further information

A template Twinning Agreement and examples of past Eurosite Twinning Agreements are available upon request from the Eurosite Secretariat. For further information please contact Eurosite at: info@eurosite.org.