

Chair's report for the ESUG General Meeting, 14 October 2026

Dear ESUG members, it is a pleasure to welcome you to our General Meeting in Brussels, following the PRO-COAST final consortium meeting and conference at the European Parliament. The last sixteen months, since we met in Tallinn on 5 June 2025, have been exceptionally busy. Much of ESUG's work has centred on bringing PRO-COAST through its reporting, final delivery and scale-out phase, while also strengthening the Group's longer-term role in sustainable use, community-led conservation and European research collaboration.

PRO-COAST completed its first 18-month reporting and review during summer 2025. ESUG continued to lead technical coordination and dissemination, chair consortium and work-package meetings, support comparisons across case studies, and keep the many scientific, administrative and reporting strands aligned. Work has moved decisively towards final deliverables, publications, exploitation and the project's legacy beyond its funded period.

During 2025 and 2026 the case studies progressed from baseline work and stakeholder mapping into implementation, testing and reflection. ESUG, and especially Robert Kenward, helped partners respond to the practical challenge of combining local activity with repeated scientific and social-science requests. Important outputs included further development and testing of the Reciprocal Environmental Decision Support tools, the Conservation and Human Use Index, the Deep Change framework and the Community Sustainability Platform (CUSP). The REDS tool reached release for use in the Arne Parish case study, while survey information was consolidated into a project database and the CUSP was populated with project findings, tools and multilingual material.

Clustering and scale-out also became a major part of the work. Three webinars held between January and March 2026 presented the Deep Change model, CHUI and CUSP to project partners and external organisations. These activities helped shape the final policy guidelines, which draw together lessons from PRO-COAST, earlier European projects with/ ESUG involvement and ESUG's wider experience. The resulting 17 recommendations address community participation, multi-level governance, research design, knowledge exchange, clustering, and the need for practical decision-support tools.

The project's final phase culminates this week in Brussels. The conference at the European Parliament yesterday presented PRO-COAST's key conclusions and launched the next stage of scale-out, with contributions from ESUG, the European Commission, and Members of the European Parliament. Training on the project's principal approaches and tools will follow, alongside discussion of how partners and external organisations can continue to use them.

Pro=Coast has depended on the sustained commitment of the ESUG team. Robert Kenward has continued to provide scientific leadership and close support to case-study partners. New ESUG member Olympia Papadopoulou was a stellar administrator – the project could not have been completed without her. Ben Kenward and Nick Casey developed the decision-support tools and their technical infrastructure; Perline Bastid supported administration, reporting, the website and CUSP delivery. New ESUG members representing the organisation's interest in social science, David Herbert and Yvonne Jaeckel were instrumental in the social science front, and, in the case of David, the two Norwegian case studies. Phoebe Vayanou, another new ESUG member, designed, with her team, the Conservation and Human Use Index – which will be supported over the coming years. Véronique Blontrock and Boukje Tuinhout helped resolve organisational and financial matters and represented ESUG in project activities; Tetiana Gardashuk supported clustering, translation, while Julian Mühle sorted the meetings this week and assisted with wider policy work. We thank Despina Symons and her team for assistance from EBCD throughout the project and the meeting at the EU parliament, and David Scallon for his support and mentorship throughout the project. Stratos Arampatzis was ultimately responsible for all this; it was his ingenuity that managed to fund the project through EU Horizon and UKRI. Many other members have assisted with translation, review, dissemination, meetings and case-study activity. I am deeply grateful to everyone who has contributed time and expertise, often well beyond what was originally anticipated.

ESUG has continued its work beyond PRO-COAST. Our IUCN membership is now in place, giving us a stronger basis for engagement on sustainable use and for following developments across SULI, CEM and related processes. This resulted in Robert being able to join the 2025 IUCN World Conservation Congress that was held in Abu Dhabi, UAE, with our one vote in his hand. Him and Julian, representing IAF were a useful pair, supporting sustainable use. ESUG members remain active in IUCN and IPBES as well as other international networks, while the committee has begun exploring future collaboration on invasive species, citizen science, conservation through sustainable use and reconstruction-related environmental work in Ukraine. The Group is also considering how its European network, country contacts and translation capacity can contribute to new research proposals and decision-support initiatives.

The most important legacy of PRO-COAST for ESUG is CUSP. Although project funding ends in October 2026, ESUG is committed to maintaining the platform until 2033. CUSP will provide a multilingual hub linking communities to practical guidance, stakeholder networks, case-study experience and decision-support tools. The committee has agreed in principle to invest a substantial proportion of the expected PRO-COAST surplus in programming and network administration during the next year, with continuity for the people who have built and supported the platform. A concise strategy is now

needed to guide technical development, governance, funding, partnerships and responsible growth.

As we close the funded phase of PRO-COAST, we should recognise both what has been achieved and what remains to be done. The project has given ESUG an opportunity to turn long-standing ideas about sustainable use, community participation, knowledge exchange and adaptive management into practical tools and policy recommendations. Our next challenge is to keep those tools useful, strengthen the network around them and secure the partnerships and resources needed for the next stage. I thank our patrons—the British Association for Shooting and Conservation, FACE, Robin Sharp and Anatrack—as well as all ESUG members and PRO-COAST partners for their continued support and hard work over the past years.

Dr Julie Ewald