

Europarc presentation

Challenges and opportunities for nature conservation in CEE

Many thanks for the opportunity to address you. I was not born and raised here, nor am I a protected area professional. Nevertheless, I have been working in this wonderful, sometimes frustrating, often exhilarating region long enough to have some inside insight in addition to my outside perspective that will hopefully be of some use to you.

As you will see, my presentation will be an indirect route to thanking all of you for being here.

The region where we are is truly Europe's treasure chest for nature.

Some two-thirds of Europe's bears are from Central and Eastern Europe – and most of these are from Romania. In fact, I am told that 44 bears regularly visit a waste dump not far from here on the outskirts of Brasov – that is more bears at one Romanian waste dump than I think exist across the entire Alps.

Our continent's greatest remaining stands of natural forest are found here.

And here are many of Europe's greatest natural treasures – areas like Retezat, Rila, Bialowieza, Biebrza wetlands in Poland, the Pieniny, High and Low Tatras in Slovakia, or the Carpathian beech forests of Ukraine.

On paper, protection of these magnificent treasures looks pretty good.

Some 20% of the region is under some form of protection – be it national, international and especially EU, through its Natura 2000 network of specially protected sites.

But unfortunately, this protection on paper is currently worth little in practice.

I sometimes have the impression that there is an all-out assault on the natural riches of this region.

Here in Romania, WWF is currently – or rather still – involved in a legal case against the Orthodox Church, which is finishing what is essentially though not officially a tourism complex in the core zone of Ceahlau National Park.

National parks are being clearcut – as here last year in Rodna, but also closer to here in Piatra Craiului.

Development of the Danube as the EU's "Corridor Number 7" for waterway transportation could potentially affect over 1000 km of the river, including especially the most valuable nature areas.

Areas in Romania on the Lower Danube between Calarasi and Braile are now threatened by construction of bottom sills that would effectively cut off key migration routes of Danube sturgeon, which are already teetering on the edge of extinction.

Bulgaria has followed the sad example of Spain in permitting its once beautiful Black Sea coastline to be buried under concrete. Hotels and holiday homes are threatening all of the last remaining areas of coastline left in a natural state, including Stranzha, Bulgaria's largest nature park on the Turkish border.

Across this region, millions and in fact billions of Euro are now being invested in construction of ski facilities – most without any regard to the realities of climate change other than snow cannon. Many of these projects are located in or near existing protected areas.

The Romanian government has adopted a plan, Ski 2000, which foresees construction of ski facilities in 7 of the nation's national parks.

Slovakia... Slovakia is a special case. I am from an NGO, and will use my liberty to call a spade a spade and not mince words. In terms of official nature protection, the country has gone from quite respectable, on the European stage, to simply disastrous as the current Slovak Environmental Ministry has to all intents and purposes declared war on the environment in favour of development and personal aggrandizement. The wolf is in the chicken coop.

The protected area administrations have been restructured, and purged, to put it diplomatically. At this point, there are very few real conservationists left in the Slovak Ministry of Environment and State Nature Conservancy – and those that are, including participants here, are under severe pressure, severely frustrated and facing a steep uphill struggle. They deserve our support.

Simply put, the pressure for development here is intense.

These pressures of course are not limited to this part of the world. To a certain extent, at least, we face them everywhere.

But here the pressure is probably more intense, and there is relatively less support and less controls, and less of a culture that can mediate these conflicts in favor of protecting our natural heritage.

The rule of law is often shaky. Corruption is still all too prevalent. Economic and political power still too closely wed. There is still only limited experience with genuine consultation with the public and stakeholders, and factoring in environmental concerns. Environmental authorities lack capacity and, as everywhere, are firmly on the bottom of the governmental totem pole.

Civil society, while active and outspoken in many countries, is still embryonic and still lacks a deeper rooting in society. The public is still all too passive and resigned to change, if any, coming from above.

Particularly under these circumstances, stewards of natural areas, especially protected areas authorities, but also NGOs and other advocates, have a critically important role to play as the rearguard defense for our natural riches.

Unfortunately, they are working under very difficult conditions.

They have for one very limited capacity and resources.

Here in Romania, there is no state budget for protected areas, other than for the Danube Delta. Other protected areas are covered by the State Forest Administration as well as some county authorities and NGOs – with support for these efforts provided by the organisations themselves.

While there are many cases where this system works relatively well, and we can be very thankful for this support, there are also some cases where the conflict of interests is all too clear – as e.g. in Ceahlau National Park, which is administered by the county authorities, who have given the Orthodox Church free reign for tourism development.

Plans of the Ministry of Environment to introduce a state agency to at least control and oversee these efforts continue to be frustrated.

Many areas have no management; and those that do, have limited resources and capacities.

Across the border in Ukraine, the situation at first sight is better. The Carpathian Biosphere Reserve has some 300 people working for it – more than is employed in all of Romania. But they cover a whole range of functions not normally shouldered by protected area authorities, including firefighting. And while they have human numbers, they have only limited funds for covering other needs, from infrastructure to awareness raising, training and even gasoline.

The pay is poor, with an average salary of around 200 Euro per month. Very few of these people have the skills they need -- to work with local communities and stakeholders, to communicate with the rest of the world, to work with other actors.

In fact, many of the protected area managements in this region, to the extent that they do exist, are poorly prepared to address the new challenges that they face.

Today, increasingly, protected area administrators need to work with local communities and stakeholders, to initiate and inspire local development – to create local livelihoods that build on and preserve natural heritage, rather than destroy it.

They need to be able to work with local people, to communicate, to facilitate meetings, to resolve conflicts, to manage projects and raise funds from a range of different sources. They need to be creative and flexible; they need to be good managers, good leaders and good entrepreneurs. Super people.

This is why WWF has been devoting, with support from the MAVA foundation as well as other funders, so much of its efforts here to training and capacity building for protected areas authorities in the region – so that they can better shoulder these modern challenges.

This is also why last spring we joined the Romanian Environmental Partnership Foundation and Fauna and Flora International in establishing ProPark Foundation, which is focused on capacity building for nature conservation and management first in Romania and later in other countries as well.

My remarks til now have been quite critical. At the same time, while criticism is due, it does need to be taken in context.

While there is quite a tradition of protection in the region – in many cases reaching back to the 1930s or before – modern protected area systems and management in these countries is very new.

I think you will recognise this individual, the president of Europarc and, I am happy to say, a dear colleague and friend.

Erika was one of the first protected area managers in Romania. She was a forester and in 2000 became the first director of the newly established management team of Retezat National Park.

That is right, real protected area management in Romania is scarcely 5 to 10 years old.

The fact is that this region has been undergoing dramatic change. The social, political and economic systems now here are less than 20 years old, and even where protected area systems did exist, their role, purpose and outlook has completely

changed. And we are still very much working through the consequences of these changes.

We could and maybe should therefore be more understanding – if there was not so much at stake.

The trends are going in the right direction; many things are in place; concern and care for nature is growing. There are growing signs of new economies based on, working with and supporting nature conservation -- from certified forestry to tourism. We have a growing number of good examples in protected area management.

But we are in a race, and protected area administrations and stewards have the critical role to play in defending and holding onto these natural riches until we have found a new equilibrium in our societies that treasures our natural capital as the basis of our well-being.

And this brings me to you. Please help us win this race.

Support these efforts. Stand together. Share your experience, share your knowledge and your skills.

This conference is a singular opportunity to meet each other, learn from each other, and develop lasting bonds, across this region, across Europe, across the hundreds of protected areas represented here from over 30 different countries.

This is why WWF has supported the organisation of this conference. This is why so many of my colleagues have been working since October, and recently, many nights as well as days, to organise this event.

We *can* make a difference.

The committed efforts of protected area professionals, NGOs, and active citizens has put a stop, at least for now, to construction of holiday homes in Stranzha Nature Park in Bulgaria, and has put a strong spotlight on current plans to build ski areas in the national parks.

Committed opposition from both within Poland as well as outside has also saved the Biebrza valley – one of Europe’s wetland pearls – from destruction through the Via Baltica motorway, and opened space for better alternatives.

Here in Romania, committed efforts have pushed the government to moderate its plans for constructing ski facilities in and around the country’s protected areas.

These are important successes, because they serve as a precedent and example for many other cases. The hope is growing.

No doubt, there are many problems in this region. But fortunately, there are also many exceptional, dedicated individuals that are doing their very best to put these problems to right.

Many of these people are in this room today. And there are many more who are not with us right now.

To take one example:

A ranger from Gradiste Nature Park in the southwestern part of Romania. I had the great fortune to spend a couple days and a night with him. I and a French photographer met him at a shepherd's coral. In the evening, he led us to his home, walking full-speed without lights, for 2 or 3 hours, through a park that he obviously knew like the back of his hand. We spent the night with his family. The French photographer asked if he could take a shower. Our host answered sheepishly that, uh, he had not quite gotten to installing a shower yet and only had the tap outside. He asked us if we wanted to have our own rooms to sleep in. Unfortunately, my French colleague quickly said yes – hopefully not realising that this meant that our host and his family would be sleeping on the kitchen floor.

He had electricity, but no running water, no road or access by car. No uniform, no goretex, nylon or lycra. He makes at best 200 E a month to feed his family of 4 plus mother.

He obviously cares deeply for “his” park, is proud of it, and very dedicated to its protection.

I could give more than a few similar examples from other countries, from Bulgaria, Ukraine, Slovakia, Poland, Czech Republic, among others. People working for protected areas, but also for NGOs.

And again, I won't embarrass them individually, but let me just say that there are many of these dedicated individuals in this room today and I encourage you to meet them, learn from them, teach them, and support them.

I ask you to support them and their efforts to protect the extraordinary natural patrimony of this region, of Europe, and of us all. They are working under often difficult conditions and addressing very significant challenges.

Guido Plassma of the Alpine Network of Protected Areas, said on Tuesday in his presentation to the Carpathian Network of Protected Areas that solidarity was one very important side effect or benefit of Alpine cooperation. The same applies for the Carpathians, Eastern European, and indeed all nature stewards across the continent.

So, finally: welcome. I hope you have a great stay, that you use this opportunity to meet and learn from one another, to have fun together, to hike together, and – as I am promised and told – to dance together. For all of our sake.

At a time when ongoing climate change further underlines the importance of maintaining the resilience of our ecosystems, you all across Europe are on the front line of our efforts to defend and hold onto our natural heritage.

We – and our children and our children's children – need and depend on you.

Thanks again for coming.