

Hungary: forest degradation with State assistance

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As a new Member State of the European Union, Hungary became, from 1 May 2004, part of the EU's forest management policy. Here we give a brief outline of the nature of, and threats to, Hungary's forests, as well as a summary of the effects on forests of the EU accession. Special emphasis is given to the possible role of the NGOs in protecting the country's forested land.

1. Introduction

Hungarian forests: ecology and conservation

The total forest cover in Hungary (including plantations¹) is currently 1,712,000 ha – 18.4% of the land area – compared to the 85% of land estimated to have been forested originally. Of the 'forest' stands that remain, about half are either highly altered and dominated by non-native species, or else are plantations, again of non-native trees.² Common plantation species include black-locust (*Robinia pseudo-acacia*), poplar (hybrid *Populus* spp), black pine (*Pinus nigra*) and spruce (*Picea abies*), which together cover around 910,000 ha.

From a European conservation perspective, Hungary's most valuable forests are the remaining fragments of forested steppe (oak woodlands on sand, loess and alkaline soils), the shrub-forests of the steep southern facing slopes (dominated by *Quercus pubescens*), and the remnants of the formerly widespread riparian forests (dominated by *Quercus robur*, *Fraxinus pannonicus* and *Ulmus laevis*). However, nationally, the protection of the less unique oak- and beech-dominated forests is also a high priority. The oak forests, characteristically dominated by turkey oak (*Quercus cerris*) and sessile oak (*Quercus petraea*), form Hungary's most common forest type, while the stands dominated by beech (*Fagus sylvatica*) can mainly be found in the most humid Western part of the country, and also on the highest elevations.³

Currently, 60% of Hungary's forests are owned by the State, managed by 21 State forestry companies. The rest is owned and managed by about 300,000 private owners, the resulting small forest compartments (averaging 1.3 ha) making it extremely difficult to carry out sustainable forest management. Of these private forests, 200,000 ha are of natural origin.⁴ Meanwhile, even the 327,178 ha (20%) of the total forest area which is 'protected' is subject to large-scale timber harvesting, leaving forests that are completely devoid of management (core areas of forest re-

erves) covering as few as 4.025 ha.⁵ Private-owned, non-protected forests are the most endangered of all forest types in Hungary.⁶

Logging and trade

Major threats to Hungary's forests include the intensive forest management methods used, and the pressure of game, the country's high stock of which makes some methods of forest regeneration enormously expensive or even impossible.

In terms of forest management, clearcutting forms the most common harvesting method (78%), while even regeneration methods use too short a rotation period, taking only 2-3 years from the opening of the stand until the final cut.⁷ Single tree selection and other nature-based management systems are of very

small, or only, experimental importance. The result is the development of mainly even-aged forests dominated by one or two species, leading in turn to habitat and biodiversity loss. Meanwhile, despite remarkable forestation efforts in recent years, with plans to create 700,000 ha of reforested land by 2035,⁸ the preference for planting exotic species hinders the restoration of natural ecosystems in many sites.

Hungary's forests currently yield an annual harvest of 6.5-7 million m³, of which 1.5-2 million m³ is exported (to Austria and Italy). The import is lower, 0.6-0.7 million m³, mainly from the countries of the former Soviet Union, so the export-import balance of the country is positive. These harvests have grown in recent years, with an increasing proportion of timber utilised in ineffective power stations as a 'renewable' resource.⁹

2. Effects of the EU accession

Hungary's recent accession to the EU has had some impact on the country's forests. However, while, the transposition of the Habitats Directive (and, as a consequence, the designation of *Natura 2000* sites) has expanded the country's protected areas, there has been neither any aggravation of the legislation, nor any strengthening of its implementation.

By the time of the accession, the environmental law harmonisation process had mainly been completed, and today the Hungarian legislative environment meets the EU requirements. The designation of Hungary's *Natura 2000* network, despite missing its accession date deadline (1 May 2004), was decreed in September 2004, and the final list of the *Natura 2000* sites will be soon published. After some disagreement over the list, habitats with exceptional conservation value have now been included in the *Natura 2000* network.

However, this legislation in itself will not protect the forests. The Hungarian Regulation on nature conservation and effects on the ground, are, in certain respects stronger than the EU's Habitat Directive. Thus, law harmonisation was only significant in the cases of *Natura 2000* sites which were newly added to the network of protected areas. More important, in practice, is the issue of implementation, in respect to which there are serious problems concerning both the national and the EU legislation. For example, there are known cases in which permissions for intensive lumbering were issued for designated *Natura 2000* sites in October 2004 – immediately after the area had been designated as a *Natura 2000* site in September. Despite intensive NGO protest, the logging was carried out.

Moreover, the management plans for most of the protected – mainly State-owned – forests are in har-

mony with neither the spirit nor the prescriptions of the Habitats Directive. Not only is the development of the plans is dominated by economic interests, but the reorganisation of the nature conservation authorities seems to diminish the effectiveness of their work

by reducing human resources, ending their autonomy (through their integration into unified water management, environmental and conservation authorities), and decreasing the possibilities for public participation in and NGO control of the official processes.

3. Conclusion

Hungary's forests – which are already seriously degraded and at risk due to poor management – will remain under threat as long as the implementation of EU legislation remains ineffective. And while the new legislation has brought about no basic change in the attitude of the forest industry or the authorities, the degradation of Hungarian forests is continuing, while governmental measures move towards the weakening of the official and civil control. The reversion of these tendencies, the transformation of the present institutional system, and the approach of forest management are important issues for Hungarian NGOs active in conservation field to work on.

NGOs could play an important role in addressing these issues. The civil sector in Hungary is strong enough to become a partner of governmental and official institutions in preparing strategic plans for forest management and nature conservation. NGOs also can effectively control practical work and management practices of forestry and conservation authorities and institutions, and they have the ability to participate in raising awareness and providing information and training for both forest managers and the public. Five core areas can be identified where NGOs should target their efforts:

1. *Institutional background of forest management*: here the goal is to abandon the profit-led interests of the forestry industry in the management of existing and future protected areas. NGOs should apply pressure

at the governmental level to restructure forestry and nature conservation institutions in order to strengthen the enforcement of conservation goals.

2. *Reinforcement of nature conservation authorities and the implementation of the regulations*: NGOs should lobby for giving management rights of protected forests to the conservation institutions.
3. *Strengthening of civil control of forest management*: NGOs should take firm steps to implement the regulation on public participation (e.g. Aarhus Convention¹⁰), and engage intensively in the preparation of management plans and the control of forestry practices.
4. *Propagation and popularisation of natural forest management practices* (e.g. Pro Silva¹¹, single tree selection): campaigns which turn public attention to the problems of forest management, information leaflets and training on alternative management technologies for forest managers (both private and State employed) seem to be the most obvious tools for NGOs in this field.
5. *Improve public awareness and empower the local communities*: to encourage civil participation in decision-making on issues relating to their forests. Legal aid, trainings and providing consultation for local communities and NGOs could help them to protect their own forests and to take effective steps against maltreatment of their neighbouring State-owned forests.

Notes

¹ In Hungary there is no difference between plantations and forests by law.

² Exner T, Jávor B (2003) Erdőfigyelő jelentés 2003 (Forest Watch Report 2003, in Hung.), WWF Magyarország, Budapest

³ Bartha D (2000) Erdeink egyre csak szegényednek? (*Are our forests just worsening?* in Hung.) In: Gadó G. A Természet romlása, a romlás természete, Föld Napja Alapítvány, Budapest.

⁴ Bartha D (2000) Erdeink egyre csak szegényednek? (*Are our forests just worsening?* in Hung.) In: Gadó G. A Természet romlása, a romlás természete, Föld Napja Alapítvány, Budapest.

⁵ Hungarian Forestry (2003), Aqua Kiadó, Budapest.

⁶ Bartha D, Oroszi S (1995) Magyar erdők. (*Hungarian forests* in Hung.) In: Járainé-Komlódi M. Pannon Enciklopédia, Dunakanyar 2000, Budapest

⁷ Bartha D (2000) Erdeink egyre csak szegényednek? (*Are our forests just worsen-*

ing? in Hung.) In: Gadó G. A Természet romlása, a romlás természete, Föld Napja Alapítvány, Budapest.

⁸ Reforestation is largely in land abandoned by agriculture in line with the EU's reformed Common Agricultural Policy objects and subsidies.

⁹ Bartha D (2000) Erdeink egyre csak szegényednek? (*Are our forests just worsening?* in Hung.) In: Gadó G. A Természet romlása, a romlás természete, Föld Napja Alapítvány, Budapest.

¹⁰ The Aarhus Convention: *The Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters*. See: www.unece.org/env/pp/documents/cep43e.pdf

¹¹ For more information about Pro Silva see: http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/J_Kuper/prosilva.htm

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This briefing is part of a series of briefings about the forest situation in the new Member States