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Forest protection starts in our backyard

# EU forests in danger

February 2019

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## EU forests in danger: Forest protection starts in our backyard

February 2019

Cover photo by Marcin Nowak

### Acknowledgements

This publication was written by members of civil society, researchers and activists from EU Member States, and compiled and edited by Fern.

Thank you to Matthias Schickhofer and Luke Chamberlain, the NGO Agent Green, Malin Sahlin and the Swedish Society for Nature Conservation, Laslo Maraz from Forum Umwelt und Entwicklung, Eddie Mitchel, Katja Garson, Ondrej Kameniar and the REMOTE Primary Forests project, Siim Kuresoo from Eestimaa Looduse Fond, Jan Skalík from Friends of the Earth Czech Republic, Sylvain Angerand from Canopée, Marija Dabrisiute from Gyvas Miškas, photographer Marcin Nowak and an activist from Camp for the Forest (Poland), who wished to remain anonymous.



**Fern office UK**, 1C Fosseway Business Centre, Stratford Road,  
Moreton in Marsh, GL56 9NQ, UK

**Fern office Brussels**, Rue d'Édimbourg, 26, 1050 Bruxelles, Belgium  
[www.fern.org](http://www.fern.org)

*This publication has been produced with the assistance of the European Union. The contents of this publication are the sole responsibility of the author and can in no way be taken to reflect the views of the European Union.*





# Introduction

Trees cover 182 million hectares of the EU. That's six times the size of Italy. Yet as the stories in this report show, European Union (EU) forests are under threat, and rapid and committed action is required to save them. We all - citizens, policy-makers, civil society organisations and political leaders - have a responsibility to protect our forests, and to make sure they are managed in a way which respects biodiversity, indigenous and community rights, and natural resource limits.

The EU is taking strong action to protect forests globally, through development aid, innovative trade work such as the EU Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade (FLEGT) Action Plan, and commitments to end EU consumption of goods that cause agricultural deforestation. But to meet climate targets and improve the lives of countless communities, we must protect forests the world over. **The EU can't only call to protect forests elsewhere; we must also protect the natural and old-growth forests on our own doorstep.**

This issue has been generously written by contributors from eleven countries across the EU. It brings us up to date on some of the long-standing struggles, victories, and rising movements to protect EU forests, whilst outlining the dangers, losses and poor management that are damaging these unique habitats and carbon sinks.

Artificially-planted spruce forests in the Czech Republic fall prey to bark beetles, biomass power plants threaten to gobble up French forests, the destruction of old-growth forests on Natura 2000 sites continues in Estonia, conifer plantations swamp Ireland, and Sámi peoples battle logging on indigenous lands in northern Finland and Sweden. These are just a handful of examples from the rich selection in this EU forests in danger issue, which includes perspectives from Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Sweden.

This situation is particularly worrying, since the EU's Renewable Energy Directive referred to the EU's 'Sustainable Forest Management' to justify the use of bioenergy. These portraits, that paint a concerning picture of increasing industrialisation and artificialisation of European forests, show that the EU was wrong to do so.

Read on to hear stories from the ground, and to learn why protecting EU forests is of critical importance to people, planet and our collective future.

## Czech Republic

### Planting tomorrow's problem?

In the 19th century, new regulations pushed Czech forest owners to start planting spruce monocultures. This seemed to make perfect sense, spruce grew fast and natural forests had been heavily cut and burnt to feed the hunger for industrialisation.

Since then forests have grown to cover 34 per cent of the country - half is owned by the state and 3.5% is part of national parks. Despite this positive trend, ICP Forests (the International Co-operative Programme on Assessment and Monitoring of Air Pollution Effects on Forests) found that Czech conifers have the lowest health in Europe.

Forestry and associated industries create only 2.5 per cent of national Gross Domestic Product and for several decades only 20 million cubic metres (m<sup>3</sup>) of wood was cut each year. In 2018, however, tragedy struck as many Czech forests were hit by the bark beetle infestation. This led to a huge increase in cutting and the Ministry of Agriculture expects that in 2019, 50 million m<sup>3</sup> of affected wood will be cut. This would be by far the biggest cut in Czech history, removing 5 per cent of the forest in a single year, damaging their ability to deliver ecosystem services and destabilising the whole forestry sector.

The problem is stark, and one of the main causes takes us back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The artificial spruce plantations are simply not prepared for climate change. But despite these problems, reforestation with spruce continues – 81 per cent of reforestation is artificial plantations, and as many spruce have been planted as all broadleaf trees combined.

This means that as well as the present crisis, Czechia is setting itself up for a future even worse problem. But the solutions are simple...

**The Czech Republic needs a new forestry model** which only subsidises natural species rich reforestation, avoids large clear-cuts, temporarily reduces the game population and includes large non-intervention zones that can be used to study how forests develop in a changing climate.

More than 20,000 citizens have joined the Friends of the Earth Czech Republic initiative *Save the Forests*, calling for more stringent legislation and a rapid end to unsustainable forest management.

To find out more visit : [zachranmelesy.cz](http://zachranmelesy.cz)

# Estonia

## The race is on for Estonia's last natural forests

### **A 2017 inventory of Estonian forests found that only two per cent of our forests are "natural"**

(those that have had minimal human impact in the last 200 years and that retain their most important ecological characteristics). Those remaining are fragmented, scattered around the country, and one in four have no protection. But even protected forests are falling prey to ecologically destructive logging. One of the main reasons is that the price of wood reaches a new high nearly every month, making it profitable to log even in difficult to access areas.

Official State figures show that between 2011 and 2016, 13 per cent of natural forest (7,000 hectares) were cut. Such figures alarm most Estonians as protecting forests would be a popular measure. According to the Eurobarometer, Estonians believe forests' most important benefit is providing natural habitat for its species<sup>1</sup>. And national NGOs are looking for ways to stop forest biodiversity being destroyed for short-term economic interests. Unfortunately they have received a hostile reaction from the State. Key Woodland Habitat legislation<sup>2</sup> has been weakened in favour of logging interests which bypass Forest Stewardship Certificate (FSC) requirements; an initiative by the Estonian Naturalists' Society to find missing patches of natural forest has been met with regulatory restrictions; and **the State forest management has refused to suspend logging from areas identified as potentially valuable by their own employees**. Where we need cooperation between communities, NGOs, loggers and the government, we are met with an aggressive race to cut forest as fast as possible.

As an EU Member State, Estonia must abide by the Habitats Directive and protect Natura 2000 sites. But Estonian national legislation does not even ensure the protection of all habitats listed in the EU Habitats Directive and the government turns a blind eye whilst logging activities in Natura 2000 areas intensify. Two per cent of natural forest is already **too little to host the biodiversity typical of the region**. Estonia should be looking at ways to restore forest that has already been lost, instead of clearcutting Natura 2000 areas.

Forests' role in Estonia's future is still being debated, but while discussions continue, their most biodiverse part is being destroyed. When the debate is over, we'll have few options left. **The Estonian people want forests that can house wildlife and fight climate change**, to achieve this aim, the forest destruction needs to stop. Now.

For more information, visit: [elfond.ee](http://elfond.ee)

*A fresh logging from Natura 2000 site, where the owner is compensated from EU funds for economic loss due to restrictions even after a clear-cut.*



<sup>1</sup> [https://data.europa.eu/euodp/en/data/dataset/S2087\\_84\\_2\\_440\\_ENG](https://data.europa.eu/euodp/en/data/dataset/S2087_84_2_440_ENG)

<sup>2</sup> A mechanism to voluntarily protect small high conservation-value patches of forest.



## Finland

### How Finland's indigenous peoples are fighting for their forests

In the northern reaches of Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia, where the high fells bristle with forest and peatlands shift colour with the seasons, lies Sápmi. This is the name given to the region by one of Europe's few indigenous peoples, the Sámi. The Sámi homeland is roughly the size of South Korea, and includes the parts of Sweden and Finland that English speakers call Lapland.

It is now a site of struggle between the indigenous community and extractive industries. In Finland, logging is threatening to destroy the forest for economic profit.

**Old-growth boreal forest is crucial for the 80,000-strong Sámi population**, including the 10,000 who dwell within Finnish borders. Sámi are reindeer herders by tradition, and possess knowledge and customs deeply entwined with the landscape and its ecology. Though many Sámi have taken jobs in other sectors, reindeer herding and reliance on the forested landscape remain cornerstones of Sámi culture, as well as for the wider community. Studies have shown that 40 and 30 per cent of incomes in Inari and Muoni respectively come from tourism, which relies on intact forests and traditional culture.



*Sámi herders are now buying other feedstock for the reindeers. This is not only an added expense, but means a seismic shift both in the reindeers' diet and the Sámi culture. Source: fern.org/arcticlimits*

The forests nurture lichen, the only winter reindeer food. They also provide a habitat for berries, mushrooms, and International Union of Conservation Network (IUCN) red-listed (endangered) species. **Recent years have been marred by conflict** as companies such as [Metsähallitus](#) carry out logging for the pulp and paper industry, [breaking up seasonal reindeer pastures](#) and destroying protected species' habitats.

Trees north of the Arctic Circle grow slowly, and reveal dense growth rings when felled. Peurakaira forest, which was [logged in 2007 and 2008](#), lost pines that began growing in the 1600s. The government sees northern forests as an economic resource like any other, and includes them in its plans to [increase wood harvesting by 25 per cent before 2025](#). Despite opposition from over 130 signatories, NGOs, the Sámi Parliament and all 13 reindeer herding cooperatives, **in March 2016 the Finnish Forest Act was passed, releasing 360,000 hectares of land, mostly in Sámi regions, to economic activity including mining and forestry.**

Texts such as Finland's Reindeer Husbandry Act and [Articles 13, 14, and 15 of ILO 169](#) are side-lined by the Finnish government. According to the [UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#), "indigenous peoples have the right to the lands, territories and resources which they have traditionally owned, occupied or otherwise used or acquired", and "[legal] recognition [of these resources] shall be conducted with due respect..." yet Sámi spokespeople at the [September meeting](#) of the Arctic Parliament noted that government and industry statements often discuss the exploitation and protection of Arctic regions in the same sentence.

Forest protection has seen some success, however. In 2010, the Sámi and Greenpeace [celebrated the protection of 80,000 hectares](#) of old-growth forest for at least the next 20 years, if not permanently, from the activities of [StoraEnso](#) and Metsähallitus, the State Forest owners. This was the result of an [eight-year-long campaign](#) involving international NGO collaboration, national outcry, protests in countries which received Finnish wood exports, and a lawsuit. The case set precedent for indigenous communities seeking recognition of their rights the world over.

**Most recently, tensions have mounted over the proposed Arctic railway which would cut across Finnish Lapland to Norway.** Sámi claim that while the railway would benefit the forestry and mining industries by opening up new trade routes, it would [fragment reindeer herding lands](#) and ecosystems. They have also complained that a working group only had [two months to assess](#) predicted impacts on forests and Sámi.

**“Logging in Sámi Lapland will not only deplete carbon sinks and harm biodiversity; it will inflict irreversible damage at the heart of indigenous communities.”**

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Until texts intended to protect indigenous rights are implemented and forest management is carried out with respect for Sámi communities’ rights, this conflict will continue. Logging in Sámi Lapland will not only deplete carbon sinks and harm biodiversity; it will inflict irreversible damage at the heart of indigenous communities. It remains to be seen whether the Finnish government will take committed steps to protect the northern forests and peoples.

For more information, visit: [fern.org/arcticlimits](http://fern.org/arcticlimits)





# France

## French forests under threat

French forests are at a crossroads. Some are calling for them to be protected and restored, to enable them to support the climate, wildlife, clean the air and give communities places to breathe. Others want them to suffer the same industrialisation that faced French agriculture in the 1950-1960s.

French forest policies, mirroring many other European countries, encourage the industrialisation of forest management, aiming to increase the use of wood for energy from 6.5 per cent to 13.5 per cent by 2030. **Such policies would disrupt the market for local producers, notably small and medium-sized sawmills – more than 100 small sawmills close every year –, and increase timber imports from third countries.**

The source of this intensification is exemplified by projects like Gardanne, a project to convert a major coal power plant to biomass. At full-capacity, the plant took supplies of 850,000 tonnes of wood, enough to disrupt the regional forestry and wood industry within a 400 kilometre radius. And although this project is strongly contested and experiencing difficulties, it is not the only one in development.

Industrial-sized biomass energy projects are spreading everywhere in France, and are likely to increase further since the government committed to stop coal use by 2022.

The damage these projects could cause is immense, but each new proposal is met with near



*In 2017 French Court cancels the Gardanne coal-fired plant's biomass plant operation, preventing it from turning into one of the biggest biomass plant of the kind in France.*

indifference. This is an indication of the lack of critical public debate in France on biomass and the [industrial] intensification of forest management.

Another example is the French Government's recently published strategy which could dramatically change French forests - most people will not know it exists. **The objective is to harvest an extra 12 million cubic meters of wood each year for the next ten years - an increase of about 32 per cent compared with 2017.** This will reduce forest's ability to remove carbon dioxide from the atmosphere at a time when we need them most. This is suicidal because without living forests, there is no way to limit runaway climate change.

To counter this threat, networks are being created - Réseau pour des Alternatives Forestières, SOS Forêt – and citizens are regularly mobilising - a recent march for forests was organised by the interunion National Forests Office. This follows on from forests increasing their presence in popular culture through François-Xavier Drouet's movie "Le temps des forêts" and Peter Wohlleben's book "The Secret Life of Trees".

The time for forests to fight back is coming. A large coalition of actors, including nature organisations, forest managers favouring close-to-nature forestry (Association Pro Silva) and small and medium-sized sawmills, is ready to be heard.

To support all these movements, I have recently started a new NGO - 'Canopée'. This will help to build the strong advocacy capacities that will allow those voices to be heard and confront the government and policy-makers.

For more information contact [sylvain.angerand@canopee-asso.org](mailto:sylvain.angerand@canopee-asso.org).



## Germany

### Is sustainable forestry in Germany fake news?

Many in Germany would claim that the country's forestry model is a cradle of sustainability, but facts don't bear them out. Whilst it is true that total stocks of biomass have been slowly growing over the decades, much of this is in spruce and pine plantations of low ecological quality. Although efforts are being made to convert these artificial stands into mixed deciduous forests, progress is slow and time is short - climate change is already causing problems in most of the country.

The most visible effects are storm damage, acidification, drought, and insects like the bark beetle. And these problems are exacerbated by the deer whose numbers are kept artificially high to please the hunting lobby.

A recent study by Naturwaldakademie<sup>3</sup> showed that several natural forest types are endangered and that three have come close to extinction due to intensive forest management. Forests protected from logging still cover a mere 2.3 per cent of forests, despite a Federal Government target of having five per cent by 2020.<sup>4</sup> The timber and forestry industry often prevent the establishment of new national parks or the creation of legally binding criteria for sustainable forestry.

Voluntary schemes like the Programme for the Endorsement of Forest Certification (PEFC) and the Forest Stewardship Certificate (FSC) certify the vast majority of forest areas, but many see this as proof of the need for clear and binding regulation.

Despite increasing scientific proof that we need to protect and restore forests to meet climate goals, pressure on forest resources is growing. **Almost half of harvested timber is burned, and large parts are used in packaging (pallets) and production of pulp and paper.** The predicted increase in bioenergy demand and the recent promotion of the bioeconomy as a climate solution have the potential to threaten forests both within Germany and in third countries. Just to replace the energy delivered by the open cast mine of Hambach would require burning Germany's entire annual forest biomass harvest.

Even substituting wood for more carbon heavy materials in the building sector is not much more beneficial, (except concrete) once the need to establish new conifer plantations is taken into account.

**But it's not all bad news.** Fear of losing soil fertility has stopped some foresters from going for higher harvesting levels, and some plantations are being converted to forests, even while the timber industry calls for more softwood production. Some Länder (federal States) are progressing towards the five per cent target for protected forest area. And the recently established countrywide union of local initiatives<sup>5</sup> has begun protesting unsustainable forestry and harvesting practises – finally, the opposition to plantation forestry and the overcutting of old beech forests is gaining power.

**“Just to replace the energy delivered by the open cast mine of Hambach would require burning Germany's entire annual forest biomass harvest.”**

For more information, visit: [www.forumue.de](http://www.forumue.de)

<sup>3</sup> T. Welle, K. Sturm und Y. Bohr: Alternativer Waldzustandsbericht. Eine Waldökosystem-basierte Analyse des Waldzustands in Deutschland anhand naturschutzfachlicher Kriterien. (Hrsg. von Naturwald Akademie), Stand: 24. April 2018.

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.bfn.de/fileadmin/BfN/biologischevielfalt/Dokumente/broschuere\\_bilog\\_viefalt\\_strategie\\_bf.pdf](https://www.bfn.de/fileadmin/BfN/biologischevielfalt/Dokumente/broschuere_bilog_viefalt_strategie_bf.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.bundesbuergerinitiative-waldschutz.de/>

## Ireland

### More of a plague than a forest: Conifer plantations in the West of Ireland

Over many generations, County Leitrim in the North West of Ireland has suffered from rural decline. Emigration to England, America and elsewhere is an ever present issue. Every age group has stories of their experiences abroad – most leave this beautiful place in their youth and then return with partners when it's time to raise children. The result is a rich, diverse mix of people, all here for love rather than money.

“But the land we love is changing”, says Eddie, member of a rural community in County Leitrim.

“Having grown up in this mountain valley, it's impossible to ignore the growing patchwork of Sitka spruce plantations. My grandparents spoke of families having to sell out to forestry, of **allowing conifers to spread like a disease across the landscape**.

These are not diverse, life-giving forests, inside there is only darkness, and dead branches that scrape your face.”



*Sitka spruce plantation. Photo: Brian Clark.*

In the early days the plantations brought local jobs, employing big gangs of men. Work was tough, but it provided work for married men who did not want to emigrate. Now it is all mechanised, the jobs have gone. Even the timber mills are miles away.

“All we are left with are the trees. But these conifers don't send children to schools. They don't buy groceries. They don't attract tourists. Instead they compete with us for space, steal our light and affect our wellbeing.”

But there is little hope of change. In the South and East of Ireland, intensive dairy production is expanding, increasing associated methane emissions. They rely on the heavier soils to the West

and the North West to house trees to offset these emissions. The government calls these “marginal lands” but the poor communities that live on them, see it as an unprecedented land grab – one that is subsidised by the government.

**In the name of climate action, government grants can be used to cover 100 per cent of the cost of buying land to plant conifers.** Leitrim people are keen to play a part in battling climate change by planting broad leaf plantations on their land. They have just won a battle against the fracking industry, but now they are losing their land to foreign tax-free investment and invasive species. Government figures show that in Leitrim about 85 per cent of plantations are conifers.

“We've already lost 19 per cent of our counties' land cover, and with no regional planning controls available to us, the next step could be the catastrophic collapse of our rural economy”, add Eddie.

“We're fighting for our future. We love our beautiful countryside and we love our native woodlands.

**We need restoration of those woodlands not afforestation with invasive species.** But foreign investors don't care what is planted as they're not settled here. We need to be at the heart of decisions about land use. This is our home.”

For more information visit: [facebook.com/saveleitrim](https://facebook.com/saveleitrim).



## Lithuania

### Increased clearcutting in Natura 2000 sites demands a rapid response

**A fight is heating up in Lithuania over government-authorized clearcutting in national and regional parks, many of which are also protected under the Natura 2000 network.**

The conflict began more than a year ago: the Seimas, Lithuania's parliament, approved a highly controversial [forestry reform in July 2017](#), centralising forest governance to facilitate the sell-off of large areas of forest, and attracting private investors (notably Ikea, which became the country's largest private forest owner in November 2018).

In 2017, more than 15,000 permits to clear-cut were issued, many in parks and Natura 2000 sites. Even so, the Ministry of Environment [viewed environmental impact assessments as unnecessary](#). The Vice-Minister argued that the increased felling was needed for bioenergy to keep energy prices low. Local fauna and flora have already been seriously damaged as logging in protected areas has proceeded.

Lithuania's rules were amended on 8 August 2018 – during the summer holidays – to increase felling by six per cent in areas protected under national rules; [Natura 2000 sites](#) represent almost 18 per cent of these protected areas. Neither the public nor civil society organisations were informed or consulted; when this lack of participation was raised, the government claimed that no suggestions had been received.

Civil society quickly organised themselves, and significant public opposition made authorities pause tree-felling for one month in Labanoras Regional Park, most of which is protected under Natura 2000, but it has since resumed at a greater pace.

Tensions are rising. A protest march in Vilnius, 1 December 2018, attracted some 1,500 celebrities, activists and citizens who demanded an end to clearcutting. On 3 December, a lawsuit was filed in Vilniaus Apygardos Teismas, (Vilnius Regional Court); on the same date, Environment Minister Kęstutis Navickas was fired. The Seimas was to debate the issue on 4 December, but no action was taken.

For now, large-scale clearcutting continues.

The Commission sent a letter of formal notice related to the Birds and Habitats Directive on 17 May 2018 regarding Lithuania's failure to designate sufficient nature protection areas. They are concerned that sites proposed by Lithuania do not adequately represent the habitats and species present.

The European Commission has now opened infringement proceedings against Lithuania for its failure to adequately protect habitats and species by designating areas to nature protection. But EU infringement proceedings are lengthy; and since the Lithuanian government has been open to dialogue with the European Commission, the Commission is not in a rush to take the legal proceedings to the next level.

Any delay in action to suspend logging while legal proceedings play out works against the climate, biodiversity and Lithuania's citizens. A rapid response is required.

For more information, visit Gyvas Miskas's (Long Live the Forest) webpage.



Activists fighting for the Białowieża forests. Photo by Marcin Novak.

# Poland

## Białowieża Forest – valuable and endangered

Białowieża Forest is one of the last remnants of natural lowland forest on the European continent. It covers more than 1,500 square kilometres (km<sup>2</sup>) in the tranquil area where Poland meets Belarus.

It is irreplaceable in terms of biodiversity conservation – it hosts the largest free-roaming population of the European Bison, and also protects 59 types of mammal, over 250 birds, 13 amphibians, 7 reptiles, and over 12,000 invertebrates. Every year scientists discover something new.

Biodiversity thrives due to the wide variety of trees – including Oak, Elm and Lime - and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) has recognised it as a Biosphere Reserve and a World Heritage Site. It is visited by thousands of people from all over the world.

But only 152 km<sup>2</sup> of Białowieża Forest is a national park, and on 17 February 2017, the State Forest Authority Director signed Decision 51 which allows foresters access to unlimited logging in two-thirds of the forest's managed area.

Logging started in May 2017, with the excuse that bark beetles were damaging the forest. This met huge social resistance – not only amongst from NGOs like Greenpeace Poland, WWF, ClientEarth and Wild Poland Foundation, but also citizens movements such as Camp for The Forest and “locals against the logging” an organisation led by local people who work there as guides and run hotels and restaurants.

The government responded with a huge disinformation campaign which accused activists of being traitors and cheaters, and sent in forest guards who repeatedly used unjustified violence.

Eventually, the European Court of Justice got involved and in April 2017 stated that intensified logging, ordered by the Polish Minister of Environment is against the European law. The Minister of Environment was obliged to follow it immediately. So far, they have not.

The harvesters eventually left the forest in November 2017, but it is still not safe, and several hundred citizens have ongoing court cases.

Over the last 30 years about 165,800 cubic metres of timber has been harvested – equal to about 150,000 big trees. Half of this came from natural, over-100-year-old forest stands, and a large part was conducted in protected habitat.

**Now is the time for the entire Białowieża Forest to become a national park - the highest form of protection in Polish law.** This is the only way to permanently preserve this extraordinary forest and support tourism-based development.

Environmental groups fear [the government has fresh plans to restart logging Białowieża forest](#), and so Camp for the Forest continues to today, based in Teremiski village. They monitor every step the State Forests take and long for the day that the forest will be a national park.

Please visit us at the **Camp for the Forest** – we would love to show you the forest, the dangers and the beauty. Białowieża is one of the few bridges to wild and ancient Europe, come and see it for yourself!

For more information, visit [Save Białowieża](#), [Obaz dla Puszczy](#) or [Dzika Polska](#). Or read [Forest Biology's scientific research](#) on the issue.



*Clear-cut in Romania. Photo by Matthias Schickhofer.*

## Romania

### Europe's last large tracts of old-growth forests are vanishing fast

**Romania hosts the largest remains of old growth and virgin forests within the EU. But these unique forests are under acute threat from logging and corruption.**

At the beginning of the 1900s, Romania was home to almost one million hectares of virgin forests,<sup>6</sup> including large tracts of ancient beech forests. This changed when the communist state nationalised forests in the 1950s, opening most areas up to logging. A recent government national forest programme has made things even worse, decimating large areas of remaining forest. It is estimated that half of this final destruction was enabled through forged documents and corruption.

But the EU's largest tracts of virgin forests remain, mainly in the Southern Carpathians, where in some places no roads, or even marked trails, exist. Such true wilderness is rare in Europe other than in Northern Scandinavia.

A 2004 forest inventory<sup>7</sup> found that 218,000 hectares of virgin forest remained in Romania. This is probably an underestimation because forest administrations did not report forests which they hoped to log. Vast areas have since been lost, even though they are supposed to be protected under Romanian law.

<sup>6</sup> Virgin forest is the common used term, a definition is available on page 8 of this document: [http://www.mmediu.ro/app/webroot/uploads/files/2015-12-22\\_Virgin\\_forest\\_Romania\\_Summary.PDF](http://www.mmediu.ro/app/webroot/uploads/files/2015-12-22_Virgin_forest_Romania_Summary.PDF)

<sup>7</sup> Pin Matra project; Biris and Lakes, 2004





*Photo by Matthias Schickhofer*

*Less than one per cent of EU forests are in a natural state.*



*Photo by Matthias Schickhofer*

*Romania is a haven for old-growth forests, but also a logging hotspot. Old-growth and virgin forests are under strong pressure, and the main reasons are a lack of forest protection, weak implementation of laws and corruption, and the high demand for biomass for bioenergy.*

Inadequate data and a lack of government oversight make it impossible to know how much natural forest is still intact in Romania, but NGOs and experts estimate between 100,000 - 200,000 hectares (ha) of virgin forests remain. The extent of high conservation value forests (including old-growth) is certainly greater, because traditional forestry practices have had a lower impact in rural areas.

**Most of these forests are in national parks and Natura 2000 sites, but industrial logging is omnipresent and often officially sanctioned.** Even in the remote valleys of the Carpathians, more forest is logged than is allowed.

Twelve of 13 national parks are administered by state forestry enterprise Romsilva, an organisation which benefits from logging. Former park managers and ex-members of national park scientific councils report that Romsilva has actively blocked the creation of non-intervention zones as they wish to log, rather than protect the national parks. The problem is made worse because park management funding is so low that staff and 'management activities' depend on Romsilva's budget.

Romania widely ignores EU's nature directives, and Natura 2000 sites have been badly degraded by forest destruction. Only one of Romania's 13 national parks abides by International Union of Conservation Networks (IUCN) criteria for strictly protecting 75 per cent of the area through non-intervention zoning. Outside of "protected areas", parks and reserves are logged and look like industrial logging sites. **Even in buffer zones of United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) World Heritage sites, old-growth forests are logged and destroyed by bulldozers carving new roads.**

In 2012, a ministerial ordinance was issued - the "National Catalogue of Virgin and Quasivirgin Forests". The ordinance aims to stop the logging of intact virgin forests, but the process for inclusion is slow and blocked by bureaucracy. To date, only 21,000 ha have been listed for protection.

The Romanian environmental NGO *Agent Green* recently published shocking data which shows that **levels of illegal logging in Romania are approximately twice as large as official government statistics.** 38 million cubic metres of wood is logged every year, 20 million more than permitted – dwarfing most EU countries' legal production. Given the scale of criminal practices and the black market, a high proportion of local and governmental authorities are likely to be involved.

For more information visit: [www.saveparadiseforests.eu](http://www.saveparadiseforests.eu)

**"Romania hosts the largest remains of old-growth and virgin forests within the EU. But these unique forests are under acute threat from logging and corruption."**

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## Slovakia

### Large protected areas - but only on paper

**Natural forest ecosystems are at the heart of ecologically stable countries. But Slovakia, like many EU Member States, suffers from over-logging and poor forest governance.**

On paper, 23 per cent of Slovakia are protected – with nine National Parks, 14 Protected landscapes, Biosphere reserves, Natura 2000 sites and Important Bird Areas. Over the last 40 years, important native bird species such as the Capercaillie declined by 70 per cent. Half of this has happened since 2004, when Slovakia entered the EU. Similar reductions have occurred in other species, mainly because of increased fragmentation of mountain forests and habitat loss (e.g. between 2004 and 2014, 67 km<sup>2</sup> of natural spruce forests disappeared).

Primary forests now represent only 0.5 per cent of forests and 0.2 per cent of the Slovakian landscape<sup>8</sup>. Yet such forests are still being destroyed.

WWF Slovakia and the NGO Prales recently proposed the creation of a strict “Primary forests of Slovakia” reserve of 6,994 hectares. This would include all remaining primary forests. Negotiations are ongoing, while logging continues.

One of the main reasons given for increasing logging in mountain forests is *salvage logging*, which it is claimed can help forest ecosystems recover after disturbances. **Science shows, however, that disturbances such as windstorms and bark beetle outbreaks are a natural, even essential part**



Photo by Karol Kaliský

Primary forest remnant Zámotská hoľa destroyed by logging in summer 2018.

**of forest ecosystems.** Such events have happened for hundreds of years and forest species are well adapted to them.<sup>8,9,10</sup> **Forests are also able to fully recover without human intervention.** In fact *salvage logging* can cause more biodiversity loss than the original disturbance.



*Unmanaged bark beetle outbreak in the strictly protected area NPR Bielovodská dolina in the High Tatra Mountains. Young trees benefit from leaving the deadwood on the ground.*



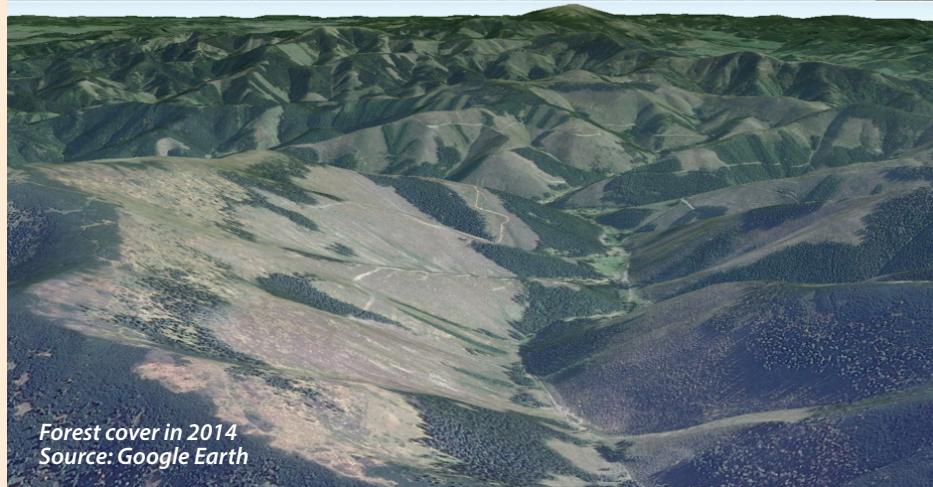
*Managed bark beetle outbreak in the same strictly protected area. Ironically, people are not allowed to walk outside of tourist paths, because "they could damage the fragile mountain ecosystem..."*

In Slovakia there is often a conflict of interest, as forest managers also manage protected areas. When ecologists and activists show that forest cover is decreasing, forest managers claim the opposite. The difference can be explained through definitions. Forest managers talk about *forest property* and ecologist about *forest ecosystems*. And forest property and forests are not the same.

**Replacing natural forests with monocultures delivers the same amount of trees, but does not replace the homes of the Capercaillie, bears, wolves and lynx and ecosystem functions.**

### Box 1: Forest property and forests are not the same

Change from 2007 to 2014 in the central part of National Park Low Tatra Mts. This is still forest according to forest managers in Slovakia. But Capercaillie and other disappearing species do not think so. Also the local people are suffering from floods and droughts, which are the results of this kind of "management".





The turning of ecosystems into monocultures also lowers peoples' life quality. The EU needs to urgently pressure our country's officials to protect nature, because local NGOs, the public and scientists are all being ignored. As we see, "protection on paper" is not enough...

For more information, visit [www.pralesy.sk](http://www.pralesy.sk), [www.remoteforests.org](http://www.remoteforests.org) and [www.mysmeles.sk](http://www.mysmeles.sk).



*Male-capercaillie displaying in the spruce forest disturbed by bark beetle. Capercaillie evolved in natural forests and can thrive despite natural processes like bark beetle outbreaks.*

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## Sweden

### The Swedish forestry model – not to be replicated

**Sweden has been held up as an example of a clean, green forested nation, but Swedish forestry has fundamentally and negatively transformed nature and caused a biodiversity crisis.**

Since the 1950s, more than 60 per cent of Sweden's forests have been logged through - clear cuts followed by, for example, soil scarification, afforestation, fertilization, drainage and sometimes planting of alien tree species. This large-scale intensive forestry is conducted at the expense of forest biodiversity and social and cultural values. More than 1,800 forest species are now listed in the national red list of species whose future is uncertain.<sup>12</sup>

**Today, young homogeneous forests dominate the landscape, but they are not yet old enough to cut. This has meant foresters continue to fell high nature value forests<sup>13</sup>.** Although new trees are planted after each clear felling, 100 per cent of the annual growth of unprotected forests is harvested annually,<sup>14</sup> and every year more of the old-growth forests are cut.

**Such forestry also has a major negative impact on the indigenous Sami people.** Sami reindeer husbandry is an important part of the Sami heritage, but Sami rights to use the woodland and landowners' property rights are both constitutional. This often leads to conflicts when logging is planned and conducted in reindeer grazing areas.

Reindeers need access to forests, especially during winters when snow conditions reduce access to ground lichens, and reindeer switch to eating hanging lichens. For the food to last the winter, reindeer must be able to easily move across large pasture areas.<sup>15</sup> But the Swedish forestry model has decreased grazing areas since the 1950s<sup>16</sup> making it far harder for the Sami to continue traditional reindeer husbandry. Clear cuts, young homogenous forests and forest service roads fragment the Swedish forest landscape. In some areas it is now impossible to move reindeer between different seasonal grazing areas.<sup>17</sup> The use of foreign trees further impedes the reindeer husbandry by causing obstructions and altering soil vegetation.

In Sweden, the Sami are fighting for fundamental human rights already recognised for many other indigenous peoples. Their way of living is based on nature's conditions and dependent on non-fragmented, stable ecosystems. **Listening to the Sami and improving the Swedish forestry method will not only benefit the Sami, it will also pay dividends for biodiversity.**

For more information, visit: [www.naturskyddsforeningen.se](http://www.naturskyddsforeningen.se)



Photo by Kjell Eson, Flickr/cc.

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“Despite increasing scientific proof that we need to protect and restore forests to meet climate goals, pressure on forest resources is growing.”

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**Fern office UK**, 1C Fosseway Business Centre, Stratford Road, Moreton in Marsh, GL56 9NQ, UK

**Fern office Brussels**, Rue d'Édimbourg, 26, 1050 Bruxelles, Belgium

[www.fern.org](http://www.fern.org)

