

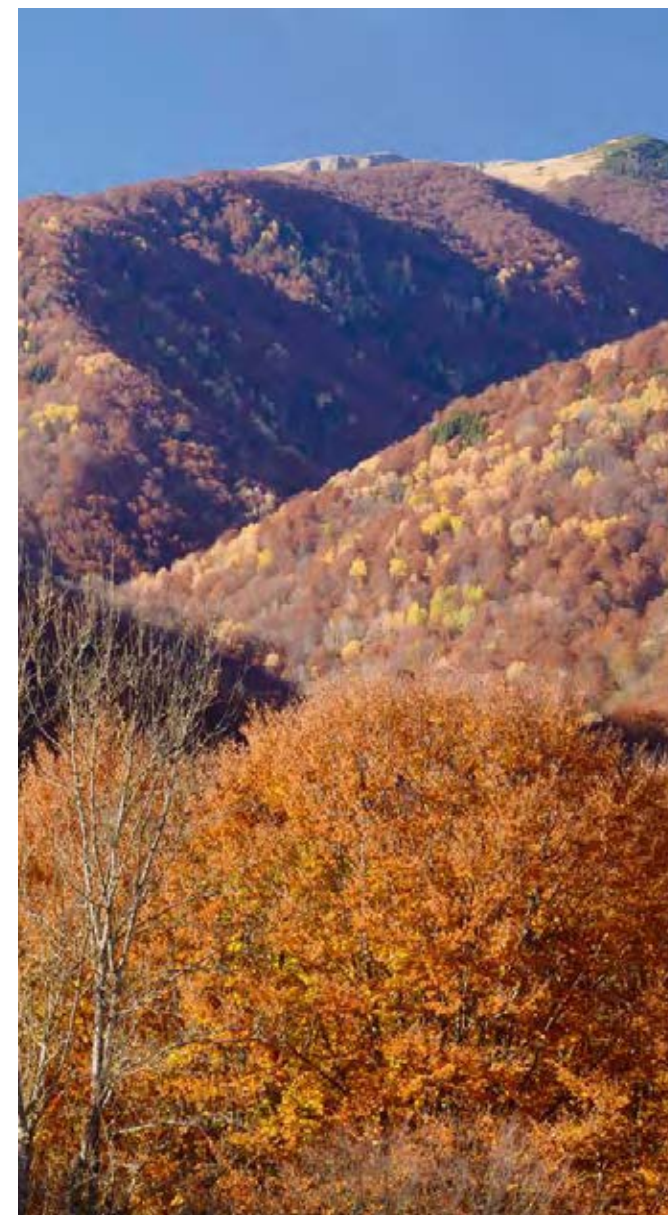




Cernisoara forest wilderness in Domogled - Valea Cernei National Park.

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FOREWORD

Did you know that many of the best forests of the European Union can be found in Romania? Few people know this, but it is true: the lion's share of virgin forests of the EU (excluding Scandinavia) is located in Romania. There is no other country within the EU with so many large patches of connected, uninterrupted forests with very low or even no forestry use. The main finding of the recent PRIMOFARO study commissioned by EuroNatur Foundation is that around 525,000 hectares of potential primary and old-growth forest areas still exist in Romania.

All these forests are located in the Carpathians, this 190,000 km² mountain range which is shared by seven countries: Romania, Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Serbia, Slovakia and Ukraine. This fascinating mountain range is home to a tremendous natural treasure: large intact natural forest landscapes, sparsely populated by humans, but by many plants and animals which are elsewhere suffering from the intensity of human use of nature. The most significant part of these wonderful forests are located in Romania, therefore it is very relevant what will happen in Romania in the very near future.

Legally, primary and old-growth forests are protected in Romania, but in practice they are logged at an unbelievable rate. The PRIMOFARO study found that only around 55% of virgin forests previously identified in 2005 can still be confirmed as intact. The European legal framework, especially the Birds and Habitats Directives, is widely ignored. Almost all virgin forests lost in the last 15 years were located

in Natura 2000 sites. Also, Romania's national legal system is often neglected or twisted. A significant portion of these virgin forests is located in national parks. But in the buffer zones of national parks the same commercial logging methods are applied as elsewhere in Romania. It is so scandalous that one tends to ask why these national parks exist at all. Some of the national parks appear as fake parks. Buffer zones of national parks are also declared in many cases as buffer zones of properties of the World Nature Heritage Site "Ancient and Primeval Beech Forests of the Carpathians and other regions of Europe". It is shocking to see that progressive cutting within these buffer zones leads to destruction of old-growth forests surrounding the core areas of World Heritage and intensive logging only respects a distance of 50 metres to these areas of outstanding universal value.

We request the Romanian government to urgently prohibit commercial logging in all national parks and ensure that only the firewood needs of local communities are served. This would secure the outstanding universal value of World Heritage properties and fix the current abuse of the national park label in Romania. Furthermore we request the Romanian government to follow the provisions of the EU Nature Directives and ensure that primary and old-growth forests in Natura 2000 sites – in total this is an area of more than 300,000 hectares – are protected from logging. There is even more potential in Romania to enlarge and enhance the existing protected area network and to make sure that around half a million hectares of incom-

parable forests – representing 7% of all forests in Romania and 2% of the national territory – will be safeguarded. With the support and the request of the European Commission and the European Union these urgent and necessary changes are possible.

Our vision is that these surviving outstanding forests are legally and effectively protected as wilderness, as homes for wild animals and plants, as a safeguard against the climate crisis as well as sites for humans to enjoy.



Gabriel Schwaderer, EuroNatur



Gabriel Paun, Agent Green





photo: Matthias Schickhofer

Logging of primary beech forest in Stramba Valley, Făgăraș Mountains Natura 2000 site.

INTRODUCTION

To many people, Romania is an enigma. Over a hundred years ago, when Bram Stoker brought to life a macabre fictional character loosely based on a historical figure, he could not have foreseen the confusion he would create for those infected by the story of the world's most infamous vampire. If Count Dracula was imaginary, so too was Transylvania, the region in which he lived. So, too, the wolves of the dark, forested valleys of the Carpathians Mountains. Well, both Transylvania and the wolves that call the Carpathians home are real. But Romania remains a mysterious country, unmapped in many people's understanding of the world, and the lines between reality and illusion can be blurred.

It is the same with Romania's crown jewels, her places of great, wild, untouched nature. Few would appreciate that Romania is home to some of the largest and healthiest populations of large carnivores – bears, wolves and lynx – in all of Europe. Probably even fewer would know that, excluding Scandinavia, Romania is home to two-thirds of the European Union's most prized natural heritage – intact, irreplaceable virgin forests.

Stretching for 1,500 kilometres across Central and Eastern Europe, the Carpathian Mountains cut an impressive arc through Romania, forming a backbone of monumental ecological importance. This treasure chest of natural heritage is dominated by mixed mountain forests of European beech and spruce, and at higher altitudes, coniferous mountain forests with endemic black pines and alpine meadows. They are the last forested places of almost indescribable natural wonder in Europe.

The exact amount of virgin forests in Romania is, however, unknown because the Romanian government shows very little interest in mapping and protecting them. There is evidence that at least 115,000 hectares of pristine, virgin forests survive from a previous inventory, but this was not entirely comprehensive, and much more virgin forests still exist, by far making up the lion's share of virgin forests in the EU excluding Scandinavia (Figure 1).

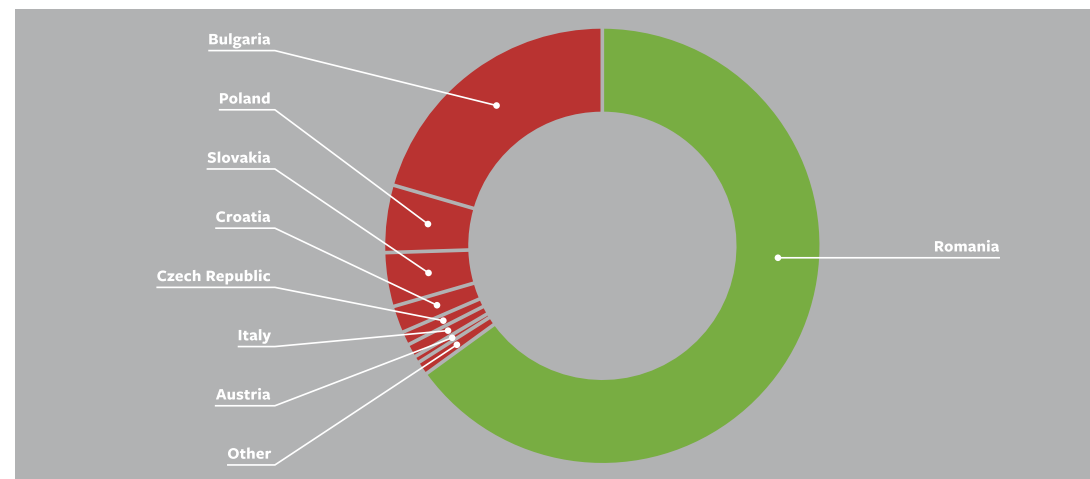
And yet, these places of stunning natural beauty are being lost before our eyes. Virgin and old-growth forests are destroyed before their values are even assessed. **Logging is out of control – National Parks, Natura 2000 sites, buffer zones of UNESCO World Heritage sites and forests of equivalent outstanding natural value are being**

logged and lost, both legally and illegally, with the full permission and support of the Romanian government. The rule of law is not enforced – management plans are insufficient, over-logging is rife and forest exploitation frequently takes priority over forest conservation. Illegal logging has long been widely recognised by the Romanian government, non-government organisations and the media.

Romania's state funded forestry company, Romsilva, and Romania's Ministry for Forests lie at the heart of the problem. In a classic case of giving with one hand and taking with the other, Romsilva is responsible for both the protection and the destruction of Romania's forests. Romsilva, whose rule is given full consent by authorities in Bucharest, prioritises logging over conservation. Greed, and short-term

It is time to turn this around, to log out of Romania's most precious forest heritage.

Figure 1: Estimated shares of virgin forest by country within the EU excluding Scandinavia. Source: Expert interviews



profit interests, corruption and deplorable governance win out at the expense of natural ecosystems and the prosperity of the people of Romania who depend on them for clean air, fresh water, carbon abatement, tourism, and personal recreation.

Firewood extraction, including for bioenergy, and commercial commodity production of timber products are largely driving the logging of forests in Romania.

Large international timber companies, including IKEA, Holzindustrie Schweighofer, Egger, Kronospan, Kastamonu, Massiv, Romanel, Yıldız Entegre and Losan all benefit from logging in Romania. Intense demand for commodity wood products in turn puts undue pressure on Romania's forests. Irreplaceable forests are lost to the bulldozer and chainsaw, places of outstanding beauty sacrificed for a logging regime that is detached from the realities of best practice planning and governance, the forest resource is plundered and corruption and illegal practices are rife.

Actions of Romsilva and the Ministry for Forests appear to be deliberate, divisive and destructive. The situation demonstrates a widespread breakdown

of the rule of law. Trust in the Romanian government and its institutions to deliver for the majority of its citizens continues to be damaged - the negative consequences are substantial, broad and long-term.

Immediate intervention is necessary to turn this ongoing natural tragedy into an opportunity of hope and prosperity. Economic, social and environmental benefits will come from the protection, not the destruction of these forests. Precious forests must be placed under a moratorium until their full protection is guaranteed, starting with state owned property. National park management must be removed from Romsilva and placed in the hands of a competent, independent state organisation whose purpose is to protect and promote Romania's wild places, not destroy them. Activities within Natura 2000 sites must be in accordance with EU obligations that ensure the protection of valuable natural habitats and species.

Only then can the veil be removed from this crown jewel of European natural heritage, the true mystery of Romania's wild places revealed to the world. No longer will Transylvania and the Carpathian Mountains only be confined to a book of fantasy - they will be revered by visitors from near and far, coming to discover for themselves, the most beautiful forests left in Europe.



Virgin forest under threat from logging in Stramba Valley, Făgăraş Mountains.

photo: Matthias Schickhofer

WHY ARE OLD-GROWTH AND VIRGIN FORESTS IMPORTANT?

The global significance of old-growth and virgin forests, and the critical need to protect them, is meticulously understood and documented (Watson et al. 2018). They harbour an incalculable abundance of plant and animal species. They are more resilient to storms, droughts and fire than managed forests. They gift us with water and clean air – they function as our natural air conditioners, they filter, store and cycle water and they provide pollination services that are critical to food production. When compared to degraded forests, old-growth and virgin forests provide superior ecosystems services that better support human health (Watson et al. 2018). They store enormous amounts of carbon in the soil and in above ground biomass while logging

releases this carbon into the atmosphere. The critical importance of forest protection as a key defence against a rapidly changing climate was formally recognised in the 2015 Paris Agreement (UNFCCC, 2015). Intact forest protection, therefore, provides us with hope – a chance to help buffer against the worst dangers of a rapidly changing climate.

Yet they are more than all of this. Old-growth and virgin forests are some of the most awe-inspiring places on our planet. They capture the accumulation of time passing through millennia. When we stand in an ancient forest, we exist only in this single moment, but we are witness to the unbroken continuum of the evolution of life on earth, immediately

surrounded by the passing of eons of time. Few places capture the four dimensions of our world, three physical, and the fourth of time, in the one place. They link the past and the future, and are a living encyclopaedia of ecological knowledge from which we still learn.

However, these places of irreplaceable beauty are becoming rarer the world over. Increasing human appetite for paper, wood and fuel means the tyranny of distance that once protected these forests now no longer keeps machines that bring them down at bay. Valleys that once were one valley too far, one mountain range out of reach, are, day by day, encroached by the commodification of nature.

The protection of old-growth and virgin forests is critical to our common future. In Europe, where these forests are so rare, we have a shared responsibility to protect the last of these fragile places, to accord them the highest respect and protection and to ensure they endure into the future. Their plight is our plight. Their protection is a measure of our progress as human beings and a direct reflection of how we, as humans, treat ourselves and each other.

“It’s a magical place. This is completely untouched nature. This is one of the very few places in Europe with prime forest that has been untouched since the beginning.”

Professor Dr. Hans D. Knapp, co-initiator of the UNESCO World Heritage program for the protection of European beech forests, speaking about Boia Mica in the Făgăraș Mountains



Primary forest in Sinca Valley, part of the UNESCO European beech forest World Heritage site. Old-growth forest in the buffer zone has been logged since the site's nomination.



photo: Matthias Schickhofer

Untouched and unprotected. One of the last great wilderness valleys of Europe. Boia Mica, in the southern Făgăraș Mountains.

ROMANIA'S NATURAL FOREST HERITAGE UNDER THREAT

Hand-painted on a sign that is slowly disappearing into the surrounding Carpathian forests, a Romanian proverb captures the familial importance of this country's forests – *Codrul e frate cu românul, sa-l iubim ca pe un frate!* – “The forest is the Romanian's brother. Let's love it like a brother!”

This poetic evocation has its roots in science. These forests are part of an outstanding family of natural habitats that are rich in biodiversity, being home to around 3,700 plant and over 33,000 animal species. A relatively high portion of Romania's plant species are endemic with 75% of these existing in mountainous areas (National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan, 2016) and forested areas make up the highest portion of unique habitat types in the country (Ministry of Waters, Forests and Environmental Protection, 2000). The exceptional value of Romania's biodiversity is recognised in part as a consequence of its unique variety of mountain, hills, plateaus and plains relief forms which are important not just in Europe, but on a global scale (Romanian Ministry of Environment and Climate Change, 2014). Its forests are home to some of the largest populations of bears, wolves and lynx in Europe.

According to the latest National Forest Inventory, Romania hosts around 7 million hectares of forests, covering approximately 29% of the country. Substantial levels of historical logging and forest loss mean that Romania now falls well below the European average for forest coverage of 43%. Although the area of Romania's virgin forests has declined significantly over the past few hundred years (Figure 2), many steep and previously inaccessible

mountainous areas provide refuge to the remaining pockets of the largest patches of virgin forests in the EU. These forests have large representative ranges across all forest ecosystem types in Romania, they contain huge areas of enormous tree specimens and harbour rare and remarkable biodiversity at all levels of the ecosystem (Biris and Veen, 2005). They deserve immediate, strong and permanent protection.

Romania's disappearing virgin forests

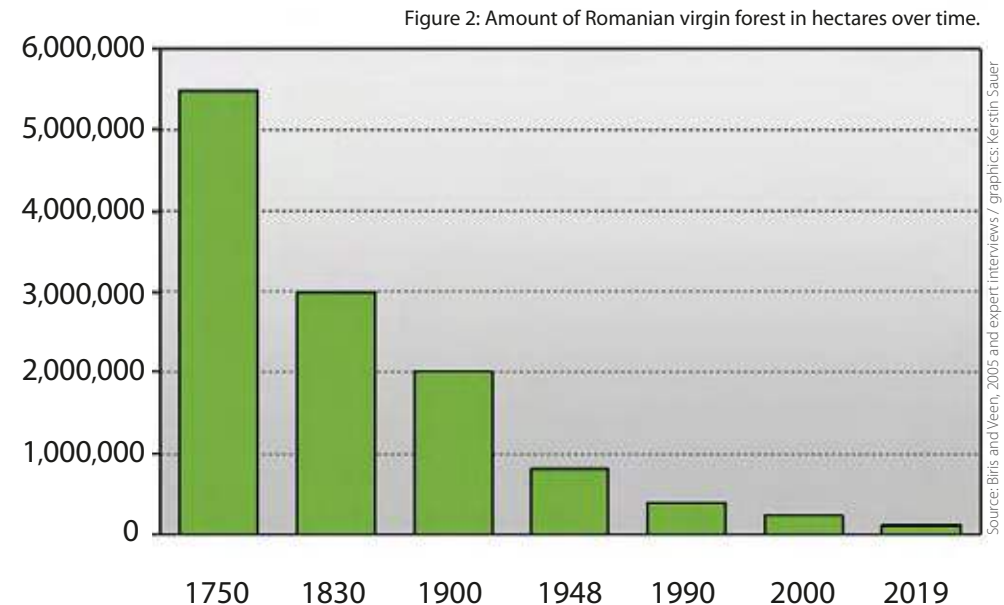
Contrary to the Romanian proverb, however, these forests are not loved like a brother. Despite a recent increase in the size of protected areas in Romania, important forests continue to be logged and lost (Knorn et al. 2012). In 2005, a Dutch government funded scientific study of Romania's virgin forests (Biris and Veen, 2005) – the so called “Pin Matra” project – found that almost 220,000 hectares existed in Romania. Although this study did not identify all virgin forests in Romania, it did provide as comprehensive a picture as possible of virgin forests at its time of publication in 2005.

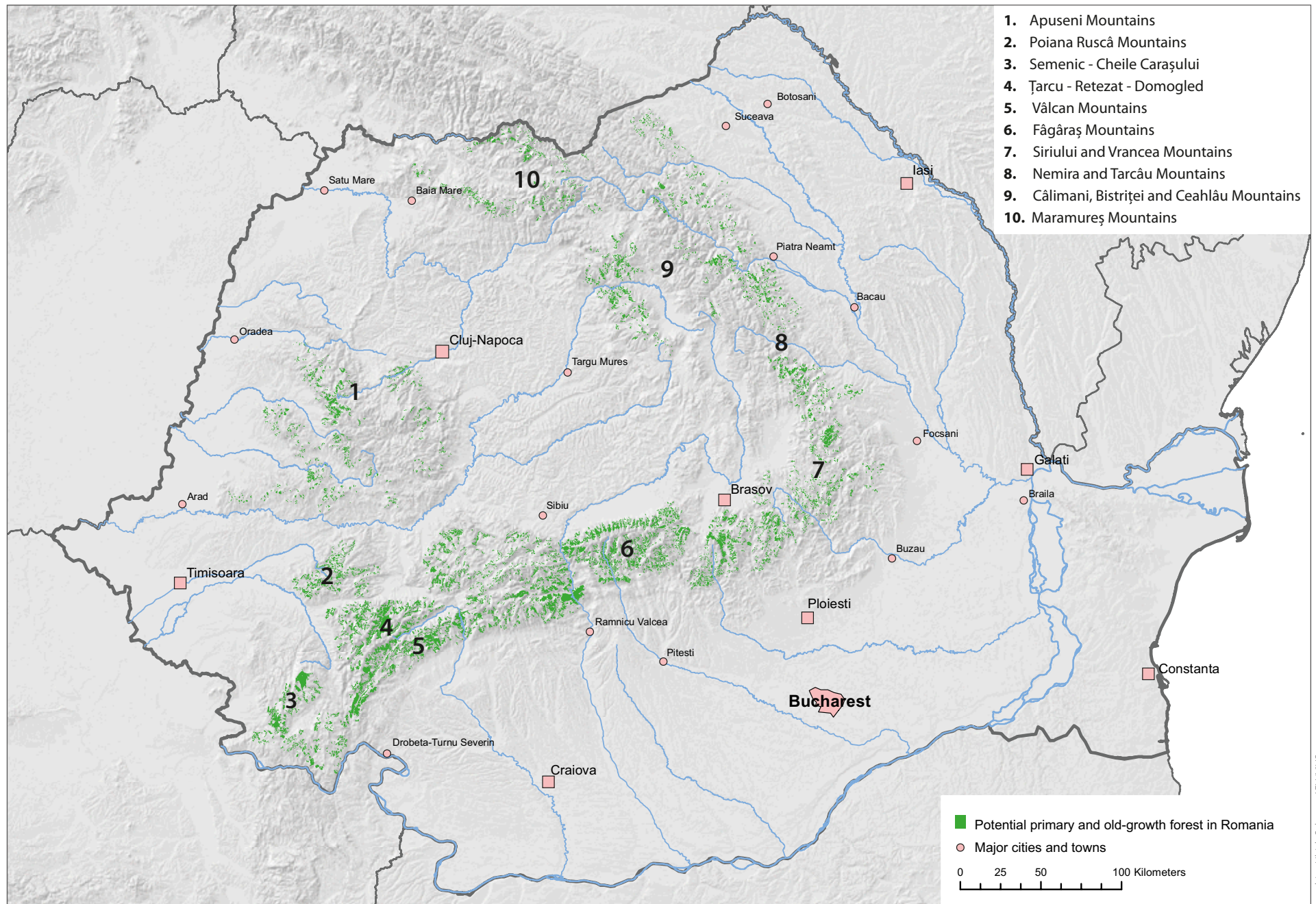
But a decade and a half is a long time in unprotected forests. Over the past two years, a rigorous desktop analysis, underpinned by on-ground inspection, has been undertaken that has provided a more contemporary view of the status of virgin forests in Romania. **Sadly, this PRIMOFARO study (Schwarz and Schickhofer, 2019) has revealed the true magnitude of a shocking environmental catastrophe of which very few people are aware. The analysis shows that around 45% – almost half –**

of the forest identified in the 2005 Pin Matra inventory can no longer be confirmed as virgin forest. Logging has destroyed or severely degraded many tens of thousands of hectares of pristine ecosystems since that time. Under Romanian law, virgin forests are supposed to be protected. This new analysis makes a mockery of the legal system in Romania, where logging in virgin forests is clearly out of control.

The good news is that the analysis has revealed that there is much more natural forest left than previously identified. Around 525,000 hectares of potential old-growth and primary forests with high biodiversity value were found. This includes at least 115,000 hectares

of virgin forests mapped by the Pin Matra study, and also ecologically mature forest stands where the impacts of humans are negligible. This represents just over 7% of Romania's estimated total forested land. More than 300,000 hectares of these forests are already included within national parks and Natura 2000 sites, but most of them are not secure from logging.





Map of Romania showing potential primary and old-growth forests. The Carpathian Mountain arc is clearly one of the most important refuges of primary and old-growth forest left in the entire European Union.

UNDER THREAT - UNESCO WORLD HERITAGE SITES

UNESCO WORLD HERITAGE SNAPSHOT

The UNESCO World Heritage List represents the best of the best of our planet's natural and cultural heritage. Sites are inscribed on the list because they are of "outstanding universal value" and it is expected that they are managed with permanent conservation and protection in mind. On this list exists a uniquely complex serial site called the *Ancient and Primeval Beech Forests of the Carpathians and Other Regions of Europe*. This site now covers 92,023 hectares across more than 40 protected areas located in 12 European countries. The site

was initially inscribed in 2007 with components located only in Slovakia and the Ukraine, and then it was extended to German components in 2011. In 2017, 10 countries successfully added further forests to the listing. The Romanian component of this extension (23,983 hectares) disproportionately comprised almost 40% of the 10 country addition (61,660 hectares) to the existing site. In total, Romanian forests make up 26% of the entire 12 country World Heritage listing, making it by far the largest contribution from a country of the EU.

These component areas were added to the World Heritage List under criteria (ix) of the World Heritage Convention as they are "outstanding examples representing significant on-going ecological and biological processes in the evolution and development of terrestrial, fresh water, coastal and marine ecosystems and communities of plants and animals". The Romanian components are described, amongst other rich ecological and biodiversity values, as including important refuges of virgin forests, being of a high degree of naturalness, and supporting a vast array of plants and animals including endemic, rare and threatened species (Kirchmeir, H. & Kovarovics, A. 2016).

Site name: Ancient and Primeval Beech Forests of the Carpathians and Other Regions of Europe. Total area in Romania: 23,983 hectares. Percentage of international site: 26%. Issues: Logging in Buffer zones, leading to fragmentation and loss of connectivity; does not cover all forests of outstanding universal value and expansion necessary; lack of government re-sourcing and promotion; planned road construction and expansion.

Complimenting core listed sites are buffer zones which surround the World Heritage property and are designed and designated to further protect it. According to the World Heritage Centre, "a buffer zone is an area surrounding the nominated property which has complementary legal and/ or customary restrictions placed on its use and development to give an added layer of protection to the property" (UNESCO WHC, 2017). Protection of buffer zones is confirmed in the site nomination document, which was signed by the Romanian government, where the Statement of Integrity states "*Buffer zones including surrounding protected areas (nature parks, biosphere reserves) are managed sympathetically to ensure the long-term conservation of the particular character of the designated beech forests together with its inherent attributes*" (Kirchmeir, H. & Kovarovics, A. 2016).



Bulldozing of logging road through the buffer zone of a UNESCO World Heritage site within Domogled - Valea Cernei National Park.

In Romania, intensive commercial logging takes places in the buffers zones of these World Heritage site components.

The progressive logging of ecologically mature forest areas leads to isolation of the core zones and endangers ecological connectivity in the landscape. It is clearly not compatible with the World Heritage Operational Guidelines and the Statement of Intent of the nomination document and undermines the international cooperation that is crucial to the collaborative management of this important 12 country World Heritage site.

Furthermore, logging continues in surrounding forests that contain the same outstanding universal values that are found within the current World Heritage areas. The initial delineation of the Romanian World Heritage sites has clearly not covered all forests equally - forests with 400 year old trees outside the site are logged, but are protected within the site. Additions to the World Heritage area should include these forests of equal outstanding universal value.



Logging in the buffer zone of a UNESCO World Heritage site in Domogled - Valea Cernei National Park.

UNDER THREAT - NATIONAL PARKS

National parks are the pride of many countries and their citizens - think Yellowstone in the USA, the Serengeti in Tanzania or the Great Barrier Reef in Australia. The purpose of a national park is to protect natural biodiversity, to ensure our unique plants and animals persist into the future and to secure the enjoyment of our most precious places for future generations.

Romania has 13 National Parks, totalling only 1.3% of Romania's land area. These parks protect some of the most outstanding natural values in Romania, including ancient forests, spectacular mountain peaks, deep canyons, extensive cave systems and even one of Europe's largest inactive volcanic craters. One would be excused for thinking that the 1.3% of land contained within national parks would be permanently protected and upheld with the same national pride and respect for which national parks in other parts of the world are revered. The on-ground reality, however, is cause for a startling insight into the perverse governance of the Romanian state.

Under the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) protected area classification system, national parks fall under Category II, where management should set aside "large natural or near natural areas and large-scale ecological processes, along with the complement of species and ecosystems characteristic of the area, which also provide a foundation for environmentally and culturally compatible spiritual, scientific, educational, recreational and visitor opportunities". 75% of national parks should be in core zones (IUCN and WCMC, 1994) where non-intervention management ensures

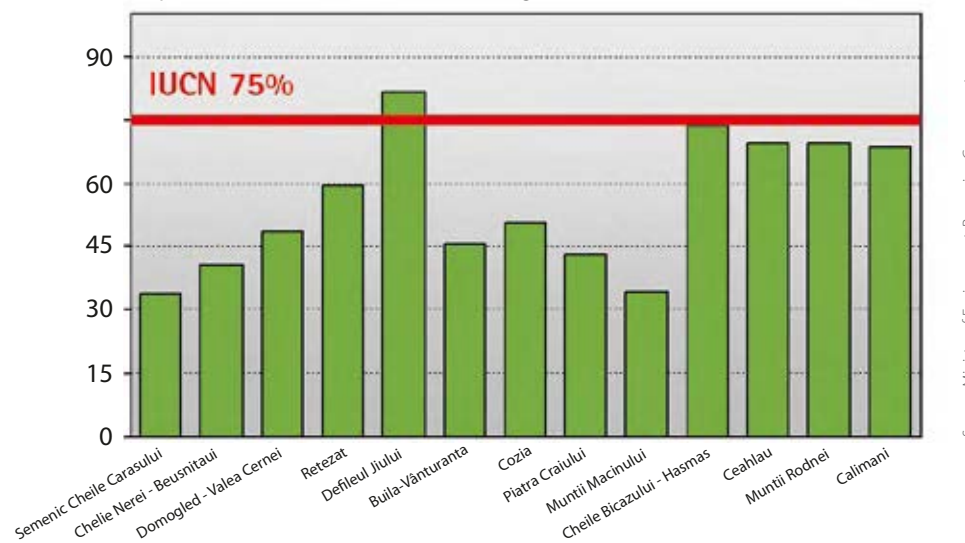
nature conservation is paramount. In Romania, only 53% of the area within national parks is classified as non-intervention, falling well short of the 75% target (Figure 3). Many forests within national parks have been logged since the parks were proclaimed and some core zones have been subsequently reduced in size to allow more logging within the park system.

In many cases, forests are managed no differently within the national park as they are in surrounding production forests. In a bizarre case of the fox being in charge of the henhouse, Romsilva, Romania's state funded forestry company, which is responsible for logging production forests across the country, is also in charge of national park management. Incredibly,

this logging agency determines what happens in national parks, including the approval of national park management plans. The consequences for national parks are dire, as a conflict of interest is inherent in conservation management and its associated governance systems. Logging takes precedence over nature conservation and occurs systemically within national parks, including in virgin forests. It is authorised by park management officials, in full contravention of IUCN guidelines and public expectation of world's best practice national park management.

It is a desperate situation when even national parks, representing only around 1.3% of the land surface in Romania, are not immune from commercial logging, both legal and illegal.

Figure 3: Percentage of non-intervention (protected) zones within national parks against the IUCN 75% benchmark. Romania has no plan, nor a timeline, to meet the IUCN target.



Source: Ministry of Environment, Romanian Government

NATIONAL PARK SNAPSHOT

Number of national parks: 13. Size of national parks: approximately 318,000 hectares (only 1.3% of Romanian land area). Issues: Logging occurs in all forested national parks; management does not prioritise conservation - Romsilva (state forestry company) manages parks and prioritises logging; zoning (protection) does not reflect ecological needs and has been highly compromised; IUCN criteria of 75% non-intervention is not met in all parks but one and there is no plan to meet this benchmark; parks are being fragmented by logging roads; conservation is underfunded and under-promoted; illegal hunting.

A look inside Semenic–Cheile Caraşului National Park

Even though it hosts the largest intact remnant patch of beech forest left in Europe, Semenic–Cheile Caraşului National Park in south–west Romania doesn't even have a visitor centre. Since its inception in 2000, it has been progressively logged and deteriorated by deliberate mismanagement and neglect. Romsilva, the state forestry company, is responsible for its management and has repeatedly blocked large areas of the park from being protected. Today, nearly two decades after it was proclaimed, the park's management plan is still in a scandalous draft version with only around 34% of the park proposed for protection – comprehensively watered down from many original versions that had much greater portions of the park in core protection zones as proposed by the park's independent Scientific Council. The original president of the Council was sacked for proposing non–intervention protection for important forests in the park.

But even within the protected parts of the park, logging occurs. The Romanian government recently announced it would investigate illegal logging, but it still allows cutting in other parts of the park. Roads are cut through the national park into remote areas. Important reserves that have been logged include Caraş Springs, Barzavita Reserve and the Toplita Valley.

In 2018, after 15 years working as the park's biologist, Alina Sinuclet resigned because of illegal logging within the park, including in old-growth forests. Alina tried for years to have the non-intervention zone of the park implemented as large as possible to protect intact forests, but Romsilva constantly worked against her. She subsequently ended up in a court battle against Romsilva and won. In the end, however, the trauma was too much, and Alina resigned in disgust at the mismanagement of the park and the destruction of its forests.

Described by Romanian environmental organisation, Agent Green, as "how Europe's forests used to look after the last glacial age", the national park is under constant attack, from logging both legal and illegal.

The sorry tale of deliberate neglect in Semenic–Cheile Caraşului National Park is almost comical were it not so devastating to the natural values that should be promoted to the world.

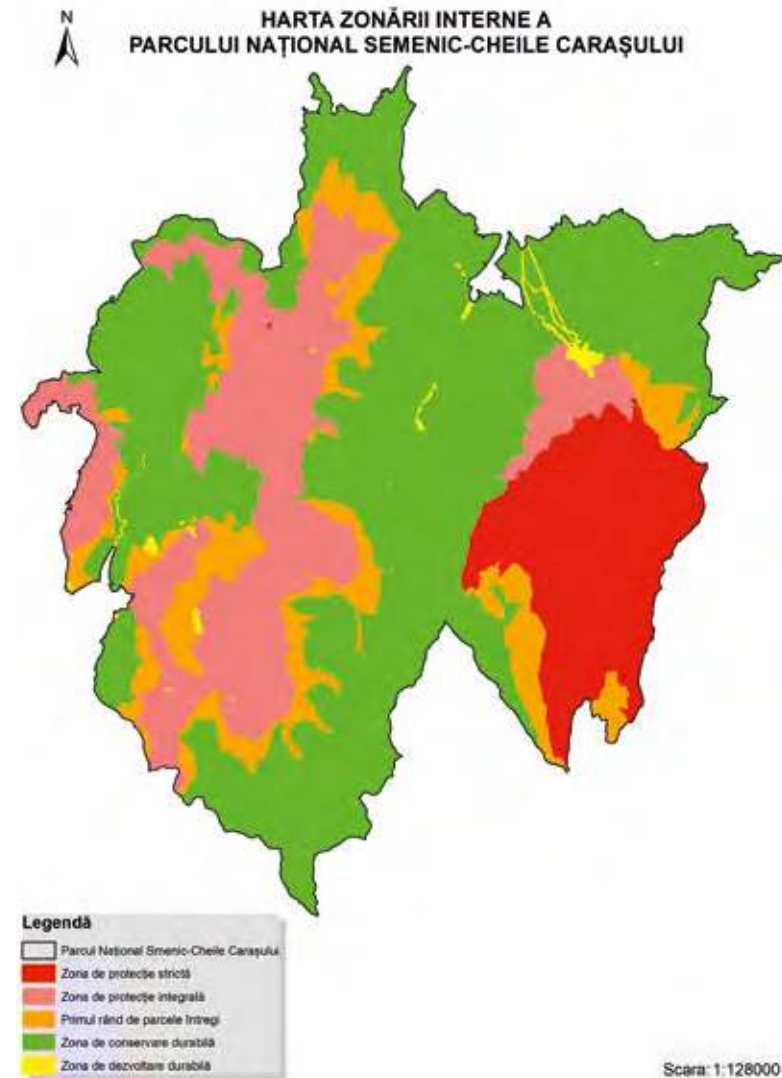


Figure 4: Semenic-Cheile Carasului National Park proposed internal zoning - protected areas are only in red and pink. All other parts of the park (green, yellow and orange) can be approved for logging.

UNDER THREAT - NATURA 2000 SITES

The Natura 2000 framework and its supporting legislative Birds and Habitat Directives were established and adopted over the past 40 years as the cornerstones of the EU's biodiversity protection policies. These "Nature Directives" commit all EU member states to conserve Europe's most valuable and endangered habitats and species.

Since then, the EU has reinforced and further confirmed its commitment to halt the loss of biodiversity in Europe, through the implementation of its EU 2020 Biodiversity Strategy. This strategy defined an ambitious target to "... halt the loss of biodiversity and the degradation of ecosystem

services in the EU by 2020, restore them in so far as feasible, while stepping up the EU contribution to averting global biodiversity loss." The implementation of the "Nature Directives" through the protection of Natura 2000 sites is central to this objective.

When Romania joined the EU, the provisions for site designation, management measures and species protection became legally binding, articulated and enforced through specific articles of the Directives. For example, Article 6(2) of the Habitats Directive requires that there is no significant deterioration of habitats and disturbance to species in Natura 2000 sites. **On paper, Romania**

has signed up to the protection of important habitats and species that must be preserved under the Natura 2000 framework. On the ground, Romania is failing, deliberately or otherwise, to meet these commitments.

Romania's Natura 2000 network covers 22.7% of the country's land area. This is above the European average of 18.1%, highlighting again the important natural values that are found in Romania. However, across this network, forests, including virgin and old-growth forests are being systematically lost and logged. Roads are cut through areas where they have not existed before. Habitat is deteriorated and destroyed when forests, particularly ecologically mature forests, are logged. The obligatory process to convert areas of "Sites of Community Importance" to "Special Areas of Conservation" has not taken place, allowing these sites to be deteriorated. Appropriate assessments, before any "plan or project" is started, as required by the EU Habitats Directive, are not carried out, or are simply bureaucratic exercises that lack substance.

NATURA 2000 SNAPSHOT

Number of Natura 2000 sites: 597. Area of Natura 2000 terrestrial sites: 54,214 km² (around 23% of Romanian land area, using latest government data). Issues: Romania has failed to designate conservation areas within Natura 2000 (N2K) sites; logging occurs in most forested sites; management is under-funded; habitats showing favourable conservation status within sites are being significantly deteriorated by logging; new logging roads are being cut through Natura 2000 sites, leading to further landscape fragmentation; management plans are not in place for all sites, and those that exist are contradictory to forest management plans.



photo: Matthias Schickhofer

Logged ancient beech tree in Stramba valley in Făgăraș Mountains Natura 2000 site.

In its latest report on the status of Romania's Natura 2000 network, the European Environmental Bureau, Europe's largest network of environmental citizens' organisations, found severe gaps with Natura 2000 management (EEB, 2018):

- Assessments are "full of deficiencies", not carried out when they should be or carried out by people without the relevant expertise or who are employed by the developer
- Stakeholder management is non-transparent
- The precautionary principle is not applied (this is particularly important when the values have not yet been assessed, identified and mapped)
- A dedicated budget management does not exist nor are there sufficient staff or services for Natura 2000
- There is no national management system in place and government data is questionable

The Romanian government's latest *National strategy and Action plan for biodiversity conservation, 2014-2020* report to the CBD, states that in the initial years of Romania's Natura 2000 network, management funding was 36 times less than what was considered necessary to implement Natura 2000 objectives.

The deficiencies in Romania's management of Natura 2000 sites is further reinforced by the European Commission's Directorate-General for Environment. Its latest review of Romania's im-

plementation of environmental policy and law (DG ENV, 2019) illuminates the problem clearly - **"As far as nature conservation is concerned, implementing the Nature Directives remains a considerable challenge. Romania's Natura 2000 network appears to suffer from the lack of an appropriate administrative capacity framework and the absence of updated knowledge and data."**

In April 2018, after years of public protest and opposition from hundreds of scientists, the European Court of Justice (ECJ) ruled against the Polish government for the unlawful logging of forests within the Białowieża Natura 2000 site. The logging of old stands was not compatible with the objectives and provisions of both the Habitats and Birds Directives and breached a number of the associated legislated Articles. In its findings, the ECJ made clear that logging in ecologically mature forest stands with the presence of protected species within Natura 2000 sites is a violation of EU legislation - anywhere in the EU. Poland was ordered to stop the logging. Although a welcome result and very important step to protecting some of Poland's most important old-growth forests, this logging was confined to one location in Poland. In Romania, the logging in Natura 2000 sites is country wide, it is happening in virgin and other ecologically mature forests and at a scale many times greater than in the Polish case.

Whilst the Romanian government continues to prioritise logging in Romania's forested Natura 2000 sites, deteriorating forest habitats and impacting upon the species that depend on them, it operates in clear defiance of the EU's most important environmental laws.



Unprotected primary mountain spruce forest in Sambata Valley, Făgăraș Mountains Natura 2000 site.

photo: Matthias Schickhofer

DEFYING THE RULE OF LAW

Any system of governance is only as good as its rules are policed and enforced. In Romania, one could be fooled by the illusion of good forest governance and nature protection based on the existence of legislation that is supposed to regulate logging at both the national and the EU level.

At the national level, the legislative framework is underpinned by a number of acts of parliament including the Forestry Code, land restitution law, the Environmental Protection Act and a Government Ordinance for Protected Areas. Forestry activity is the responsibility of the Ministry of Water and Forests and is managed by its subordinate state forestry

company, Romsilva. Virgin forest protection was incorporated in the Forest Code in 2008, but only more recently in 2016 was a stronger mechanism introduced to specifically protect identified virgin forests (see boxed text). At the EU level, the Nature Directives provide legal protection for a large number of listed animal and plant species and habitat types as well as prohibiting developments that could lead to their degradation or deterioration. The EU Timber Regulation, aimed at preventing the illegal trade of wood products within the EU, also applies to Romania.

The Romanian government claims that these laws protect its valuable forests. However, the reality on

the ground, in the actual forests where nature matters, is completely different. Law enforcement is grossly under-resourced and systemic breaches of the law occur. There are the odd cases where investigations of illegal and corrupt activities have led to prosecutions, but the lack of proper resourcing on one side and the sheer volume of logging and political support on the other, mean that illegal activities occur across the landscape, most often without consequence. **The government's own publications contradict its own claims. Romania's *National Strategy and Action Plan for Biodiversity Conservation, 2014-2020* reports that "the uncontrolled exploitation of wood and illegal cutting represents a threat to biodiversity."**

"Tragically, the ancient and primary forests of Romania become ever more unique as in other parts of Europe native biodiversity and forests have been declining for centuries. It is a shame that this continent, which is proud of enlightenment and manifold cultural achievements, in the 21st century proves unable to preserve these very last natural legacies. The fact that Romania was slower than most other countries in sacrificing millenia-old ecosystems for short-term wealth would be an inappropriate excuse for the current devastation."

Professor Dr. Pierre L. Ibisch,
Professor for Nature Conservation,
Faculty of Forest and
Environment, Eberswalde University
for Sustainable Development,
Germany



Protest action by Agent Green against illegal logging in Vidraru Lake area, Făgăraș Mountains Natura 2000 site.

Romania's Virgin Forest Catalogue. Too good to be true?

Originally welcomed by Romanian environmental organisations as a huge step forward for virgin and old-growth forest protection, the Romanian government's "National Catalogue of Virgin and Quasivirgin Forests" has become the victim of deliberate government inaction. Since its inception in 2016, the government has made it difficult to inscribe forests on this list. Resource-intensive studies must take place before forests are considered for protection by the state. Even then, paperwork is often lost and bureaucracy is burdensome, and the criteria for inclusion of forests are extremely strict and exclusive and are often used to exclude forests from protection.

The onus falls on under-resourced civil society organisations and research institutions to find the forests before logging companies and Romsilva log them. It is an absurd race against time, a classic case of "don't look, don't find", creating a mockery of Romania's legal system. It's like it is illegal to rob someone's house, but if you don't turn on the lights and nobody can see what is stolen, then the robbery is legal. It is much quicker to get approval and start a chainsaw and log a virgin forest than it is to prepare a thorough study and submit it to the government for protection. The law states that all virgin forests should be protected but thousands of hectares have been lost since the catalogue came into law.

As of May 2019, only 6,947 hectares of *virgin* forest and 22,116 hectares of *quasi-virgin* forest are included in the National Catalogue. Since 2017, only 1,042 hectares of *virgin* forest and 9,719 hectares of *quasi-virgin* forest have been added to the catalogue. Between August 2017 and October 2018, not a single hectare was added to the *virgin* category. Furthermore, the majority of forests are included through the forest management plan process whereby they are added by default if identified by the local forest manager. The Ministry, which is ultimately responsible for the catalogue, has only approved around 4,800 hectares within the catalogue through its assessment of submitted scientific research. Studies completed and submitted in 2017 are still awaiting the Ministry's approval. At this snail's pace, it will take the better part of this century to protect Romania's virgin and old-growth forests. Even Romania's UNESCO World Heritage sites are not fully protected in the catalogue. This scandalous situation once again highlights the tragic circumstances in which Romania's forests are being managed and Europe's most prized forests are being lost.

To describe virgin forests is almost to diminish them - ancient, rare and irreplaceable forests are often refused inscription based on complex criteria technicalities.



Field work by Czech and Slovak primary forest research project (REMOTE) in Doamnei Valley, Făgăraş Mountains Natura 2000 site.

photo: Matthias Schickhofer





Devastated mountain forest in the Făgăraș Mountains Natura 2000 site.

photo: Agenția Green

Corrupted forest privatisation process

The stage was set for ongoing abuses of the law, beginning in the 1990s, during the country's forest restitution process. Subsequent to the fall of the communist government, many state-owned forest lands were handed back to private owners under the assumption that they were previously privately owned. During this process, large areas of forests fell into the hands of people who did not previously own them and had no previous right to cut them. Private forestry operations have, on the most part, lacked ecological knowledge and have often been short-term profit driven (Knorn, 2012). This has led to the often unlawful cutting of enormous areas of forests that should today still be standing, including virgin forests (Biris and Veen, 2005). Some very complex court cases are ongoing, where several state ranking officials stand accused of illegal retrocession activities. In some closed cases, jail terms have been handed down, including for ex-employers of Romsilva, forest guards and other state organisations. In one case, an ex-business partner of Holzindustrie Schweighofer has been sentenced to prison. It is impossible to measure the full extent of the corruption within the retrocession processes - there are simply not enough resources investigating systemic abuses - but the alleged costs associated with existing court cases amount to several hundreds of millions of euros in illegal logging. In one case alone, the illegal restitution of only 544 hectares of land represented a cost to the Romanian state of over 5 million euros (National Anti-Corruption Directorate, 2012). In another ongoing case, an illegal retrocession in Bacau county in eastern Romania of around 43,000 hectares alleges costs of around 300 million euros.

Illegal on-ground logging practices

Illegal logging has been comprehensively reported as a systemic problem in Romania (Greenpeace, 2017; WWF DCP, 2005; Environmental Investigation Agency, 2015). In its 2017 *Illegal Logging in Romanian Forests* publication, Greenpeace reported over 12,000 cases of illegal logging. At the local level, illegal logging occurs regularly without consequence:

- Logging occurs in areas, such as core zones of parks and scientific reserves where it is forbidden
- Government Ordinance for Protected Areas 57/2007 states that commercial logging in national parks is forbidden, but even the Ministry of Environment approves management plans that enables commercial cuttings well beyond local community use
- Forests are cut on slopes that are steeper than are legally allowed
- Primary forests are cut when management plans indicate only the existence of secondary forests because inventories are not comprehensive
- Logging equipment, including bulldozers, are dragged through water courses, even in protected areas, polluting and destroying important stream and river systems
- Logging occurs without proper approval and paperwork, in both state-owned and private forests, and illegal haulage of timber continues at scale
- Legal requirement to mark cut trees is not met and trees are cut down when the approval has not been given.



When a strictly protected scientific reserve is not protected at all. The Giumalau Scientific Reserve in 2016 after it was logged following a windfall rather than being allowed to naturally recover.

Fined for doing the right thing – Ciprian Coc's story

It's one of Ciprian Coc's earliest memories. As a small child, he remembers being carried by his mother in a woven basket as she tramped through the forest along a horse path to reach his grandfather's meadow. The distance may not have been great, but to a small child, it felt like a long slow journey through a wonderland. The forest was full of gigantic trees, and Ciprian knows that the enchantment of the forest has been with him ever since. Now a driving instructor from Strâmbu Băiuț, in the Maramureș district in northern Romania, Ciprian's love of forests is as strong as when he was a child. However, on the sunny early summer day of the 4th of June in 2015, Ciprian noticed something strange was happening in his local patch of forest, not far from one of the most ancient beech forests in Europe. When he witnessed the same logging truck coming out of the woods several times that day, he suspected something illegal might be happening and decided that enough was enough. By 2015, illegal logging was so ubiquitous, it had been declared an issue of national security and the government allowed its 112 emergency telephone number to be used to check the legality of a wood transport based on the license plate of the vehicle. Ciprian decided to act on this and he called 112 to check the legality of the truck exiting the forests burdened with large freshly cut logs. Rather than receiving a response about the legality of the truck, Ciprian received a 1000 RON fine – the maximum for this 'offence' – in his postbox 24 hours later. The fine was issued by the local police officer for the alleged abusive use of the 112 emergency number. Ciprian was shocked and disturbed and fought his case in court. He also contacted Agent Green for help. The case caught the interest of the media and was broadcast all around the country. A national wave of sympathy for Ciprian followed, and a lawyer took on his case pro-bono. He won the case before the end of the year. Investigations by the Ministry of Environment confirmed the vehicle had unlawfully made two shifts on the same day. Ciprian was discharged from paying the fine and the local police officer was instead sanctioned. In his own way, however he can, Ciprian still continues to fight for the protection of the forests he fell in love with as a child being carried in a wicker basket by his mother.



photo: courtesy of Ciprian Coc

Ciprian Coc in a primary beech forest in Maramureș county in Strâmbu Băiuț area.

Overlogging

In 2013, an official Romanian Court of Accounts investigation uncovered a frightening abuse within Romania's forest estate. During the previous decade, an estimated 80 million cubic metres of wood were illegally logged, at a conservative cost of at least 5 billion euros (Curtea de Conturi a României, 2013). The amount of forest illegally cut – around 366,000 hectares – is more than 12 times the size of the urban area of Bucharest, Romania's capital city. In northern Romania, in Maramureş Natura 2000 site, around 20,000 hectares of forests have been illegally overlogged without consequence. In the Făgăraş mountains, another Natura 2000 site, forest inspectors found that private forest owners had logged in 3 years what they were allowed to log in 40 years. In this case, which was investigated by the Forestry Ministry and forest guard, forest management plans were fraudulently duplicated to give the impression that more forests were allowed to be logged. In other cases, inventory data on stocking volumes has been shown to be fraudulently doctored so that logged forest volumes never appear in paperwork. Other excuses such as bark beetle infestation and wind damage have been used to log more forests than is legally allowed.

Scale of logging is unsustainable

The scale of logging in Romania is enormous. A previous estimate indicates around 28,000 hectares of forests are lost or degraded by logging each year (Greenpeace, 2012). This equates to an area four times the size of Brussels or an area the size of three football fields of forest lost or degraded every hour of every day of the year. Forest management planning should incorporate environmental protection. Although much is known about the exquisite biodiversity values of Romanian forests, there are still enormous data gaps, and more scientific research is needed. Exhaustive surveys of plants and animals, and their associated threat levels, have not been completed across the landscape. Crucial forest habitat, including virgin and old-growth forests have not been robustly mapped. The precautionary principle is not applied, as logging continues to occur at a massive scale without the full incorporation of environmental values, and their protection, into management plans.

The Romanian Forest Inventory and the disappearing forests.

In 2018, the results of Romania's second National Forest Inventory were published. Unfortunately, not all information from the inventory made the light of day. According to information obtained by Romanian NGO Agent Green, more than double the legislated amount of forests were lost every year between 2013 and 2018. According to forest management plans, the maximum volume that can be logged from Romania's forests is 18 million cubic metres and the amount of forest logged each year was 38 million. These numbers represent an explosion in illegal logging in Romania, and are totally contrary to a recent government announcement that illegal logging is only around 400,000 cubic metres per year.

This would mean that the amount of illegal logging related only to allowable logging levels is twice the size of the entire legal extraction of wood in the UK (National Statistics on UK Wood Production and Trade, 2018). In 2017, Romania's Competition Council found significant discrepancies in forest data provided by the National Institute of Statistics, Eurostat and the National Forestry Inventory (Competition Council media release, 27 October 2017). This inventory must be independently investigated by Romania's General Prosecutor's Office. If these figures are confirmed, the illegal logging in Romania is beyond comprehension, it completely undermines Romania's economic future and the associated destruction of biodiversity is an international outrage.

Breaches of EU Law

Logging permissions in Romania are based on forest management plans (FMPs). FMPs are strategic long-term plans for the sustainable management of forests and play a vital role in Natura 2000 sites. Unfortunately, in Romania the majority of these plans do not undergo Strategic Environmental Assessments (SEA) and Appropriate Assessments (AA) before logging starts. FMPs are often not even carried out and logging occurs before they are approved. These represent clear breaches of EU law, particularly, the EU Habitats, Birds and Strategic Environmental Assessment Directives.

Public access to environmental information regarding the forestry industry is very limited. This includes access to basic, non-commercially sensitive, but ecologically relevant information such as the indication of planned logging sites and logging methods. Authorities apply access to information exceptions using a very broad interpretation to prevent citizens from accessing it. The Romanian government's failure to provide information about the forestry industry constitutes a breach of the Aarhus Convention on access to information and of the EU Directive on Access to Information in Environmental Matters.

The current situation in Romanian forests clearly undermines fundamental EU environmental protection legislation. The EU should act urgently to ensure that logging in Romania is carried out in line with its legal standards.

Anti-competitive activity and market collusion

Since 2016 Romania's Competition Council, an autonomous administrative body of the Romanian government, has been investigating malpractice within the Romanian forestry sector. At the time of printing this report, the Council has just expanded this probe and is now investigating 94 companies including Holzindustrie Schweighofer, Kronospan Romania, Egger Romania and Alredia (Romanian Competition Council media release, 10 April 2019). Illegal anti-competitive activities being investigated involve the timber auction system, pricing and collusion in the marketplace between companies. Three companies were found guilty and fined in January 2019 for market collusion (Romanian Competition Council media release, 25 January 2019). As well as specific investigations involving particular companies, the Council is also investigating the general "structures and operating mechanisms" of Romania's timber market.

Impunity for illegal logging activities

If a systemic system of illegal logging practices was not bad enough, the actions of the Romanian government in response to them borders on the absurd. In what is a malfunction of justice, on several occasions, the Romanian government has attempted to provide impunity to illegal logging activities. It has requested policing officials to no longer check the legality of timber trucks, it has passed legislation that provides impunity to official representatives who are found guilty of unlawful activities, and it has reduced fines for illegal logging, sometimes down to 10 percent of the original court ruling.

Furthermore, this has been recently undermined by government attempts, as reported in the Romanian media in March 2019, to allow logging and clearing in protected areas, including within core zones of national parks under the guise of 'public utility' management such as road and highway building. One must wonder, when national parks cover 1.3% of the country, why a government would need to build major roads through a park other than to open them up for logging.

Media outlets such as the Organised Crime and Corruption Reporting Project have previously reported the cost of illegal logging in Romania at several billion euros. Nobody knows the exact costs, but as virgin and old-growth forests continue to fall, Romania loses some of its most valuable natural assets. Whilst these activities continue, the status of wood entering the supply chains of the large companies sourcing wood from Romania remains acutely problematic and the social licence of these companies is rightly questioned by civil society organisations.

Illegal logging is clear, present and ongoing. With the help of relevant authorities at both national and EU levels, it must be stopped.

A CONTEMPORARY VIEW OF ROMANIA'S PRIMARY AND OLD-GROWTH FORESTS

To properly protect environmental values, it is critical to have as detailed spatial information about the existence of those values as possible. In Romania, there have been several attempts to examine and determine exactly where virgin and old-growth forests exist in order to protect them. These attempts, including the 2005 Virgin Forests in Romania study (Biris and Veen, 2005) - more commonly called the "Pin Matra" inventory - and a more recent desktop analysis by Greenpeace, have been complicated by a 'race against the clock' situation, where forests are logged and destroyed before they can be verified in the field and granted proper protection.

Over the past 2 years, EuroNatur commissioned experts to build a contemporary view of the existence of primary and old-growth forests in Romania. This analysis has expanded beyond Romania's strict definition of "virgin" forests to ensure as much as possible the comprehensive protection of all ecologically mature forests and to better correspond with the EU Natura 2000 system which does not restrict forest protection only to virgin stands. The Romanian definition only refers to very old development phases of forests with the consequence that primary forests have not been protected because of very strict and often misinterpreted criteria within ministerial orders such as the absence or presence of enough 'dead wood' or 'old trees'.

The aim of this PRIMOFARO (**Primary and Old-growth Forest Areas of Romania**) study (Schwarz and Schickhofer, 2019) is to provide a detailed and validated map of the spatial existence of Romania's potential old-growth and primary forests.

The mapping exercise is based on an initial exhaustive visual analysis of satellite and high resolution aerial images across the entire Romanian landscape using a key set of criteria for the identification of potential old-growth and primary forest areas. Core areas containing the highest potential for concentrations old-growth and primary forests were then assessed against historical satellite imagery from the 1960s which helped confirm the existence of ecologically mature and undisturbed forest stands up to that time. The study also tried to identify areas of potentially higher human impact in comparison to areas with a higher likelihood of intactness, based on proximity to human settlements and roads, forest type and forest slope.

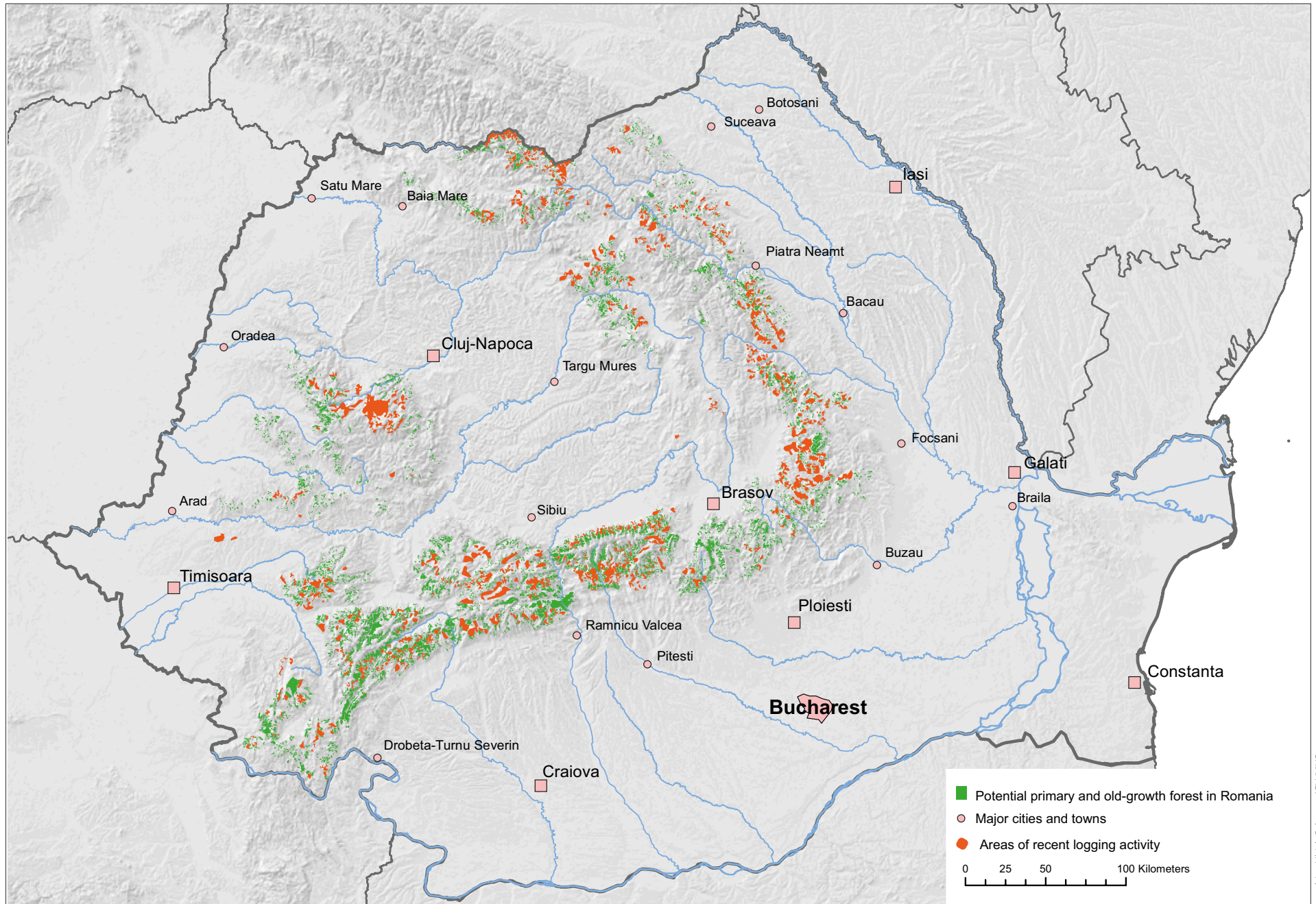
The results of the PRIMOFARO study paint two different pictures. The first relates to previously verified virgin forest stands and confirms a European natural tragedy of devastating proportions. Approximately 45% of virgin forests previously identified in the 2005 Pin Matra study can no longer be confirmed as intact virgin forest, meaning that an enormous part of Europe's most prized forest heritage has been destroyed before the eyes of the EU in less than one and a half decades. Many of these forests also existed within national parks and Natura 2000 sites, meaning that laws and regulations designed to protect them are not being upheld.

On the other hand, the study has identified an enormous opportunity to right the wrongs of the past and finally move to protect the best of what is left of Romania's forests. The PRIMOFARO inventory maps approximately 525,000 hectares - of which almost 480,000 hectares have been verified against historical satellite images by the study in 12 focus areas - as potential old-growth and primary forest. These are the most intact forests in Romania, and according to the PRIMOFARO report, this "extraordinary forest treasure must be preserved as one of Europe's key contributions to global biodiversity protection."



Field work by Czech and Slovak primary forest research project (REMOTE) in Făgăraș Mountains Natura 2000 site.

photo: Matthias Schickhofer



Map of Romania showing potential primary and old-growth forests (green) and areas of recent logging activity (red). The importance of the Carpathian Mountains is clear but Romania's primary and old-growth forests are being logged and lost at a rapid rate.

FORESTS IN FOCUS

DOMOGLED - VALEA CERNEI

Natura 2000 site, National Park and UNESCO World Heritage site

This Natura 2000 site effectively encompasses the Domogled - Valea Cernei National Park in south-west Romania. Harboring towering limestone mountain peaks, natural thermal springs, deep gorges, spectacular waterfalls, impressive cave systems, critical habitat for a plethora of protected plants and animals and ancient UNESCO World Heritage listed forests, one would think that Romania's largest national park would be afforded the highest level of protection. The site is protected under both Birds and Habitats Directives but the ongoing devastation of virgin and old-growth forests tells a vastly different story.

Only about half of the Domogled - Valea Cernei National Park is actually off-limits to logging, with large areas of strict protection zones occurring in the alpine meadows. The park easily fails the IUCN (International Union for the Conservation of Nature) standard of at least 75 % of the park zoned as strictly protected, with less than 50 % of the surface of the park falling inside these zones. Less than one-third of forests within the park are protected. With Romsilva, Romania's state-owned forestry company, in charge of national park management, this is not difficult to imagine.

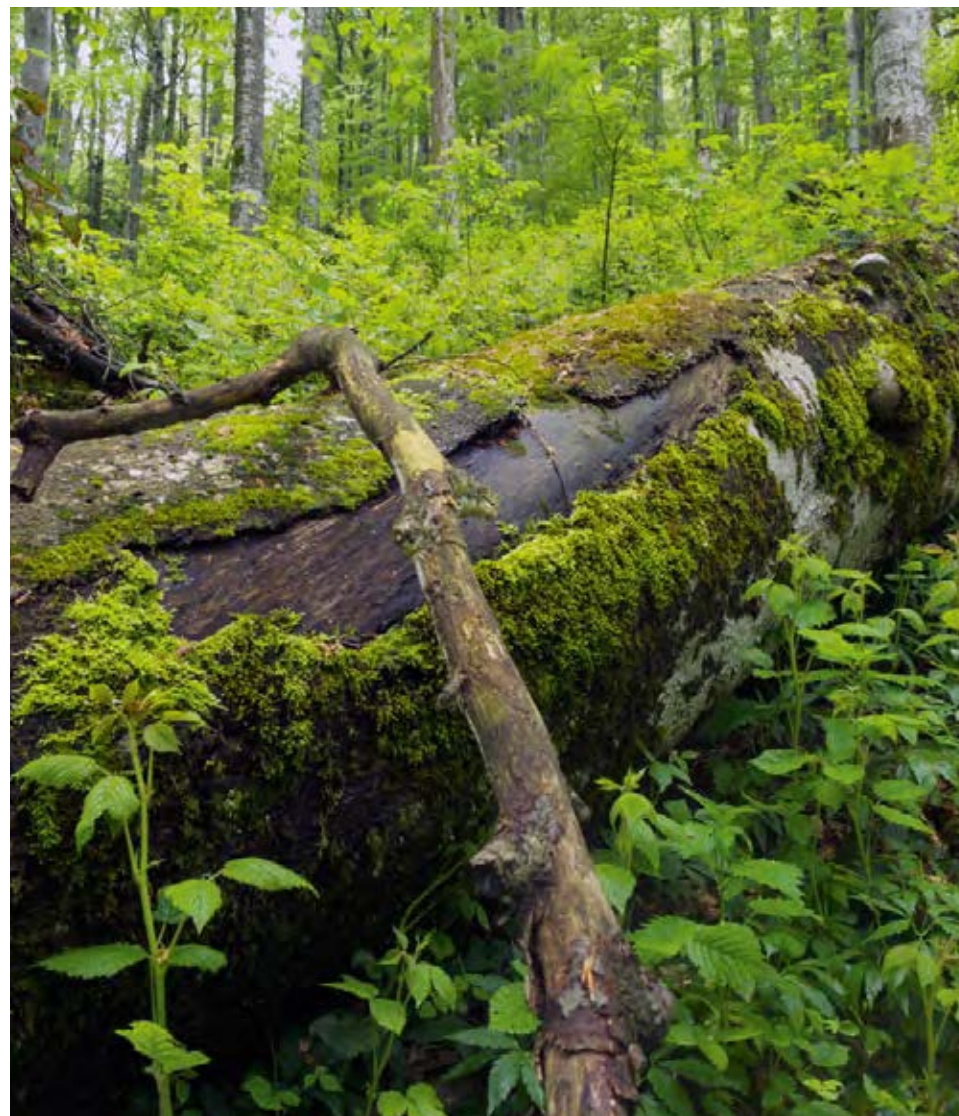
In 2017, logging and road cutting was identified in virgin forests in the upper catchment of the pristine Cerna River. More recently, excursions to the park – including with members of the European Parliament, and during an informal visit with the European director of IUCN – have revealed first-hand the devastating commercial logging within the park. Logging progresses into the remotest

areas of the park where the last strongholds of ancient beech forests are found. Only in the spring of 2017, a new logging road was cut in the Rado-teasa valley, in the middle of a large untouched forest landscape, which is located between two UNESCO World Heritage site component parts.

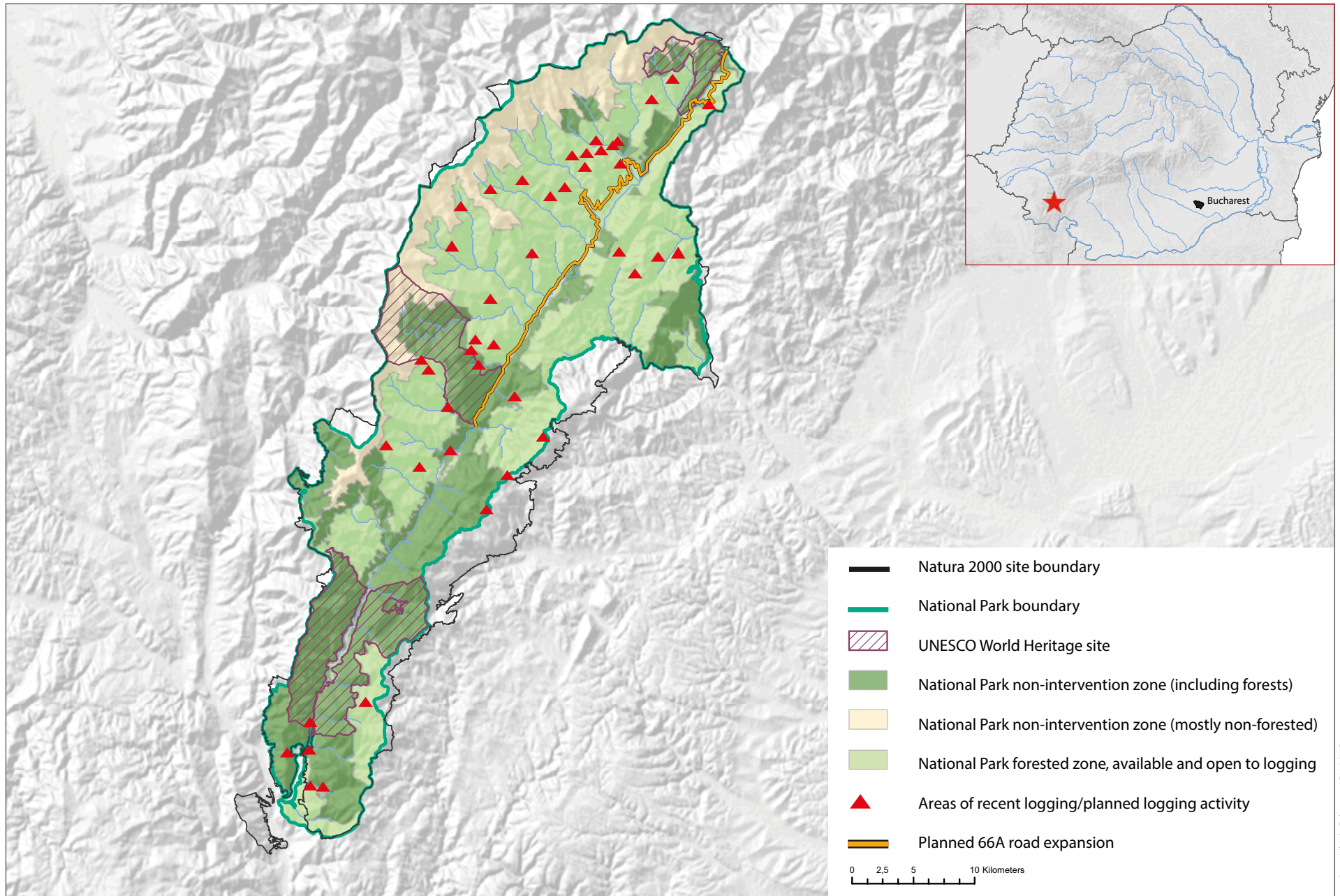
Park management staff openly talk about commercial logging within the park as if it is completely normal. This is in contravention of Romania's environmental laws. They call the logging "progressive" and dismiss concern for the environmental values of the park. This "progressive" logging simply means that rather than an area being completely cut in one go, it is cut over a period of about 10 to 15 years. In many parts of the park, virgin forests that are protected by law, but have not yet gone through the difficult bureaucratic process of listing them, are illegally logged without effective criminal prosecution. Even in the strict non-intervention zones of the park, illegal logging has taken place.

As at August 2019, controversial old plans to expand and upgrade a track - road 66A - have been reintroduced. If implemented this will irreversibly damage the park's integrity and will cut a 1km swathe through a UNESCO World Heritage site.

The destruction of magnificent forests within Domogled - Valea Cernei National Park is systemic of the logging within almost all of Romania's national parks. Management in Romania's national parks must be overhauled to ensure that the irreplaceable heritage values are protected for the enjoyment of all future generations.



Primary beech forest in Domogled - Valea Cernei National Park, which is also part of the European beech forest UNESCO World Heritage site. There is ongoing logging in old-growth forests in the buffer zone.



Map of Domogled - Valea Cernei Natura 2000 site and National Park zoning. Only about 50% of the national park is actually protected. The dark green areas shows the protected areas of the park that includes forested land. The beige area (at top left) shows protected areas but largely includes alpine meadows and very little forest. The light green areas are forested areas that are not protected within the national park and can be logged. The red triangles indicate very recent logging activity or imminently planned logging activity. The hashed purple areas are the core areas of the UNESCO World Heritage site. The entire national park outside of these hashed areas is the "buffer zone" of the UNESCO World Heritage site.

FORESTS IN FOCUS

MARAMUREȘ MOUNTAINS

Hugging the border with Ukraine in the north of Romania, the forests of the Maramureș Mountains are a shadow of what they used to be. Many of the forests here have been liquidated. Over the past 15 years, entire forested mountain sides and valleys have simply disappeared. Logging is ongoing inside the site covered by both the Birds and Habitats Directives and also within the Maramureș Mountains Natural Park.

Over 20,000 hectares of forests were illegally logged around the towns of Borsa, Tibau, Repedea and Poienile de sub Munte. NGOs believe that nobody has been prosecuted or sentenced, nor were any fines collected for the crime. It is estimated that over 6 million tonnes of wood were illegally stolen from these forests, conservatively valued at around 300 million euros. Investigations were made by local forest guards and their findings were handed to the police. The police investigations are ongoing, but to date, not a single person has been charged for the calamitous theft.

In 2016, an illegal logging exposé by the Environmental Investigation Agency, noted that a government investigation discovered approximately 10,000 tonnes of illegal wood entering Austrian owned Holzindustrie Schweighofer's Sebeș mill from Maramureș county alone every single month between January 2014 and April 2015 (Environmental Investigation Agency, 2016).

In 2015-16, Romania's then interim government, led by Dacian Cioloș, called logging a threat to Romania's national security, and passed an emergency ordinance to rein in the logging and forestry abuses. It was the particularly tragic appalling situation in mountain areas such as Maramureș that triggered this emergency proceeding. Since this time, however, these special government ordinances, designed to protect forests from illegal logging, have been ignored, watered down or wound back.



graphics: Ulrich Schwarz / FLOVIUS

Natura 2000 site and Natural Park



photo: Agent Green

Logging in Maramureș Mountains.



photo: Agent Green

Old-growth forest in Maramureș Mountains Natura 2000 site.

FORESTS IN FOCUS

NORDUL GORJULUI DE VEST

Natura 2000 site

At 86,989 hectares, the Nordul Gorjului de Vest Natura 2000 site in south-west Romania, is almost completely uninhabited. Bordering the Domogled - Valea Cernei National Park to the west, it incorporates the densely forested Vâlcan mountain range. The Natura 2000 dataset indicates that this site contains the most extreme differences in altitude in comparison to any other protected or potentially protected area in Romania, and perhaps in Europe (Natura 2000 dataform, site code ROSCI0129, 2006).

Only 15 years ago, these mountains harboured some of the largest concentrations of old-growth and virgin beech forests in Romania (Biris and Veen datasets, 2005). Since this time, intense logging has changed that. Today, these forests continue to be lost and if the logging is allowed to continue, the former sea of virgin forests will be turned into a patchwork of islands in a sea of clear-felled and barren logging sites. From the air, the cuttings in the once huge swathes of closed beech forests are crystal clear and bare openings in the landscape can be seen.

Scandalously, EU funds are being used to pay for the cutting of new roads into remote areas of this Natura 2000 site in order to log the forests. These roads are cutting into areas that have never been accessed before. The importance of roadless areas to both humans and nature is well documented (Selva et al. 2011). The fragmentation and access to these previously inaccessible forest will inevitably lead to their degradation and mean they are less resilient to pests, fire, disease and the impacts of a changing climate.

Despite the recent ravages from logging, because the Vâlcan mountains contain such a large complex of outstanding natural forests, these mountains are home to some of the largest remains of virgin and old-growth forests in Romania. Nordul Gorjului de Vest Natura 2000 site is an outstanding part of European natural heritage and, sadly, it is almost completely unknown.

graphics: Ulrich Schwarz / FLOUVIUS



Sign indicating road funding from the EU.



EU funded road construction in a pristine valley in the Vâlcan Mountains, Nordul Gorjului de Vest Natura 2000 site.

photos: Matthias Schieckhofer



Largely unprotected primary beech forest in the Vâlcan Mountains, Nordul Gorjului de Vest Natura 2000 site.

Satellite image of new road carved into the Nordul Gorjului de Vest Natura 2000 site.

FORESTS IN FOCUS

FĂGĂRAȘ MOUNTAINS

Natura 2000 site

The Făgăraș Mountains are Romania's highest and wildest and are a critical hotspot for intact virgin forests. According to a fieldwork report by scientist from the Czech University of Life Sciences in Prague (Mikoláš and Kameniar, 2018 and personal communications), these mountains "host the largest areas of primary forests in the entire EU" outside of Scandinavia. Additionally, other extensive valuable natural forests are found here which "connect primary forest localities into larger complexes of high naturalness". The scientists confirm that the Făgăraș Mountains deserve "special attention and conservation".

It is estimated that over 5% of the surface of the Natura 2000 site is virgin forest. A report published by the Norwegian Institute for Nature Research (Linnell et al. 2016) recognised the important values of the Făgăraș Mountains by concluding it "is an area with very rich biodiversity" and "includes a fully functional large mammal community and very diverse communities of birds, reptiles, amphibians,

invertebrates and plants" and that "there is an urgent need to implement land use planning on an ecosystem scale".

Logging, however, is quickly fragmenting the forest landscape and reaching further and further into previously inaccessible valleys. Primary forests that are the subject of scientific studies, such as those from the REMOTE project at the Czech University of Life Sciences in Prague, are under threat. In some cases, such as the important forests of Ucea Mare, research plots have already been destroyed by logging. In another part of Ucea Mare, enormous areas of forests were clearcut under the guise of a bark beetle outbreak. As in the Białowieża forests in Poland, scientists have publicly disputed bark beetle as a reason for exploiting forests through logging.

Some of these valleys have, as yet, escaped the logging roads and remain pathless areas, hosting some of the most outstanding wilderness forests in Europe. The most precious is Boia Mică, a true wonderland that few would know still exists in Europe. It covers 1,145 hectares with an altitudinal difference of 1,670 metres over a distance of nearly 8 kilometres. The valley is completely pristine, with no path ever cut into its untouched forests.

Many scientists agree that the Făgăraș Mountains deserve a high level of protection. Plans for establishing a national park have been in place for many years. It is time these plans, along with the protection of all primary and old-growth forests in the Făgăraș Mountains, become a reality.



Methuselah sycamore tree in an unprotected primary forest in Sambata Valley,



graphics: Ulrich Schwarz / FLOUVIUS



photo: Matthias Schickhofer

Before and after. Logging in the Făgăraș Mountains Natura 2000 site. Photos show site before logging in 2011 (top) and after logging in 2017 (bottom).

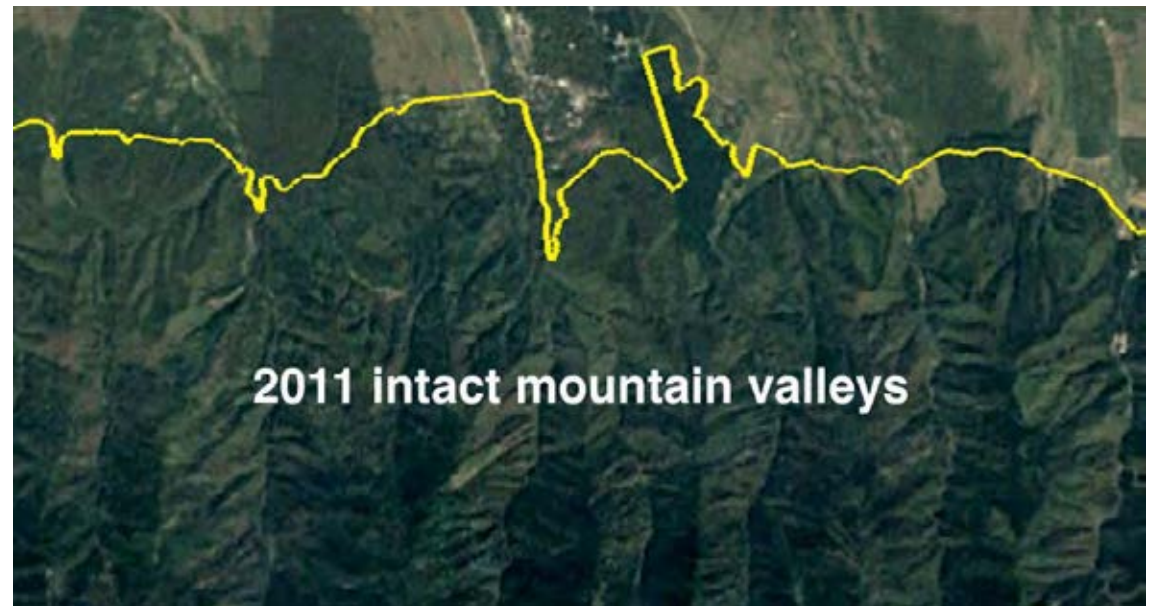


photo 2011: Google - NASA, Digital Globe, Landsat / Copernicus; photo 2017: Google, CNES Airbus

CONCLUSION

Romania, a country barely known to many people, is home to some of the most important natural forests in Europe. These forests, which face a clear and present threat from logging, are at a crossroads.

Standing at this crossroads, the Romanian government and the European Union and its institutions have a clear choice. They can live up to the expectations of the citizens they represent and deliver on their commitments to protect nature, or they can do the opposite, and reveal their empty promises for all to see. They can protect Romania's forests or they can continue to allow them to be logged and destroyed.

These are two very different futures, and both lead to opposite certainties. One future leads to greed, loss and regret, the other to prosperity and a promise of hope to future generations. One leads to environmental catastrophe, the other to environmental respect and richness.

It is our goal to choose the latter path, to protect Romania's universally important forests for all people, for all time.

To walk this path, change is needed. The Romanian government must firstly fully embrace the precautionary principle and immediately stop the logging of important primary and old-growth forests. It must rapidly build a roadmap to this different future and it must move down this path with unwieldy political ambition. With the support of the European Union and the European Commission, institutional change in Romania is essential.

The following steps are critical to help build this roadmap to a different future for Romania's forests:

- Immediately place a moratorium on all potential primary and old-growth forests, in particular on state-owned property.
- Harmonise national park management with IUCN guidelines, prioritising conservation within protected areas and increasing core protected areas to at least 75 % of park area.
- End commercial logging in national parks except for the basic subsistence needs of residents and adequately compensate forest owners for forest protection.
- Remove Romsilva from national park management role and replace with fully funded, independent organisation that meets international benchmarks for conservation protection and management.
- Ensure management of Natura 2000 sites is in strict accordance with EU conservation legislation.
- Increase the size of existing protected areas to incorporate all primary and old-growth forests.
- In all production forests, ensure a transformation from intensive logging to close to nature forestry and enforce all regulations and laws.

The magic of Romania's forests is hardly known. By protecting them from logging, we put a stake not into their heart, but into the ground before them. This stake allows us to peak beneath the veil of the enigma that is Romania. It is a marker of hope and is a welcome sign to people from all over Europe and the world: Come and experience for yourself the most awe-inspiring forests left in Europe. Come and visit Romania, and, like a child, be filled again with wonder.



photo: Matthias Schickhofer

Gigantic beech tree in a primary beech-fir forest in Ucea Mare Valley, Făgăraş Mountains Natura 2000 site.



photo: Matthias Schickhofer

Gorgeous Cerna Valley in Domogled - Valea Cernei National Park, which is partly also included in the UNESCO European beech forest World Heritage site.

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Additional design:
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Photo credits: All photos by
Matthias Schickhofer,
unless otherwise stated

Maps by:
Ulrich Schwarz, FLUVIUS

Printed by: Digitaldruckhaus Konstanz
on 100% recycled paper

Imprint
EuroNatur Foundation
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Remote but largely unprotected Sabata Valley in Făgăraș Mountains Natura 2000 site.



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