
POSELSTVÍ FROM PRAGUE

An Agenda for Europe's Wild Areas

Summary of the Conference on Wilderness and Large Natural Habitat Areas, Prague, Czech Republic, 27-28 May 2009¹

Final version

The Conference on Wilderness and Large Natural Habitat Areas hosted by the Czech European Union Presidency and the European Commission brought together some 250 participants from some 40 countries, including officials of government ministries, nature agencies, conservation NGOs, academics and interested parties from landholders, agriculture, forestry, business and other sectors.

The objectives of the conference were to (i) raise the profile of wilderness and wild areas in Europe; (ii) recommend an agenda for protection and restoration of such areas, and; (iii) build a partnership between sectors based on consensus for implementing this strategy.

Wilderness is defined as a large area of terrestrial and/or marine natural habitat and ecological processes substantially unaltered by the hand of man. By contrast, wild areas refer often to smaller and often fragmented areas whose natural condition is either partially or substantially modified.

Biodiversity continues to decline rapidly in Europe, though a few species and ecosystems are recovering. Although European States have achieved substantial progress in the conservation of biodiversity, and are committed to halt the loss of biodiversity by 2010, the target will most likely not be reached. Wilderness and wild areas form a very small part of Europe's land and sea territory, but a vital part of its natural heritage. Many of them, such as wetlands, marine areas, and old growth forests, are facing imminent threats which require rapid and effective response.

At the same time there is increasing awareness that the economic and social as well as ecological benefits (ecosystem services) derived from nature are essential for sustainable development.

The importance of wild areas is increasingly appreciated, in particular as noted by the Report of the European Parliament on Wilderness in Europe, adopted by a margin of 538 votes to 19 in February 2009, that calls for improved protection for wilderness areas through appropriate measures including mapping, research and awareness raising together with provision of adequate funding to achieve this.

I. Importance of European Wilderness and Wild Areas

Wilderness and wild areas are important because of their indirect and direct economic, health, social, research and cultural values. They have a high intrinsic value, are essential laboratories for research into biodiversity and natural processes and provide gene banks for the future. They can also contribute to mitigation and adaptation to climate change, and provide a wide range of ecosystem services. At a human level they provide huge scope for spiritual inspiration and physical recreation and renewal.

There are substantial opportunities for supporting the protection and restoration of such areas – including identification and valuation of their multiple non-extractive benefits,

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which in addition to their contribution to biodiversity and landscape conservation can be utilised for local communities, landholders and society in general.

Although wild areas are an important part of the strategy for halting biodiversity loss and promoting natural ecosystem processes and functions, many of them are still not adequately protected.

Future policy on biodiversity will be directed increasingly towards the protection of the resilience, integrity and vitality of natural ecosystems. In the context of such an approach, based on the protection and development of natural/green infrastructure in a multifunctional landscape, wilderness areas have a unique and highly valuable contribution to make.

II. A need for a co-ordinated Pan-European approach towards protecting Wilderness Areas

Protection of wilderness areas requires co-ordination at a Pan-European scale in order to be effective, especially for transboundary areas.

For many EU Member States the Natura 2000 network constitutes a foundation upon which to develop a specific approach to the protection of wilderness areas. As the non-EU States are making a significant contribution to protecting wilderness in Europe, relevant recommendations developed for EU Member States should equally be applicable to them.

Protection of wilderness areas is very strongly linked to the implementation of policies concerning agriculture, fisheries, regional development, forestry, research, energy, trade and external relations. For Member States of the EU, some mechanisms already exist to ensure that the protection of wilderness is integrated into the delivery of other policies, but these needed to be substantially strengthened.

III. What needs to be done

The remaining pristine areas in Europe should be regarded as a unique asset and benefit from the highest level of protection. They should not be diminished or degraded.

The following four sets of recommendations have been identified, calling in particular for action by the European Commission and EU Member States with the support of other stakeholders:

A. Policy development

1. Provide guidance on how wilderness qualities could receive legal protection both under the Natura 2000 regime and outside the EU, without compromising concrete protection of species and habitats in Europe
2. The management of the Natura 2000 network should take account of the need to protect ecological processes as well as habitats and species.
3. Guidance should be developed concerning the protection of wilderness areas in the context of the EU nature legislation, addressing issues such as natural changes to sites, response to climate change, the maintenance of specific succession states and non-intervention.
4. Assessment and implementation of means by which links with neighbouring countries can more effectively support protection of wilderness and wildland areas outside EU boundaries.
5. In the light of a clearer definition of wilderness and wild land in different parts of Europe, and the extent to which this is protected by existing legislation and policy, consider and promote the action needed to ensure existing legislation protecting wilderness and wildlands is monitored and enforced effectively by all responsible authorities and steps are taken to fill the gaps in protective cover that are identified.
6. Promote connectivity of existing protected areas, restoration of degraded areas, and the setting up of corridors and ecological networks.

7. To identify and promote opportunities within the 2012 Common Agricultural Policy review that can benefit protection and restoration of wilderness and wildlands, especially in relation to abandoned agricultural land and ecosystem-based adaptation to climate change.

B. *Awareness building*

8. In the short run, to incorporate recommendations from the Conference into relevant reports (including TEEB), government meetings (upcoming EU Presidencies), international conferences (CBD/Nagoya, UNFCCC/Copenhagen) and other events – facilitated by compilation of a relevant schedule and production of appropriate policy documents.
9. To further develop awareness in the conservation sector of the contribution wilderness and wildland areas can make to halting biodiversity loss and supporting Natura 2000 and the Emerald Network.
10. To develop a programme promoting the values of wilderness and wildlands to organizations and decision-makers in all relevant sectors, including landholding, agriculture, forestry, business, local and national government, health, institutions, media and education, so as to ensure that these values are reflected in appropriate sectoral plans, including the EU Forestry Action Plan, EU Fisheries policy, EU Agricultural policy. Differences in natural bio-geographical regions should be taken into consideration.
11. To invest in mass communication to the wide European audience about wilderness and wild values.

C. *Further work and information needs*

12. Finalisation of a definition of wilderness and wild areas, taking into account the globally agreed definitions, criteria and characteristics and the continuum of natural habitats and ecological processes, the range of ecological and cultural interpretations of these terms and their application in different parts of Europe.
13. Compilation of a Register of Wilderness using existing databases, such as the EEA and WDPA, identifying in tandem with appropriate interested parties the remaining areas of wilderness and wildlands, the threats and opportunities related to these, and their economic values, with practical recommendations for action.
14. Completion of mapping wilderness and wildland areas in Europe, involving appropriate definitional and habitat criteria and level of scale to effectively support plans for protecting and monitoring such areas.
15. Identification of key opportunities for prospective restoration of wild natural habitats and processes, involving mapping, biodiversity design and benefit assessment for relevant parties including local landholders and communities.
16. Further investigation into the scientific rationale underpinning the linkage between wilderness, wildlands and delivery of societal benefits in support of social programmes – eg for youth development, youth at risk, conflict reconciliation and healthcare.
17. Quantification of the value of non-extractive economic, social and environmental benefits of wilderness and wildland, identifying key beneficiaries.
18. Identification and promotion of how ecosystem services such as carbon sequestration, flood mitigation, water purification, erosion control, and pollution alleviation can be linked to specific payment mechanisms, via landholders, communities and other beneficiaries, for protection and restoration of wilderness and wildland. The public goods benefits of wilderness will require public funding.
19. Review of how to secure opportunities for gaining of value from social benefits (eg healthcare, youth development, youth at risk, conflict resolution) – linked to proactive development of new markets (eg probationary and health services) and delivery infrastructure.

D. *Supporting capacity*

20. Further development of the Wildland Support Network, especially to support implementation of recommendations from the conference.
21. Establish a website and network based Wildland Information Exchange to collate and disseminate good practice and model projects to demonstrate the value of wilderness benefits, link initiatives and enable coordinated response to threats and opportunities.
22. Develop examples, based on best practice, of how local communities and landholders can secure value from recreation, tourism and other initiatives.
23. Undertake a full assessment of government, institutional and private sector funding opportunities for protection and restoration, as part of broader conservation programmes.
24. Build inter-sector consensus and support by developing initiatives for joint approaches based on common ground with other sectors including: landholders, forestry, agriculture, business.