

Presentation of EuroNatur Award 2016

Island of Mainau/Lake Constance at 12 October 2016

Acceptance speech of award winner Gabriel Paun

I feel grateful to be here with you today representing the millions of Romanians and people around Europe who are standing to preserve our continent's last primeval forests (Urwald). There are not so many forests like that left. It covers maybe 1% of my country's surface but that still means about 3/4 of all primeval forests left in the EU. They cover so few but they are the most precious forests of all.

Precious is also the EuroNatur award. It was received before by so many special people. It is unbelievable that this year is my turn. Receiving this award came as a great surprise. I feel humble and honoured. I accept it as recognition of the efforts of all Romanians standing up for their forests.

I have to say thank you EuroNatur, thank you to you dear participants for being here today to celebrate pure nature.

Thank you to the media for bringing this topic to the attention of millions of people.

Thank you to all those who support our work with euros, signing a petition or just sending an encouraging message.

Thank you to my family and my friends for not giving up on me because I am always too busy to spend time with them.

These last great forests are the witness of history. They were formed after the last ice age and they still look the same today. There are beech and fir trees that may grow higher than 60 meters and measure over 6 meters around them. Some of them were born more than 500 years ago and are still full of life. The standing or fallen dead wood is the kitchen for hundreds of species of birds, bats and other small mammals. Golden eagle finds here the most peaceful retreat. These forests are home for more than half of EU's brown bears, grey wolves and lynx. Thousands of species of flora and fauna were identified in Romanian forests. Therefore, our fight is important. If we are successful then it will be the greatest gift we can offer to the future of biodiversity.

There are many reasons why Romania still shelters most of EU's primeval forests. But this is not the point today. The point is that the country started to feel inspired by the same mistakes that the rest of Europe made in the past decades and centuries in the name of progress. This needed progress caused permanent habitat loss and fragmentation and forests were in many cases turned into a wood farm with exotic species that cannot sustain life in harmony. The Bear, king of the temperate forest is gone in Austria, Switzerland and Germany.

Before I go a bit deeper into the problem I wish also bring you some good news. We just submitted scientific studies to Romanian Government to preserve about 2000 hectares of virgin forests, after last year we managed to get about 750 hectares preserved. The Government does not make studies and they do not finance it, but at least they legally accept studies made by us from people's donations. Other organizations, universities, institutes and private individuals are also joining forces in this race to save the last virgin forests. It is a great joy to see that this topic has reached the political and society agenda like never before. Maybe it's not too late and hopefully Romania can do better than Western Europe on this chapter.

And there is more good news! The brown bears, grey wolves and lynx are no longer allowed to be hunted. Last week Romania took the decision to ban trophy hunting of these great and so rare animals. All we have to do now is to speed up protecting their home, the forest.

Our fight to save the last primeval forests (Urwald) is a race against a ticking clock. Illegal logging and poor forest governance are the reasons why the last primeval forests are quickly disappearing, forever! There were at least 220.000 hectares of primeval forests in year 2004. It is unclear how much is still left as legal protection status only came to force recently. It is thought that half is already gone but nobody really knows yet.

Protecting these forests has become our biggest challenge because during the past 13 years, powerful foreign companies came to Romania and built sawmills that can process more wood than it is legal to harvest.

With such an immense stress on the forest, not even the national parks or primeval forests could escape the growing need of more and more wood to feed those gigantic sawmills. Try to imagine one being able to take up to 2 million m³ each year. It is acknowledged that half of the harvested wood in Romania is illegal and it enters the free EU market. Illegal wood may be hidden in this sheet of paper, in our furniture, floor or pellets.

We have to be aware that illegal logging finances organized crime. It finances violence, real violence.

Local communities are suffering. Domestic wood industry is disrepute and in many cases went bankrupt. Wilderness is shrinking.

There are people who have been killed or severely injured in their fight to save their forests from the wood mafia. I have been a victim myself. I was attacked several times and suffered multiple injuries but I have almost fully recovered every time. Maybe I am just like a cat and have 9 lives. Maybe I am just lucky or it's because I can run very fast when needed. Anyway, I always return to forest to investigate more, to bring the evidence of illegal logging and sometimes also to find peace. There is no better place for me to find peace and harmony than in deep forest.

I will shortly come to an end with my story but not before stressing out that watching what is happening in Romania is no longer an option if we care about our continent and if we want to preserve a tiny piece of it in its original shape. We are all responsible to care about our Europe and if we join forces than we can disrupt the wood mafia's ability to operate.

We cannot allow illegal wood that maybe comes from our last primeval forests to enter the market. If more of us will join this effort by calling our Governments and EU institutions to do more, then Romania has a chance.

Thank you !