

Presentation of EuroNatur Award 2016 to Gabriel Paun

Island of Mainau/Lake Constance at 12 October 2016

Laudation of EuroNatur Presiding Committee Member Jörg Nitsch

Gabriel Paun is an activist in nature protection matters in its best sense. He has devoted himself to the primeval forests in Romania. These forests are extraordinary, rare on the one hand and on the other hand still existent to an extent which leaves every nature and forest protector in our country amazed. What happened in our region decades or centuries ago – the destruction of almost all primeval forests – currently takes place not only in the Amazon region and in Indonesia, but also in Romania. This is the reason why we focus on the Carpathians and provide support for all those who stand up for the protection of the last primeval forests in Europe.

Gabriel Paun leads attempts to oppose the destruction of the primeval forests in Romania and he does so regardless to personal disadvantages.

Already very early Gabriel Paun got close to nature. At the tender age of four his father took him out to the forests to let him hear the wolves howl. Gabriel Paun told me that these very impressive experiences made as a young boy have shaped him decisively. A short time later in kindergarten he “pinched” the fruits of the fruit trees in the surroundings with his friends. They made sure to pick only the fruits and to go easy on the trees and branches at the same time.

Later at school he was lucky to be taught by a class teacher whose interest was focused on natural sciences and especially on geography and on climate. Thus he himself got interested in the fields of nature, he immersed himself in everything that could be grasped, be experienced about these topics. On this basis he then concentrated his interests on biology, which accompanies him until today.

His mother, who is with us today as well, would have wanted him to study medical science. But Gabriel Paun decided to study biology and remained faithful to his deepest interest. And he did so although it was very difficult to obtain university places. His successfully completed studies of biology laid the foundation for his further activities.

The family situation after the early death of his father was difficult. His mother raised him and his brother Adrian alone, which sure was not easy in this then and now poor country. Despite this difficult situation his mother made her best efforts to support him and financed his studies. That is why we want to take this opportunity as well to sincerely thank you, Mrs Paun, for your invaluable contribution to your son's path of life!

Gabriel Paun was active in the area of nature and animal protection and against genetic engineering in various ways during the last years and decades. From the middle of 2001 until 2004 he worked as programme coordinator at the NGO Ecosense mainly on the

organisational level. Important issues included relevant environmental aspects in the field of transportation, participation and organisation of transnational aspects between Romania and Hungary, working on relevant aspects of the development of civil society in Romania and not least the problematizing of the usage of genetic engineering in Romania. The resistance against the introduction of genetic engineering in Romania, to which Gabriel Paun made a vital contribution, led to the prohibition of genetic engineering in Romania in 2007, the year of Romania's accession to the European Union.

From January 2005 till October 2008, Gabriel Paun was active as programme campaigner for Greenpeace in Romania, here as well against genetic engineering as the wrong way in agriculture.

In the following he worked four years for the organisation "Vier Pfoten" in Romania. There he was responsible for international campaigns and achieved enormous success with his team. Especially large enterprises of nutrition and outdoor industry have altered their productions due to campaigns developed and implemented by Gabriel Paun and pay now significantly more attention to animal protection aspects.

However, we have to highlight in particular Gabriel Paun's commitment to the protection of Romanian primeval forests. This is the reason why we present today the EuroNatur Award to him.

In 2009, Gabriel Paun initiated the foundation of the NGO Agent Green and since then he is holding its presidency. The nature protection organisation Agent Green is active in the battle against illegal logging in Romanian forests since its foundation and continually brings to the attention of the public violations against valid laws. And Agent Green is not only active, but it is the forefront of the resistance against the destruction of forests, especially of primeval forests in Romania.

One example of successful engagement against illegal logging is the primeval forest "Cosava Mica" in the Semenic Mountains, which was saved from clear cutting thanks to a campaign led by Agent Green in December 2015. Although the almost 750 hectare primeval forest borders the Semenic national park it was seriously threatened.

The most important traits of Gabriel Paun's commitment are his fearlessness, his consistency and his courage in the struggle against the destruction of the last European primeval forests. About 60 percent of the still existing European primeval forests are located in Romania. This means if and to which extent we can preserve this European natural heritage for the future will be decided there. And in this conflict Gabriel Paun is one of the most important players, who fight for us in Romania for the preservation of primeval forests and the European natural heritage.

I visited him this summer together with Gabriel Schwaderer. What we have experienced there, more than confirmed that the decision of the EuroNatur presiding committee to present the EuroNatur Award to Gabriel Paun was right. The battle for the last primeval forests is a battle against ruthless nature destruction, against corruption and also against mere pursuit of profit that sometimes does not even stop when faced with laws and international protective mechanisms. The cutting of primary forests even in acknowledged national parks, in Natura 2000 sites and in contradiction to national protection provisions is daily routine in Romania.

Gabriel Paun and his organisation Agent Green fight for what in our region has been lost a long time ago. Therefore he needs our support and solidarity which EuroNatur wants to give at this point as a representative for German nature protection.

The engagement of the activists of Agent Green goes far beyond the usual! They are out and about around the clock in order to document more and more new violations against the protection provisions and to transport them to the public. Regardless to personal disadvantages and dangers they are active on the spot. Gabriel Paun has been i.a. physically assaulted and beaten up. This is documented by video recording, but has remained unpunished until now. But there were not only physical assaults, but this spring there was also an attack on his data which is not at all solved up to today. Unknown persons managed to read out large amounts of data from his hard disk by means of malware infiltrated by a dirty trick. This led not only to high costs in order to replace the hardware, but even worse it is an attack on his privacy. When you can no longer be sure, if you are spied upon in your apartment via your own webcam and which E-mails are read by whom, then this creates a bad feeling of insecurity and persecution. Who exactly was behind these attacks, remains unclear up to today, but we can assume that it was the wood mafia who wanted to intimidate Gabriel Paun.

I have experienced how Gabriel Paun documented wood transports in his drives through the country in order to keep track of their legality – or likewise their illegality. As far as we know this system in Romania is a unique establishment of documenting timber use in a European country. Via telephone calls one can ask so to speak in real time, if a wood transport in front of oneself is conducting a legal transport right at the moment. A system, that was introduced as a control against the illegal timber use, but finally cannot stop the illegal logging, because there is corruption everywhere to such an extent that we can hardly imagine.

Agent Green and its president Gabriel Paun are real Europeans. They take the provisions serious, which are valid for the protection of nature in Europe. They stand up for their implementation and live what Europe should stand for and connect. What is missing so far is a consequent intervention of the European Commission against the permanent violations against European conservation laws. At this point we can help the Romanian activists, we want to support them and denounce the illegal destruction of the primeval forests in Romania and bring them into the light of the public.

Agent Green and Gabriel Paun are role models in their commitment for the protection of forests.

They show us in their despair and anger but with their heart as well and their love for a wild and free nature, what nature can mean for us, especially in its natural form, still unaffected by humans.

Dear Gabriel, EuroNatur is glad and proud to present today our nature protection award to you and we promise that we will continue to fight by your side for the conservation of the Romanian primeval forests.