

Presentation of EuroNatur Award 2016 to Gabriel Paun

Island of Mainau/Lake Constance at 12 October 2016

Speech of EuroNatur President Christel Schroeder

I would like to welcome all of you to the presentation of the EuroNatur Award. This year, we are honouring Gabriel Paun in recognition of his longstanding and high personal involvement for the conservation of the European natural heritage and particularly the Romanian primeval forests.

What do we mean by “European natural heritage”? We mean unique and irretrievable natural phenomena and assets, which have to be preserved for us and for further generations. Social consensus about this topic can be found for example through inclusion in the nature protection network within the European Union, Natura 2000, or through selection for the UNESCO World Natural Heritage List.

The natural heritage we are referring to today are forests. EuroNatur wants to set a clear signal for the protection of the last primeval forests of Europe.

The value of a forest cannot be equated with the value of its wood resources. The ecosystem services of forests we are all benefiting from are much more precious: for example by renewal of freshwater reserves, the production of oxygen, their contribution to the preservation of biodiversity and to climate protection. Vice versa an uncontrolled deforestation might have significant negative effects and lead to floods, inundation and mudslides.

Christian Friis Bach, Executive Director of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, explained this connection a few weeks ago in an article for the German newspaper “Süddeutsche Zeitung”. I quote: “In recent research the value of the services rendered by forests measures 16.2 Trillion Dollars per year, the value of wetlands 26.4 Trillion Dollars. Together this is more than half of the global gross domestic product.” He points out, that this was not about giving each twig in the forest a price tag. However, in light of the alarming fact that ecosystems are further destroyed regardless of the long-term effects, it was especially important to make these dramatic consequences visible for our society by means of valorisation. (30.08.2016, p.2)

Real primeval forests have become rare in Europe. In the Romanian part of the Carpathian Mountains this unique natural treasure was still existent up until this century. But here as well the precious natural heritage is disappearing. During the last ten years huge areas of these more than 6,000 year old forest associations have been destroyed. Many primeval forests have been cleared illegally. By means of modern technology today it is possible to

advance up into the wildest high mountain region and the current price of wood is sufficient incentive. The perpetual funding requirements of government administration form the background for this drama of gigantic overexploitation. The willingness to ruthless private enrichment, corruption and partly criminal energy of some international timber companies lead to scandalous deforestation. Huge clear cutting is left behind in areas which are known to the Romanian authorities as primeval forests for a long time and which dispose of the respective protection status – at least on paper.

The European natural heritage is destroyed due to short-term profits, for the most part illegally, despite national and international protection provisions government authorities bow their heads in silence. Citizens of civil society, who do not want to accept this injustice, are abandoned by the state. Every resistance is associated with a high personal risk. Those who do not want to resign when faced with the brutal facts have to display a large portion of courage.

In this situation international support is of vital importance. EuroNatur can help to concentrate the spotlight on this situation of injustice and to make the overexploitation visible. Transparency is a precondition for international attention on the one hand and where appropriate for penalties too, on the other hand it represents the best protection for the local people, who fight against the injustice.

Some of you may remember the brave forest protectors from the Czech Republic, the group Hnutí Duha, who were honoured with the EuroNatur Award two years ago. The tough and unyielding battle against the deforestation in the national park Sumava was finally successful. One important condition for success was the transnational collaboration and support here as well, as the Europe-wide attention made many people in the country think. Politicians were persuaded to rethink.

At present, EuroNatur is conducting a strong campaign against the forest destruction in Romania. Not least because of our intervention the EU member has to stand trial for the violation of the rules in Brussels, too. However, the daily struggle takes place in Romania. Our local partners play a decisive role in that struggle. In the forefront is the activist Gabriel Paun whom we honour today for his courage to expose the scandalous forest destruction and for his bravery in a fight against an opponent, who often appears superior.