

Romania's Forests Under Threat

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Caught in the act

Though marred by political interference, the Forest Inspector wood tracking system provides graphic evidence of the unfolding tragedy in Romania's forests

This tells the unfortunate short story of why we shouldn't make optimistic assumptions, even when all indications tell us the assumption should be true.

In February 2020, when the European Union decided to initiate an infringement against Romania, triggered by clear evidence showing failure of this EU member state to implement EU law, it did so because it found "that protected forest habitats have been lost within protected Natura 2000 sites in breach of the Habitats and Birds Directives." These directives are the EU's central environmental legal protections. One year on from the beginning of this infringement process, the laws are still being ignored in Romania.

Old-growth and primary forest habitats are undoubtedly critical natural habitats that demand strict protection. In its Biodiversity Strategy, endorsed by every Member State, the EU calls for all remaining primary and old-growth forest to be strictly protected. The Birds and Habitats Directives requires countries to "take appropriate steps to avoid, in the special areas of conservation, the deterioration of natural habitats and the habitats of species". It is unambiguous that primary and old-growth forests are natural habitats. It is also unambiguous that destroying primary and old-growth forests deteriorates them.

Given the Romanian government is the subject of an infringement procedure for breaching EU environmental law related to logging of important forest habitats and species, and given it has pledged to protect all primary and old-growth forests, would we be forgiven to sensibly conclude that these forests should no longer be ending up on the back of a logging truck?

A sensible assumption that one could draw from these two facts is that the Romanian government is doing everything in its power to keep trees

from old-growth forests where they belong - in the forest. Sadly, this assumption is false.

Romania has an online system - the Forest Inspector - that details live information about much of what is happening in Romania's forests regarding logging and trafficking wood. On first access to this data, one can draw the following immediate conclusions:

- The scale of logging in Romania is astronomical
- Something must be seriously wrong with governance if drivers need to photograph what they are carrying on their logging truck.

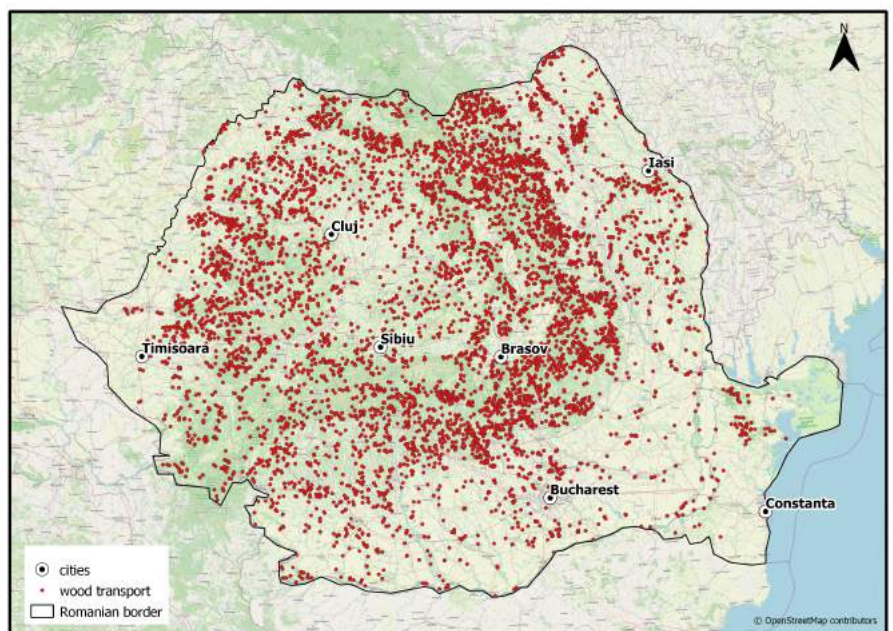
The Forest Inspector system reveals the mind-numbing scale of logging in Romania. As many as 45,000 trucks can be found for a 72 hour period throughout Romania. Trucks can be found hauling wood out of so-called protected areas (including in Natura 2000 sites and national parks) throughout the country. Maybe this is a reason why Romanian authorities have removed the protected area boundaries from the Forest Inspector online tool.

Below: 72 hours of logging in Romania

Each red dot represents at least one wood transport.

Data from 14-16 April, 2021

Source: Forest Inspector (SUMAL 2.0)





Captured in the Forest Inspector system, is the photograph above (left). This truck is coming out of Natura 2000 site Fagaras, one of the last great strongholds of primary and old-growth forests in Romania. The ancient tree at the bottom, with its hollowed out centre has most likely been growing for 300-400 years. It is a travesty that such an old tree would be cut to make furniture. That it most likely would be used for firewood or turned into pellets to be burned is unforgivable.

The system is far from complete – photographs and routes have only so far been made available for about 30% of transports and the system only shows trucks for the past 3 days. Furthermore, data that was available on an older version of the Forest Inspector is no longer available, including maps of forest management plans, historical logging permits and maps of previously identified primary forests.

The photograph above (right) is taken from Domogled – Valea Cernei National Park in south west Romania. This national park is also one of the Natura 2000 sites included in the infringement procedure brought against Romania by the EU Commission and it is also the site of a recent visit of a UNESCO/IUCN reactive



mission responding to concerns over World Heritage management. Domogled – Valea Cernei is a place of outstanding natural beauty that should be strictly protected. Sadly, the images of trucks carrying off with the forests of Domogled – Valea Cernei tell a terribly different story.

Day after day after day, on truck after truck, old-growth trees are destroyed, cut down and hauled off after growing in a forest for centuries. These pictures show this is happening under the very nose of the European Union. It seems Romania authorities are perversely trying to use the excuse that because they have this online system in place, the infringement should be closed.

The Forest Inspector is proof that the systems in place in the EU to protect the natural environment are not even close to working in Romania. Thus, closing the infringement is simply not an option.

Above left: Screen image taken 25th Feb, 2021

Above right: Screen image taken 24th Feb, 2021

Image source: Forest Inspector (SUMAL 2.0)

For more information:

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www.agentgreen.ro

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Imprint: EuroNatur Foundation • Westendstraße 3 • 78315 Radolfzell • Germany • info@euronatur.org