



BRIEFING
PAPER

Logging Out

Romania's virgin forests —
turning tragedy into prosperity

euRONATUR





Romania’s irreplaceable virgin forests — a tale of loss or a glimmer of hope?

Stretching for 1,500 kilometres across Central and Eastern Europe, the Carpathian Mountains, Europe’s third longest mountain range, are home to the last large refuges of the European Union’s most prized natural heritage—intact, irreplaceable virgin forests. Romania, at the southern end of this arc, hosts by far the largest share of these natural jewels (see figure above). Although the exact amount of virgin forest in Romania is unknown, there are indications that at least 120,000 hectares survive from a previously verified inventory. This inventory was not entirely complete and even more virgin forests remain, representing a monumental two-thirds of all virgin forests left in the European Union excluding Scandinavia.

This treasure chest of European natural heritage is dominated by mixed mountain forests of European beech and spruce, and at higher altitudes, coniferous mountain forests with endemic black pines and Alpine meadows. Romania’s forests are also home to the EU’s largest and healthiest populations of brown bears, wolves, lynx, chamois and red deer. They are the last forested places of almost indescribable natural wonder in Europe.

And yet, these places of stunning natural beauty are being lost before our eyes. Logging is out of control—National Parks, Natura 2000 sites, buffer zones of UNESCO World Heritage sites and forests of equivalent outstanding natural value are being logged and lost, both legally and illegally, often with the full permission and support of the Romanian government. The rule of law is often ignored within these forests—management plans are insufficient, over-logging is rife and forest exploitation frequently takes priority over forest conservation.

Romania’s state funded forestry company, Romsilva, and the Ministry for Forests lie at the heart of the problem. In a classic case of giving with one hand and taking with the other, Romsilva is responsible for both the protection and the destruction of Romania’s forests. Romsilva, whose rogue rule is given full consent by authorities in Bucharest, prioritises logging over conservation. Greed and short-term profit interests, corruption and deplorable governance win out at the expense of natural ecosystems and the prosperity of the people of Romania who depend on them for clear air, fresh water, carbon abatement, tourism, and personal recreation.

Firewood extraction, including biofuels, and commercial commodity production of timber products are largely driving the logging of forests in Romania. Large international timber companies, including IKEA, Holzindustrie Schweighofer, Egger, Kronospan, Kastamonu, Massiv, JAF, Romanel, Yıldız Entegre and Losan all benefit from the scale of logging in Romania. Demand for commodity wood products in turn puts pressure on Romania’s forests. Without proper protection and law enforcement, irreplaceable forests are lost to the bulldozer and chainsaw.

It is the goal of Agent Green and EuroNatur to reverse this situation and protect the best of Romania’s forests forever.

*Above: **Untouched and unprotected.** One of the last great wilderness valleys of Europe: Boia Mică, in the southern Făgăraș Mountains.*

*Front cover: **Virgin forest under threat** from logging in Stramba Valley, Făgăraș Mountains. Photos: Matthias Schickhofer*



Devastated mountain forests
in the Făgăraș Mountains Natura 2000 site.
Photo: Agent Green

Why are virgin forests important?

Virgin forests are crucial sanctuaries for rare and threatened forest dwelling plants and animals. They are more resilient to storms, droughts and fire than managed forests. Virgin forests are vast carbon stores and protecting them keeps this carbon safely out of the atmosphere. They are a source of inspiration to all of us in a world of increasing urbanisation, digitalisation and disconnectedness from nature. In Europe, where only a tiny amount of virgin forest remains, they are a link between the past and the future, a living encyclopaedia of ecological knowledge from which we are still learning.

“It’s a magical place. This is completely untouched nature. This is one of the very few places in Europe with prime forest that has been untouched since the beginning.”

Professor Dr. Hans D. Knapp, co-initiator of the UNESCO World Heritage program for the protection of European beech forests

Their protection, along with the rest of the world’s intact forests, is also critical to meeting agreed climate targets, keeping the world safe from dangerous climate change and combatting the loss of natural ecosystems.

The long term conservation of virgin forests is an indicator of a prosperous society. Like other countries that benefit economically, socially and environmentally from long-term forest conservation, so too can Romania and its people be enriched by the protection, not the destruction of virgin forests.

Securing a prosperous future for Romania’s forests

Protecting virgin forests, the jewel in the crown of Romania’s magnificent forests, is our paramount priority. However, Romania’s virgin forests exist as islands in a sea of other forests of varying ecological qualities. Their protection in isolation is not enough to ensure important values are maintained into the future. Larger, contiguous areas of forests must be set aside for conservation purposes to ensure resilience, species richness and the ongoing evolution of forest biodiversity. These areas must also include as a priority other forests of the highest conservation value—beyond strictly defined virgin forests. Identification of these forests is an important step to complement virgin forest protection.

Over the past two years, we have undertaken a rigorous desktop analysis, underpinned by on-ground inspection that has provided a critical understanding of the situation in Romania’s forests. Sadly, it has revealed the true magnitude of a shocking environmental catastrophe in Romania’s virgin forests. In 2005, an expert scientific study of Romania’s virgin forest inventory—the Pin Matra project—was undertaken, identifying at that time an area of almost 220,000 hectares of virgin forests in Romania. Our analysis demonstrates that 45% of this area has been destroyed since 2005, meaning that almost half of the virgin forests identified in the Pin Matra study from last decade no longer exist. By Romanian law, virgin forests are supposed to be protected. This new analysis makes a mockery of the legal system in Romania, where logging in virgin forests is clearly out of control.

The good news is that our analysis has identified around 500,000 hectares of potential virgin and old-growth forests, including at least 120,000 hectares which have been previously identified as virgin forests. →

More than 300,000 hectares of these forests are already included within national parks and Natura 2000 sites, but they are not secure from logging.

In 2017, 10 countries added a total of 61,660 hectares of ancient beech forests to the Ancient and Primeval Forests of the Carpathians and Other Regions of Europe UNESCO World Heritage site. The Romanian contribution of almost 24,000 hectares made up a disproportionately significant component of nearly 40 per cent of the 10 country inscription. However, other forests of equal outstanding universal natural value remain unprotected in Romania. These must be immediately officially identified and placed under a moratorium from logging until they are scientifically assessed against World Heritage criterion.

To secure a prosperous future for Romania's forests, we call on the Romanian Government, with support of EU institutions to:

- Immediately place a moratorium on all potential virgin and old-growth forests, in particular on state-owned property.
- Harmonise national park management with IUCN guidelines, prioritising conservation within protected areas and increasing core protected areas to at least 75% of park area.
- End commercial logging in national parks except for the basic subsistence needs of residents and adequately compensate forest owners for forest protection.
- Remove Romsilva from national park management role and replace with fully funded, independent organisation that meets international benchmarks for conservation protection and management.
- Ensure management of Natura 2000 sites in strict accordance with EU conservation legislation.
- Increase the size of existing protected areas to incorporate all virgin and old-growth forests.
- In all production forests, ensure a transformation from intensive logging to close to nature forestry and enforce all regulations and laws.

Domogled-Valea Cernei National Park

Encompassing towering mountain peaks, natural thermal springs, deep gorges, spectacular waterfalls, impressive cave systems, critical habitat for a plethora of protected plants and animals and ancient UNESCO World Heritage listed forests, one would think that Romania's largest national park would be afforded the highest level of protection. The ongoing devastation of virgin and old-growth forests in the national park, which is also a Natura 2000 site, tells a vastly different story.

Only about half of the Domogled-Valea Cernei National Park is actually off-limits to logging, with many areas of strict protection occurring in the alpine meadows. The park easily fails the IUCN (International Union for the Conservation of Nature) standard of at least 75% of the park zoned as strictly protected, with less than 50% of the surface of the park falling outside these zones. Only one-third of forests within the park are protected. With Romsilva, Romania's state-funded forestry company, in charge of national park management, this is not hard to believe. In 2017, a scientific research team funded by the German Federal Environment Foundation encountered logging and road cutting in virgin forests in the upper catchment of the pristine Cerna River. More recently, excursions to the park — including with members of the European Parliament, and during an informal visit with the European director of IUCN — have revealed first-hand the devastating commercial logging within the park.

The destruction of magnificent forests within Domogled-Valea Cernei National Park is systemic of the logging within almost all of Romania's national parks. Management in all of Romania's national parks must be overhauled to ensure that the irreplaceable heritage values are protected for the enjoyment of all future generations.



For more information:

www.euronatur.org

www.agentgreen.ro

www.saveparadiseforests.eu

Bulldozing of road through the
buffer zone of a UNESCO World Heritage site
within Domogled-Valea Cernei National Park.

Photo: Matthias Schickhofer