



Memorandum

Scientists call for Protection of the Primary Forest Heritage of Romania

1. Europe's most important areas of primary forest are located in the Carpathians, especially in the Ukraine, Slovakia and Romania. An estimated two thirds of primary forests of the European Union have survived in the Romanian Carpathians. Together with the Ukraine, Romania is the most important country for conservation of larger stands of primary forests of the European Beech (*Fagus sylvatica*), which is of global natural heritage.
2. However, many of these areas of outstanding universal ecological and scientific value have been degraded or destroyed during the past 10-15 years. It is not clear exactly how much primary forest is left today. This degradation and destruction continues at an alarming rate. At the moment we are facing one of the most serious losses of European natural heritage. The main direct threat to the primary forests in Romania is logging, both legal and illegal.
3. Romania's protected areas yet do not give proper protection to primary forests: Most of the Natura 2000 sites are logging hot spots and show large scale destruction / degradation of primary forests. Almost all Romanian National Parks fail to meet IUCN best practice criteria for management zoning of national parks. Primary forests in National Parks such as Domogled - Valea Cernei are under immediate threat by commercial logging, as reported often disguised as „salvation logging“.
4. According to an inventory on primary forests in Romania conducted more than ten years ago (Biris I.A. & P. Veen, 2005; funded by the Dutch Pin Matra program) Romania at that time hosted at least 218.000 ha of virgin and old growth forests. However, many forest stands have been destroyed in the meantime. But there are indications that there is more potential primary forest in the country than registered by the inventory.
5. In 2008, the approved Forest Code clearly stated that all virgin and so called quasi-virgin forests were to be protected. Unfortunately, for at least four years, a by-law explaining which areas qualify as virgin was missing, causing much further loss of primary forests.
6. In 2012, this flaw was partially addressed by Ministerial Order No. 3397, although the identification of virgin forests in this by-law contained questionable criteria. It states that identified primary forests (as mapped with the Veen /Biris inventory) are only allowed to be logged if the respective Territorial Inspectorate for Forest and Hunting Regime (ITRSV) attests that the defined criteria for the identification of primary forests are no longer fulfilled. This also includes forests where logging was already permitted in the decadal management plan. These legal obligations have been widely ignored by forest managers and large areas of primary forest have been destroyed without sanction. Satellite image comparisons and comprehensive reports by NGOs and researchers show massive losses of clearly identified and mapped primary forests.
7. Today it is not exactly known how large the primary forest remains in Romania are and where they are precisely located.
8. Recently, the Romanian interim government (2015 - 2016) started a process to create a *National Catalogue of Virgin Forests* (Ministerial Decision no.1417; July 11, 2016). This is an important step towards improved protection. Due to the size of the country and the potential high conserva-

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tion value forests, it may take several years to assess, map and document primary forest remains. So far no proper public budgets have been made available to fund this critical work. Currently the task is conducted entirely by NGOs and expert volunteers. Given the slow pace of populating the National Catalogue, many important areas could be additionally destroyed by ongoing logging before they can even be considered by the National Catalogue.

9. All potential primary forest areas submitted for the National Catalogue have to be documented by expert studies, including information about forest parcels affected and forest ownership. As soon as such a study is submitted, a temporary logging ban enters force and the forest has to be evaluated by authorities. However there is no guaranteed public access to that information and there have been reports that in several cases forest managers and authorities have not cooperated with experts and studies could not be completed on time before the winter break this year (no studies are accepted between October - February). Those forests are not protected now and could be logged.
10. The regulations for protection of primary forests within the *National Catalogue of Virgin Forests* (based upon Ministerial Decision no.1417 / 2016) are partly unclear and include potential loopholes allowing interventions „according to the law“, which could result in logging (Article 10).
11. Furthermore the criteria for the identification of primary forest stands for the *National Catalogue* were previously defined in the framework of the Ministerial Order No. 3397 in an exclusive way, thus risking the exclusion of valuable areas due to factors of minor importance for the conservation value and the ecological integrity of the forest ecosystems. Selection criteria such as a general requirement for “frequent presence of dead wood“, the “absence of roads“, “difficult access“ and “natural limits“ can be used as arguments countering protection and to continue with logging. If similar criteria were to be applied for other European Union member states most of the valuable old growth forest remains there would be destroyed today.

Therefore we, the undersigned scientists and researchers, call on the Romanian Government to ensure the rapid and comprehensive protection of Romania’s primary forest heritage - and to take the following decisions:

- Establish an immediate and comprehensive moratorium on logging in all potential primary forests as reported and documented by experts and NGOs until their conservation value status has been confirmed by independent and scientific research. The existing logging moratorium as set by the Ministerial Order No. 3397 for all potential primary forests as mapped by the 2005 Pin Matra inventory must be enforced and logging of intact areas must be stopped immediately.
- Forest authorities, especially Forest Guards, have to be put under stricter administrative control in order to ensure full implementation of the Ministerial Orders No. 3397/2012 and 1417/2016. They have to be legally obliged to provide all necessary information to experts in conjunction with studies for the National Catalogue of Virgin Forests.
- Revision of the Ministerial Order No. 1417/2016 in order to clearly ban all kinds of logging including conservation cutting and salvage logging in primary forests. Furthermore it needs simplification as well as more clarity regarding the procedure of elaboration of the expert studies for inclusion of forests in the *National Catalogue of Virgin Forests* and for the procedures of verifying and approving those studies by Forests Guards.

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- The criteria of the identification of primary forests for the National Catalogue of Virgin Forests need adjustment to ensure that they allow the inclusion of as many as possible of the remaining valuable forest stands and do not favour logging interests. All stands recorded to be older than 140 years old in the forest management plans, must be checked for potential inclusion in the National Catalogue, disregarding their functional sub-category.
- Provide sufficient public funds for experts and civil society groups to ensure rapid and comprehensive mapping and field checks for the *National Catalogue of Virgin Forests*.
- Secure IUCN fitness of Romania's national parks by enlarging nature zones to meet the IUCN criterion of at least 75% non-intervention zone. Romania's national parks also need independent management bodies which are committed to give priority to conservation targets over commercial interests. These bodies must be adequately funded to ensure the delivery of these conservation targets and to secure protection of Romania's natural heritage for future generations.
- Urgent implementation of proper financial mechanisms for compensations to private owners of primary forests which are under strict protection regime or are proposed for that. Such a payment scheme will crucially decrease the pressure to log and raise acceptance of their protection.

We also call on the European Union and the governments of the member states to support Romania in its efforts to protect that outstanding European natural heritage!

This memorandum has been initiated by EuroNatur.

It will be formally submitted to the Romanian Government.

First signers are (alphabetic order):

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If you are a scientist and wish to show your support for the memorandum by adding your signature to the list, please send an E-Mail with your full name, title, academic degree and institution (including potentially a brief statement of support) to: info@euronatur.org

Please forward this document to colleagues and friends!

Thank you for helping to save Romania's primary forests!

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