

Vilm resolution of the Beech Forest Network of Europe

From 15 to 19 of November 2015, 30 experts and stakeholders from 12 European countries¹, who are dedicated to ecological research on and conservation of old and free-willed European Beech forest ecosystems, gathered on the Isle of Vilm and conducted an intensive workshop to exchange recent findings². As one of the results of the workshop they agreed on the following statement:

1. The European Beech Forests represent a unique and unifying European natural heritage, stretching from the Mediterranean regions and southeastern Europe to the British Isles and Scandinavia, comprising vast areas in the Balkans and the Carpathians as well as in the northern European lowlands. The special history and ongoing ecological processes related to the expansion of beech forests after the Ice Ages is acknowledged by the establishment of a transnational serial UNESCO World Heritage property “Primeval Beech Forests of the Carpathians and the Ancient Beech Forests of Germany”. Inscribed in 2007 and 2011 this site now comprises 15 component parts in Germany, Slovak Republic and Ukraine.
2. We applaud the efforts of 11 countries currently striving for the extension of this World Heritage property and on having submitted a total of 64 component parts to the corresponding UNESCO tentative list, and we express our hope that the experts and the World Heritage Committee in charge of evaluating the proposal share and promote the enthusiasm of a growing group of people and nations dedicated to the conservation of primeval and old Beech Forests. The serial World Heritage property has the potential to develop into a unique Europe-wide instrument for effective conservation and for raising the awareness of the value of primeval and old forests without any interventions.
3. Taking into account all lessons learnt in the context of the management³ of the existing World Heritage site and referring to a recent study on its management⁴ as well as reports from the member countries, it is confirmed that the nomination can boost recognition and regional sustainable development. It also facilitates access to additional resources. But it is also acknowledged that the management of the property requires appropriate resources for the activities of working groups and coordinated action.
4. A significant part of the workshop was dedicated to better understanding the vulnerability of Beech Forest Ecosystems across all 12 beech forest regions that have been identified. A preliminary inventory of ecosystemic stresses, the threats and the underlying causes shows a diverse panorama. In many regions (such as the so-called Pyrenaic-Iberic, Central Mediterranean, Alpic, Atlantic, Subatlantic-Hercynic, Baltic, and Polonic-Podolic-Moldovan

¹ Austria, Belgium, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Kosovo, Romania, Slovak Republic, Spain, United Kingdom, Ukraine

² The workshop was funded by the Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation, Building and Nuclear Safety and organised by the Centre for Economics and Ecosystem Management, Eberswalde University for Sustainable Development and Writtle College. The participants work with ministries and other governmental institutions, academia as well as non-governmental organisations (Agent Green, European Wilderness Society, IUCN ECARO, WWF Ukraine).

³ Concerning the Joint Management System of the property as well as the management teams of the component parts.

⁴ Conducted by the Centre for Economics and Ecosystem Management at Eberswalde University for Sustainable Development, for the German Federal Agency for Nature Conservation and the Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation, Building and Nuclear Safety.

regions) past forest degradation has led to increased vulnerability to current and future threats. Fragmentation, isolation, eutrophication as well as intensified harvesting are particularly problematic in a number of regions.

5. In those regions that represent the centre of large and intact European Beech Forests (especially Carpathian, Illyric and Moesian-Balcanic regions) comprising large and highly significant tracts of wilderness the intensity and way of forest exploitation gives reasons for serious concerns. There are reports about substantial illegal logging activities in various countries such as Kosovo, Romania and Ukraine that also involve internationally operating companies from Western Europe. Especially in Romania the loss of ancient forests is at a critical stage. We ask our governments and the European Commission to investigate these claims.
6. We also urge the governments to avoid overexploitation and to ban inappropriate silvicultural practices such as clearcutting, large-scale shelterwood systems and coppicing, and support independent monitoring programs on the impacts of silviculture on forest ecosystem functioning using old-growth forests as a benchmark.
7. Experts from various regions observed that climate change is aggravating the vulnerability of multiply stressed forest ecosystems. Old-growth forests are suggested to be more resilient and characteristically better able to provide buffer and regulating capacities as a result of complex feedback processes and high levels of mutualism. They also represent a significant 'knowledge bank' of tested genotypes and phenotypes from which forestry could benefit. More research is needed on this topic.
8. The old-growth forests constitute a significant component of Europe's Green Infrastructure. The conservation and restoration of old-growth Beech Forests promote ecosystem-based adaptation to climate change and provide stepping stones for shifting species. At the same time old-growth forests provide crucial ecosystem services such as climate change mitigation and carbon sequestration by permanently storing organic matter in the soil for thousands of years. The destruction of old-growth forests is a significant source of man-induced carbon emissions.
9. The current protected area systems in Europe are insufficiently protecting the remaining stock of old-growth Beech Forests and focusing too heavily on a few iconic well-known sites. The effectiveness of protected areas harboring old-growth Beech Forests needs to be improved and standardized in Europe as well as controlled by an independent regular auditing process.
10. We call for a logging moratorium in European old-growth Beech Forests, especially in protected areas and state properties. Old-growth forests must be categorically excluded from biomass provision, e.g. in the context of renewable energy production. We also identify the urgent need to enhance public awareness about the relevance of old-growth forests.

Isle of Vilm, 19 November 2015

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