



**COUNCIL OF
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NOTE

from : General Secretariat
to : Delegations

Subject : Conference on Wilderness and Large Natural Habitat Areas
(Prague, 27-28 May 2009)
– Information from the Presidency

Delegations will find annexed a note from the Presidency on the above subject, which will be dealt with under "other business" at the meeting of the Council (Environment) on 25 June 2009.

**Conference on Wilderness and Large Natural Habitat Areas (Prague, 27 – 28 May 2009)
- Information from the Presidency -**

The Czech Presidency of the Council of the European Union (represented by the Czech Ministry of the Environment), together with the European Commission, organized a Conference on Wilderness and Large Natural Habitat Areas in Prague on 27 and 28 May 2009.

The European Commission issued the contract for organizing the event. A consortium of organisations comprising the IUCN ROfE, the WWF Carpathian Programme, the PAN Parks Foundation, the Wild Europe Initiative, the IUCN Global Wilderness Task Force, Natuurmonumenten, the Royal Society of Wildlife Trusts (UK), UNESCO and the WWF European Policy Office won the contract and, together with the Czech Presidency, organized this conference to initiate discussion on wilderness and wildland areas in Europe.

Even today, there are some large, truly wild or ‘wilderness’ areas in Europe, very substantial regions largely untouched by man. They are located in Finland, Sweden, Norway, but also Belarus, Ukraine and western Russia, in Romania, Bulgaria and in other parts of the Balkans, with only small areas in Central and Southern Europe. What is alarming is the tiny coverage of these areas, constituting less than 1% of European territory; moreover, many such habitats are increasingly threatened.

Wilderness is not the same in all parts of Europe, and it was stressed that these areas vary considerably across Europe. Firstly, there are purely “pristine areas” – large untouched zones with so-called “zero management”. There are also “non-intervention areas” in which active management used to be applied in the past but is no longer employed. The last category of wilderness is that of “restoration areas,” defined as places which have been mostly renewed or completely restored, reforested, or left for spontaneous development.

More than 250 delegates from the policy sector, science, non-governmental organisations, practitioners and other stakeholders from EU Member States and other European countries discussed the role of wilderness and wildlands. The overall aim was not to resolve this complex issue but to initiate a discussion about the protection and restoration of these areas, not only within the EU but also in the whole of Europe, where most of these undisturbed/non-intervention/pristine areas can be found.

Within the EU itself, some of these areas are part of the Natura 2000 network, the principal EU instrument for nature conservation, which is essentially not a network of strictly protected natural areas, but areas where human, economic, social and cultural activities are integral parts of management. On the other hand, many wilderness areas are located outside this network and it will be useful to discuss an approach to their management as well.

The overall aim of this Conference was to formulate a series of recommendations for wilderness protection and restoration in Europe.

The objectives of the Conference were the following:

- a) to raise the profile of wild habitats and wilderness in Europe
- b) to recommend a strategy for protection and restoration of wild and nearly wild areas
- c) to build a partnership among sectors, based on consensus, for implementing this strategy.

The Conference adopted a final document entitled “Poselství from Prague – An Agenda for Europe’s wild areas”. It stresses the importance of wilderness areas, mainly for their intrinsic value and also their economic, aesthetic, social and research importance. Further, it highlights the need for a coordinated European approach for the protection and management of these sites. It underlines that protection of the remaining pristine areas in all of the above “categories” is closely linked with the implementation of policies and strategies concerning agriculture, fisheries, regional development, forestry, research, energy, trade and external relations. For EU Member States, some mechanisms already exist to ensure that the protection of wilderness is integrated into the delivery of other policies, while elsewhere these need to be substantially strengthened or even developed.

Participants in the “Poselství” agreed on critical recommendations, calling in particular for action to be taken by the European Commission and EU Member States with the support of other stakeholders. They include, *inter alia*, the following:

- Provide guidance on how wilderness qualities could receive legal protection both under the Natura 2000 regime and outside the EU, without compromising concrete protection of species and habitats in Europe
- Guidance should be developed concerning the protection of wilderness areas in the context of the EU nature legislation, addressing issues such as natural changes to sites, response to climate change, the maintenance of specific succession states and non-intervention management.
- Promote connectivity of existing protected areas, restoration of degraded areas, and the setting up of corridors and ecological networks.
- To further develop awareness in the conservation sector of the contribution wilderness and wildland areas can make to halting biodiversity loss and supporting Natura 2000 and the Emerald Network. Incorporate recommendations from the Conference into relevant reports (including TEEB), government meetings (upcoming EU Presidencies), international conferences (CBD/Nagoya, UNFCCC/Copenhagen) and other events – facilitated by compilation of a relevant schedule and production of appropriate policy documents.
- Need for further research, completion of mapping wilderness and wildland areas in Europe, involving appropriate definitional and habitat criteria and level of scale to effectively support plans for protecting and monitoring such areas, and compilation of a wilderness register using existing databases. Find options for involving local communities and other stakeholders.
- Implement other supporting activities, such as the development of the Wildland Support Network, especially to support implementation of recommendations from the conference by all stakeholders. Establishment of a Wildland Information Exchange to collate and disseminate good practice, and assessment of options for financing.

All the recommendations can be found in the full text of the „Poselství from Prague“:

http://www.wildeurope.org/attachments/047_POSELSTVI%20FROM%20PRAGUE_final%20version.pdf

The first meeting following the conference, to discuss the future development of the Wildland Support Network and the implementation of Recommendations will take place already in July 2009. For the effective protection and restoration of these sites, it is necessary that States that still have these wilderness and wildland areas should participate in the discussions.