

# Wilderness Momentum in Europe

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Europe does not usually conjure up visions of expansive, unbroken wilderness landscapes or seascapes. Highly developed and populated, with intensive agriculture and heavy industry, Europe has been taming its wilderness for centuries. Nonetheless, pockets of wildness have persisted throughout the continent, primarily—although not exclusively—in forested alpine regions, and Europe's megafauna, including brown bears, wolves, lynx, and chamois persists, although in small numbers.

However, awareness of wild nature and the potential for wilderness protection are increasing, and a range of exciting new wildland conservation initiatives are emerging. This article briefly summarizes some of this fast-moving action, with more detailed reports on a few special examples in central and southern Europe.

## Why Europe, Why Now?

Several developments led to new opportunities for wilderness protection in Europe. One was the fall of the iron curtain, which revealed large, intact areas in central and Eastern Europe, primarily along the east-west border, and created significant opportunities for government-protected areas. Another aspect of the fall of the iron curtain was that most Eastern Bloc countries have become, or are applying to become, European Union (EU) members. EU membership

requires restitution of public land to former owners, many of whom want to sell their land. This significantly affects critical areas of intact wildlands in Romania's Carpathian Mountains. The restitution process specifically prohibits resale of land for logging, creating a significant opportunity for conservation for private investors. Unfortunately, some areas are being logged nonetheless, creating a real threat to wilderness and biodiversity, and narrowing the window of opportunity for private conservation investors (Baltzer 2007).

A second major development was the change in Europe's common agricultural policy and a decrease in farming subsidies, which made farming in marginal areas economically nonviable. As a result, in some areas there has been significant rural depopulation, followed by falling land prices. This has led to rewilding in some places, and has created a significant, but probably short-lived opportunity for conservation (Theil 2005).

These political and economic developments have been accompanied by growing interest in wilderness conservation throughout the continent. Interest is driven by factors such as awareness that very few biologically intact areas remain in Europe, heightened concern over climate change, and expanding wildlife populations. For example, predators such as wolves and lynx are returning to habitat from which they were formerly extirpated.

This new interest can be measured in many ways. One indicator is grassroots activism, and the success and increase in number of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) explicitly and exclusively focused on wilderness awareness and protection. Another good indicator is government policy, and specifically the gradual increase in interest in wilderness as a protected area category within governmental protected area classification systems.

## Wilderness NGOs and Initiatives

**Wilderness Foundation UK**—One of the oldest continuing NGOs in Europe dedicated to wilderness awareness and protection is The Wilderness Foundation UK ([www.wildernessfoundation.org.uk](http://www.wildernessfoundation.org.uk)). A small staff has focused on the therapeutic benefits of the wilderness experience to inner-city or disadvantaged youth, and the use of the wilderness experience for conflict resolution in Ireland. They connect youth with wilderness experiences in Africa and elsewhere, focusing on building leadership and advocacy, while also advocating for wilderness policy and designation in the British Isles. An independent but allied organization, The Wilderness Foundation (Germany), is being established by colleagues in that country to raise wilderness awareness in central Europe.

**PAN Parks**—The PAN Parks Foundation ([www.panparks.org](http://www.panparks.org)), a joint project of World Wildlife Fund and the Dutch tourism operator Molecaten, provides an NGO certification mechanism for wilderness areas within European protected areas (see April 2008 issue of *IJW*). PAN Parks has certified approximately 530,000 acres (214,575 ha) to date.

**European Green Belt Initiative**—Launched in 2004, the European Greenbelt Initiative is working to implement an extensive north-south



Figures 1 and 2—European Lynx (*Lynx lynx*) and Wolf (*Canis lupus lupus*), once on their way to extinction, are establishing new populations in numerous new areas throughout Europe. Photo by Rainer Pöhlmann.

conservation corridor bisecting central Europe, and including some of the most biologically important and intact lands on the continent ([www.europeangreenbelt.org/indoor.html](http://www.europeangreenbelt.org/indoor.html)). These lands remained in a wild state primarily because they were used as a buffer between east and west along the iron curtain during the cold war. They represent a unique opportunity for large-scale conservation, but also have deep symbolic significance. The scale of this work, combined with the fact that component parks are adopting a wilderness philosophy (see section on Germany and the Czech Republic, below) makes this work highly relevant, although it is not explicitly a wilderness initiative.

**Wild Europe**—Wild Europe promotes a coordinated strategy for the protection and restoration of wilderness and large natural habitat areas in Europe. Currently chaired by the director of natural environment at the European Commission (EC), it brings together representatives from the World Conservation Union; WWF; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization; PAN Parks Foundation; Europarc Federation; Council of Europe; and others. A resolution calling for improved protection of remaining wilderness areas is being jointly developed, to be presented to the commission as part of an approach that seeks to place wilderness and

natural habitat areas more centrally in EC biodiversity strategy. The working conference on wilderness planned for Europe in spring 2009 is formally included in the schedule of the European Commission Presidency.

## Rewilding

Rewilding is occurring naturally in numerous areas in Europe (Theil 2005). Wolves have crossed from Poland into Germany, and recent studies now show some 30 animals inhabiting Saxony. Wolves in France make their way across the border to Italy. Populations of European lynx are on a slight upswing and are part of a gene pool between the Czech Republic and Bavaria. Even an occasional brown bear is tracked crossing borders from Slovenia into Italy, Switzerland and Austria.

Rewilding with human assistance is occurring across the continent. One of the first (established in 1984), most successful, and ongoing such initiatives is Trees for Life in northern Scotland ([www.treesforlife.org.uk](http://www.treesforlife.org.uk)), based at the Findhorn Foundation and focused on restoring 600 square miles (1,554 sq km) of the ancient the Caledonian Forest.

Another initiative is based in the Oosvaardersplassen (Vera 2007), in the Netherlands, in which biologists have recast the concept of ancient wilderness in Europe, moving from a concept of vast, dark consolidated forest to one



Figure 3—Hikers crossing Retezat National Park, southern Carpathian Mountains, Romania. Photo by Vance G. Martin.

of a mosaic of primeval forest and meadows, managed by large ungulates such as the auroch (original wild cattle) and the tarpan (wild horse). Roaming the Oosvadersplassen now are herds of Heck cattle and Konik horses, the closest living relatives to their extinct predecessors, from which reintroductions are being made to wildland areas throughout Europe.

European Bison (*Bison bonasus*) or “wisents” are returning to the forests. Wisents were originally released from captive populations into Bialowieza (western Poland) in 1952, and have thrived in this ancient forest (Vera 2007). Elsewhere, in western Russia, breeding stations in the Oksky and

Prioksky-Terrassny *zapovedniki* worked for several decades with various zoos to create viable herds of bison to release into other Russian *zapovedniki* (Williams 2008).

### European Wilderness Law and Policy

Only one country, Finland, currently has a federal law creating a wilderness protected area category in Europe. However, Russia’s

*zapovedniki*, which cover 33.7 million hectares (83.3 million acres), often function as a close analog. Turkey is currently in the process of developing wilderness legislation. Italy has also recently passed a regional wilderness designation (in northern Italy’s Friuli region, see below).

Iceland’s legislation does not recognize wilderness as a separate protected area category, although Iceland’s Nature Conservation Act of 1999 lists wilderness as one of the key criterion for establishing new protected areas (Article 66) in the country, and wilderness is defined under the Act (Article 3). To facilitate the task of creating new wilderness areas with wilderness qualities, Iceland’s Environment Agency has developed a map of wilderness areas throughout the country.

Ukraine’s 2003 policy statement, The Conceptual Foundation of the Development of Nature Protection in Ukraine, which will guide protected area policy in Ukraine through 2020, introduced the concept of wilderness protected areas. Amendments have been proposed to create wilderness protected areas under the Protected Areas Fund Act of 1992, and have been approved by the Commission on Environmental Policy, but have not

yet been approved by Parliament.

Norway has land use planning policies that seek to preserve “wilderness-like” countryside—defined as places that are at least 5 km (3.1 miles) away from major infrastructure developments—and areas without infrastructure development that are 1 to 5 km (0.6 to 3.1 miles) away from major infrastructure development. The Svalbard Environmental Protection Act, in force since 2002, specifically seeks to protect the archipelago’s wilderness qualities.

Austria’s State Forest Agency estimates that about 22% of Austria’s forests are close to natural, but that only 3% of Austria’s forests are in a wilderness state. The government of Lower Austria has designated the primeval Rothwald forest on Dürrenstein Mountain as the Dürrenstein Wilderness Area (Dürrenstein Wildnis-gebiet). The wilderness area is 460 hectares (1,136 acres) and is part of a larger 2,400 hectare (5,928 acre) protected complex (Jones 2006).

Sweden does not designate wilderness areas and does not have a wilderness law. However, a joint publication by the National Board of Forestry and the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency entitled *Protecting the Forests of Sweden, Legal Protection in the Form of National Parks, Nature Reserves, Habitat Protection Areas and Nature Conservation Agreements* states that 3.3 million hectares (8.2 million acres) are managed according to IUCN’s Category 1b-Wilderness.

Wilderness has been under discussion in Germany and the Czech Republic, in particular with respect to a transboundary protected area shared by the two countries (see below) and plans for a Greater Bohemian Forest Ecosystem. In Slovakia, a project to protect intact valleys in the northern part of the country is called the Ticha



Figure 4—European brown bear (*Ursus arctos arctos*) in the Ticha Valley, northern Slovakia. Photo by Bruno D’Amicis.



Figures 5 and 6—Wilderness experience programs are used by The Wilderness Foundation UK to address personal growth and social issues, for example on this trip to Ulva in the Inner Hebrides. Photo by The Wilderness Foundation UK.

Wilderness ([www.tichawilderness.com](http://www.tichawilderness.com)). BirdLife International developed a conference in Slovakia called Biologically Important Forests: Megacorridors of the European Wilderness?, to be held in Tatra National Park in Slovakia in October 2008.

## Italy

There was a great victory for wilderness preservation in Italy—and for Europe—on December 28, 2008, when the Friuli Venezia Giulia Autonomous Region in northeastern Italy approved *Deliberazione n. 3304*. *Deliberazione n. 3304* represents the first legislative wilderness designation in Europe since Finland's landmark wilderness designations in 1991, and the first wilderness designation for a European regional government. Thanks to a previous general directive (n. 3117 of December 15, 2006) the Friuli Venezia Giulia Regional authorities have now approved eight wilderness areas for a total of 3,772 hectares (9,318 acres).

Most of the work on this project was done by the Italian Wilderness Society (*Associazione Italiana per la Wilderness—AIW*). AIW has worked for 25 years to develop a wilderness preservation model for Italy, and has helped establish 51 wilderness areas totaling

more than 33,000 hectares (81,510 acres) on municipal lands, regional public lands, and by private organizations and philanthropic individuals.

In the executive section of the *Deliberazione*, the Regional Board of the Friuli Venezia Giulia Autonomous Region makes reference to the first designated wilderness area in the world (the Gila Wilderness in New Mexico), to the U.S. Wilderness Act of 1964, to the resolutions on Italy approved by the 4th and 5th World Wilderness Congresses, and to the IUCN's Category Ib—Wilderness in IUCN's protected area classification system.

This regional law or Decision (*Deliberazione*, in Italian) is the first time that a legislative authority has recognized a wilderness protected area in Italy. The *Deliberazione* is important since it recognizes a wilderness preservation concept for all regional forested lands in the public domain, opening the door for future expansion of the existing designations, and for new wilderness designations. The *Deliberazione* allows municipalities to designate communal lands bordering the regional wilderness.

The *Deliberazione* recognizes the eight other wilderness areas in the Friuli region established by the AIW,

thereby giving political recognition to the larger wilderness system in the region as well. These additional eight wilderness areas include mountainous areas with beech, black pine, red and white spruce, and larch forests, with high pasture, scenic rock formations, and wild rivers. Their rich wildlife includes red deer, roe deer, chamois, golden eagle, griffon vulture, eagle owl, pygmy owl, Tengmalm's owl, capercaillie, black grouse, hazel hen, the rare three-toed woodpecker, and other alpine birds. In some cases, lynx and brown bear are also present, migrating from the nearby mountains of Slovenia. The flora includes many endemic and rare species of the Dolomite and Balkan areas.

The hope is now that all these areas may be expanded to nearby Regional and Communal wildlands, so that a real "Regional Wilderness Law" can be presented and discussed in the Regional Parliament; and that other Italian regional governments will follow with their own *Deliberazione* for wilderness areas.

## Germany and the Czech Republic

In addition to Italy, central Europe is another region where large-scale



Figure 7—Mount Flagjel, Monte Flagjel Wilderness Area, Friuli, Italy. Photo by Claudio Bassi.

conservation is making great strides. Southern Germany and the Czech Republic share one of the largest areas of wild and semiwild forested land in central Europe, much of which is protected by adjoining reserves: the Sumava National Park in the Czech Republic and the Bavarian Forest National Park in Germany. Together these parks cover 93,280 hectares (230,500 acres), and protect populations of capercaillie (*Tetrao urogallus*—a large grouse species), lynx (*Lynx lynx*), red deer (*Cervus elaphus*), and hazel grouse (*Bonasa bonasia*). Wildlife biologists anticipate that migrating wolves and moose will eventually repopulate this area. Although this area is large, estimates are that wildlife populations must be managed within an even larger system to persist. As a result, conservationists in the region are calling for a strategy for a Greater Bohemian Forest Ecosystem, which would involve a mix of conservation and wildlife friendly land uses to ensure the sustainability of current wildlife populations.

Unfortunately, the spectacular Sumava-Bavarian Forest transboundary protected area is now under some threat from increased recreational use given that the Schengen Treaty, which came into effect December 21, 2007,

allows tourists to cross the border between the two countries freely. In anticipation of significant increases in tourism as a result of this development, the directors of the Sumava and the Bavarian Forest National Parks came together on March 13, 2008, to sign an agreement on the joint management of a core area of about 13,900 hectares (34,348 acres; 64.7% of it in the Czech Republic and 45.3% in Germany).

The plan is to increase the core area under joint management to about 25,000 to 30,000 hectares (about 60,000 to 75,000 acres). The plan for the core zone includes the closure of about 40 km (24.8 miles) of trails, to be replaced by about 15 km (9.3 miles) of new trails, where public access is allowed only from July 15 to October 31. A plan will be implemented in both parks to monitor impacts from recreation.

The decision to manage this area as one transboundary complex is significant progress, particularly as the joint management agreement makes use of the term *wilderness* (Germany: *wildnis* / Czech: *divocina*) in a number of places. Although Germany does not include a formal wilderness protected area classification in its national system, the guiding philosophy for Germany's parks, developed by Hans Bibelriether, the first director of the Bavarian Forest National Park and one of the pioneers of the "National park idea" in Germany, can be summarized by the motto "let nature be nature." This motto, which has been applied to all of Germany's national parks, is usually interpreted as "protecting and maintaining extensive (as a rule) ecosystems and viable functioning ecological processes largely without human interference." Thus,

Germany's management approach to its 14 national parks covering 963,835 hectares (2.3 million acres), or about 2.6% of the total area of Germany, is related to the wilderness concept.

In practice, however, most of Germany's protected area system does not yet consist of "extensive ecosystems and viable functioning ecological processes." Holger Wesemüller, vice chairperson of the Protected Area NGO *Europarc Deutschland* estimates that "not much more than one percent" of Germany currently meets this standard. This number is important. In May 2008, Germany hosted the 9th Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity. Anticipating this event, the German Parliament developed a National Strategy for Biological Diversity, which states that Germany—along with all EU countries—will halt the loss of biodiversity by the year 2010. This paper—dated November 11, 2007—explicitly states that the target for 2020 is to protect 2% of the country as wilderness areas (*wildnisgebiete*).

Upon inquiry, a press spokesperson of the German Federal Ministry of the Environment emphasized that the term *wilderness areas* does not necessarily correspond to the matching IUCN protected area category nomenclature. Instead, the definition for wilderness areas, according to the 2007 federal paper, generally means: "large areas where nature is allowed to develop according to her own devices" or as stated above, areas where "extensive ecosystems and viable functioning ecological processes are protected largely without human interference."

## Conclusion

Europeans have systematically reduced their wilderness resource for

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the reserve directors, mandating that they generate a profit of 154.5 million rubles (approximately \$5.5 million dollars) that year (Ministry of Natural Resources 2006). In March 2007, new rules limited the ability of reserve inspectors to levy fines against poachers on-site, moving the function to bureaucrats in distant urban areas (Goroshkova 2007). Zoning was changed for the Sochi National Park near the Caucasus Nature Reserve to pave the way for resort development associated with Russia's 2014 Winter Olympics. Over protests of environmental groups, a new agreement with China resulted in approval for a gas pipeline to cross the Altai's Ukok Plateau, a UNESCO World Heritage Site protected territory (Braden 2007).

My husband received another email from Viktor Lukarevskiy, who had just updated his field research on snow leopards along one of the Altai mountain ranges. "How many tracks

did he see this time?" I asked. Zhenya looked up from his computer screen: "None."

In May 2007, Igor Kalmykov was picked to be the director of the Altai Reserve, with a territory more than twice that of Sayano-Shushenkiy. He has recently announced plans to develop a Visitor Center to welcome tourists. IJW

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centuries: initially out of fear of a hostile environment, then to maximize agricultural productivity, and finally, because the cultural and aesthetic values of traditional agricultural landscapes had become so highly valued that maintaining them, through heavy subsidies if necessary, became a high priority. As a result, the wilderness concept still meets considerable resistance throughout the continent. Nonetheless, the mindset is changing, and momentum for wilderness is building. In our view, we have crossed a critical threshold: building toward a European strategy for wilderness conservation is a difficult undertaking,

but we believe it will happen in the foreseeable future. IJW

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