

From Research of the Carpathian Beech Virgin Forests to the World heritage

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Abstract

The history of complex ecological research of Carpathian Primeval Forests started on beginning of 20. century in Transcarpathia Region (former Czechoslovak Republic), due to the initiative of Czech professor Alois Zlatník. The Zlatník's stationary plots in virgin forest represents a model position of the geobiocenoses type. As a permanent research area it represent natural biotopes of the research object. The characteristic of the geobiocenoses contains the description of the ecotopes, phytocenoses, development stages and productivity. Stationaries enable to perform repeated researches and to compare the evolution and changes of the biocenoses under changing of ecological conditions. For centuries much of the Carpathian mountain forests remained untouched. Virgin forests constitute a natural heritage of global significance. In 2007 the Primeval beech forests of the Carpathians (Slovakia, Ukraine) were added to UNESCO's World Heritage List. The paper is aimed at the presentation of long-term research and utilise the results to the nomination process of World Heritage. The part of nomination project are principles of the Integrated Management Plan. Ultimate goal is to achieve that management and socio-economic sustainable development practices are in harmony with primary objectives of the World Heritage protection, biodiversity conservation, ecosystem and landscape stability, rational use of natural resources, ecotourism development and with potential of the landscape in largest possible extend. The paper present also a future research project.

Keywords

Research, Primeval Beech Forests, Ecological Processes, Integrated Management Plan; World Heritage.

Introduction

Europe's beech forests are deciduous forests which are dominated by the European Beech (*Fagus sylvatica* L.) (BARNA et al. 2011). The beech is endemic to Europe and beech forests are limited to Europe (GÖMÖRY et al. 2011). Such forests therefore share the fate of all deciduous forests of the northern hemisphere's nemoral zone (BOHN & NEUHÄUSL 2003). They have been exposed to an enormous development pressure (settlement, utilisation) for centuries so that natural forests have become scarce (BRITZ et al. 2009; KOZAK et al. 2007).

Beech is one of the most important elements of forests in the Temperate Broad-leaf Forest Biome (UDVARDY 1975) and represents an outstanding example of the re-colonisation and development of terrestrial ecosystems and communities after the last ice age, a process which is still ongoing (KNAPP 2011; MAGRI et al. 2006; MANOS & STANFORD 2001). Forest communities built up and dominated by the beech are widespread across major parts of Central Europe (BRÄDLI & DOWHANYTCH 2003; HAMOR & COMMARMOT 2005).

The Primeval (Virgin) temperate forests are rare in Europe due to the long-lasting, continuous human use of forests and due to high human population densities (KNAPP 2011).

The Carpathian Mountains in Europe are a biodiversity hot spot, harbor many relatively undisturbed ecosystems, and are still rich in primeval, natural, and seminatural, traditional landscapes (BJÖRNSEN-GURUNG et al. 2009). The Primeval Beech Forests of the Carpathians are indispensable to understanding the history and evolution of the genus *Fagus*, which, given its wide distribution in the Northern Hemisphere and its ecological importance, is globally significant. These undisturbed, complex temperate forests exhibit the most complete and comprehensive ecological patterns and processes of pure stands of European beech across a variety of environmental conditions and represent all altitudinal zones from seashore up to the forest line in the mountains (BRANG 2005; BRITZ et al. 2009).

Valuable knowledge concerning dynamics of primeval beech forests in Carpathians has been obtained during the past 85 years. Thanks to the Czech professor Zlatník, the primeval beech forests of the Transcarpathian Ruthenia (1918-1944 former Czechoslovak Republic, since 1945 Ukraine) has been surveyed and evaluated in 1928 – 1938 (ZLATNÍK 1934, 1935, 1936; ZLATNÍK et al., 1938). Since 1947 Ukrainian researchers continued the investigation and research of this virgin forests (BRÄDLI & DOWHANYTCH 2003; HAMOR & COMMARMOT 2003; STOYKO 2002; STOYKO et al. 1982; STOYKO & TASENKEVITCH 1993). The research of natural and primeval beech forests worked up in Poland mainly Jaworski (JAWORSKI et al. 1994a, 1994b; JAWORSKI & KOŁODZIEJ 2004), in Slovakia numerous authors (BARNA et al. 2011; BUBLINEC & PICHLER 2001; KORPEL 1982, 1989, 1995; SANIGA 2011; SANIGA & SCHÜTZ 2001, 2002; SANIGA & SKLENÁR 2003, SANIGA & KLIMEŠ 2004; VOLOŠČUK 1992, 1994, 1995, 1999, 2003), in Switzerland LEIBUNDGUT (1978, 1982, 1993), BRANG (2005), in Germany ASSMANN et al. (2008), BRITZ et al.

(2009), DÖRFELT (2008), PRETZSCH (2003), KNAPP (2011), in Austria ZUKRIGL et al (1963), and in Romania GIURGIU et al. (2001). Over the past decade the generality of processes observed in individual studies have been the subjects of considerable discussions. The model of the main natural successional phases occurring in primeval forests of Central Europe was evaluated as: growing-up stage, optimal stage and decaying stage (DRÖSSLER 2006; DRÖSSLER & LUPKE 2005; KOOP & HILGEN 1987; KORPEL 1995, MEYER 1999; OHEIMB et al. 2005; ZUKRIGL et al. 1963). In the growing-up stage, trees are found in all three layers – upper, middle and lower, and the crown closure is dense. As there is low mortality in trees of this age, there is little dead wood (KORPEL 1995; SANIGA & SCHÜTZ 2002). In the end phases, however, the competition between individuals is so great that strong dying off of juveniles occurs. In the following optimal stage, the maximum timber stock is reached, but the number of trees per area unit is low. With the lack of an understorey (SANIGA 2002, 2003), the attainment of maximum height and a closed canopy, the forest in this phase is known as „hall-forest“, being reminiscent of the interior of a cathedral or great hall, and also bears some resemblance to a commercial forest. During the transition to the decaying stage, tree vitality decreases and the proportion of dead wood increases considerably. In this phase, the number and size of gaps between tree clusters increases and regeneration of climax tree species starts again (KORPEL 1982).

A significant feature of the beech forests is decline in floristic diversity (FALKENGREN-GRERUP & TYLER 1991; BARBIER et al. 2008) which is a result of the history of flora and vegetation, from the former glacial refuges in Southern and Southeastern Europe up the northern and northwestern subterritories (MÖLDER et al. 2008). Old beech trees can form a highly diverse habitat for fauna (BRANG 2005). The beech is a key species which creates its own internal forest climate and crucially influences soil formation, regeneration cycle, food chains and structures reveals an astonishingly specific diversity of plants, vertebrates, insects, molluscs and fungi (DIERSHKE & BOHN 2004; DÖRFELT 2008). This diversity is described in terms of its ecological role in the ecological processes of beech forest ecosystems – trees and shrubs, mycorrhizae, geophytes, other herbaceous plants, lianas, herbivores, carnivores, dead wood inhabitants, destruents, etc. (ASSMANN et al. 2008; CAPOTORTI et al. 2010).

The Primeval Beech Forests of the Carpathians (Slovakia and Ukraine), have been inscribed on the World Heritage List on June 28, 2007 under criteria of outstanding universal value (COMMARMOT et al. 2000; BUBLINEC & PICHLER 2001; BRÄNDLI & DOWHANYTSCH 2003; HAMOR & COMMARMOT 2003; PICHLER et al. 2007a, 2007b; PLACHTER et al. 2008). The results from geobiocenological research of virgin forests was utilized for practical forest and conservation management.

The Decision of the 35. Session of the World Heritage Committee, Paris 25 June 2011, approved the extension of the Primeval Beech Forests of the Carpathians (Slovakia and Ukraine), to include the Ancient Beech Forests of Germany, and becomes the Primeval Beech Forests of the Carpathians and the Ancient Beech Forests of Germany (Slovakia, Ukraine and Germany), on the basis of criterion: outstanding examples representing significant ongoing ecological and biological processes in the evolution and development of ecosystems and communities of plants and animals (BRITZ et al. 2009). The German extension in 2011 is another major step towards transboundary protecting this unique ecosystem for the long term (TURNOCK 2002).

The ecological process is understood as a continuous action or series of action that is governed or strongly influenced by one or more ecosystems (a system of plants, animals and other organisms together with the non-living components of their environment). Natural ecosystem is understood as an ecosystem where since the industrial revolution (say 1750) human impact (1) has been no greater than that of any other native species, and (2) has not affected the ecosystem's structure. Human impact excludes changes of global extent, such as climate change due to global warming (IUCN/UNEP/WWF 1991).

The World Natural Heritage with beech ecosystems in Europe comprising 15 components – 10 in Slovak – Ukrainian Carpathians and 5 in Germany. The World Heritage Sites in Slovakia are situated in strict protected nature reserves - IUCN Category I of Poloniny National Park - IUCN Category II, and in nature reserves of Vihorlat Protected Landscape Area - IUCN Category V (DUDLEY & PHILLIPS 2006; IUCN 1994; EUROPARK & IUCN 2000; BISHOP et al. 2004; HOCKINGS et al. 2006; LOCKWOOD et al. 2006; PHILLIPS 2002; THOMAS & MIDDLETON 2003, VOLOŠČUK 1999). The World Heritage Sites in Ukraine are situated in territory of Carpathian Biosphere Reserve, which is the strict protected category in Ukraine (by IUCN it is Category I) (HAMOR & COMMARMOT 2005) and in nature reserves of Uzhansky National Nature Park - IUCN Category II (KRICSFALUSY et al. 2001). In Germany the World Natural Heritage Sites are situated in national parks - IUCN Category II (BRITZ et al. 2009).

The Principles of Joint Management Plan

Long-term protection and management of the Protected Areas and especially of the World Heritage Sites is ensured through national legal protection as national parks or core areas of a biosphere reserves (COONEY 2004; IUCN WCPA 2000; KUEMMERLE et al. 2008; LEVREL 2007; LOCKWOOD et al. 2006; STOLTON & DUDLEY 1999; SYNGE 2004; THOMAS & MIDDLETON 2003; WILSHUSEN et al. 2002; ZBICZ & GREEN 1997). Effective implementation of the integrated transboundary management plan and the trilateral integrated management system is required to guide the planning and management of this World Heritage Sites.

The general objectives of the Integrated Management Plan are (PICHLER et al. 2007a, 2007b) :

- To ensure the most effective conservation of the WHS properties with all their abiotic and biotic components, geo- and biodiversity and ecological processes. To secure a lasting homeostasis and self-reproduction of the respective ecosystems and their protection both against anthropogenic factors (ČEŘOVSKÝ 1996; DENISIUK & STOYKO 2000; HAMILTON et al. 1996; HAMILTON & McMILLAN 2004; PHILLIPS 2000; STOLTON et al. 2012; SYNGE 2004).

- To maintain and expand the existing, ecologically connected complex of primeval and natural beech forests that encompass the WHS within the corridors connecting the WHS. Supporting the succession of managed beech semi-natural forests (BENNETT 1994, 1998; BISHOP et al. 2004; SANDWITH et al. 2001; STOLTON et al. 2003, PICHLER et al. 2007b).
- To use WHS for scientific research in order acquire knowledge transferable and applicable on the level of sustainable (VOLOŠČUK 1992, 1994, 1995, 2003; OTTO 1994). To use WHS for enhancement of landscape ecological stability and resilience (PETERSON et al. 1998).
- To use WHS for enhancement of ecological and environmental education, awareness of primeval forests – chosen to maintain integrity and conservation of the existing sites, to preserve their naturalness and uniqueness (STOLTON & DUDLEY 1999; TURNOCK 2002).
- To support of traditional crafts, products and ecotourism (CEBALLOS-LASCURÁIN 1996; EAGLES et al. 2002; GEBHARD et al. 2007; PICHLER & SOROKOVÁ 2005; BALANDINA et al. 2012; EUROPARC Federation 1993).

Common elements of an effective management system could include: a) a thorough shared understanding of the property by all stakeholders; b) a cycle of planning, implementation, monitoring, evaluation and feedback (HOCKING et al. 2000, 2006; IUCN WCPA 2000), c) the involvement of partners and stakeholders (EUROPARK Federation 1993; SYNGE 2004), d) the allocation of necessary resources; e) capacity-building; and f) an accountable, transparent description of how the management system functions (LEVREL 2007).

New research project of the World Heritage Beech Forests Ecological Processes

Based on several studies over the past decades the current status of Beech Forests World Heritage Sites in the Carpathians need identifies knowledge gaps, and suggest avenues for future research. In December 2012 the 15 scientists from Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica and Technical university in Zvolen elaborated a new project „Research of Dynamics of the World Natural Heritage Ecological Processes in the Eastern Carpathians and Vihorlat Mountains“. Project is aimed at the research of unique ecological processes dynamics in ecosystems in model areas of World Natural Heritage in Eastern Slovakia, on the Slovak-Ukraine border: flysch of the Poloniny National Park (Stužica and Havešová Reserves) and Vihorlat Mts. volcanos (Morské oko and Vihorlat-Nežabec Reserves). Evaluated also will be the development of these model areas. Hydric potential of the region and natural hazards of the connecting corridors, futher the phytoecological processes dynamics of development stages of ecosystems, functional relations of bryoflora, mycoflora and epigeic communities in relation to the dead wood, research of biomass, activity and diversity of soil organisms, nutrient cycling and the soil physical-chemical characteristics in relation to the herb layer and dendroflora structure. Part of this research is also aimed at the ecological complexity and derivation of the resilience macroscopic indicators of natural ecosystems. Knowledge on unbalanced ecosystems thermodynamics will be aimed at the solar energy transformation by ecosystems, in order to derive the ecological sustainability indicator of ecosystem processes and landscape-ecological potential. Ecosystem services and ecological stability will be studied in relation to the research of complexity and resilience of ecosystems. The problem of environmental, scientific, tourism-recreational potential and ecological sustainability of ecosystems and World Natural Heritage lencsapes will be also solved.

Acknowledgements

This study was supported by the grant from the Agency for Science and Research APVV No 0190-12 and Grant Agency for Science VEGA No 1/0172/12.

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Zeitschrift/Journal: [Nationalpark Hohe Tauern - Conference Volume](#)

Jahr/Year: 2013

Band/Volume: [5](#)

Autor(en)/Author(s): Voloscuk Ivan

Artikel/Article: [From Research of the Carpathian Beech Virgin Forests to the World heritage 789-794](#)