

Report on the trip to the Šumava National Park, Aug. 10, 2012

Policy Committee of the Society for Conservation Biology Europe Section

The Policy Committee of the Society for Conservation Biology – Europe Section, met in Hluboka, Czech Republic, for three days during August 2012. A special item on the meeting agenda involved forest management activities in the Šumava National Park, a topic which has already been raised in a resolution of the Europe Section of the Society for Conservation Biology (SCB) in June 2012. During the Policy Committee meeting, members visited parts of the park to witness at first hand some of the problems and issues raised in the resolution. The management policy for the core zone of the Sumava NP over the last few decades has aimed to keep human disturbance and intervention to a minimum. The NP is noted for several Natura 2000 priority habitats and species, such as the Eurasian lynx, otter, capercaillie and black grouse. It is home for 53 protected species of birds and 66 species of birds on the Czech 'Red list'.

The team visit to “Ptačí potok – Na Ztraceném”, which is included in the core zone of the national park (Fig. 1, 2), was also attended by local experts. Recent activities here included extensive logging and de-barking of dead and dying trees in an attempt to contain the widespread infestation of spruce bark beetle (*Ips typographus*). A newly constructed or improved asphalt road that borders the core zone is used to carry even heavy vehicles including machinery.

A considerable amount of tree surgery activity was observed both within and also outside the core zone in those areas of forest infested with bark beetle. This included felling of dead and dying trees resulting in the clear-felling of spruce stands, as well as de-barking of standing trees. There appeared to be no real selection process for de-barking other than the necrotic state of the tree. A rough estimate of the scale of harvesting was made based on crude calculations of tree spacing and stocking density. A ball-point estimation for the spacing of trees was rounded up to approximately 5-8 m, which would equate to roughly 500+ trees per hectare (this is a conservative estimate as many trees were growing in closer formation than this figure suggests). Across much of the clear felled areas the ground was under a layer of recently stripped bark together with felled timber. As felling and extraction was still on-going this generated high levels of both noise disturbance and physical activity throughout the day. There was clear evidence of efforts being made to monitor the extent and level of infestation by *I. typographus* as numerous traps were observed across all affected areas.

From the preliminary findings of the visit the following conclusions and considerations are offered by the team:

- The current strategy and method of containment of the beetle infestation within the park boundaries and specifically within the core zone may be in breach of European legislation for Natura 2000 sites and IUCN protected areas. More specifically, activities may directly contravene the Habitats Directive legislation for sited priority habitats and species. For instance, the clear-felling of spruce outside the core zone and any such tree surgery activity within the core zone, together with other human activities and noise disturbance, are potentially detrimental for maintaining a favourable conservation status of the populations of several of the Habitats Directive Annex II species. Especially the three-toed woodpecker, black woodpecker and capercaillie populations are likely to be directly affected, as standing dead wood in old growth stands that contains colonies of bark beetle constitute vital foraging resources. Secondary effects, including human disturbance and loss of breeding holes at intervention sites, may also affect the Eurasian lynx, as well as several of the 53 protected species of birds such as the pygmy and Tengmalm's owl.

- Extensive clear-fell sites in natural forest stands, in particular in old growth forest, introduce extreme conditions to the system that results in unnatural changes to local microclimatic regimes, potential localized erosion, and disruption to forest-dependent species populations. Other environmental impacts include exposure to invasive species and environmental stresses, such as wind throw, fire, pathogen and further insect infestation. This last point is of particular concern as evidence from scientific studies indicate that infestation of spruce by bark beetle increases significantly in stands of forest that have been recently exposed by clear felling in adjacent lots.

- The practice of de-barking and clear-felling causes an excessive bark litter that prevents any vegetation regeneration. This, in turn, causes local extinctions for many plant and invertebrate species, and also exposes fragile forest soils to acute levels of erosion. In the long term, 'slash-and-clear' practices employed to contain bark beetle infestation have limited success because they open up potential fronts for future infestation in adjacent forest stands. Irrespective of the ecological justifications for discouraging this practice, the team questions the legality of clear-felling forest in designated core zones, or indeed, in a national park that is covered by both Natura 2000 and UNESCO designation status. No recent assessment of the impact of these practices on the conservation status of species and habitats or integrity of the Natura 2000 site has been done, as required by the Habitats Directive.

- The policy committee of the Europe Section of SCB is highly involved in advocating low intervention management of forests, and protection of roadless and wilderness areas as large and unfragmented as possible. Roads, especially paved ones, promote human activities and enhance disturbance into natural areas. Sadly, our observations along the aforementioned road indicate that human disturbances are maximized, rather than minimized, along the road we have been using (on bicycles).

- Finally, we would like to mention that – as a trans-boundary conservation area – the current management of the Šumava NP stands is in clear conflict with the non-intervention approaches that are taken on the German side in the Bavarian Forest NP, which

we strongly support. Intervention practices in Šumava NP may affect the conservation status of species and habitats of the Natura 2000 sites in the German Bavarian forest. The continuity of forested landscape between the Czech Republic and Germany significantly increases the conservation value of this regional landscape and is an important criterion in the UNESCO designation. Any activity on either side of national borders is likely to have 'ripple effects' on a trans-boundary scale. This would include movements of mobile species such as birds and large mammals but also pathogens, pest species, and various disturbance factors.

Therefore, we call for:

- urgent halting of the intervention management in the core zone;
- assessments of the impacts on rare species at the sites impacted by human interventions;
- restoration of the site in close contact with conservation experts to allow natural regeneration of the ecosystem and reduce hazards of potential further degradation of the ecological status of the forest;
- engaging in a participatory long-term planning of the site to reduce human disturbance by management, roads and visitors and enhancing potential synergies of cooperation to achieve the same conservation targets in both neighbouring national parks.

Members of the Policy Committee Society for Conservation Biology – Europe Section

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10 September 2012

* Participation in the field trip to Šumava National Park in June 2012.

Appendix 1: Photos from field trip to Šumava National Park in June 2012



Picture 1: Member of the Policy Committee SCB-ES at clear-felling site in Šumava National Park (photo P. Ibisch).



Picture 2: removal and debarking of felled trees as observed during the visit (photo P. Ibisch).



Picture 3: Debarked standing trees: note the large number of dark trees debarked, indicating that the debarking action was too late as a prevention measure (photo G. Pe'er).



Picture 4: Establishment of forest roads close to core zone of Šumava National Park (photo P. Ibisch).



Picture 5: Traffic on asphalt road close to core zone of Šumava National Park (photo P. Ibisch).



Picture 6: Recent improvement of asphalt road close to core zone of Šumava National Park (photo P. Ibisch).

Appendix 2: SCB – Europe Section Resolution on Šumava National Park



Society for Conservation Biology

Europe Section
President

Petr Nečas
Prime Minister of the Czech Republic
Office of the Government of the Czech Republic
Nábřeží E. Beneše 4
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27 March 2012

Dear Prime Minister Nečas,

The Society for Conservation Biology (SCB) is an international organization of conservation professionals. Its ranks include scientists, resource managers and educators. The society is dedicated to preserving biological diversity through science and education, and comprises over 5,000 members from more than 60 countries. The SCB Europe Section membership extends to almost every country in Europe, and the Section has organized thus far three European Congresses of Conservation Biology (ECCB), the second of which (Prague, 2009) received close to 1,500 conservation professionals attending it.

The SCB Europe Section has the duty to alert policy-makers when activities are likely to hinder biodiversity and ecosystems in Europe. The approach we take draws on sound scientific knowledge and understanding of the problems relating to the conservation of biodiversity. In this context, we hereby raise concern about current developments that threaten the conservation status of the Šumava NP, one of the largest well conserved transboundary areas in Central Europe. The importance of Šumava NP has been acknowledged by its designation as a Natura 2000 site, its inclusion in the list of world biosphere reserves, and the listing of its wetlands as a Ramsar site. At the Conference of Parties to the Convention of Biodiversity (CBD) in Nagoya 2010, world governments have agreed that at least 17% of the land area should be set aside as protected areas, with particular emphasis on a need to apply effective and equitable management, ecological representativeness and protection of well-connected systems of protected areas, especially when areas of particular importance for biodiversity and ecosystem services are involved. This global target must translate into regional activities, and clearly, Šumava NP is an important contribution to this target for the Czech Republic.

Led by the government of the Czech Republic and under the Czech Republic EU Presidency, a conference on wilderness and large natural habitat areas was held in Prague in 2009. The meeting concluded that the remaining areas with wilderness or rewilding potential in Europe should be regarded as unique asset and benefit from the highest level of protection. Recent developments in Šumava are in strong disagreement with these conclusions. According to information obtained through Czech members of SCB Europe Section, new laws would compromise the area's biodiversity by promoting various development activities not compatible with the national park's objectives.

The SCB Europe Section is deeply concerned about these developments. A targeted resolution on this topic has been published informing European conservation professionals and the general public about recent developments.

In light of the rigorous internationally-ratified legal requirements for safeguarding natural resources from local to global, SCB Europe Section asks for affirmation from the appropriate Czech authorities that Šumava NP will receive the full protection against such harmful development or other anticipated forms of human disturbance.

We welcome your response and will be happy to engage in a dialogue on how to achieve the protection requirements of Šumava NP.

Yours sincerely,

András Báldi PhD, Dsc

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http://www.conbio.org/images/content_groups/EESS/SCB_Europe_letter_to_Czech_Prime_minister.pdf

Resolution

concerning the preservation of the

Šumava National Park (Czech Republic)

The Bohemian Forest, with its two national parks (Šumava NP and Bavarian Forest NP), forms a unique forested zone in Central Europe and one of the largest forested areas between the Atlantic ocean and the Ural Mts. The large size of the Bohemian Forest allows long-term persistence of natural ecosystems. Nowadays, mountain spruce and mixed forests in all life stages, together with peat bogs and mountain meadows create a unique mosaic of biotopes, affluent by rare and endemic as well as endangered species like lynx, otter, pearl mussel, capercaillie, owls, woodpeckers and hole-nesting songbirds.

The Šumava NP, established in 1991 to protect the most valuable parts of the Czech side of the Bohemian Forest – together with the neighboring Bavarian Forest NP – forms the largest non-intervention area in the Central-European cultural landscape. Therefore, the first transboundary Central European Wilderness Area of international importance – Europe's Wild Heart – has been established here in 2008. The Šumava NP was included in the list of World Biosphere Reserves in 1990 and Šumava peat bogs are an important Ramsar site. The whole region of the Šumava NP is a Natura 2000 protected area – both in terms of the bird directive and the habitats directive).

Because of long-lasting disputes regarding its proper management, several international expert missions (IUCN, Ramsar, European Council, Europarc Federation, PAN Parks) visited the area several times and expressed their recommendations. Based on these and on many years of extensive on-site studies, an important body of Czech scientists from the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic and several prominent Czech universities, defined those areas in the Šumava NP (available at www.infodatasys.cz), which should be left untouched by any human activities (especially logging), in order to preserve their unique ecosystem processes and associated biological communities, still existing only in a few places in central and western Europe. Recent activities supported by the Czech national government and regional bodies seek to open Šumava NP for development and reduce the extent of non-intervention zones below the area previously defined by experts. Concretely, the draft of the new law that we have received from our Czech colleagues would imply an imminent risk of a couple of activities that would compromise the area's biodiversity, such as salvage logging in areas proposed as potential core zones, building touristic infrastructure within the NP (i.e., Modrava, Horská Kvilda, Prácheň), opening new trails in the most sensitive areas (peat bogs, capercaillie), canoeing on the Upper Vltava river (pearl mussels), establishing new tourist attractions in the most sensitive parts of the NP core zone (new winter pub in Břežník, new restaurant & exhibition – Roklanská chata), reestablishing or repairing old roads in core zone areas, or privatization of land close to the villages inside the NP converting them from meadows to land for construction. This is expected to result in irreversible losses of precious natural areas with high conservation value of European relevance, which would be in disagreement with the current international and national legislation.

The Society for Conservation Biology (SCB) Europe Section urges the Czech government to halt any further human interventions and disturbances, at any sites defined by the above-mentioned national and international experts as non-intervention areas. Especially, construction of a new chairlift in the Hrást-Smrčina area (a current core zone of the NP), any privatization of state properties around villages inside the NP, building new roads/trails or reconstruction of old forest roads in the above-defined core zones of the NP, are considered to be potentially detrimental. Other means for economic development of local communities and ways, how these communities might profit from the existence of the NP, must be developed. This will require a shift of economic activities from the current exploitation and hard tourism infrastructure projects to a diverse economy, which will be compatible with both sustainable standard of living of local human communities, and maintenance of vital ecological processes, levels of biological diversity, and continued existence of endemic and/or threatened species. The SCB Europe Section is prepared to offer their experts to help in looking for these ways.

The Society for Conservation Biology Europe Section urges the EU Commission, national governments, the scientific community and the general public to express their desire for continued protection of the Šumava NP as an important component of European natural and cultural heritage. Both the EU and European governments are challenged to help in providing the means for the Šumava NP to become a model for simultaneous implementation of nature conservation and development of local communities.