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Position of CEEweb on the draft report and resolution 'Wilderness in Europe' by Mr. Gyula Hegyi MEP

General comments and concrete amendments

1 Strong support for the report

The report and resolution represent a political declaration by the European Parliament that wilderness is important – and such a declaration is welcomed by CEEweb.

CEEweb hopes that this declaration, once adopted, will be followed by constructive follow-up which integrates the wilderness concept into mainstream conservation policy.

This is why it proposes amendments to the resolution to **ensure that the Commission and member states include wilderness in their broader policies, such as Natura 2000, biodiversity action plans, the 7th Environment Action Plan and any future biodiversity framework strategy.**

2 Invasive Alien Species supported

CEEweb totally supports the statements by Mr Hegyi calling for an EU-wide legislative framework to combat invasive alien species (points F and 15 of the resolution). Wilderness, being areas not used by human activities, face as the most important threat to their good ecological status the risk of alien species invading and suppressing or displacing the indigenous species of plant and animal. Alien species such as American mink, pond terrapins, bullfrogs, Japanese knotweed, ruddy ducks etc are already causing major problems to European habitats and wildlife; only a coordinated EU-wide framework ensuring that all member states act together can stop more alien species arriving and can begin the task of rolling back those already present.

3 Tourism opposed

CEEweb has doubts about the several references to tourism in the report and resolution. The message of the wilderness report should not be giving the impression or allowing the interpretation to “open existing wilderness areas for tourism”.

Situations such as in the PANPark Rila NP (Bulgaria), where 8 ski-resorts are being built in a ring around the mountain, are not sustainable for nature and negate the whole idea of wilderness. 'Wilderness' must not be used as a clever sales argument for more of the kind of intensive tourism which has already damaged natural landscapes in many places across Europe.

In CEEweb's opinion, the message should be first and foremost to “designate / create more wilderness areas because we need wilderness for nature conservation”

CEEweb is of course aware of the importance that local communities, especially in isolated and rural areas, gain income and employment opportunities from their natural heritage, just as from their cultural heritage. Therefore, it is **not against using small, limited parts of wilderness areas for sustainable tourism** – not for “tourism in general”, not for large-scale resorts and infrastructure nor for leisure activities which disturb wildlife, but for “special tourism based on the wilderness experience”. There are market opportunities for this kind of tourism, because people want to experience wild nature. Using limited parts of the wilderness areas to develop sustainable high-quality, not high-quantity, tourism can even be a suitable “compensatory measure” for local communities compensating decreasing of incomes from the exploitation of natural resources through forestry, hunting, fishing etc – exploitation which would end when areas become designated wilderness (re-wilded).

There are already several examples across Europe where this approach, of closing the largest part of the wilderness area to all access except scientific research and of opening a limited part to nature-based tourism, with packages and offers provided by operators from the local community, is working.

PANParks, being a certification scheme for well-managed nature tourism in national parks, can play a role in developing these solutions.

CEEweb therefore proposes amendments to ensure that the resolution promotes such win-win combinations of wilderness area and limited wilderness-experience tourism.

4 Definition urgently needed

CEEweb considers that definition of ‘wilderness’ is an important task for follow-up. It is necessary for any further work, to avoid confusion, misunderstanding, etc., or even abuse where dynamic and semi-natural habitat types which ought to be actively managed are declared ‘wilderness’ in order to escape the cost and effort of management.

As an example of definition problems, CEEweb holds the 10.000 ha limit for wilderness to be too restrictive. For instance, the strict reserve in Bialowieza National Park, a ‘forest wilderness zone’ and important reference point for forest ecology in lowland Europe, has an area of ca 5000 ha and would thus fall outside the definition of wilderness! If we limit to areas >10.000 ha it means in practice we are focused only on mountains and Scandinavia ...

Instead of setting numerical limits, CEEweb thinks that the message of the wilderness concept and of this report ought to be more “space for nature”. More room for natural processes to take place, but on all spatial levels – not only very big (>10.000 ha), but also medium (100-10.000 ha) or small (1-100 ha), depending on the local situation, and not restricted to forests and mountains.

A debate on wilderness definition ought to be wide-ranging, involving all interested organizations. **The plans of the Czech presidency to organize a European conference on wilderness in the spring of 2009** would seem to provide the ideal platform for such a debate.

5 Studying the drivers of wilderness loss

Once wilderness is defined, mapping wilderness and evaluating benefits is useful to provide authoritative and comprehensive information on the extent and location of wilderness, and its intrinsic value. Given that the Commission is already running a study programme (TEEB) to assess the value of biodiversity, evaluating wilderness benefits should be included in this programme.

CEEweb however considers that follow-up studies should above all focus on the relationship between wilderness areas and European policies which could have a direct impact on them:

- the Trans European Networks (which could cut through wilderness zones and increase fragmentation),
- the CAP and the biofuels targets (which could be reducing the areas of marginal farmland being given back to natural processes and bring set-aside/abandoned land, which is re-wilding, back in production);
- spatial planning (to define and preserve wilderness zones);
- the Marine Strategy (for wilderness areas at sea).

In relation to point 13 of the resolution, CEEweb holds that the formulation it now has is ambiguous – **giving stricter protection to wilderness inside Natura 2000 sites could be read to mean that less protection is OK for non-wilderness inside Natura 2000**. Natura 2000 is an integral whole; it is results-oriented (favourable conservation status of everything, including of wilderness) and should not be differentiated into ‘core’ and ‘buffer’ sections. Point 14 on the other hand is important and could even be improved to make it clearer mean connectivity and networking between sites (also in view of climate change adaptation) is meant.

6 Non-management and favourable conservation status

“We have to protect the nature, but through human use” is true for semi-natural habitats and some dynamic habitats, but it is contradictory to the idea of wilderness. Wilderness is, to CEEweb’s understanding, an area where there is no human intervention and natural processes, including ‘catastrophes’ like storms, wildfires and floods, have free play. Therefore CEEweb considers that follow-up to this resolution should, for example, **accentuate more the role of natural processes in maintaining ecosystems**, and recognize them as a component of ‘structure and function’ parameters within favourable conservation status criteria.

Such natural processes, and the structural elements generated by such processes, should be expressed and included as criteria for measuring favourable conservation status – for example dead wood, trees uprooted, and the presence of natural gap dynamics should be considered as criteria for ‘perfect forest’ (FV status).

Favourable conservation strategy should not be defined too narrowly – all natural fluctuations should be considered within the vision of FV status, not counted as negative factors.

Greater understanding and recognition of natural processes in maintaining the favourable conservation status in habitats is certainly needed within conservation, and the wilderness idea can help to achieve this.

Thus in the strict forest reserve of Bialowieza NP (Poland), where ecosystems are left to natural processes, Habitats Directive Annex I forest habitats and Annex II forest species and birds are in an excellent conservation status, much better than in the managed part of Bialowieza Great Forest Complex. This proves that it is sometimes an excellent idea to “keep something wild” and “manage by doing nothing”.

Of course, this is not a general rule. Even not all types of forest habitats get better conservation status when left unmanaged, and among habitat classes such as grasslands management is necessary in the vast majority of cases.

Yet it is important to underline, as this report does, that wilderness and non-management have a role to play in conservation and deserve more attention than they have had so far.

To make sure that this message is not diluted, CEEweb proposes removing the term ‘management’ from certain parts of the resolution (such as points 5 and 12 of the resolution).

CEEweb's proposed amendments to the draft resolution

Point 1

To read 'calls on the Commission to define wilderness, after hearing the opinions of interested parties, such as through the planned Czech presidency conference on wilderness'

Point 3

To read 'calls on the Commission to undertake a study of how wilderness areas relate to, and are affected by, the CAP, the biofuels target, the Trans European Networks, the Marine Strategy, spatial planning etc and to ensure that the value and benefits of wilderness protection are included in the current study programmes on TEEBs'

Point 5

Delete the words 'tourism packages' and 'measuring and improving management effectiveness';

Insert at the end the words 'and introducing wilderness-related concepts such as the role of free natural processes and structural elements resulting from such processes into the monitoring and measurement of favourable conservation status'

Point 9:

Replace existing text by:

'In view of the well-documented damage which tourism has inflicted, and continues to inflict, on many of Europe's most precious natural heritages, calls on the Commission and the Member States to ensure that tourism, even if focusing on introducing visitors to the habitats and wildlife of a wilderness area, is handled with extreme care, making full use of experience gained inside and outside Europe on how to minimise its impact, and with reference, where appropriate, to Article 6 Habitats Directive. Models where wilderness areas are for the most part closed to access (outside of permitted scientific research), but where a limited part is opened to sustainable high-quality tourism based on the wilderness experience and economically benefiting local communities, should be considered'

Point 12:

To read 'Calls on the Commission to develop guidelines on how to protect, monitor and finance wilderness areas under the Natura 2000 network, with special attention to the principle of non-management which is at the core of the wilderness concept'

Point 13:

To delete the words 'special role and stricter protection'

To read instead 'Calls on the Commission and member states to acknowledge the wilderness zones in the natura 2000 network as living laboratories which can serve to generate a greater understanding and recognition of natural processes in maintaining the favourable conservation status in habitats'

Point 14:

To read 'calls on the Commission to ensure that the Natura 2000 network will be strengthened further, through connectivity and interlinking between sites, to become a coherent and functioning ecological network, able to adapt to the effects of climate change, in which wilderness areas have a central place'