

by CEEweb for Biodiversity

The European Union scales up its effort to protect wilderness

Brussels, Belgium – The European Commission calls for ‘wilderness’, a new approach in nature conservation additional to the traditional management approaches. Wilderness refers to large natural areas without human intervention, governed solely by nature. A European Presidency conference was held on 16-17 November to share good examples and to discuss several issues important for a Wilder Europe, such as vision, benefits, management, policy, communication and funding. Central and East European NGOs took part in the process.

What is wilderness?

The term ‘wilderness’ refers to **large, undisturbed natural areas**. These places are governed by natural processes without human intervention, and offer sanctuaries for wild plants and animals. But that’s only one of the special things about wilderness. The other one is purely emotional: people who are lucky enough to visit such areas, often sense a **unique experience of spiritual quality** which might change their basic attitude to nature, to mankind, and sometimes even to themselves.

Why wilderness is relevant in Europe?

And still, wilderness in Europe has been mostly out of talk until the last decade. The reason for this is that wilderness had been perceived to be something which belongs to other continents, whilst Europe’s strength lies mostly in its cultural heritage. In fact, Europe hosts wilderness on less than 1% of its territory – much of which is under high pressure of human disturbance. On the other hand, there is another 1% of European land with the potential for succeeding into true wilderness, if the initial steps of this process are assisted by restoration (e.g. removing infrastructure, reintroducing native species including large herbivores and carnivores, etc.). This 1% comprises natural and semi-natural areas and is backed by the Europe-wide trend of rural depopulation and abandonment of agricultural land. **Europe is rewildening, which brings a unique momentum for creating space for nature.** Besides significantly strengthening the effectiveness of European nature conservation, this would bring many other benefits to local communities, landholders and European society in general: wilderness areas can offer substantial environmental, economic, social, and cultural gains for them (such as tourism development, personal therapy and many more).

The wilderness momentum in the European Union

A conference on ‘Rebuilding the Natural Heart of Europe’ was organized by the Belgian EU Presidency and the Wild Europe Initiative on 16-17 November 2010, in Brussels. The European Commission’s DG Environment clearly stated its aim to **introduce the wilderness concept into European policy** by including it in its Post-2010 Biodiversity Strategy. As Ladislav Miko (Director of Natural Environment, European Commission DG Environment) has stated, wilderness is part of our European identity, and beyond the clear emotional and ethical reasons, preserving its coherence and healthy functions would provide us essential tools when facing challenges of a rapidly changing world (such as climate change and resource scarcity). Wilderness protection will be realized in 3 pillars: strict protection of remaining wilderness areas is the priority, followed by re-wilding of large natural areas as well as restoration of suitable abandoned land. A Register for Wilderness is going to be created, and specific guidelines for wilderness management within Natura 2000 sites are compiled. Kurt Vandenberghe (Head of Cabinet, Environment Commissioner of the European Commission) has **put the concept into a broader view of green economy**, and he promoted the integration of wilderness approach into the EU’s reformed Agriculture Policy, Cohesion Policy and the new EU Budget. Mr. Vandenberghe emphasized that while focusing on growth and jobs, it is vital for the EU to ensure

that essential public goods provided by nature will not be sacrificed. Enabling natural processes to operate on large unmanaged areas is one effective tool to ensure this.

History of the European Wilderness concept:

Since 1999: The PAN Parks Foundation works to protect Europe's wilderness by creating a network of European protected areas eligible for wilderness criteria

Since 2005: the Wild Europe initiative brings together a range of organizations which promote a coordinated strategy for protection and restoration of wilderness and large wild areas

2009: The European Parliament passed a Resolution in February 2009 calling for improved protection, funding and promotion of wilderness areas. It was adopted with 538 votes in favour and only 19 against, representing a massive cross party endorsement and a strong popular mandate for action.

2009: The EC Presidency Conference on Wilderness and Large Natural Habitat Areas, held in Prague on 28/29 May 2009, developed a series of policy recommendations for protection and restoration of Europe's wilderness and wild areas.

2010: 'Restoring the Natural Heart of Europe': EC Presidency Conference on wild area restoration

Special relevance in Central and East Europe

As strict protection of remaining wilderness areas is a priority, the new EU Member States in **Central and East Europe** play special role in wilderness protection, since they - together with Nordic countries - **host the vast majority of these areas**. Therefore it is essential for these countries to be aware of their key role in the process, invite wide range of experts and stakeholder in the discussions at national level and channel their ideas into the discussions at EU level. They should set clear national goals (e.g. Czech NGOs Hnutí DUHA and Friends of the Earth CZ have initiated a discussion in the Czech Republic about re-wildening 3% of its territory), and designate their first wilderness areas.

Role of NGOs in the process

CEEweb for Biodiversity has organized a workshop for some committed CEE NGOs, subsequent to the conference 'Rebuilding the Natural Heart of Europe', with the aim of discussing NGOs' role in the process. CEE NGOs would like to grab the momentum and stimulate the process, by taking part in consultations with relevant organizations (such as PAN Parks, the Wild Europe Initiative and the European Commission DG Environment) regarding the technical details and methodology, discussing the issue with various national nature conservation organizations, and raising awareness of national governments as well as the general public, the latter in cooperation with PAN Parks. As CEEweb is an umbrella organization with member NGOs throughout Central and East Europe, it is ready to do coordinated actions covering the region.

Now, please take a look at some breathtaking photos of European nature at the website of 'Wild Wonders of Europe' (<http://www.wild-wonders.com/>), to see how amazing natural treasures Europe still hosts.

Useful links

CEEweb for Biodiversity <http://ceeweb.org/>

European Commission about Wilderness and large natural areas

http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/natura2000/wilderness/index_en.htm

Wild Europe Initiative <http://wildeurope.org/>

PAN Parks <http://www.panparks.org/>

Restoration Conference <http://wildeurope.org/index.php/restoration/restoration-conference.html>

About CEEweb for Biodiversity

CEEweb for Biodiversity is an umbrella organization of NGOs in the Central and Eastern

European region. Our mission is the conservation of biodiversity through the promotion of sustainable development.

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