



Strasbourg, 6 March 2017
[de13e_2017.doc]

T-PVS/DE (2017) 13

CONVENTION ON THE CONSERVATION OF EUROPEAN WILDLIFE
AND NATURAL HABITATS

Standing Committee

37th meeting
Strasbourg, 5-8 December 2017

**Group of Specialists on the
European Diploma for Protected Areas**

8 March 2017
Palais de l'Europe, Strasbourg, Room 6

**UPDATE REGARDING THE BIALOWIEZA NATIONAL
PARK**

*Document prepared
by Dariusz GATKOWSKI, Biodiversity Policy Specialists, WWF Poland*

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Białowieża: Logging threat to old-growth forests – Update 2 March 2017

Białowieża forest is the best preserved forest ecosystem and the last low-land deciduous old-growth forest in Europe and hosts Europe's largest bison population. Białowieża forest is characterised by natural processes and has seen little human intervention and impact compared to other European forests. The Polish area of the Białowieża Forest is in its entirety protected as EU Natura 2000 site (PLC200004) and a transboundary UNESCO World Heritage Site. One-third of the Polish area of the forest is protected as a national park and nature reserves (strictly protected areas), while the remaining two-thirds are subject to forest management.

- In 2008, the European Commission launched a procedure of a structured dialogue (EU pilot) with Poland because of intensive wood extraction in the Białowieża forest. Negotiations resulted in a compromise: the logging limit was lowered and set at the level of wood needed to fulfil local community demand. As a result, in 2013, the Commission closed the structured dialogue.
- In March 2016 the Polish Ministry of the Environment accepted an update to the Forest Management Plan (FMP) for Białowieża Forest District, which allows for a threefold increase of wood extraction.
- The increase in timber extraction was criticized by the most important scientific bodies and institutions responsible for nature protection in Poland. Also the public strongly opposed large-scale cutting of trees in Białowieża. More than 160,000 people signed the appeal¹ for protection of this site. The increase of wood extraction approved by the Ministry of Environment breaches the agreement reached in 2013 under the EU pilot.
- On 19 April 2016 seven Polish and international NGOs submitted a legal complaint² to the European Commission to warn that Poland had breached Article 6 of the Habitats Directive, as there had been no appropriate assessment of the impact of the planned increase of logging on the Natura 2000 site.
- On 16 June 2016 the European Commission started a formal infringement procedure.
- On July, at the 40 session of World Heritage Committee, there was adopted the decision 40 COM 7B.92³ in which the Committee:
 - Notes with concern the recent amendments to the Forest Management Plan for the Białowieża Forest District in Poland [...] and the recently adopted "Programme for the Białowieża Forest as a UNESCO Natural Heritage and a Natura 2000 site", which would allow active habitat restoration interventions in two thirds of the area of each of the three Forest districts in Poland within the property which could result in disturbance of natural ecological processes.
 - Requests the State Party of Poland to submit to the Committee an evaluation of potential impacts on the amendments to the Forest Management Plan on the OUV [Outstanding Universal Value] of the property...
 - Also requests [...] to take any necessary measures to maintain the continuity and integrity of protected old-growth forest in Białowieża Forest and to ensure that no commercial timber extraction is permitted within the entirety of the Polish part of the property and considers that such commercial timber extraction would represent a potential danger to the property in accordance with Paragraph 180 of the Operational Guidelines;

¹ <http://kochampuszcze.pl/>

² Complaint to the European Commission concerning alleged breach of Union law:
<http://www.documents.clientearth.org/wp-content/uploads/library/2016-04-19-complaint-to-the-european-commission-concerning-alleged-breach-of-union-law-over-logging-bialowieza-coll-en.pdf>

³ <http://whc.unesco.org/en/soc/3469> (adopted decision to be found at the bottom of the web-page)

- [...] reiterates its request to the States Parties of Belarus and Poland to prepare such a [management] plan as a matter of priority in order to ensure a coordinated approach to the management of the property and to guarantee that no actions can be allowed within the entire property that could negatively impact on its OUV;
- On 15 September 2016, the Polish Directorate General of State Forests, the holding subordinated to the Minister of the Environment, issued a decision to increase the log-ging limits for 2016 in all three Forest Districts of Białowieża Forest. It was decided to start extracting wood according to the amended Forest Management Plan in Białowieża Forest District. The increase of logging limits was motivated by:
 - the public safety reasons, what is understandable if dead wood stays on the site, which is not always the case;
 - the fire safety reasons, what is misleading as the fire hazard level in three Forest Districts invariably stays at the same, the lowest (the safest) level, as reported by relevant, official services;
 - “the implementation of plan of protection tasks for Natura 2000 site”, what can-not be accepted as the forestry is listed there as one of threats to the Natura 2000 site.
- At the end of 2016, the decision was implemented and intensified logging has been observed. The wood extraction was running in the UNESCO zone excluded from log-ging (“partial protection II” zone where forestry is forbidden), most of wood was sold commercially (not for local community use for its own purposes as heating).
- The Polish Government plans to continue logging in Białowieża Forest District according to the amended FMP in 2017. This was confirmed by the Deputy Minister of the Environment, Andrzej Konieczny, during a press conference held on 16 February 2017.
- Until now, the proper impact assessment of increased logging on the Natura 2000 and World Heritage sites were not prepared.

As the intensive logging, foreseen in the amended FMP is threatening the integrity, natural processes and unique biodiversity value of the forest. The situation on the ground clearly shows that Poland is not taking the public and scientific opinion, concerns of the Commission and the World Heritage Committee into account.