

Strasbourg, 17 March 2010
[files09e_2010.doc]

T-PVS/Files (2010) 9

CONVENTION ON THE CONSERVATION OF EUROPEAN WILDLIFE
AND NATURAL HABITATS

Standing Committee

30th meeting
Strasbourg, 6-9 December 2010

Complaint in stand-by

**Threats to Vjetrenica cave
(Bosnia and Herzegovina)**

REPORT BY THE NGO

*Document prepared by:
The Academy of Sciences and Arts of Bosnia and Herzegovina*

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About Vjetrenica cave

Vjetrenica cave is situated in Popovo polje karste area and it is the most popular karst phenomenon in Bosnia-Herzegovina. In the warmer parts of the year a cold air blows from entrance of Vjetrenica (which means “wind cave”).

It is the largest cave in Bosnia and Herzegovina. For the time, cave has been explored and described to a total of 7.013 meters in length; of this the main canal is about 2,47 thousand meters long (from the edge of Popovo polje to the south). There are several permanent and occasional streams, and lakes, which the largest is about 168 m. long. There are many stalactites, flowstone, draperies, cascades and others calcite forms.

Probably the largest number of species has been described there: according to still incomplete data, Vjetrenica is the locus typicus for more than 35 species.

The Vjetrenica cave is the habitat of 101 troglobiontic organisms (see enclosed journal article), for 38 of which the Vjetrenica is the locus typicus, and for no fewer than 14 the only known habitat. The fauna includes three monotypic genera and two of the three species of subterranean fauna on the Natura 2000 List (*Proteus anguinus* and *Congerina kusceri*). Other species in Vjetrenica, in addition to *Proteus*, the only cave-dwelling vertebrate in Europe, and *Congerina*, the world's only subterranean fresh-water mollusc, include:

Velkovrhia enigmatica – the only species in the genus, a unique freshwater species of the family Bougainvilliidae, and the only troglobyte Hydrozoa (Sket 2003);

Marifugia cavatica – the only freshwater serpulid (Serpulidae) and the only stygobite (Polychaeta);

Pholeoteras euthrix – the only known cyclophorid (Cyclophoridae) in Europe, a relict of ancient tropical fauna (Sket 2003);

Dina absoloni – the first recognized stygobitic leech (Hirudinea).

The remains of several fossilised animals have been found in it, the largest being the cave bear (Carnivoria, Ursus spelaeus) and one complete skeleton of a leopard (Carnivoria, Panthera pardus).

On the rocks at the entrance to the cave there are two carved stones, typical for Medieval tombstones in this region.

In a scientific sense, Vjetrenica has been the site of many different forms of research, which may be traced back to the 16th century. Pliny the Elder in his work Historia naturalis mentions a nameless cave from which a strong whirlwind blows, and he was actually referring to Vjetrenica.

More information available on www.vjetrenica.com

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**P.O. Box 36
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31 August 2009

Prime Minister FBiH
Mustafa Mujezinović
Alipašina 41
Sarajevo
BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

Dear Prime Minister,

I am writing to express my very deep concern about the damage being done to the Popovo-Vjetrenica Region of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

This area comprises a remarkable collection of landforms. It includes the immense and complex polje of Popovo, the Vjetrenica Cave and the plateau above the cave. The cave itself has a unique morphology and micro-meteorology and one of the greatest examples of subterranean bio-diversity in the world. It is unquestionably one of the most important examples of natural heritage in a karst area.

Indeed, it is regrettable that the current development of the cave for tourism purposes is being conducted without the expertise that such a complex and important site demands. Together with inappropriate extraction of water from the system, improper use of agricultural chemicals and extremely poor practice in quarrying this is greatly degrading the natural values of the site.

Let me state my credentials for this assessment. I have now been involved for 56 years in the study of karst, in campaigning for its preservation and conservation and in establishing effective organisational arrangements for appropriate management. This has involved me in working across 70 different countries including most parts of the immense areas of China and the United States. I have held many significant positions in international organisations including having led the IUCN/WCPA Task Force on Caves and Karst. I have also taught or examined a large number of post graduate students in karst studies. From all of this I make the judgement that Vjetrenica and Popovo comprise one of the most significant karst heritage sites in the world.

I can only say that I believe the extent to which you and your colleagues in Government are neglecting the proper protection and conservation of this region will go down in history with great discredit to yourselves. It will be a tragedy for the future of your country and the respect in which it should be held by governments throughout the world.

It is vital that you should establish an expert group to assess what should be done to ensure proper protection and management of the region. I personally know and have worked with many of the people from whom such a group might be selected and appointed.

If you accept my concern and decide to act on it, I would be glad to return once more to visit your country and assist in establishing such a group. I would also be glad to oversee the planning process and help to commence its implementation.

Yours sincerely
Elery Hamilton-Smith
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