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REPORT

**ON THE SPOT EXPERT APPRAISAL OF THE
POLONINY NATIONAL PARK**

(SLOVAK REPUBLIC)

22-23 August 2017

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The European Diploma for Protected Areas (EDPA) was first awarded to Poloniny National Park in the Slovak Republic in 1998. The Group of specialists on the European Diploma for Protected Areas decided at its meeting in 2016 that an on-the-spot appraisal be undertaken during 2017 to assess whether the EDPA should be renewed for a period of 10 years from 2018.

This report is written in relation to a consideration of the renewal of the EDPA for the 10-year period from 2018 until 2027. No member of the Secretariat in Strasbourg was present during the on-the-spot visit from 20 to 24 August 2017.

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THE REMIT

At its meeting on 8 March 2017, the Group of Specialists on the European Diploma for Protected Areas (EDPA) decided to carry out on-the-spot appraisals of the areas which are subject to the EDPA renewals in 2018. Poloniny National Park in the Slovak Republic was one of these EDPAs.

In a letter dated 6 June 2017, signed by Iva Obretenova, I was asked to be “the independent expert in charge of the on-the-spot appraisal, visiting the site, meeting relevant stakeholders as per the draft agenda, and preparing a report, including the necessary recommended actions”. Furthermore, the letter stated that “the objective of the on-the-spot appraisal is to assess whether the conditions of the site remain the same as when the Diploma was awarded and extended, or whether they have improved or deteriorated”.

INTRODUCTION TO THE POLONINY NATIONAL PARK

It has to be admitted that there is a history of problems with the Poloniny National Park; the question that was asked was whether it should or should not continue to hold the EDPA. Indeed there was a time 2 to 3 years ago when a proposal to withdraw the EDPA from Poloniny National Park was drawn up (Paper T-PVS/DE (2015) 9). However, the EDPA was not withdrawn at that time; hence consideration now needs to be given to as to whether the EDPA should be renewed from 2018 onwards.

There are three facets of the National Park which need to be taken into consideration in assessing whether or not the EDPA should be renewed.

First, there is the background of the people who lived in the watershed of the Starina Dam. The construction of the dam and the filling of the reservoir occurred between 1981 and 1987. All seven villages along the Cirocha River were compulsorily relocated. This led to considerable distrust by the people affected and often outright opposition to anything suggested by government and its agencies. Even 30 years after completion of the dam, two people from Ruské wanted to speak to me and tell me why they considered that the EDPA should not be renewed (and also why the Poloniny National Park should not be on the World Heritage List). From what I heard, the management of the National Park is making considerable strides to gain the confidence of the local population, but trust between people and authorities will take many decades to be fully developed.

Second, the approval of the *Poloniny National Park Management Plan for 2017 – 2026*, with its many appendices, is a considerable advancement, despite the many delays. The Action Plan in Appendix 6.6.17 of the management plan is particularly important, and its successful adoption and implementation is essential for the long term well-being of the EDPA site.

Third, I felt that the management of the National Park, under the leadership of the (relatively) newly appointed and relatively young Director, Mário Perinaj, is reasonably vibrant. This bodes well for the future, though I am aware that Mário faces very considerable challenges.

My overall conclusion is that these three inter-related factors are important when considering the remainder of this report and considering whether or not to renew the EDPA for the Poloniny National Park.

EUROPEAN INTEREST

The particular European interests in the Poloniny National Park are the beech (*Fagus sylvatica*) forests. In many places there are more or less pure stands of beech trees, some of which are extremely ancient. In some areas the beech is intermixed with silver fir (*Abies alba*) and occasionally with Norway maple (*Acer platanoides*). There is a number of transitional forest types – alder (*Alnus glutinosa*) becoming more frequent in the wettest areas, and in disturbed areas mixtures with species such as oak (*Quercus robur*), birch (*Betula pendula*), hornbeam (*Carpinus betulus*), rowan (*Sorbus aucuparia*), aspen (*Populus tremula*) and willow species (*Salix* spp.). It is the silvicultural system used in the management of the beech forests which is particularly important in the Poloniny National Park (this topic will be further developed later in the report; see ‘Conservation measures: forests on page 7).

Whereas the beech forests form the largest percentage of the National Park's area, they are interspersed with meadows, the so-called 'poloniny', which gave the National Park its name. It is this mosaic of habitats which provide the National Park with its considerable range of species and variety of habitats. The published inventory of plant species indicates 40 species of ferns and their allies, 3 species of conifers, and 914 species of flowering plants occurring within the National park (published in 1991). For the invertebrates, the inventories include 724 species of spiders, mites, etc. (Arachnida – published 2003), 1467 species of beetles (Coleoptera – published 2001), 2254 species of flies (Diptera – published 1995) and 819 species of butterflies and moths (Lepidoptera – published 2000). Whilst these totals are impressive, without doubt more species will be added in time as further inventory work becomes available.

There is also a wealth of vertebrate species, including amphibians, reptiles, birds and mammals. Considerable information about these is given in the management plan's introductory sections; the numbers of species are 13 amphibians, 8 reptiles, 211 birds and 63 mammals. The management plan also lists 18 habitats and 101 species of European Community interest (and hence worthy of inclusion within the Natura 2000 sites)

There is no doubt that the Poloniny National Park retains very considerable European interest for its biological resources, especially the beech forests which also form a part of the 'Primeval Beech Forests of the Carpathians' on the World Heritage List. Whether or not the European interest has changed since the EDPA was first awarded is almost impossible to ascertain. However, my impression is that the problems of the past are being overcome slowly and hence that the European interest is therefore likely to be maintained or possibly improved.

BRIEF APPRAISAL OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF CONDITIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

At the renewal of the EDPA in 2012, 5 conditions and 7 recommendations were attached. In this section of the report I provide my brief assessment of the extent to which these 12 issues have been addressed. This is based on observation and discussions whilst I was in Slovakia, and on the annual reports submitted to the Council of Europe by the Slovakian authorities and the Poloniny National Park.

Condition No. 1: Finalise and adopt the management plan for the park within two years of the renewal. The specified time span of two years was not achieved. However, a management plan was approved by Government Resolution on 7 July 2016 for implementation between 2017 and 2026. There is a large number of annexes to this plan, but the most important is the Action Plan in Annex 6.6.17. This condition has now been complied with (although there will be a further discussion of this later in the report; see 'The Management and Action Plans' on page 10).

Condition No. 2: Start work on devising a new blueprint for forestry and hunting management in the diploma-holding area, taking greater account of the biological imperatives dictated by its European significance, within one year of the renewal. The national authorities shall supply a strategic plan for the sustainable development of the woodland during the next period of validity of the diploma and inform the Group of Specialists on the Diploma each year of the progress made. The blueprint shall include revision of the current hunting allocation in the diploma-holding area, ensuring that the functional units each cover a surface area of 3 000 to 4 000 hectares, consistent with the biology of large herbivores. Progress has been made on this condition, as outlined in the annual reports submitted to the Council of Europe. Whilst progress might have been slower than anticipated when the EDPA was last renewed, much of this has now been subsumed into the management and action plans approved by Government Resolution in July 2016.

For the forests, there is a continual dichotomy of opinion between local people, who wish to exploit the forest resource to the maximum, and the conservation interests, which wish to see the forests in as natural a state as possible. Post 2014, there were 17,599 ha of 'economic forests' and only 9,649 ha of forests which were under a greater protective regime. A further 72 ha, the Borsukov Hill Nature Reserve, should be moved from an 'economic' to a 'protected' status in the near future. However, there remain considerable concerns about the exploitation of these forests.

There have been considerable developments in the management of hunting, especially with management plans having been finalised for grey wolf (*Canis lupus*), brown bear (*Ursus arctos*) and

Eurasian lynx (*Lynx lynx*). Deer were evident during the visit, though more work is needed to protect the endemic (to the Carpathian region) subspecies of red deer (*Cervus elaphus montanus*) from the non-native subspecies (*C. elaphus hippelaphus*). There are on-going discussions with hunting organisations in relation to the management of bison (*Bison bonasus*).

Although perhaps not completely in the prescriptive manner of the wording, this condition has largely been fulfilled by implementation of the management and three hunting plans.

Condition No. 3: Create a functional network of protected areas during the next period of validity, meeting international standards in this area and complying with the national Law on Nature and Landscape Protection (notably sections 28 and 30). Work continues in meeting this condition. The Borsukov Hill Nature Reserve was declared on 1 January 2016, increasing the area in the 5th level of protection (see definitions of levels of protection on page 8 of this report) by about 8%. There are, however, legal restrictions on what can be achieved. Because this is a long-term process, this condition should be retained in a modified form as a recommendation (see Recommendation 1, listed in Annex 3).

Condition No. 4: Pursue the steps taken to purchase private forests and draw up a future purchasing plan with specific objectives, indicating the funding to be assigned to this purpose each year. This condition can only be fulfilled at times when private owners wish to sell their land. If a private owner wishes to sell land within the National Park, it first has to be offered to the State (i.e. the Ministry of Environment). Compliance with this condition has therefore to be opportunistic, taking advantage on any land coming on the market. As the offer of sale to the State is a legal requirement within the National Park, no further condition or recommendation is required.

Condition No. 5: Set up a scientific programme inventorying and monitoring the large carnivore populations in the diploma-holding area: the national authorities shall submit the scientific protocol for that programme for opinion to the Group of Specialists on the Diploma within one year of the renewal. A variety of approaches has been used. These include studies on the behaviour and health of brown bears. Although it is estimated that there are 46 individual bears within the National Park (this number is variable due to movement of bears across national frontiers), no licences have been, or are being, issued to hunt them. Research on wolves, probably with 2 packs within the National Park, has been coordinated with two universities. This condition has therefore been complied with.

Recommendation No. 1: Give the management of the diploma-holding area responsibility for forestry and hunting matters and involve it in the corresponding decision-making process. It is difficult to judge to what extent this recommendation has been acted upon. Annual reports refer to various Acts of Parliament and Agreements which stipulate how relationships between the Ministry of Environment, the State Nature Conservancy and the Poloniny National Park will be conducted. The appointment of the (relatively) new Director for the National Park provides hope that he will be able to liaise freely with the authorities in terms of implementing the National Park's management and action plans.

Recommendation No. 2: Consider the signature of a simplified agreement between the bodies directly responsible for managing the protected areas on the borders of the three neighbouring countries (Poland, Slovakia and Ukraine), based on the programming of joint activities. I was not able to assess this during the visit. No one was present at the meetings from either the Polish or Ukrainian sides of the border. However, reference to the trilateral agreement in 2013, as well as the joint meeting, with Germany also present, in Slovakia in 2015, indicates progress with this recommendation.

Recommendation No. 3: Pursue efforts to upgrade human resources, in particular by taking on more technical staff and wardens, and very substantially step up funding, at least doubling the annual ratio per hectare for the period of validity of the diploma. An increase in numbers of staff has been achieved. At the time of the visit there were 15 full time staff and 1 temporary member of staff working full time for four months in the information centre.

Recommendation No. 4: Give full protection to wolves and ban shooting them throughout the area of the national park. This recommendation has been fulfilled, with the grey wolf being fully

protected in the Poloniny National Park (as well as in the adjoining area of Poland, and, although unconfirmed, also in the adjoining area of Ukraine).

Recommendation No. 5: Strongly consider the designation of a hunting district within the park as a strict cynegetic reserve. It is difficult to know quite what this recommendation means. It is presumed to relate to the protection of the Carpathian subspecies of red deer (*Cervus elaphus montanus*) in the face of migration into the area by the Central European subspecies (*C. elaphus hippelaphus*). This issue was mentioned in relation to condition 2 above, and hence action appears to be taking place in relation to this recommendation.

Recommendation No. 6: Pursue the efforts to restore buildings in the traditional regional style: the park might devise a charter of architectural rules for local authorities. As has been stated in annual reports, this recommendation has been complied with. During the visit three wooden churches were visited, the restoration partly funded by grants from Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway.

Recommendation No. 7: Start experimenting with the selective felling of beech forest in a state-owned woodland unit: the national authorities shall inform the Group of Specialists on the Diploma each year of progress made. It would appear that only limited progress has been made on this recommendation. An important study investigated the economics of selective felling against clear felling, taking the long term view of sustainability of income. The results of this research will help the National Park administration in discussions about forest management with the private owners and their associations and with timber companies.

Conclusion. It would appear that three of the five conditions have been complied with, and, of the remaining two, one will be the subject of recommendations in this report and the other is a legal requirement in the Slovak Republic. Progress has been made on either 5 or 6 of the seven recommendations. My assessment is therefore that both the Slovakian authorities and the National Park management have made considerable strides in complying with the twelve conditions and recommendations attached to the last renewal of the EDPA.

CONSERVATION MEASURES

Forests

Broadly speaking there are four silvicultural systems for the management of forests. One is to leave the forest completely untouched so that the trees grow, mature, die and regenerate in a manner which can be termed 'natural' or 'near-natural'. The other three silvicultural systems are based on intervention to fell trees— they are selection forest, shelterwood forest and clear-felled (or clearcut) forest. The *selection system* relies on single trees or small groups of trees being felled, extracted, and natural regeneration occurring within the gaps which have been created. There are several types of *shelterwood system*, but essentially the forest stand is heavily thinned so as to allow light to reach the forest floor and natural regeneration to germinate and grow. Growth of these young trees is enhanced by further thinning of the mature trees until all of the older trees have been cut and removed (a variant of this system is for a strip to be felled and, once regeneration has reached a certain height, then an adjacent strip to be felled). The *clear-felling system* requires larger areas of mature trees to be felled and the forest regenerated by (usually) planting the desired species.

According to the Slovakian Act 543/2002 Coll. of 25 June 2002 on Nature and Landscape Protection, five levels of forest protection are identified (as defined on pages 8 to 11 of the English language translation of the Act). Briefly, these are

- Level 1: more or less any silvicultural system can be used provided that it does not influence natural habitats of European interest or damage or destroy habitats of national interest. None of the forests in the Poloniny National Park are classified as level 1.
- Level 2: more or less similar to level 1, though there are further restrictions on actions which might cause environmental damage. Land in level 2 accounts for approximately 5,099 ha (all of which is located within the buffer zone of the Poloniny National Park). All of this is effectively in the buffer zone.

- Level 3: this level imposes further restrictions on environmental impacts, and implicitly, though not explicitly, advises against a clear-felling silvicultural system. The majority of forests within the Poloniny National Park (24,919 ha or 91% of the National Park) are classified as level 3.
- Level 4: this incorporates the safeguards on environmental damage listed in levels 1 to 3, but explicitly prohibits clear-felling of forests. Only approximately 9 ha (less than 1% of the National Park) are defined as level 4.
- Level 5: This is essentially the ‘natural’ forest, without any management interventions. There are approximately 2,325 ha (8.5% of the National Park) of forests in this level.

Information about areas of forest in the various levels of protection, together with information about ownership, is given in Table 1.

Degree of nature protection	Total area	Forest land in state ownership	Forest land in private ownership	Other land
Level 5	2381	1964	361	56
Level 4	52	5	4	44
Level 3	27380	15957	8962	2461
Total in National Park	29812	17926	9326	2561
Level 2 (Buffer zone)	10966	3526	1574	5867

Table 1. Information on the areas of the National Park and its buffer zone, according to ownership categories and levels of protection. All areas are in hectares (ha) and are rounded to the nearest whole number of hectares. Information provided on 4 October 2017 by Jana Durkošová and Marián Gic.

Herein lies a difficulty. Local people and corporate owners wish to exploit the forests so as to gain an income from the sale of timber, and hence there is pressure for privately owned land to be included in level 2 (or indeed in level 1, but this could only occur outside the National Park and its buffer zone). National Park conservation and landscape interests would wish to see as much forest as possible in level 4 or level 5.

Ownership of the land in the National Park is diverse. Forest land in state ownership is by three bodies (the Forest Agriculture Estate, Ulič, s.e.; Forests of the Slovak Republic s.e. – Branch Plant Vranov nad Topľou; and Slovak Water Management Enterprise, s.e.). Together this represents 66% of the surface area. Private owners and their associations, known and unknown, own a further 33% of the forest, and the remaining 1% is church-owned.

Given that this is a National Park, the following two recommendations can be made.

Recommendation 1: A prioritised plan for all land in state ownership to be re-classified in levels 3, 4 or 5 should be developed; and demonstrable progress should be made in re-classifying the forest in level 3 into either level 4 (with exploitation by a selection silvicultural system) or into level 5 (no exploitation).

Recommendation 2: Owners of land in private, association and church ownership should be encouraged to move their land into level 3 or level 4, utilising a single tree or group selection silvicultural system wherever appropriate.

Grasslands (meadows)

The grasslands, which form a mosaic with the forests, have previously been managed by a traditional form of land management. When there were farms, these meadows were grazed (and some would have been cut for hay), but with the decrease in farming activity, and with a falling human population size, the traditional form of management has been abandoned. Given this scenario, the meadows would be invaded by shrubs and trees, and hence change into some form of mixed-species woodland.

The National Park was named after these ‘poloniny’ meadows, and they contribute significantly to the biodiversity of the area. They therefore need to be managed in a manner which will maintain both their biological and cultural interest, neither allowing them to be invaded by woody plants nor allowing their nutrient status (by input from decomposing vegetation or from the atmosphere) to be increased.

Ideally, management would be in the traditional manner of summer grazing by livestock. If it proved to be possible to assist the farmers who remain in the area by the innovative use of agri-environmental funds, this would ensure the continued value of these meadows. However, in the absence of farmers able to undertake this form of management, cutting of the grass after the flowering species have set their seed would be appropriate. The cut vegetation has to be removed from the meadow so as not to lead to a build-up of nutrients and/or humus in the soil. The importance of these meadows within the National Park leads to a further recommendation.

Recommendation 3: Maintain the management of meadows, preferably by summer grazing with livestock or alternatively by cutting and removing the cut material from the site.

Cultural heritage

As well as the meadows mentioned above, there are many other objects of cultural significance within the National Park. Prime amongst these are the wooden churches, and very considerable work has been undertaken to restore them. A cycle route, the ‘Icon Cycloroute’, of 109 km links the 9 wooden churches, including those within and outside the National Park. Another cultural feature is the Porta Rusica, a stone road built between 1861 and 1865, with various stone monuments, stone culverts, and nearby military cemeteries. Whereas the cemetery which I saw at Topľa was in excellent condition, only vestiges of the Porta Rusica’s original condition could be seen.

During the visit, I did not gain the impression that there was an inventory of all objects of cultural significance. It would seem essential to draw up such an inventory and then to prioritise those in urgent need of restoration. Although a very considerable programme of work has already been completed on objects of cultural significance, some of it funded by external nations, further restoration work will be required. Thus, a further recommendation is:

Recommendation 4: Liaising with appropriate stakeholders, especially those involved with sustainable tourism, prepare an inventory of objects of cultural significance within the National Park and support a prioritised programme of restoration of these culturally significant objects.

MANAGEMENT

The management and action plans

The management plan for Poloniny National Park was approved by the Government of the Slovak Republic on 7 July 2016. As its preparation was a condition for the renewal of the EDPA in 2013, it was submitted to the Council of Europe. Robert Brunner and Hervé Lethier were asked to provide their common opinion on this plan (given in paper T-PVS/DE (2017) 10).

The opinion is that the management plan “cannot be seen as meeting the ED requirements and responding to the preservation of the values and interest of the diploma holding area”.. Furthermore, they say “this document lacks a vision and a statement which presents how the European interest of the area as well as its outstanding universal value will be preserved in the long term; there is a clear need also to elaborate further and target the operational objectives and concrete measures that will be taken to meet those objectives”.

These, and many other criticisms included in paper T-PVS/DE (2017) 10, are important and need to be considered by the authorities in the Slovak Republic. However, attached to the management plan is Appendix 6.6.17 (entitled 'Poloniny NP Action Plan'). Whilst this in part rectifies the deficiencies in the management plan itself, it is important that the actions are carried out and that the assessment of their success (or otherwise) is recorded. Three examples of entries in the action plan are included in Annex 2, which also gives further details about the 52 specific actions within the plan. However, for the long-term well-being of the National Park, two conditions to the renewal of the EDPA can be suggested.

Condition 1: A detailed report, covering every one of the 52 actions in the 'Poloniny NP Action Plan' (Appendix 6.6.17 of the 'Poloniny National Park Management Plan for 2017-2026') should be made to the Council of Europe before the end of the fifth year of the plans' implementation period, i.e. by 31 December 2021.

Condition 2: Work should have commenced by 2022 on revised management and action plans for the Poloniny National Park so that they can be approved (by Government Resolution, if necessary) before they are due to be implemented on 1 January 2028.

Other management issues

It was perhaps surprising that at no time during the on-the-spot visit were there any complaints about lack of funding for the National Park, nor about lack of human resources. However, inspection of the 2017-2026 management plan indicates level funding of €87,587 for each year from 2018 until 2026 (Table 14 on page 68 of the management plan). Even although inflation rates are relatively low in 2017, level funding of this nature does not allow for inflation over the 10-year period, nor might it allow for the purchase of any private forests which might become available within the National Park.

The human resources of the National Park in August 2017 are equivalent to 15.33 full time staff, or approximately 1 member of staff per 2660 ha of the park and its buffer zone. Although the resources seem appropriate for the year 2017, the level funding over the next 9 years indicates that it is likely that the National Park will become increasingly under-resourced during the period of the management plan (i.e. between 2018 and 2026). Thus further resources will be required if the full implementation of the required actions in the NP Action Plan is to be achieved.

Condition 3: In order to achieve a satisfactory outcome of the actions detailed in the Poloniny NP Action Plan, adequate resources, both financial and human, need to be deployed.

The NGO scene in Slovakia is rather different from that in other countries, as there is no wide spectrum of NGOs specialised on various taxonomic groups of plants and animals (except for two national ornithological NGOs) or on particular habitats. There is, however, the Friends of the Earth Slovakia, which is an association of three environmental NGOs – Friends of the Earth (CEPA), Friends of the Earth SZP and WOLF Forest Protection Movement. The latter aims to protect all forests in Slovakia, supporting the change of the management regime to that of non-intervention, i.e. that no felling takes place. In order to further this aim, I was informed that the NGO is prepared to bring cases to court; again, from what I was told, none of these cases have been successful so far. However, in relation to Poloniny National Park, there is the ever-present possibility that a court case might be brought due to the management of forests in levels 2, 3 or 4.

Research and monitoring

At the time of the previous EDPA renewal the need for research into forest management, as well as the monitoring of some animal populations, were included in recommendations. During the on-the-spot visit there was some evidence of both research and monitoring, but these activities were generally small scale. Sound management practice is generally founded on the results of research and hence this aspect of the National Park's management must not be neglected.

Similarly, to plan effectively for the conservation of important species (mammals such as the brown bear (*Ursus arctos*), birds such as the boreal owl (*Aegolius funereus*), insects such as the ant-dependent *Maculinea* butterflies, and plants such as the green shield moss (*Buxbaumia viridis*)), there is a periodic requirement (not necessarily yearly) for monitoring. Whilst research and monitoring are time consuming activities, assistance can be obtained from University-based projects and by what is

now termed ‘citizen science’ (i.e. by using amateurs, hunters’ organisations, NGOs, etc.). There may be benefits in developing a Research/Scientific Advisory Committee, incorporating people from universities and NGOs who have experience relevant to the National Parks activities. As well as assisting in the coordination of scientific data, such an advisory committee could ensure that quality of the information collected.

Recommendation 5: Develop effective programmes of research and monitoring which provide data helpful to the management of the National Park’s resources.

USES AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES

It is sad to record that the Poloniny National Park was created in 1997 in an atmosphere of controversy. The building and filling of the Starina Dam during the 1980s meant that the populations of seven villages were displaced, engendering a feeling of mistrust between local people and the authorities. Even today, I heard complaints that the inhabitants of displaced villages were unable to return freely to the sites of their previous villages (in one instance I was told that permission is granted for only one day each year). Ways need to be found to build the trust between the National Park authorities and the local population. This requires recognition that the presence of the National Park must be seen to assist the economic well-being of local people.

Tourism predicated upon the National Park would appear to be one possible solution. The park has great natural heritage value for tourism, but it also has other features such as the wooden church at Topľa, which I visited. There was a complete contrast between the Starina Dam and the much smaller dam (Morské Oko) in the Vihorlat Landscape Area – essentially no tourists are able to visit the former, whereas the latter was well visited (when I visited outside of the formal on-the-spot visit). The opening of the whole area around the Starina Dam would be a step in the direction of encouraging some tourism in the National Park and in gaining the support of local people. The question which needs to be addressed is “what are the benefits, and to whom, of closing the valley with the Starina Dam to visitors?”. These need to be compared with the undoubted benefits of opening the area to visitors.

If tourism, taking advantage of the local environment, is to be encouraged, then the infrastructure required has to be put in place. The mayor of one village said that it was not possible to create tourist accommodation in his village because the water supply – a single well – just did not have the capacity, and piped water would be needed. Whilst such infrastructure projects might not be appropriate for the National Park authorities, liaison with local authorities to assist the local population will be required. Whereas a number of relatively small projects are outlined in the Poloniny National Park Action Plan (section 5.6), an over-arching view of tourism in and near the National Park needs to be undertaken. This leads to a recommendation:

Recommendation 6: A tourism development strategy and a prioritised action plan need to be devised and implemented with the local stakeholders so that the infrastructure of facilities can be developed for the benefit of both the National Park and the economic well-being of the people who live in the area.

As outlined in the Poloniny National Park Management and Action Plans, the National Park and its surrounding area is not short of other resources. There are many traditional crafts and there are opportunities for small-scale local industries such as brewing, collection of fruit, herbs and mushrooms, and the use of hay, straw, wood by-products. A ‘Tourism Development Strategy’ needs to consider this range of resources and assess how the National Park can be an integral and vital part of the region’s economic development. As the National Park’s importance becomes increasingly valued, so its conservation and protection is likely to become increasingly important.

CONNECTIVITY OF THE AREA

Parts of the Poloniny National Park have been inscribed on the UNESCO World Natural Heritage List since 2007. This UNESCO site originally linked beech forest habitats in three nations – Germany, Slovak Republic and Ukraine – as ‘The Primeval Beech Forests of the Carpathians and the Ancient Beech Forests of Germany’. UNESCO now refers to this site as ‘Ancient and Primeval Beech

Forests of the Carpathians and Other Regions of Europe'. The description of the site on UNESCO's website is as follows:

“This transboundary extension of the World Heritage site of the Primeval Beech Forests of the Carpathians and the Ancient Beech Forests of Germany (Germany, Slovakia, Ukraine) now stretches over 12 countries. Since the end of the last Ice Age, European beech spread from a few isolated refuges in the Alps, Carpathians, Mediterranean and Pyrenees over a short period of a few thousand years in a process that is still ongoing. This successful expansion is related to the tree's flexibility and tolerance of different climatic, geographical and physical conditions”.

To the north of the northern boundary of the Poloniny National Park, which is also the national boundary between the Slovak Republic and Poland, is situated the Bieszczadzski National Park. This is also a European Diploma site. I found it interesting that the management each side of the border was different. The meadows of the Slovakian side had been cut in 2017 whereas those on the Polish side were uncut. The beech forest which I walked through on the Slovakian side was classified in Level 3, though because of the difficulty of operating in such steep terrain it was essentially in Level 5. However, on the Polish side the forest had been managed by a shelterwood silvicultural system, with a more or less even-aged stand of beech trees and reasonably extensive regeneration. Greater cooperation in the management of the two EDPAs might result in this abrupt change in habitat management from one side to the other side of the path along the national boundary. Indeed there might be benefits in 'twinning' the two EDPAs in the way that Gran Paradiso National Park in Italy and Vanoise National Park in France consider their European Diploma as “twinned diplomas”.

During both days of the visit we were accompanied by staff from the neighbouring Landscape Protected Areas – Východné Karpaty and Vihorlat. Whilst these are not part of the Poloniny National Park, they are nevertheless important environmental features and need to be considered in relation to any tourism developments. It is essential that cooperation continues between the managers of the National Park and the World Heritage site, and authorities responsible for these protected areas, both within and beyond the Slovak Republic's borders.

Recommendation 7: Cooperation should be maintained with the other nations which incorporate parts of the 'Ancient and Primeval Beech Forests of the Carpathians and Other Regions of Europe' World Heritage Site, as well as with Bieszczadzski National Park in Poland and the two neighbouring Landscape Protected Areas – Východné Karpaty and Vihorlat.

CONCLUSIONS

Over the last decade there have been serious concerns about the felling of beech trees within the Poloniny National Park. It seems inimical that such operations are allowed to continue in what has been declared as a 'protected area'. Indeed these concerns have been so great that a paper was written in 2015 which recommended the withdrawal of the European Diploma for Protected Areas from the Poloniny National Park.

Exploitation of the beech forests is still occurring, though this might be expected in a situation where the forests are owned and managed by private individuals and associations, and by companies whose *raison d'être* is timber production. However, beech forests managed by a shelterwood silvicultural systems (as seen in Bieszczadzki National Park adjoining the Slovakian border) or by a single tree or small group (<0.25 hectare) selection silvicultural system, can be effective in preserving both biodiversity and landscape values.

A real concern relates to the value of the existence of the National Park to the local people. An atmosphere of distrust was certainly created at the time of the construction of the Starina Dam and the closing of the watershed to visitors. However, meeting the village mayors and their representatives also indicated the emergence of more positive views. The Mayor of Topľa, for example, was enthusiastic about the restoration of her village's wooden church. Trust needs to be increasingly built between local populations and the 'authorities', and the positive attitudes of many of the village mayors is a good sign for the future.

In conclusion, I recommend that the EDPA be renewed for the 10-year period, 2018 to 2027. However, attached to such a renewal should be a set of 3 conditions and 7 recommendations. These are discussed in the report, and are listed for convenience in Annex 3.

END NOTE

The report has been written assuming that, after the initial 5 years, the renewal of the European Diploma would be for a period of 10 years, i.e. from 2018 until 2027. The 3 conditions and 7 recommendations made in the body of this report, and listed in Annex 3, have been made on the assumption that renewal, if approved, would be for this 10-year period.

However, it has been suggested that the ‘Group of Specialists on the European Diploma for Protected Areas’ may prefer to consider two options for the renewal of the European Diploma. Given the history of tardy compliance with the conditions, and with the previous threat to withdraw the European Diploma, the ‘Group of Specialists’ might wish to consider whether a 10-year renewal is appropriate. It may, for example, be appropriate only to renew the European Diploma for 5 years, and after that to consider whether a 10-year renewal, or a further 5-year renewal, is the most appropriate course of action.

If the ‘Group of Specialists’ wishes to recommend the renewal of the European Diploma for a period of 5 years, then the 3 conditions and 7 recommendation will require re-consideration. A possible revision of the suggested conditions would be as follows:

Condition 1: Replace condition 1 in Annex 3 with the following – “A detailed report, covering every one of the 52 actions in the ‘Poloniny NP Action Plan’ (Appendix 6.6.17 of the ‘Poloniny National Park Management Plan for 2017-2026’) should be made to the Council of Europe before the end of the fourth year of the plans’ implementation period, i.e. by 31 December 2020”.

Condition 2: Replace condition 2 in Annex 3 with the following – “Work should have commenced by 31 December 2020 on updating the management and action plans for the Poloniny National Park in readiness for consideration of the renewal of the European Diploma for the period 2023 to 2027”.

Condition 3 and **Recommendations 1 to 7** would probably need no revision, though progress on all of these 8 topics should be demonstrable by 31 December 2020.

Annex 1**ON-THE-SPOT EXPERT APPRAISAL OF THE POLONINY NATIONAL PARK:**

Programme, 20 to 24 august 2017

Sunday 20 August

Flight from Edinburgh to Amsterdam; hotel accommodation near Amsterdam Airport.

Monday 21 August

Flights from Amsterdam to Prague and then onwards to Košice.

Met by Mária Gič, and drive (c. 2 hours) to Snina; overnight stays at Hotel Kamei.

Introduction to the people listed below.

Jana Durkošová (Director of Department of Nature and Landscape Protection, Ministry of Environment of the Slovak Republic (MoE), Bern Convention including European Diploma, Natura 2000)
 Roman Bies (Director of Division of Nature Protection, State Nature Conservancy of the Slovak Republic (SNC))
 Branislav Hrabkovský (CMS, Natura 2000, MoE)
 Jana Janecová (Management plans for species; economic tools of nature protection, MoE)
 Michaela Mrázová (Coordinator of International Agreements, SNC)
 Jana Roskošová (Budget department, MoE)
 Simona Stašová (UNESCO heritage, Natura 2000, ecosystem services, MoE)
 Zuzana Angelovičová (Interpreter)
 Martin Djovčoš (Interpreter).

Tuesday 22 August

Visit to the renovated wooden Church of St Michael Archangel, Topoľa.

Drive into the Starinská Dolina Valley to the Porta Rusica (the road built in 1861 connecting the Slovak town of Michalovce with the Polish town of Baligród).

Walk in the Šipková National Natural Reserve (beech forest with enclaves of poloniny meadows).

Discussion meeting at the forest cottage in Ruské.

Brief visit to the Starina Water Reservoir Dam.

Evening discussions with Mário Perinaj, Milan Boroš and Jozef Gregorovič.

People, additional to the above list, who contributed to the day's programme were:

Milan Boroš (General Director, SNC)
 Marián Gič (SNC – Administration of the Poloniny National Park, IT expert, European Diploma)
 Jozef Gregorovič (District Chairman, Most-Híd Party, one of the parties in the Slovak Republic's coalition government)
 Michal Krul' (Member of the Veľká Poľana Landowners' Association)
 Róbert Latta (President of the Zvala Landowners' Association)
 Ján Lempel' (SNC – Administration of the Poloniny National Park, Ranger; President of Ruské Landowners' Association)
 Anna Macková (zoologist, environmental education, SNC – Administration of the Východné Karpaty Protected Landscape Area)
 Miroslav Oharčák (President of the Smolník Landowners' Association)
 Mário Perinaj (SNC – Director of the Administration of the Poloniny National Park)

Milan Piroš (SNC – Administration of the Poloniny National Park, Forester)

Wednesday 23 August

Visit to Havešová National Nature Reserve.

Visit to the Orthodox Catholic (Carpathian) wooden churches at Hrabová Ráztoka and Šmigovec, and finally view of a huge protected oak tree at Dúbrava village.

Visit to the small zoological garden in Snina, and two discussions; the first with two people from the Ruské Village, and the second with the group of mayors of villages in the Starinská and Uličská Dolina Valleys.

Evening discussion with Jana Durkošová, Mário Perinaj and Michaela Mrázová.

People, additional to those listed above, who contributed to the day's programme were:

Pavel Binzar (former resident of Ruské Village)

Mária Bobříková (Mayor of Topoľa Village)

Vasiľ Dinič (Mayor of Nová Sedlica Village)

Ladislav Hríb (former resident of Ruské Village)

Ján Holinka (Mayor of Ulič Village)

Ján Hrabovčín (Production Coordinator, Lesopoľnohospodársky majetok Ulič, state enterprise)

Lubomír Hrinko (SNC, Administration of the Vihorlat Protected Landscape Area, ranger)

Ladislav Ladomirjak (Mayor of Zboj Village)

Martin Riľák (Mayor of Ruské Potok Village)

Milan Sičák (Mayor of Uličské Krivé Village)

Jana Šidorová (Mayor of Kolbasov Village)

Peter Šiška (Director of Lesopoľnohospodársky majetok Ulič, state enterprise).

Friday 25 August

Drive from Snina to Košice Airport with Ján Lempel.

Flights from Košice to Prague, to Amsterdam and finally to Edinburgh.

Annex 2

THREE EXAMPLES DRAWN FROM THE ‘POLONINY NP ACTION PLAN’

Section 5 of the *Poloniny NP Action Plan* contains the details prescriptions for the management of various aspects on the National Park. These prescriptions are grouped into 10 sections, which are:

• 5.1	Fauna	21
• 5.2	UNESCO (Carpathian Beech Primeval Forests)	2
• 5.3	Habitats of Community Importance Requiring an Active Management	5
• 5.4	Cultural values	3
• 5.5	Work in Both All Society and Nature Conservation Interest	5
• 5.6	Tourism and Biking	7
• 5.7	Maintaining the Traditional Livestock Breeds	1
• 5.8	Environmental Education	1
• 5.9	Contributing to Regional Economic Development of the Involved Poloniny NP Locations	6
• 5.10	Research and Scientific Activities	1

This gives a total of 52 specific actions included within the Action Plan. Three examples of the information about the actions, what will be done, the amount of finance required and where it might be sources, and how success might be measured, are given in the examples.

EXAMPLE 1

5.2 UNESCO (Carpathian Beech Primeval Forests):

5.2.1 Ensuring the No-Intervention Mode in the World Heritage Areas

Description of current situation: Currently there is a renomination project active in order to extend the current Carpathian Beech Primeval Forests (UNESCO) site to more locations. Existing site are under Category V and III level of protection, which means that the majority of their areas has due protection, but Category III areas are still under regular management. New sites are under Category III level of protection, too. They entail protective, special purpose and commercial forests. They must be recategorized into a Category V level of protection, in order for the no-intervention mode to be applied there. Another possible solution is an agreement between owner/user and nature conservancy on area management by no-interventions based on due financial motivation.

Necessary measures: ensuring the no-intervention mode in these sites.

Location: c.a. of Zvala, Smolník, and Ruské municipalities.

Estimated costs:

Source of financing: Quality of Environment Operational Programme.

Objective of the measures: to ensure the due protection of the World Natural Heritage sites – the Carpathian Beech Primeval Forests.

EXAMPLE 2

5.3 Habitats of Community Importance Requiring an Active Management

5.3.1 Mountain Hay Meadows (Nature 2000: 6520) (Poloniny Meadows)

Description of current situation: The name “Poloniny” comes from Ukrainian. It refers to the meadows above the timberline, which were intensively used in the past for cattle grazing and regularly mowed. This is not true anymore, as cattle is not extensively bred in the area anymore and the need to mow the meadows for hay perished. This management system, however, very positively influenced

the creation of conditions for botanical species of Community importance. Gradual succession causes a decrease in the “Poloniny” meadows area and this means that the reason for the existence of the Poloniny NP name is vanishing, too. An active management is needed to preserve them.

Condition of habitats: ongoing succession of tall herb species (reed grass, blueberry).

Objective of the measures: to stop the ongoing unwanted succession, to improve the conditions of species of Community and national importance.

List of measures: hand mowing (brush cutter with trident), in accessible locations the machine mowing (once a year by 1 July).

Responsibility of: involved parties conducting the management.

Measurable indicator: intervention area (ha).

Estimated costs: hand mowing €1,000/ha, machine mowing €400/ha, hand removal of self-seeding woody plants €1,500/ha, machine removal of self-seeding woody plants €900/ha.

Location: EFA6, size of 99.0404ha, possible support for 50ha.

Source of financing: Quality of Environment OP.

EXAMPLE 3

5.6 Tourism and Biking

5.6.5 Creation of Campsites

Description of current situation: The Poloniny NP area is interesting for a specific group of tourists. They generally seek deep forests, where they find opportunities to forget about their everyday problems. However, the accommodation capacity in the area is not sufficient. One of possible solutions is to build campsites in villages from where they go hiking, such as Nová Sedlica and Ulič.

Necessary measures: creation of campsites offering tented opportunities as well as accommodation in the case of bad weather.

Estimated costs: Developing the project documentation of campsites: €1,500; building campsites of the same style: 4 x €10,000.

Objectives of the measures: to increase the proportion of tourists visiting the Poloniny NP area.

Annex 3**THE SUGGESTED CONDITIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS WHICH COULD BE ATTACHED TO THE RENEWAL OF THE EUROPEAN DIPLOMA FOR PROTECTED AREAS IN 2018**

In considering the on-the-spot visit in August 2017, it is my recommendation that the European Diploma for Protected Areas be renewed for the period 2018 to 2027. I also recommend that the renewal should have 3 conditions and 7 recommendations attached to it, as listed below.

However, there is an option, outlined in the 'End note' on page 15, for the renewal to be for a period of 5 years. This would entail reconsideration of conditions 1 and 2 in the list below, as outlined on page 15.

Condition 1: A detailed report, covering every one of the 52 actions in the 'Poloniny NP Action Plan' (Appendix 6.6.17 of the 'Poloniny National Park Management Plan for 2017-2026') should be made to the Council of Europe before the end of the fifth year of the plans' implementation period, i.e. by 31 December 2021.

Condition 2: Work should have commenced by 2022 on revised management and action plans for the Poloniny National Park so that they can be approved (by Government Resolution, if necessary) before they are due to be implemented on 1 January 2028.

Condition 3: In order to achieve a satisfactory outcome of the actions detailed in the Poloniny NP Action Plan, adequate resources, both financial and human, need to be deployed.

Recommendation 1: A prioritised plan for all land in state ownership to be re-classified in levels 3, 4 or 5 should be developed; and demonstrable progress should be made in re-classifying the forest in level 3 into either level 4 (with exploitation by a selection sylvicultural system) or into level 5 (no exploitation).

Recommendation 2: Owners of land in private, association and church ownership should be encouraged to move their land into level 3 or level 4, utilising a single tree or group selection sylvicultural system wherever appropriate.

Recommendation 3: Maintain the management of meadows, preferably by summer grazing with livestock or alternatively by cutting and removing the cut material from the site.

Recommendation 4: Liaising with appropriate stakeholders, especially those involved with sustainable tourism, prepare an inventory of objects of cultural significance within the National Park and support a prioritised programme of restoration of these culturally significance objects.

Recommendation 5: Develop effective programmes of research and monitoring which provide data helpful to the management of the National Park's resources.

Recommendation 6: A tourism development strategy and a prioritised action plan need to be devised and implemented with the local stakeholders so that the infrastructure of facilities can be developed for the benefit of both the National Park and the economic well-being of the people who live in the area.

Recommendation 7: Cooperation should be maintained with the other nations which incorporate parts of the 'Ancient and Primeval Beech Forests of the Carpathians and Other Regions of Europe' World Heritage Site, as well as with Bieszczadski National Park in Poland and the two neighbouring Landscape Protected Areas – Východné Karpaty and Vihorlat.