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**STEERING COMMITTEE FOR THE PROTECTION AND MANAGEMENT
OF THE ENVIRONMENT AND NATURAL HABITATS
(CDPE)**

**Group of specialists - Protected areas
(PE-S-ZP)**

**Szénás Hills Protected Area
(Hungary)**

On-the-spot appraisal

by

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(France)

1. Introduction

The on-the-spot appraisal took place on 13 and 14 July 1994 in the company of Mr Hacourt, representing of the Council of Europe Secretariat. We were accompanied by Mrs Katalin Madas, of the regional directorate of the National Agency for Nature Conservation, Dr. Andreás Horánszky, botany teacher, and Mr Peter Csontos, botanist. We were also invited to attend an information meeting and an audio-visual presentation concerning the reserve, in which Mrs Louise Lakos and Mr L.Peregovits, a butterfly specialist, took part. On 17 July we were received at the headquarters of the National Agency for Nature Conservation by Mr János Tardy, Deputy Minister of the Environment, in the presence of Mrs Louise Lakos, Mr Zoltán Szilassy, Dr.Sandor Szabó, regional director of the Agency, and Mrs Katalin Madas.

2. Description of the site

The Szénás Hills are a dolomitic complex ranging from 220 to 558 metres in altitude located a little to the south of Budapest. The protected area covers 1182 hectares. The flora of these hills is of considerable interest. The southern slopes, exposed to the sun, have a sub-mediterranean vegetation characterised by karst oak, *Quercus pubescens*. The northern slopes, in shadow for much of the time, are covered by sub-atlantic beech. In the neighbourhood of the ridge the forest is replaced by dolomitic grassland where there are many species of rare plants protected by Hungarian legislation, notably a species of flax which is endemic to the region: *Linum dolomiticum*. Here again the vegetation varies according to the orientation of the slopes: thermophilic on the sunny slopes, adapted to the cold on those mainly in shadow. On the ridges the soil is generally shallow with rock outcrops in many places. The climax vegetation is herbaceous. Where the soil is deeper, ligneous plants, *Juniperus*, *Crataegus*, *Fraxinus*, appear. It is possible that this is a stage in the natural succession towards forest.

The visit having taken place in mid-July, the flowering of most of the plants was already over, but it was still perfectly possible to see the very great botanic diversity of the meadows. They are also rich in animal species, notably butterflies, of which we saw large numbers. There are also rare reptiles such as the skink *Ablepharus kitaiblii*, and probably the snake *Coluber jugularis* which is threatened with extinction in Hungary.

A substantial part of the area previously covered by natural grasslands has been planted with Austrian black pine, *Pinus nigra*.

The natural forest of oak, beech and hornbeam on the slopes and in the valley bottoms was coppiced for a long time. Exploitation is now limited to a certain amount of thinning.

Of the 1182 hectares of the reserve, 942 are covered by natural deciduous forest, 100 by dolomitic grasslands and 120 by the pine plantations.

3. Protection and ownership title

The creation of protected areas and their system of protection are governed by a legislative decree of 1982 and its implementing regulations of the same year. The different types of protected area which may be designated are national parks, natural monuments, protected landscapes and special protection areas. These last are in fact nature reserves. All protected areas are established by decision of the National Agency for Nature Conservation. The particular rules applicable to each are laid down in regulations issued by the Agency.

The area for which the Diploma application has been submitted consists essentially of a special protection area, itself designated within the protected landscape of the district of Buda which was established, together with the special protection areas it contains, in 1978 under the legislation in force before the legislative decree of 1982. The latter is now fully applicable to the area in question, however.

The decision of 1978 contains general provisions for the protection of the protected landscape as a whole and additional rules for the special protection areas within it. Throughout the protected landscape area it is prohibited, without the prior authorisation of the National Agency for Nature Conservation, to change the use made of any land, modify the bed or banks of any watercourse, or burn any vegetation. Any culling or removal of wild fauna is also prohibited except in the case of species for which hunting or fishing is permitted by the legislation governing these activities. In the special protection areas no buildings are allowed except for the purposes of nature conservation or the management of the forests or wild fauna. It is also prohibited to discharge waste water, even after treatment, or to use fertilisers or chemical products on the meadows or grassland and within a belt of 50 metres around them. In the wooded areas clear felling is prohibited and efforts must be made to increase the diversity of the indigenous forest species and the ages of the trees in the population. The dolomitic grasslands are to be maintained in the natural state and no longer be given over to plantations.

The application for the award of the Diploma also concerned two areas adjoining the special protection area, to form a buffer zone of 163 hectares. The first of these two areas is a pear orchard and the second comprises agricultural land and a wood. They belong to cooperatives and individuals. Since they both form part of the protected landscape of the district of Buda, all the rules governing this area also apply to them. In particular, any constructions or changes in land use are subject to authorisation by the National Agency for Nature Conservation. These two areas are, however, only fragments of the very much larger protected landscape of which they form part. As they lie outside the special protection area, and as their status is different and they are in no way defined within the protected landscape, it does not seem possible to include them in the Diploma site, if only because, since they cannot be named, they would have to be described sufficiently precisely for their limits to be clearly determined. On the other hand, maintaining them as they are appears necessary to safeguard the integrity of the special protection area, and it is therefore essential that their protected landscape status should not be changed.

These two areas obviously constitute only a small fraction of the zone surrounding the special protection area, but they are probably the only ones which require specific protection measures as a buffer zone. The fact is that the Szénás Hills are for the most part bordered by forests, also forming part of the protected landscape, which constitute a natural buffer zone. There is also a village on the edge of the protected area and there can clearly be no buffer zone there.

4. Administration and management

Hungary is divided into nine administrative regions for nature conservation purposes, under the general control of the National Agency for Nature Conservation in Budapest. The protected landscape of the district of Buda is in the 6th region, whose headquarters are also in the capital. The regional director is responsible for all the protected areas in his region. The regional budget is a global one which does not include particular allocations for each of the individual protected areas concerned. It is therefore not possible to determine the share of the budget which goes to the Szénás Hills special protection area. There is no special

administrative structure for the reserve and no wardens are specifically assigned to it. There is no information centre for visitors to the reserve or its environs, but there are several in other parts of the protected landscape.

Motor traffic is banned from the special protection area. Visitors can enter on foot, but are not allowed to leave the paths. There are guided visits, especially for schoolchildren. There are no visitor statistics but the number does not seem to be very high. We saw virtually nobody during our visit.

The natural habitats are managed by the forestry service, which is the owner of the land. However, it has to comply with the rules laid down by the National Agency for Nature Conservation. The foresters are informed of the old trees and hollow trees which have to be preserved.

Hunting for small game is prohibited in the special protection area, but is authorised for large game animals. In order to better protect the grasslands and their biological diversity, and in particular to keep moufflon out, fences have been erected to establish certain areas of stricter protection. These areas do not however have a legal status any different from that of the rest of the special protection area.

5. Particular problems

a) The dolomitic grasslands

Everybody agrees that the pine plantations on the tops of the hills detracts from the integrity of the dolomitic grasslands and the beauty of the landscape. A programme to restore the grasslands has therefore been initiated with assistance from the European Community Phare programme. The pine trees were planted in the 1930s and cover 120 hectares. The plantations were established partly on bare and eroded areas, but also on natural grasslands. The restoration of the latter is thus a priority. It is also necessary to prevent the invasion of neighbouring surviving grasslands by pine trees, which propagate easily. The gradual elimination of the pines is proceeding, but is very slow due to the cost of the operation, which is performed by the forestry service and then invoiced to the National Agency for Nature Conservation. Hungarian scouts also participate in the work free of charge.

The natural forestation of non-climax grassland may also be a threat to the biological diversity of the reserve. It would therefore appear necessary to closely monitor the evolution of these habitats and selectively eliminate scrub by hand if the action of wild herbivores is insufficient. The use of domestic herbivores for this purpose seems impossible because of the difficulty of access, and above all because these animals would then be likely to overgraze neighbouring climax grasslands.

b) The moufflon

The large herbivores living in the reserve are deer *Cervus elaphus*, roe-deer *Capreolus capreolus*, boar *Sus scrofa* and moufflon *Ovis musimon*. The last-mentioned animal was introduced for hunting purposes. The effects of these animals on the dolomitic grasslands still seems to be poorly understood. On the one hand the herbivores may constitute a threat to certain species of rare plants and be at the origin of erosion phenomena in the case of overgrazing, while on the other they perhaps maintain the condition of the non climax grasslands which would otherwise be naturally taken over by trees.

The erection of fences capable of keeping out large herbivores is mainly intended to prevent moufflon, apparently numerous in the reserve, from entering certain particularly vulnerable areas. In any event, the presence in a nature reserve of an exotic species like the moufflon seems undesirable. It thus appears necessary to recommend efforts to eradicate them, and indeed this is stated in the guidelines drawn up by the National Agency for Nature Conservation. It is probable, however that any attempt to eradicate the moufflon would come up against opposition from hunters who still have the right to hunt in the reserve. One may however question the desirability of continuing to allow hunting in the reserve.

c) The natural deciduous forests

The forest is regenerating naturally. In some places it has been invaded by robinia *Robinia pseudacacia* whose eradication is required, in principle, under the guidelines established by the National Agency for Nature Conservation.

Given the natural character of this forest, it might be useful to establish inside it an integral reserve closed to the public and where any form of exploitation, including thinning, would be prohibited and where old trees and dead wood would be left in place. This type of reserve is in fact becoming increasingly necessary to conserve the flora and fauna, rapidly declining everywhere in Europe, of these very particular habitats. Such a reserve might cover fifty hectares or so.

The creation of an integral reserve would be facilitated if the land concerned could be transferred to the National Agency for Nature Conservation. This cannot be done without the agreement of the forestry administration, however. Failing this, it should be possible to envisage the conclusion of a contract between the two bodies.

6. Conclusions and recommendations

The Szénás Hills special protection area is undoubtedly of European interest because of the biological diversity of the dolomitic grasslands it contains. Its state of conservation appears satisfactory, though the process of eliminating the pine trees and restoring the dolomitic grasslands needs to be continued. There is therefore nothing to oppose the award of the European Diploma to this reserve. The Category A Diploma should be awarded because this is an area where virtually all human activities are prohibited.

It does not seem possible, however, to include in the award the two buffer zones for which the Diploma was also requested, because they are not part of the special protection area and they have no particular legal existence which enables them to be easily delimited. Nevertheless, given their importance for safeguarding the integrity of the reserve, it is essential that they should continue to enjoy the protection they now have as part of the protected landscape of the district of Buda.

Recommendations

1. An official name should be given to the special protection area established on the Szénás Hills.
2. The restoration of the dolomitic grasslands should be continued, with more rapid elimination of the pine trees. In the case of the non-climax grasslands, care should be taken to conserve a mosaic of habitats and the greatest possible biological diversity

by maintaining open areas, if necessary through selective elimination of the natural ligneous vegetation.

3. An integral nature reserve of at least fifty hectares should be established in the deciduous forest, where all the natural processes can go on free of human intervention.
4. A serious effort should be made to eliminate robinia *Robinia pseudacacia* entirely from the special protection area.
5. Moufflon should be eradicated and hunting should be prohibited in the entire area, unless necessary to control the populations of large herbivores.
6. The policing of the reserve should be improved by allocating the necessary staff.
7. Protected landscape status should be maintained for the two areas situated on the periphery of the special protection area, for which the Diploma was also requested, so that they can continue fully to play their role as buffer zones.

Note by the Secretariat

1. The representative of the Secretariat, who accompanied the expert, is in complete agreement with his conclusions.
2. He would nevertheless like to stress the two following points:

a) Hunting

As stated in point 4 of the expert's report, hunting is prohibited for small game while it is allowed for big game. This is incompatible with the protection criteria for an area to be awarded the Diploma in Category A (see Appendix II to the regulations). Admittedly it is the moufflon which is the biggest problem, being a species introduced specifically for hunting; it is therefore essential to take steps to eradicate it. The other large herbivores have so far been no problem, but they could constitute a threat to certain plant species.

We therefore consider that the eradication of the moufflon and the banning of hunting should be a condition for the award of the Diploma in Category A. This does not mean that there cannot be selective culling under the control of the management authorities.

b) Policing and visitors

The visit took place in July 1994 and we only encountered 3 or 4 visitors. This is very few for a natural area situated close to Budapest (20 minutes by car). However, we cannot help thinking that the award of the Diploma will attract a greater number of visitors. It is therefore worth reinforcing the policing of the reserve by allocating staff with the power to report offenders; this last condition also corresponds to the protection criteria for the award of the European Diploma, Category A.

3. The Secretariat would like to thank the Hungarian authorities for the organisation of the visits to both the Ipolytarnóc nature conservation area and the Szénás Hills protected area. This greatly facilitated the task of the expert and of the Secretariat representative.

Appendix

Draft Resolution (95) ...

ON THE AWARD OF THE EUROPEAN DIPLOMA TO THE SZÉNÁS HILLS PROTECTED AREA (HUNGARY)

The Committee of Ministers, under the terms of Article 15.a of the Statute of the Council of Europe,

Having regard to Resolution (65) 6 instituting the European Diploma;

Having regard to the proposals of the Steering Committee for the Conservation and Management of the Environment and Natural Habitats (CDPE);

Having recorded the agreement of the government of Hungary;

After deliberation;

Solemnly awards the European Diploma, Category A, to the Szénás Hills Protected Area in accordance with the regulations for the European Diploma (Resolution 91/16);

Places the aforesaid reserve under the patronage of the Council of Europe until ... 2000.

Attaches to the award the following condition:

Appropriate measures should be taken to eliminate the moufflon (*Ovis musimon*) and generally prohibit hunting throughout the area, on the understanding that selective culling organised by the managing authorities may be carried out to control the large populations of herbivores.

Together with the following recommendations:

1. An official name should be given to the special protection area established on the Szénás Hills;
2. The restoration of the dolomitic grasslands should be continued and the elimination of the pines be speeded up. For the non-climax grasslands, care should be taken to conserve a mosaic of habitats and the greatest possible biological diversity by maintaining open spaces, if necessary through selective elimination of the natural ligneous vegetation;
3. Efforts should be made to eliminate robinia *Robinia pseudacacia* throughout the special protection area;
4. An integral natural reserve of at least fifty hectares should be established in the deciduous forest, where all the natural processes are free to develop without human intervention;

5. The policing of the reserve should be improved by allocating the necessary personnel with powers to report offenders;
6. The protected landscape status of the two areas located on the periphery of the special protection area, for which application for the Diploma was also made, should be maintained so that they can continue fully to play their role as buffer areas.