



Strasbourg, 13 November 2007
[Inf14e_2007]

T-PVS/Inf (2007) 14

CONVENTION ON THE CONSERVATION OF EUROPEAN WILDLIFE
AND NATURAL HABITATS

Standing Committee

27th meeting
Strasbourg, 26-30 November 2007

**Requests of Poland, Belarus and Romania
concerning the possible revisions of the decisions of the Group of
Specialists -European Diploma – to be examined by
the Standing Committee of the Bern Convention**

Concerning:

1. The non-renewal of the European Diploma to the Białowieża National Park (Poland)
2. The non-renewal of the European Diploma to the Belovezhskaya Pushcha National Park (Belarus)
3. The non-award of the European Diploma to the Retezat National Park (Romania)

*Document prepared by
the Directorate of Culture and Cultural and Natural Heritage*

Subject to the agreement of the Standing Committee of the Bern Convention concerning its proposed advisory role to the Committee of Ministers on the award, renewal and non-renewal of the European Diploma of Protected Areas, the Committee is invited to take note of the following documents, in particular the draft Resolutions prepared by the Group of Specialists-European Diploma, concerning:

1. the non-renewal of the European Diploma of Protected areas to the Bialowieza National Park (Poland)
2. the non-renewal of the European Diploma of Protected Areas to the Belovezhskaya Pushcha National Park (Belarus)
3. the application for the European Diploma of Protected Areas to Retezat National Park (Romania)

The Committee is invited to forward to the Committee of Ministers its opinion on the award, renewal or non-renewal of the European Diploma of Protected Areas to the respective national parks.

II. Belovezhskaya Pushcha National Park (Belarus) [PE-S-DE (2007) 5]: Renewal following on-the-spot appraisal

A. Report of the Group of Specialists – European Diploma

The expert, Mr Eckhart Kuijken, reported on his visit, emphasising the Park's links with the previous Park and the need to co-ordinate forest management on either side of the border.

He highlighted a number of positive aspects, including the Park's enlargement in 2004. A number of problems had also attracted his attention:

- the lack of a management plan, although there was a desire for one;
- the drying out of peat-bogs;
- development for leisure purposes incompatible with the Park's status;
- sanitation felling;
- hunting.

The recommendations made in 2002 had not been implemented.

Mr Dzmitry Bernatsky, a Park representative, said that the management plan drawn up in 2003 was not complete, as it did not include areas recently incorporated into the Park. Park management was not in a position to draw up a modern management plan, owing to a lack of resources. He appealed to international sponsors.

The Chair said that funding could be sought if the European Diploma were placed under the authority of the Standing Committee.

The expert was of the view that the Park deserved the European Diploma, but it was difficult to consider renewing it when the management plan demanded after the last visit, with a deadline of 1 January 2005, had not been produced.

The Group approved the expert's opinion. It recommended that the competent Committee should not renew the European Diploma until the condition relating to the management plan has been satisfied.

B. Draft Resolution proposed by the Group of Specialists on the non-renewal of the European Diploma of Protected Areas awarded to Belovezhskaya Pushcha National Park (Belarus)

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, as amended by Resolution (98) 29 on the Regulations for the European Diploma of Protected Areas;

Having regard to Resolution (97) 23 awarding the European Diploma to Belovezhskaya Pushcha National Park;

Taking into consideration the expert's report submitted to the Group of Specialists on the European Diploma of Protected Areas at its meeting on 8 and 9 February 2007;

Having regard to the proposals of the Committee.....;

Decides not to renew the European Diploma of Protected Areas awarded to Belovezhskaya Pushcha National Park until the following condition has been satisfied:

1. prepare and implement a peer-reviewed ten-year management plan for Belovezhskaya Pushcha National Park, including adjacent areas of internationally recognised natural importance, with due regard to the conclusions of the “Forest of Hope” appeal;

Also recommends that:

1. existing forestry policy and practices be reviewed with a view to maximising biodiversity, in particular by considering a ban on felling old trees and providing for a significant increase in the volume of dead wood in all old-growth forest stands;
2. monitoring and applied research on the ecology of old-growth forests and the external impact of the drying out of peat-bogs and marshes be boosted and co-ordinated with a view to integrated management and habitat restoration;
3. core areas of the Park’s wilderness protection zone be further enlarged, that functional ecological corridors be established between fragments of old-growth forest and that the policy of acquiring ecologically sensitive marshes and peat-bogs around the Park be stepped up;
4. research be undertaken regarding the possibility of removing parts of the artificial barrier inside the main areas (world heritage sites), so that bisons and other large mammals have total freedom to spread out beyond the barriers;
5. efforts to monitor compliance with the total hunting ban inside the National Park (except for the culling of sick herbivores) be stepped up, and that wolves be afforded full protection; tally figures should be submitted for the Shereshevo hunting reserve;
6. a critique be undertaken regarding the hydrological and ecological impact of lake deepening on features of natural interest, and that the advisability of fishing (and restocking) be reviewed; in addition, disturbances incompatible with the zone resulting from active water sports (such as water skiing) should be strictly avoided;
7. an environmental impact assessment be carried out in respect of mass tourism in the very heart of the National Park, including a reappraisal of the boundaries, location and zoning of “Father Frost’s Manor”;
8. a bilateral conservation agreement between the competent Polish and Belarus ministries be ratified by the end of 2008, confirming the necessary principles and budgets for cross-border co-operation between the Bialowieża and Belovezhskaya Pushcha National Parks with regard to priorities for research, management, tourism and education, coupled with ecologically healthy forest management, bearing in mind the “Forest of Hope” appeal, the conclusions of the 2000 Kamenyuki Conference and the recommendations of the UNESCO World Heritage Committee;
9. Invites the Belarus authorities to keep the competent Committee informed of subsequent developments.

C. Comments from the Permanent Representation of Belarus to the Council of Europe

Aide memoire: Implementation by the Republic of Belarus of the Council of Europe requirement and recommendations concerning the management of the Belovezhskaya Pushcha National Park

Requirement:

Preparation and implementation of a peer-reviewed ten-year management plan for Belovezhskaya Pushcha National Park, including adjacent areas of internationally recognized natural importance, with due regard to the conclusions of the “Forest of Hope” appeal.

Implementation. Because of the need to comply with the CoE recommendation on the enlargement of the National Park's core protected area (see below), the Plan could not be drafted prior to stock-taking and cataloging of the newly added terrains and resources that took until 2006 to accomplish. The 10-year Plan for Territorial Organization and Forest Management of the National Park was therefore finalized only in early 2007 and endorsed by the National Park's Research Council on 13 April 2007. Its text can be made available to the Council of Europe on request.

Recommendations:

1. Existing forestry policy and practices be reviewed with a view to maximising biodiversity, in particular by considering a ban on felling old trees and providing for a significant increase in the volume of dead wood in all old-grown forest stands.

Implementation. The existing legislation prohibits the felling of any living trees in the National Park. In the past years, some targeted cutting of dead wood took place to prevent the proliferation of the bark beetle that led to extinction of almost half of the Park's fir trees, and reduce the risk of forest fires. The felling was limited to infested and roadside areas. About a half of the overall number of dead firs however, remained in the forest. With decline of the bark beetle outbreak the felling was drastically reduced and is currently well below the trees' natural extinction rate.

2. Monitoring and applied research on the ecology of old-growth forests and the external impact of the drying out of peat-bogs and marshes be boosted and co-ordinated with a view to integrated management and habitat restoration.

Implementation. Ecological monitoring is carried out in the Park for many years on 150 permanent testing grounds representing all types of forest vegetation. With climate getting increasingly warm and dry special attention is devoted to marshlands and damp forests. Research programmes are focused on water and marshland vegetations and subsoil waters' level.

A number of international projects were realized in the Park aimed at preserving the hydrological regime of its peat-bogs and marshes. Damming took place i.a. in the Dikoe marshland. The joint Belarusian – Polish – Dutch project “Belovezhskaya Pushcha – Forest of Hope” helped to designate target areas for hydrological research and preservation activity.

3. Core areas of the Park's wilderness protection zone be further enlarged, functional ecological corridors be established between fragments of old-growth forest and the policy of acquiring ecologically sensitive marshes and peat-bogs around the park be stepped up.

Implementation. In 2004 the overall Park territory was expanded to 152 200 ha up from its previous 87 400 ha, incorporating the adjacent environmentally sensitive areas i.a. the Dikoe marshland (15 000 ha). The core protected area at the same time increased from 15 000 to 30 000 ha. It is to be further enlarged by an additional 30 000 ha, including most of the old-growth forest areas in the Park, thereby making the establishment of special ecological corridors unnecessary.

4. Research be undertaken regarding the possibility of removing parts of the artificial barrier inside the main areas (world heritage sites), so that bison and other large mammals have total freedom to spread out beyond the barriers.

Implementation. Migration of large mammals in the border area is closely monitored by the Park's Administration. The National Academy of Sciences will examine practical ways of establishing the special migration corridors in 2008. Substituting the barriers with advanced controlling equipment however, represents a costly problem, and could be best tackled in cooperation with interested foreign entities and multinational institutions. A Council of Europe's contribution would be particularly welcome in this regard.

5. Efforts to monitor compliance with the total hunting ban inside the national park (except for the culling of sick herbivores) be stepped up, and that wolves be afforded full protection; tally figures should be submitted to the Shereshevo hunting reserve.

Implementation. No hunting activity is conducted in the National Park, except for the culling of sick and old ungulates incapable of reproduction. The wolves' population in the Park remains stable and relatively high by European standards, to the extent that at times represents danger for the nearby cattle farms. Limited and targeted culling is necessary therefore as a response to such danger as well as to occasional wolf rabies outbreaks. The culling however, is restricted to areas adjacent to the Park.

Specific mammals' population management plans are incorporated into and implemented as part of the overall Park management plan.

6. Critique be undertaken regarding the hydrological and ecological impact of lake deepening on features of natural interest, and that the advisability of fishing (and restocking) be reviewed; in addition, disturbances incompatible with the zone resulting from active water sports (such as water skiing) should be strictly avoided.

Implementation. No artificial deepening of lakes or rivers takes place in the Park. The only such case in the past regarded a man-made artificial reservoir (200 ha) that became increasingly shallow and overgrown with vegetation with adverse effects for the indigenous fish population, especially in wintertime. In the course of the deepening special pits were created in the reservoir's bed to enable safe fish hibernation. Neither industrial fishing, nor water sports activity currently take place in the Park area, nor are they envisaged.

7. An environmental impact assessment be carried out in respect of mass tourism in the very heart of the national park, including a reappraisal of the boundaries, location and zoning of "Father Frost's Manor".

Implementation. "Father Frost's Manor" is situated in the Park's external "recreation" zone, and not in its core protected area. Part of it used to be previously a fenced bison-keeping site while another part housed administrative and maintenance facilities. After conditions for free migration of the bison within the Park had been created, the area was no longer used and subsequently converted into "Father Frost's Manor". It is fenced to preclude the "spillout" of tourist activity into the nearby protected zone. Any related ecological impact is thereby kept minimal and restricted to an environmentally non-sensitive area.

The impact of man's activity on ecosystems is one of the focuses of the Research Program to be implemented in the Park starting from 2008.

8. A bilateral conservation agreement between the competent Polish and Belarusian ministries be ratified by the end of 2008, confirming the necessary principles and budgets for cross-border cooperation between the Bialowieza and the Belovezhskaya Pushcha National Parks with regard to priorities for research, management, tourism and education, coupled with ecologically healthy forest management, bearing in mind the "Forest of Hope" appeal, the conclusions of the 2000 Kamenyuki Conference and the recommendations of the UNESCO World Heritage Committee.

Implementation. The Administrations of the Belarusian and Polish National Parks established and actively develop cooperation on the basis of existing agreements that were renewed in November 2006. Ministerial-level agreements are non-existent but would be considered useful for stimulating the bilateral cooperation in the area.