

# PAN Parks Perspectives for a Wilder Europe

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Europe is without a doubt the continent where nature has been most affected by human influence. Indeed the rich biodiversity found in some parts of the “old” continent are very interconnected with, and dependent upon, human management. The European landscape has been shaped through thousands of years of human activity and it is part of our cultural, social and economic heritage.

Due to this close relationship between nature and human development, it is sometimes forgotten that there are remains—even if only in small fragments covering altogether no more than about 1% of all territory—of small, yet important, areas of what can be called “virgin,” “natural,” “wild,” or “wilderness” areas. These are areas where we can still find natural systems where man has had only minimum influence.

PAN Parks voluntarily shares practical lessons learnt on how to approach a wilderness area management, how to allow for an area of sustainable use, and how to enable local communities to derive benefit from the wilderness area. (Miko 2007)



Vlado Vancura

A growing number of people are now starting to value Europe’s natural heritage as much as its cultural heritage. Wilderness has been missing from the image of Europe—until recently. The vision of wilderness is a concept that reaches deep into the heart and emotions of most people. It is well known throughout the globe, but most Europeans do not

realize, that they can still find exceptional remnants of wilderness on their own continent. These places are the PAN Parks.

## Addressing a Need

During the second half of the 1990s, the World Conservation Union (IUCN) expanded their categories for

protected area management. This, in turn, increased the number of protected areas listed; however, it did very little to increase the management effectiveness of these areas. There was growing evidence suggesting that the value of many of the world’s protected areas were under threat and that a significant number of these areas were degrading and suffering significant biodiversity loss. Recognizing this as a major problem, the World Commission on Protected Areas stepped in and developed Management Effectiveness Guidelines. They highlighted strategies to help protected areas that had insufficient funding, internal management issues, and social/community problems. Witnessing all of this, the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) decided to make protected area management effectiveness a key priority in their already well-established Forest Programme.

## Developing the Concept

To address this priority, WWF devised Protected Area Network Parks (PAN), and since its early beginnings, the wilderness concept became integral to this project. WWF’s

first priority was to align themselves with a partner that shared their vision for improved management of Europe's protected areas. Following the IUCN's category expansion and a redefinition, most protected areas had to incorporate education and recreation into their regular activities. This made partnering with a tourism company an obvious choice.

The WWF found the perfect partner in the privately owned Dutch tourism company, Molecaten. In August 1999, two years after the initial launch of the project, the PAN Parks Foundation was legally registered.

The backbone of the foundation is its transparent certification process. If a protected area wants to become a certified PAN Park, it must meet each of PAN Park's strict principles and criteria. This process is aimed at defining the quality standard that both protected areas and local business partners must maintain in order to become and remain certified. The verification process is a transparent third-party audit, and if a candidate is successful, the process provides stakeholders (i.e., donors and visitors) with a guarantee that the protected areas management objectives and activities are compatible with biodiversity protection and sustainable tourism.

### PAN Parks Principles

**Principle 1: Rich Natural Heritage.** PAN Parks are large protected areas, representative of Europe's natural heritage, and protect international important wildlife and ecosystems.

**Principle 2: Nature Management.** Design and management of the PAN Park aims to maintain and, if necessary, restore, the area's natural ecological processes and biodiversity.

**Principle 3: Visitor Management.** Visitor management safeguards the natural values of the PAN Park and

aims to provide visitors with a high-quality experience based on the appreciation of nature (see figure 1).

**Principle 4: Sustainable Tourism Development Strategy.** The Protected Area Authority and its relevant partners in the PAN Parks region aim at achieving a synergy between conservation of natural values and sustainable tourism by developing and jointly implementing a Sustainable Tourism Development Strategy.

**Principle 5: Partnerships.** PAN Parks' tourism business partners are legal enterprises that are committed to the goals of certified PAN Parks and the PAN Parks Foundation, and actively cooperate with the local PAN Parks group to implement the PAN Park region's Sustainable Tourism Development Strategy effectively.

### Wilderness—A Key Element of PAN Parks Concept

The goal identified at the beginning was very clear: to create a network of the best-managed wilderness protected areas in Europe. Wilderness protection became a driving force behind PAN Parks despite the fact that, for political and historical reasons, the concept of wilderness has been a bone of contention in Europe.

The assumption at the beginning



Figure 1—A ranger on patrol in the Borjomi Kharagauli National Park, Georgia. Photo courtesy Vlado Vancura of PAN Parks.

was that most Europeans do not know that they can still find remnants of wilderness on their continent. An important element of the concept was to make it possible for people to see primeval forests or visit mountains where wolf, lynx, or brown bear still roam freely (see figure 2). The idea was to create certified PAN Parks in Europe so people would not need to travel to distant places. Today 10 such certified parks are dispersed throughout Europe from the Arctic Circle to the Mediterranean and are providing very different opportunities for recreation and tourism.

A decade ago the first steps were taken to realize a marriage between conservation and the tourism industry in the most important wilderness areas of Europe. This initiative, implemented



Figure 2—Wilderness means space for wildlife such as native bears and chamois. Photos courtesy of Leif Ostergren and the Majella National Park.



**Figure 3—Local partners and a traditional welcome.**  
Photo courtesy of Gavin Bell of PAN Parks.

by the PAN Parks Foundation (PPF), awards protected areas that meet the quality standards of conservation management, the PAN Parks quality seal. In this project, tourism is seen as an opportunity rather than as a threat, and it is a means to give economic value to wilderness-protected areas and to create support for conservation.

The key conservation concern of PAN Parks is to contribute to the goals of the Convention on Biological Diversity through:

- developing a verification scheme that evaluates and improves the effectiveness of protected area management;
- providing a method to measure the costs and benefits of protected areas from a social and economic point of view; and
- providing communication tools to improve the capacity and skills of protected area managers.

### **A Term of Contention**

The term *wilderness* generally evokes defensive feelings in the European mind. The idea to leave some land

untouched is often labeled as anti-human and unfeasible in the densely populated continent. There are some European countries where the term is misinterpreted, or poorly understood, whereas in other countries, *wilderness* has no equivalent in the national language. Wilderness is often understood to be a thrilling holiday experience for which it is worth traveling to far lands, but that wilderness experience cannot be explored in Europe.

On the other hand, *sustainable development* is a more recent and widespread term that suggests an acceptable activity, and the term has been adopted quickly by the public. One way to promote wilderness in Europe is to build on this acceptance by arguing that in some areas wilderness protection is the best way to provide “sustainable use.” Over the last few years in Europe we have observed a gradual shift in the attitudes of government and the public to wilderness. There are more European countries that take an interest in wilderness protection through their national parks and their core zones. PAN Parks is providing the framework for developing a network of European wilderness areas.

### **Europe and Worldwide Wilderness**

Numerous worldwide wilderness assessments between 1987 and 2002 demonstrated that 25 to 50% of the Earth’s land surface remains wild. For example, the assessment done by Mittermeier and others (2002) found that 46% of the planet is still wild. With a very small amount of remaining wilderness, Europeans do not aspire to create vast wilderness areas such as are in Kamchatka, Africa, or Alaska.

The wilderness challenge in Europe is to adapt the concept of wilderness to a multicultural protec-

tion framework. The campaign needs to reinforce that wilderness is important to all Europeans, because wilderness is part of our forgotten “common European heritage” and part of contemporary European identity (see figure 3).

The misperception, even presented by conservationists, is that Europe has no potential for wilderness protection. Protecting wilderness is much more a matter of societal and political will power, rather than the size of a wild area. Many Europeans still believe that we have a right and duty to modify, influence, and (mis)-use nature in the same manner as was done in the past. PAN Parks believes that Europeans need the opportunity to enjoy and experience the last remnants of European wilderness.

### **What Is Wilderness?**

Wilderness in the PAN Parks is a large area of land with its native plant and animal communities and the ecosystems intact and in an essentially natural state. PAN Parks wilderness areas are those lands that have been least modified by humans and represent the most intact and undisturbed expanse of Europe’s remaining natural landscapes.

Practically, a PAN Parks core/wilderness zone is at least 10,000 ha (24,700 acres) in size, an area where no extractive uses are permitted, and where the only management interventions are those aimed at maintaining or restoring natural ecological processes. PAN Parks wilderness areas are places where wildlife thrives, natural processes are allowed to function without human interference, and people are occasional and respectful visitors. The goal of PAN Parks is to protect the last islands of wild nature in Europe. Many of these parks are located in the

backyard of European cities with automobile access nearby, and can accommodate people of all ages and fitness levels. Adventurous visitors can take short- or long-distance hikes and try canoeing or camping.

The wilderness concept distinguishes the PPF from other conservation activities in Europe. It is used to market the destinations and to help create opportunities for experiences linked to it, such as "The Polish Wild East" or "Bear Tracking in the Wilderness." Although the wilderness concept and effective management unify all PAN Parks, the range of opportunities offered in PAN Parks includes nature-based tourism with a lot to offer all ages and all interests (see figure 4), such as dog sledding or rafting at the Arctic Circle, ice climbing in Fulufjället's waterfall, survival activities among the peaks of Retezat Mountain, or bear tracking in the Polish forests.

### Biodiversity and PAN Parks Wilderness

Ironically, some of Europe's biodiversity is dependent on human activities and past or current impacts on ecosystems. Some protected areas are intensively managed (e.g., animal grazing, cutting vegetation), but some protected areas are not intensively managed. PAN Parks works with this second group of protected areas where ecosystems are based on both structure and function, instead of overemphasizing structure and local biodiversity at the expense of function. PAN Parks looks to the opportunities presented by natural succession and ecosystem dynamics to protect global biodiversity.

### Protection through Awareness

A core aim of PAN Parks is to raise awareness about European wilder-

ness areas and generate support for them through stimulating sustainable nature-based tourism (see figure 5). PAN Parks works with local businesses in rural areas, and by doing so creates support for conservation, community involvement, and commitment to sustainable tourism development of the region. The PPF works to promote the certified parks (see table 1) as destinations to the European travel market.

### The Future of PAN Parks

A related goal of PPF is to apply the wilderness concept in marine protected areas, such as the Archipelago National Park in Finland that joined the PAN in late 2007. The successful PAN Parks certification process in Peneda Geres National Park in Portugal will demonstrate that wilderness is playing an important conservation role in the Mediterranean region.

However, the ultimate challenge is to explain the benefits of being certified as a PAN Park (see table 2) and develop additional support to make PAN Parks a sustainable, self-financing organization that is recognized as the premium European ecotourism/ wilderness brand and serves as a global role model for conservation and economic benefit for protected areas, and their local communities and business partners. **IJW**

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Figure 4—Nature-based tourism includes relaxation in wild places. Photo courtesy of Pascal Languillon.



Figure 5—Filming in the Retezat National Park Wilderness Area in Romania. Photo courtesy of Tudor Predescu.

National Park	Park Areas (ha)	Wilderness Areas (ha)
Bieszczady	29,202	18,425
Fulufjället	38,414	22,140
Oulanka	27,720	15,027
Central Balkan	71,669	21,019
Retezat	38,138	14,215
Panajarvi	104,000	30,000
Rila	81,046	16,350
Majella	74,095	16,200
Borjomi Kharagauli	76,000	50,325
Archipelago	50,219	10,600
<b>Total</b>	<b>590,503</b>	<b>214,301</b>

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## Table 2. Benefits of PAN Parks

### The benefits of PAN Parks for the protected areas:

International recognition  
Independent audit  
Easier access to sponsorship of conservation and tourism project  
Expertise exchange through a living network  
Tools:  
set priorities for building conservation capacity  
measure progress  
employee adaptive management  
improve nature management standards  
control and monitor tourism, etc.  
support in lobbying decision makers

### The benefits of PAN Parks for the local communities:

Increased collaboration in park management  
Small business promotion  
Showcase for traditional crafts and culture  
Improved tourism facilities  
Stronger government support  
International recognition  
New jobs and increased employment, etc.

### The benefits of PAN Parks for the local business partners:

Contact with European tourism companies  
More nature-based tourism  
Effective international marketing  
Support in development of tourism package  
Training services  
Prove responsible businesses  
Access experience of other businesses, etc.

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disagreement. At one extreme, we can avoid “playing God” by never intervening in wilderness ecosystems. At the other extreme is the belief that intervention cannot be avoided and that we must decide what we value in wilderness and work to protect it—even if this involves actions as drastic as assisted migration and transformation of ecosystems to ones that are compositionally and structurally different from the present or past. Concepts such as ecological integrity and resilience will need to supplement—if not replace—the traditional concept of naturalness. The ultimate workshop conclusion was that this important issue cannot be ignored but that it is not clear what path to take. It is time for society to reconsider and/or better articulate the purposes and values of wilderness now that we know more than we did in 1964 about the world and how it is changing.

Whereas philosophical issues need to be addressed before undertaking large-scale wilderness restoration, small-scale restorations are less controversial. Success here largely turns on technical issues. In this arena, the Leopold Institute has been working to increase the success of efforts to restore recreation sites. We have been conducting long-term experiments that evaluate the effectiveness of commonly employed site

restoration techniques (Cole and Spildie 2007). We also collaborated in the compilation of both experiential and technical knowledge in a 394-page guide to wilderness site restoration (Therrell et al. 2006). Up-to-date information on the institute's restoration research is available at <http://leopold.wilderness.net/research/fprojects/F008.htm>. **IJW**

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If we restore past conditions, those communities are likely to be dysfunctional—no longer appropriate for future climates.