

Wilderness and Wildlands in Romanian Carpathians

BY ERIKA STANCIU

Coming back from her honeymoon spent in the Retezat National Park in Romania, a real mountain lover from the heart of the Alps said to me: "I could not believe my eyes! There is a place in Europe where one can wander around for two weeks and see no roads, electricity lines, ski slopes—just the vast forest areas and amazing alpine landscapes." Yes, for most Europeans it is difficult to imagine that our small, overcrowded continent still has real wilderness areas. Romania is one of the European champions for wilderness.

The Carpathian Mountains and the Danube Delta are the biodiversity and wilderness hotspots of Romania. Large areas of forests and extended wetland areas in the Carpathians are places where wildlife can find a refuge and where people can enjoy solitude and beauty. Where are these places and how long will we have them? This article will focus on wilderness areas associated with the Carpathian Mountains.

The Romanian word for wilderness is *salbaticie*, describing both the state of wild animals and a deserted, lonely, isolated place, not affected by civilization. If the English term for *wilderness* comes from an old word for wild beast, the Romanian word comes from the Latin adjective *silvaticus*, originating from the word *silva* or forest. The word itself indicates that people in this part of the world have always associated wilderness with forests. Even though forest areas have been shrinking over the centuries, from 80% of the Romanian territory to about 26.7% of the total area of the country, forests are still the core of the last wilderness areas. Looking to the forest map of the country, it becomes obvious that the most suitable places for wilderness associated with forests are the Carpathian Mountains. Some of the amazing places in the Danube Delta are well preserved and protected from everyday human influence, and these are the places that can qualify as wilderness areas.

The Carpathian Mountains range over seven countries—Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia, Ukraine, Romania, and Serbia (see figure 1). They are the last refuge in Europe for large wilderness areas. More than

one-third of this mountain range, with its geological, biological, and landscape diversity constitutes the backbone of Romania. Compared to other mountain ranges in Europe, the Carpathians are not exceptionally high in elevation. In Romania, the highest peaks are below 2,600 meters (8,530 ft.), and the mountain range is relatively fragmented, cut by deep valleys and with large depressions between peaks and high plateaus. This fragmented landscape was shaped in many areas by extensive agricultural practices, and the natural forests still harbor large areas with little human influence.

Although the wilderness concept does not exist in current Romanian legislation, the term *wild areas* is mentioned in the national protected area law (Government Ordinance nr 57/20.06.07) as core areas to be preserved in strictly protected zones. Large wilderness areas did not receive special attention in Romania until very recently. The first attempts to safeguard wilderness areas were associated with small scientific reserves established in the Carpathians, such as the Gemenele Scientific Reserve in the Retezat Mountains established in 1956 on 1,600 hectares (3,950 acres), or the Pietrosu Mare Scientific Reserve on 3,300 hectares (8,150



Author photo: Erika Stanciu.

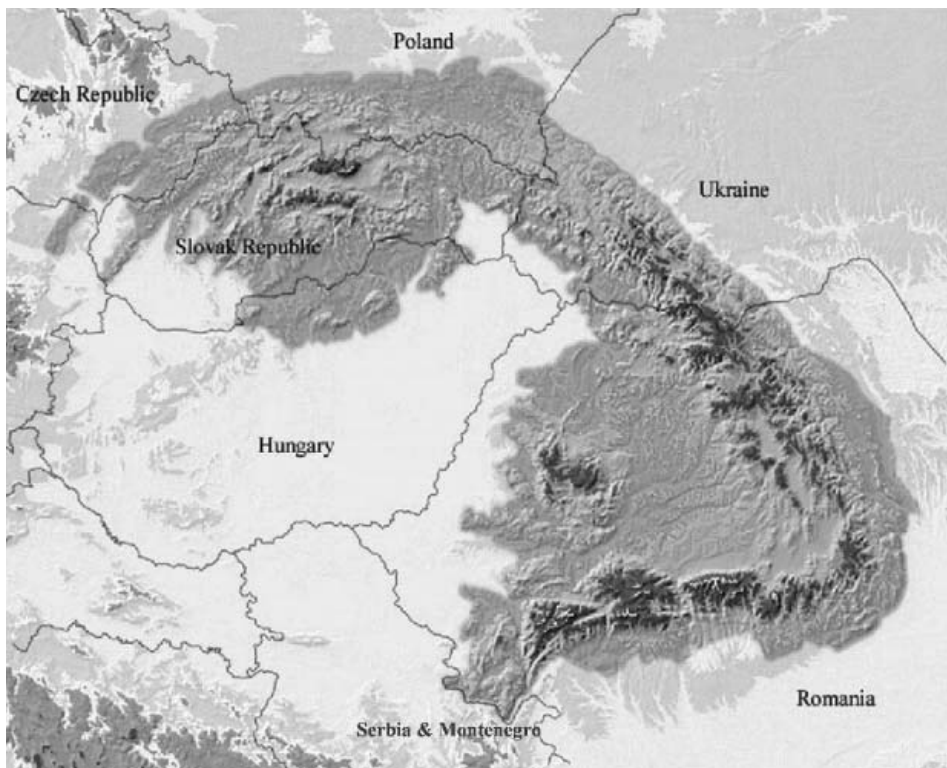


Figure 1—Map of the Carpathian Ecoregion and Romania in Europe.

acres) in the Rodna Mountains. It is difficult to associate these small areas with the wilderness concept, even though some European interpretations of wilderness would include these small areas. Some of the first large areas included in scientific reserves are the ones from the Danube Delta with more than 10,000 hectares (24,700 acres) included in some areas. However, it is noted that these scientific reserves were not created to give people the possibility to enjoy solitude, but more as strictly protected areas, where access is permitted only to a small number of visitors and mainly for research or education purposes.

Most of the large areas that qualify as wilderness areas in the Carpathian Mountains of Romania are included in national and nature parks. The 14 national parks, equivalent of IUCN category II protected areas, have core areas defined in the legislation as “integral protection zones,” where the use of natural resources or any other human

activities, except visitor access, is forbidden. Some of the alpine and subalpine pastures can be used by local communities for grazing to continue traditional activities and to contribute to the maintenance of some specific biodiversity situations. However, areas ranging from a few thousand to 30 or 40 thousand hectares (74,100 to 98,800

acres) of forest landscapes are well preserved in these national parks with little or no human activity allowed. Within these core areas, large tracks of old growth forests are still present.

Only 6.3% of the 6.37 million hectares (15.7 million acres) of forests is old growth, but having more than 240,000 hectares (592,800 acres) of pristine forests and about 160,000 hectares (395,200 acres) of old-growth forests surrounded by natural forests is an exceptional feature in the European context (see table 1) (Giurescu 1975; Giurgiu et. al 2001; Biris et. al 2002; Boisson and Radu 2007). It is important to note that only a very small percentage of the most valuable forests, from a noneconomic perspective, were included in protected areas at the beginning of this decade; therefore, most of the pristine forests were not effectively protected in the long term.

There are initiatives and significant efforts coming especially from the civil society and representatives of the Forest Research and Planning Institute(ICAS) to extend protected areas and include more of the pristine forests and wilderness areas (ICAS 2007). However, there is low acceptance from key stakeholders, such as

Table 1—Total area of pristine forests in Romania (Giurgiu et. al 2001)

Geographical area	Area of old-growth forests		In existing protected areas	
	Ha	%	Ha	%
Danube Delta	300	0.1	228	0.1
Vlasia Plane	1,300	0.5	1,278	0.5
Total lowland	1,500	0.6	1,506	0.6
Hills	3,000	1.2	262	0.1
Eastern Carpathians	54,300	22.1	14,249	5.8
Southern Carpathians	151,200	61.3	20,481	8.3
Western Carpathians	36,600	14.8	42,730	17.3
Total mountains	242,100	98.2	42,730	17.3
TOTAL	246.7	100.0	44.498	18.0

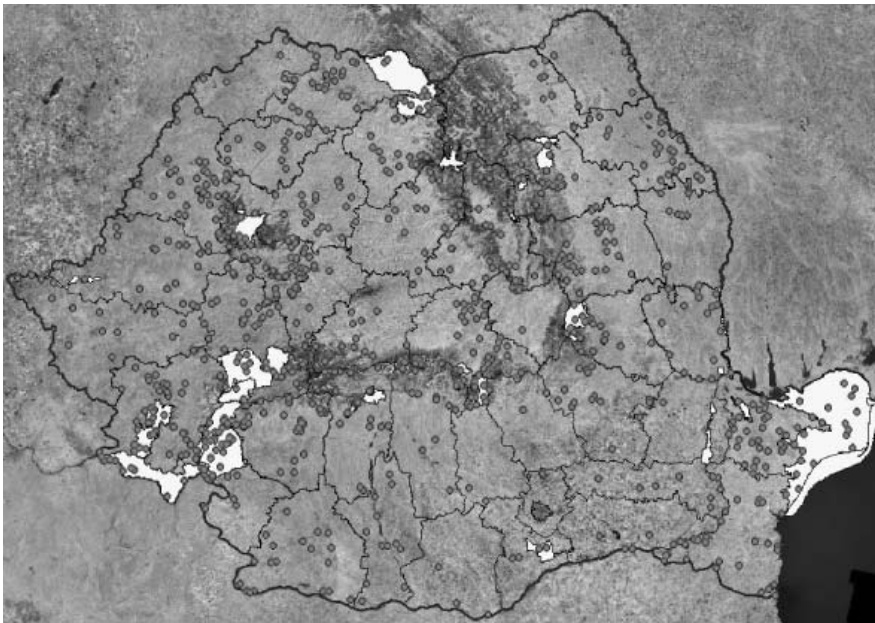


Figure 2—Map of Romanian protected areas at the national level. Light areas are national and nature parks (IUCN category II and V) and biosphere reserves, and dots are reserves and natural monuments (IUCN categories I, III, and IV). Source: Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Development, 2007.

local communities and forest managers, which makes it very difficult to have new protected areas established, especially in national parks that are the most suitable management category to preserve wilderness.

The distribution of protected areas established at the national level shows that most of the natural values of the country are concentrated in the Carpathian Mountains and in the Danube Delta (see figure 2). The 13 national parks and biosphere reserves and 14 nature parks are the largest protected areas of the country and the most important for safeguarding the last remnants of wilderness. Some of the 900 smaller protected areas are significant for preserving small bits of untouched nature, but their importance is more for the protection of certain species or very rare ecosystems.

The map of protected areas (see figure 2) shows that the distribution of the last pristine forests are mostly in the national and nature parks found in the range called Southern Carpathians. There is a concentration

of valuable biodiversity and landscapes in the southwest with good legal protection offered by the complex of nine national nature parks and geoparks: Retezat, Domogled Valea Cernei, Cheile Nerei—Beusnita, Semenic—Cheile Carasului, Valea Jiului, Portile de Fier, Gradistea Muncelului—

Cioclovina, Tara Hategului, and Platoul Mehedinti. With more than 500,000 hectares (1.2 million acres) in this corridor, it is the largest area with a legal protected statute not only in Romania, but for most of Europe. Even if these protected areas host large natural and old-growth forests, only 10,000 hectares (24,700 acres) of the pristine forests are within their borders with almost 20,000 hectares (49,400 acres) of the pristine forests from the same part of the Carpathians being outside the borders of the national and nature parks.

This large complex of protected areas covers a large part of the last Intact Forest Landscape (IFL) on the European continent located from the south to the polar circle. A study developed under the coordination of Greenpeace mapped large areas of forest landscape (larger than 500 sq. km, or 193 sq. miles) across the world with no or very low human disturbance. The last “green spot” of IFL on the European map, if Scandinavian countries and Russia are excluded, is located in Romania, in the south-

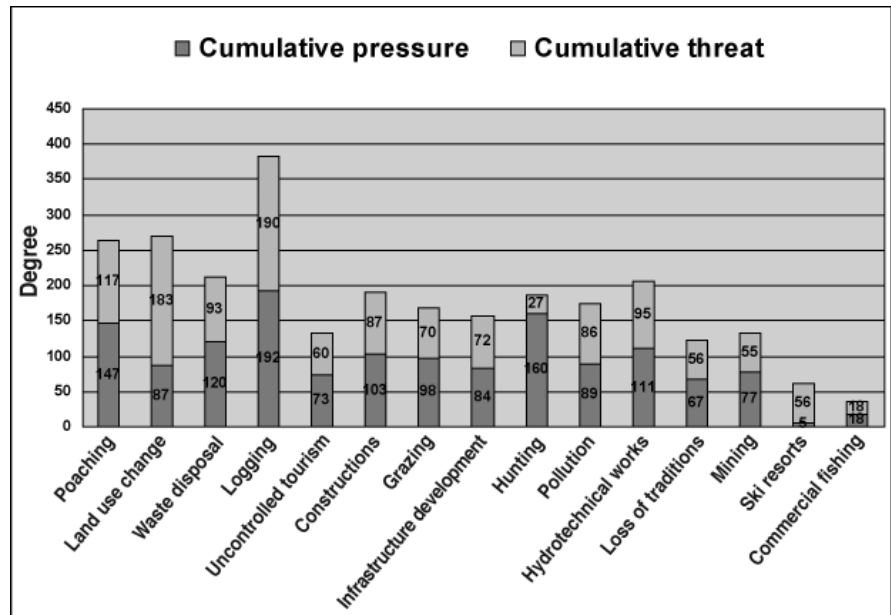


Figure 3—The most significant threats and pressures to protected areas as compiled at the 2003 RAPPAM workshop.

western corner of the Carpathians. Almost 90% of the IFL is already included in existing protected areas, but management measures are not yet adapted to support maintenance of their exceptional values. The IFL concept is not defined and accepted in the Romanian legislation or in the conservation management practices, although the exceptional and unique value of the area was confirmed through a study of the Romanian Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Development. Economic pressures are high on this area, especially from transportation and tourism infrastructure development and forestry. Threats are significant for the IFL and for the Romanian wilderness, even if they were included in a protected area system, and for the pristine and old-growth forests that are not yet legally protected.

In 2001, a group of Romanian and foreign specialists trying to design an ecological network for large carnivores as a tool to secure one of Europe's most representative and healthy popu-



Figure 4—A shepherd family—a grandmother and two sons—in Gradiste National Park, Romania. Photo by A. Beckmann.

lations of brown bears (*Ursus arctos*), wolves (*Canis lupus*), and lynx (*Lynx lynx*) (Maanen et. al 2006). The study identified the following threats to wilderness areas and large areas, including natural forests and other ecosystems,

needed by these keystone species:

1. Land privatization and encroachment, as more than 40% of the Carpathian forests have been fragmented through land restitution and unsustainable management after 1990;
2. Changes in forestry from a “close to nature” style management before 1990 to management that looks more to the economic benefits as determined by the pressure of the newly developed market economy;
3. Changes in agricultural practices such as land abandonment;
4. Hunting and poaching;
5. Stream valley deterioration, with an increasing pressure from hydro-power development in the mountain areas with the commitments of Romania, as a member of the European Union (EU), to reduce the use of fossil fuels; and
6. Very intense development of new transportation infrastructure and associated pollution along the heavily used roads.



Figure 5—Trekking in the old growth beech forest in Retezat National Park. Photo by A. Beckmann.

In 2003, another group of specialists, most of them in charge of the management of national and nature parks identified the same types of threats (Stanciu and Steindlegger 2006). Protected area managers and some of the key stakeholders from the existing protected areas identified the top pressures and threats to protected areas, during a workshop organized by World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) Danube Carpathian Program (see figure 3). The workshop assessed protected area management at the system level, using the Rapid Assessment and Prioritization Methodology of Protected Area Management (RAPPAM) developed by WWF. For national parks—the most important category for wilderness protection—the greatest threat identified is logging, followed by land use change and hunting and poaching.

These threats are worrying by themselves; however, adding the unfavorable policy environment and weak protected area policies—identified and acknowledged during the RAPPAM workshop by protected area managers—do not help in planning for a hopeful future for protected areas and wilderness in Romania. As a new member of the EU, Romania had to extend areas protected for their biodiversity values, increasing the surface of protected areas from about 8% of the

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Figure 6—Chamois (*Rupicapra rupicapra*) peer over the escarpment in Retezat National Park. Photo by A. Beckmann.

national territory (i.e., national parks, nature parks, biosphere reserves, nature reserves, and natural monuments) to about 19% with the proposed Natura 2000 sites. These future Natura 2000 sites (new protected areas) were proposed on the basis of EU legislation, with the main objective of addressing the conservation of species and habitats rare and threatened at the EU level. However, wilderness areas are not key for these newly proposed Natura 2000 sites.

The most important considerations for protected area management and for wilderness protection and management are related to financial and human resources. The Romanian government is not allocating, at present, any funds for protected area

management. Also, there is no political and financial support to include all existing pristine forests and the entire Intact Forest Landscape in protected areas. Furthermore, protected area management teams are very young and in need of training and capacity-building programs, and there are no coherent training programs for protected area management.

Despite the unfavorable policy environment and serious lack of resources for maintaining the wilderness areas in Romania, there are some projects that try to find solutions by looking to the values and benefits for key stakeholders to gain their involvement, or even setting up partnerships to promote and use wilderness areas for the benefit of people and local

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communities. One of the successful initiatives is the certification of the Retezat National Park in the Protected Area Network (PAN) Parks system and the establishment of a local tourism association that will promote the Retezat wilderness on the European ecotourism market. The Rodna National Park has a good probability of becoming PAN Parks certified in the near future.

There are active conservation organizations supporting protected

areas and the ecotourism concept as well as stewardship of high conservation value forests, thus contributing to the maintenance of wilderness areas, such as the WWF Danube Carpathian Program, the Association of Ecotourism from Romania, and Greenpeace. Efforts to preserve wilderness in Romania and reach decision makers especially at the national level must be in the context of the economic development need to increase and combine on-ground projects that



Figure 7—The unusually high biodiversity of many areas in the Carpathian Mountains has been shaped by centuries of human interaction with the landscape—including grazing, mowing, and fruit cultivation—such as in the Maramureș region. Photo by M. Mihul.

bring financial support with lobbying and advocacy.

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