

# Saving the Carpathian Forests

by Christoph Promberger, Foundation Conservation Carpathia

Since we reported in last year's Rainforest Review, we have made a large step forward in the conservation of these magnificent forests. Not only have we established and registered the Foundation Conservation Carpathia, we also have been successful in purchasing additional forests for the project. More than 6,000 ha of forests have now been purchased through our network of supporters and will be permanently protected. We have also been able to raise enough funds to secure all management costs of the Foundation until the end of 2011.

Since 2007, the extensive forests of the Romanian Carpathian Mountains have come under severe threat as a direct result of the Romanian government's decision to 'restitute' forests to the heirs of former owners, which had been nationalised during the decades of communism. In reality, hardly any of these were interested in the reinstated ownership of their forest, much more in the cash this policy would produce by a quick sale. As a result, those forests that had been given back very rapidly ended up in the hands of logging companies. Widespread clear-cuts even on the steep slopes soon became a common sight. Without intervention it became obvious that tens of thousands of hectares would disappear within a short time. Tragically, even forests within the existing National Parks have been restituted and are also in severe danger. The Romanian government has so far done very little to address this problem and it is precisely because of this that our work is so essential.



Photo: Promberger

## The stunning landscape of the Carpathians

Two years ago a group of dedicated conservationists and philanthropists got together to face this daunting challenge and to develop a conservation strategy based on the creation of a large European wilderness reserve of at least 50,000 hectares. We first needed to identify a large contiguous area of pristine wilderness – but as you might imagine, this is a difficult task anywhere in



Photo: Promberger

## Viable packs of wolves roam these forests

Europe. A threatened area of approximately 50,000 hectares was targeted either side of the Piatra Craiului National Park. The area is rich in wildlife: there are still 3 packs of wolves roaming these hills, a healthy population of brown bears, chamois deer, wild boar and even the elusive lynx is still occasionally seen.

With the help of two generous private donors, we started buying parcels of forest, which came on the market, and after a while new owners recognised us as serious purchasers and started to sell to us rather than to the logging companies. Despite the risk of price escalation we managed to keep land prices to a reasonable level. We have so far secured over 6,000 ha of forests and we will continue to purchase forests and alpine pastures in order to create what will hopefully become one of Europe's largest wilderness areas.

In December of last year, our network registered the Foundation Conservation Carpathia as the legal entity to further implement the project and through which to purchase land. Since then, we contacted a variety of businesses and individuals to support the project. A pledge from Rainforest Concern also brought significant funding which helped to continue the purchase of forests. Current negotiations are encouraging and we expect a further push to expand the core area over the next 2 to 3 years. We aim to complete the purchase the first priority block of 35,000 ha of forest within the next 12 months. In doing so we will more than double the area of the existing National Park plus safeguard all the forests inside the Park which up to now, have had little protection.

It is clear that we need to receive support at all levels. A large private Foundation has pledged a substantial donation on the basis we can find matching funding. This is a big challenge, and we must now work hard to achieve it. Of course at the same time, we must attract smaller donations as in such a big project every penny counts!

Our next big step is to set up our own protected area administration. Surprisingly Romania is the only country within the European Union, where the government allocates no money from the state budget to the administration of protected areas. Currently, the protected area administrations receive only some small funding from the State Forest Administration, but as the responsibility for protected areas has recently shifted to the Ministry of Environment, there is little hope that things will improve in the short term. Many managers of protected areas have to face such financial difficulties that even normal running expenses cannot be met, with cases of salaries not being paid for months on end. For this reason, we have decided not to rely on the state institutions but to develop our own administration. This will hopefully become an example of how to establish a model of a modern, efficient and cost effective protected area management. According to Romanian law, we need to have 7,000 ha in order to have our own administration and we plan to have reached this goal in a short time. This summer, we hired Mihai Zotta, one of Romania's leading conservationists in the field of protected areas with extensive experience of protected area management both on a local and on a national level.



Photo: Promberger

## European bears are widespread in the area

It is 10 years since Peter Bennett met me back in 2000 when he first visited Romania. Then, he expressed an interest in doing something to protect these wonderful and ancient forests but at that time, post-communist bureaucracy prevented any meaningful conservation and we had to wait until now before we could act.

We are delighted that Rainforest Concern provided the project with €100,000 earlier this year. Much of this was raised with last year's appeal and with thanks to you, the Charity's supporters, these funds have now been used to purchase the most recent additions to the reserve.