

Nature Conservation in Europe: Approaches and Lessons

Annex PL.4. Białowieża Forest, Poland

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Białowieża Great Forest is probably the most famous Polish forest (Szwagrzyk, 2016; Jaroszewicz *et al.*, 2019), located in north-eastern Poland on the Polish-Belarus border. This c.1 500 km² forest (c.630 km² in Poland) was used as a royal game hunting area and was not intensively managed for centuries. The forest is composed of a mosaic of mixed oak-hornbeam forest (Habitats Directive Annex I type 9170), alluvial alder forest (HD 91E0*), bog birch, pine and spruce forest (HD 91D0*), bog alder forest and spruce-pine forest (not Habitats Directive Annex I habitats). It has maintained outstanding natural values, including some features of natural forests and biodiversity that is typical of primeval forests (Jaroszewicz *et al.*, 2019). The forest is recognised as one of the most natural in European lowlands.

In 1915 German naturalists, directed by Hugo Convents, established the c.30 km² 'Naturschutzpark' in Białowieża Forest, on the Russian territory occupied by the German army, prohibiting felling within the area. In 1921 its protection was re-established by the Polish administration under the name 'Forest District Reserve'. In 1923 c.47 km² of the best-preserved forest area was designated as Białowieża National Park, with the former Naturschutzpark as the core area. In 1996 the National Park was enlarged to 105 km². Since 1979 the National Park has been designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The whole of the forest in Belarus has been a National Park since 1991.

In Poland, outside the National Park the forest is managed by State Forests (national forest management body) and subject to forest management. Nevertheless, even in the managed part, outstanding natural values have survived. Demands for the National Park to be enlarged to the whole forest have been made for years. Although this has not happened, pressure from scientists and wider society for better protection has led a consistent reduction in the intensity of forest management since 1975, and more nature-oriented practices. In 2003, an additional 85 km² was designated as Nature Reserve, enlarging the Nature Reserve's area to c.120 km².

After designation as a Natura 2000 site in 2004, discussions started on the proper conservation approach for the forest. It was concluded that a non-intervention approach is mostly favourable for forest habitat structure, and for most, although not all, protected species. The developed vision for the management of the Natura 2000 site was a mix of conservation measures, dominated by a non-intervention approach. Although enlargement of the National Park was not implemented, in the early 2010s some consensus on its management was achieved. In 2014 the status of World Heritage Site was extended to the whole forest. The draft Natura 2000 management plan, new forest management plans and World Heritage Site zonation contained a common vision for Białowieża Forest zonation, with an extensive non-intervention zone (extended also to some formerly managed forests) and substantial management restrictions over the rest of the forest, such as a ban on felling in stands with trees older than 100 years.

In the meantime, a serious outbreak of the bark beetle *Ips typographus* started and developed, causing extensive death of spruce trees and stands (Grodzki, 2016). Although the reasons were probably external, such as droughts and climate change, the foresters accused environmentalists of causing the outbreak due to the pre-dominant non-intervention approach. After the 2015 election in Poland, the new government was less supportive of the EU and nature conservation, and more supportive of forestry in general. It therefore decided to change the consensus on forest management, formally amend the forest management plans and carrying out extensive salvage logging, although the National Park and Nature Reserves were unaffected. Attempts to carry out the logging led to massive citizens' protests, legal actions, and a negative opinion from UNESCO. In 2018, the CJEU, considering a European Commission complaint, ruled that the change of forest management plans

was a violation of the Habitats Directive due to its inappropriate impact assessment, and that there had been a lack of implementation of measures corresponding to the ecological requirements of the Natura 2000 sites' natural habitats and species.

Although the felling was stopped, the future for the forest remains unclear because the case reflects a values conflict in nature conservation (Wesołowski *et al.*, 2016; Blicharska *et al.*, 2020). Nevertheless, this is an example how Natura 2000 rules can influence and improve conservation discussions. The only realistic way to protect the forest's outstanding natural values seems to be to extend the National Park to the whole forest, which remains to be achieved (Wesołowski *et al.*, 2018).

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