



Rzeszów-Eger Resolution on traditional rural landscapes of the Carpathian region

The international conference “Wooded rural landscapes in Central and Eastern Europe: biodiversity, cultural legacy and conservation,” organized by the University of Rzeszów and the Centre for Ecological Research, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, held in Rzeszów and Bükk National Park on 20-25 September 2017, provided the opportunity for an inter-disciplinary discussion about the future of rural landscapes in the Carpathian region. For hundreds of years, traditional working rural landscapes, covering most of the European land base, have been providing ecosystem services necessary to sustain the Europe’s bio-cultural values, including rich biodiversity. Increasing intensification and specialization of land use have become a driving force leading to substantial, progressing changes both in landscapes’ composition (introduction of new land use categories at the expense of the loss of numerous traditional categories and crops) and in their texture (traditional fine-grain texture, sustained by subsistence farming, replaced by coarse-grain texture created by industrial farms). That trend has an important demographic and social component: the farming intensification means that most of the descendants of yesterday’s farmers have become urban dwellers, increasingly detached from the bio-cultural countryside identity. This process has led to the paradoxical situation, when scores of conservation-oriented citizens generously spare their energy and devote charity to preserve (or restore) a historically almost non-existing wilderness whilst ignoring the progressing loss of what have been for centuries the true Europe’s high nature and the stronghold of cultural values. Having no intention to undermine the value and importance of wilderness reference areas, this resolution emphasizes the concern about the most neglected and threatened aspect of Europe’s bio-cultural legacy.

The document identifies major problems, underlying factors and driving forces, and indicates the need of an active, new approach:

1. The larger Carpathian region is undergoing dramatic landscape changes, through the conversion of intimate mixtures of small plough fields separated by balks and hedgerows, scattered trees, open woods and grassland grazed in an extensive way to large blocks of highly productive arable fields and meadows, monocrop plantations, and high forests.
2. This process has been exacerbated by post-war deportations, land nationalization and collectivization under communist rules, and the early 1990s ‘shock’ way of economic liberalization. The EU accession at the beginning of the 21st century provided systems of agricultural support, which, poorly adapted to local specifics, have often furthered the loss of traditional farming along with the related landscapes.
3. Dispersed development on agricultural land, in particular in the neighbourhood of urban centres and in popular tourist/recreational areas, adds to the loss of arable and permanent green land, and leads to the replacement of traditional rural culture by unsustainable ways of living and relationships with the landscape.

4. This has led to a breakdown in the social and economic fabric of traditional rural communities and their disempowerment in favour of bureaucracy (of all possible levels), strong corporate players (e.g. agro- and forestry- businesses, including big landowners), lobbies (e.g. hunting, developer), and NGOs (including environmental advocacy). The main surviving “strongholds” of traditional communities are among ethnic/national diasporas, where the strong sense of identity and separateness, allowed them to survive the whims of history and change of borders.

5. The “problem of traditional farming” (including High Nature Value farming) is not its economic inefficiency, but that it does not fit with the existing political, institutional, legal, and financial framework – misinterpreted as objective, free market based conditions. Family subsistence farming and silvopastoralism, have shaped the true “cultural landscape” of this region – a landscape that many have lost contact with. In fact, it has proved to be very efficient – securing subsistence of once very populated rural communities and providing a substantial surplus for sell. Considering multiple downsides of an industrial model of agriculture, involving high dependence on fossil fuels, long-distance transportation and the eventual waist of one third of the food product, a traditional farming can be an inspiration for a sustainable alternative. Based on the harmonious use of multiple ecosystem services, including organic crops, meat and dairy products, wood, pharmaceutical plants, high biodiversity and cultural values, contributing to recreational and tourist potential of countryside, deeply rooted in local tradition, labour-intensive farming could become the most reliable and sustainable way of conservation of the Carpathians’ irreplaceable bio-cultural values. Apart from that, silvopastoral systems, due to their structural and compositional variability, provide a number of important regulating services, which are crucial for climate change mitigation and adaptation.

6. Grant-funded conservation projects aimed at restoring bio-cultural values of traditional rural landscapes can only be a short-term solution. Unless followed by a sustainable system perpetuating such values, short-term grant project can even prove counterproductive. The preservation of high nature value landscapes, developed and fostered during the centuries of traditional farming, requires new policies allowing and encouraging the rural communities to develop their economies in harmony of their traditions and in accordance with natural knowledge, complemented with state-of-the art scientific and technological assets. Only such an approach, based on local economies, could perpetuate large blocks of working high nature and cultural values landscapes.

7. It is highly advisable to establish landscape-scale demonstration areas, where local communities would be helped to restore and sustain the traditional way of farming (including silvopastoralism), or experiment different models such as agroforestry. Such “demonstration landscape units” should become the important study areas of landscape ecology, bio-cultural diversity, natural knowledge, ecosystem services, etc.

8. Common Agricultural Policy, Forestry and Biodiversity Strategies should implement transparent, clear and reliable measures of subsidiarity, offering a necessary support to local best practices instead of sophisticated programmes based on central planning. As an example of such measures would be offering incentive to growing and sustaining trees on pastures.

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