Society for Conservation Biology Europe Section
UNIVERSITY OF WARSAW
February 12-15, 2019 Warsaw–Białowieża, Poland
Forests at risk: Białowieża and beyond

Conference Resolution[1]

Białowieża Forest: Hands off and eyes on!

Old-growth forests have outstanding conservation value, however, they comprise less than 1% of Europe's forest area[2]. Białowieża Forest, shared between Poland and Belarus, is unique in that it represents the largest remnant of lowland old-growth forest with a low human footprint and the best preserved lowland forest we still have in Europe. It is an invaluable centre of species, structural, and genetic diversity, where numerous specialized forest organisms have survived. This high diversity is a result of nearly twelve thousands years of continuous forest cover and the action of natural processes, including disturbance by winds, fires, and insect outbreaks[2,3], which continue to operate with limited human impact.

Białowieża Forest is an irreplaceable living laboratory for ecological and evolutionary sciences, and should become a prime model for nature conservation and forest research, and an important benchmark for conservation science and modern forestry. The challenges brought by climate change require the preservation of large set-aside reference areas where processes associated with forest ecosystem resilience and adaptation to new environmental conditions can be maintained. Society and science urgently need reference areas like Białowieża Forest to study nature's inherent ability to adapt to climate change and to devise functional climate adaptation policies in managed forests[3,4].

Białowieża Forest is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, with its Polish part also being a Natura 2000 site. Forestry operations are still ongoing on two thirds of the Polish part of Białowieża Forest; they have included logging, tree planting, fencing, road development, and drainage. Forestry operations are a major threat to Białowieża Forest and undermine opportunities for furthering the wellbeing and sustainable development of the local communities[5-11]. Recent logging activities were ruled illegal by the Court of Justice of the European Union on 17th April 2018[12]. However, because of safety and fire prevention considerations, continued logging is planned[13]. The future of this unique forest remains uncertain and at risk.

We, participants in the conference "Forests at risk: Białowieża and beyond" and conservation professionals, express high concern about the future of the Polish side of Białowieża Forest and urge the Polish, European, and international authorities to fulfil their obligation to safe-guard this precious and unique natural heritage for current and future generations and to:

(1) stop all forestry operations immediately,

(2) protect the entire Polish part of the Białowieża Forest as a National Park,

(3) implement a science-based conservation strategy to protect ecological processes and biological diversity which is in line with the national and international legislation, and

(4) develop a program that secures the needs of the local communities, and promotes their sustainable development and non-extractive use of the Białowieża Forest.

Footnotes

[1]The scientific conference "Forests at risk: Białowieża and beyond" was held in Warsaw and Białowieża Forest (Poland) on February 12-15, 2019. This conference hosted 5 keynote lectures, 66 oral presentations and 40 poster presentations from 120 conservation scientists on the ecology and conservation of primeval or old-growth forests all over the world. It was attended by 156 participants coming from 24 countries. The Conference has been co-organised by the Society for Conservation Biology-European Section and University of Warsaw in cooperation with the Faculty of Forest Sciences of the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, University of Wrocław and the Institute of Nature Conservation of the Polish Academy of Sciences. The Society for Conservation Biology is a global network of conservation scientists and students, whose mission is to advance the science and practice of conserving Earth's biological diversity. A priority issue within Europe, as well as across the wider world, is the continuing loss of natural forests (Global Forest Initiative http://conbio.org/policy/global-policy-initiatives/global-forest-initiative), and the intensification of forestry activities in old-growth forests and other managed forests. The regional Sections implement the Society's mission and goals on a regional scale to achieve real conservation results in specific areas of the world.

[2] Sabatini F.M., Burrascano S., Keeton W.S., et al. 2018. Where are Europe's last primary forests? Diversity and Distributions 24:1426–1439.

[3]Kujawa A., Orczewska A., Falkowski M., Blicharska M., Bohdan A., Buchholz L., Chylarecki P., Gutowski J. M., Latałowa M., Mysłajek R. W., Nowak S., Walankiewicz W., Zalewska A. 2016. The Białowieża Forest – a UNESCO Natural Heritage Site – protection priorities. Leśne Prace Badawcze 77 (4): 302-323. DOI-10.1515-frp-2016-0032

[4]Marris E. 2008. The heart of the wood. Nature 455: 277- 280.

[5]Giergiczny M. 2009. Recreational value of the Białowieża National Park. Ekonomia i Środowisko 2:116-128. [in Polish]

[6]Albrecht J., Berens D. G., Jaroszewicz B., Selva N., Brandl R., Farwig N. 2014. Correlated loss of ecosystem services in coupled mutualistic networks. Nature Communications 5: 3810.

[7]Gross M. 2016. Europe's last wilderness threatened. Current Biology 26: R641–R666.

[8]Schiermeier Q. 2016. Pristine forest at risk. Nature 530:393.

[9]Wesołowski T., Gutowski J. M., Jaroszewicz B., Kowalczyk R., Niedziałkowski K., Rok J., Wójcik J. M. 2018. The national park of the Białowieża Forest – nature conservation and development of local communities. www.forestbiology.org. Article 2: 1-28 http://www.forestbiology.org/articles/FB_05.pdf?i=5c136637b03b0 [in Polish]

[10]Mikusiński G, Bubnicki JW, Churski M, Czeszczewik D, Walankiewicz W, Kuijper DPJ. 2018. Is the impact of loggings in the last primeval lowland forest in Europe underestimated? The conservation issues of Białowieża Forest. Biological Conservation 227:266-274.

[11]Żmihorski M, Chylarecki P, Orczewska A, Wesołowski T. 2018. Białowieża Forest: A new threat. Science 361:238-238.

[12]Schiermeier Q. 2018. EU's top court says logging in Poland's ancient forest was illegal. Nature. 10.1038/d41586-018-04730-z.

[13]Ruszyły prace przy aneksach do planów urządzenia lasu nadleśnictw Puszczy Białowieskiej https://www.gazetaprawna.pl/artykuly/1389027,aneksy-do-planow-urzadzenia-lasu-nadlesnictw-puszczy-bialowieskiej.html. Dec. 23, 2018. [In Polish].