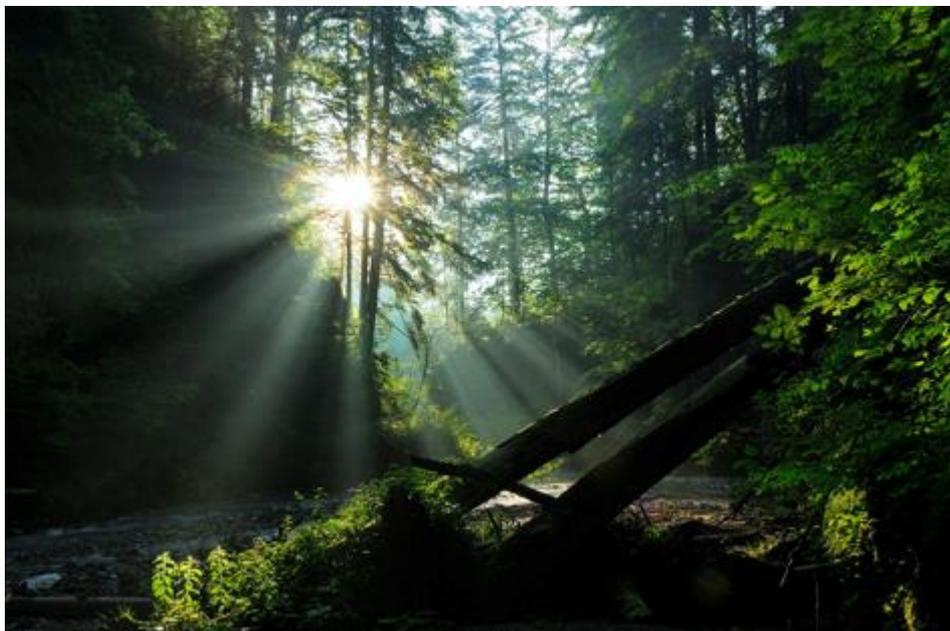


VCA Proposal – Carpathia Wilderness Reserve

September 2017

A. Executive Summary

The establishment of the Carpathia Wilderness Reserve at the heart of the Romanian Carpathian Mountains is a unique conservation initiative in Europe. With support of a consortium of private philanthropists organised in the Foundation Conservation Carpathia (FCC),¹ around 20,000 ha of forests and alpine grasslands have been purchased since 2009. The ultimate aim is secure 50,000 ha of mainly forests and integrating this area into the larger protected areas landscape of Romania. In parallel to purchasing land, FCC has started the restoration of degraded forestland and mountain streams and acquired hunting concessions to enable wildlife comeback. Work has also commenced to introduce a new, innovative forestry concept in the buffer zone - “the Lübeck forestry model” – and to assist local communities to start up nature-based enterprises and protect remaining old-growth forests. Although being subject to traditional human use for the last two centuries, the area still harbours some of the largest remaining tracts of primary, old growth forests in central Europe with many rare plant and animal species of great international importance.



The Carpathian Mountains still host some of the wildest, most untouched natural areas of Europe

¹ See: <https://www.carpathia.org/en/>

B. Area Characteristics & Manager

The Carpathia Wilderness Reserve is located in the Fagaras Mountains west of the Romanian town of Brasov. This is one of the wildest mountain ranges of Europe with large tracts of unfragmented forests, untamed rivers, unspoiled alpine meadows, spectacular rock formations, and a rich wildlife, especially of large carnivores – brown bears, wolves and Eurasian lynx.

The Foundation Conservation Carpathia (FCC) was founded in 2009 with the aim of creating a world-class wilderness reserve large enough to support significant numbers of large carnivores and to allow evolutionary processes to happen. The project area is situated in the Făgăraș Mountain Natura 2000 site, the Piatra Craiului National Park and the Leaota Mountain where over 12,000 ha of forest and alpine grasslands have been purchased directly by the Foundation and additional 8,000 ha have been purchased by one of the FCC Board members. All surfaces are managed by the Foundation.

Within the FCC area there are four Natura 2000 sites:

- *Leaota ROSCI0102 – 1,393 ha;*
- *Piatra Craiului ROSCI0194 – 15,867 ha;*
- *Muntii Făgăraș ROSCI0122 – 198,495 ha & Piemontul Fagaras ROSPA0098 – 71,256 ha, but both sides overlap and have a total size of 243,610 ha;*
- *Raul Targului – Argesel – Rausor ROSCI0381 – 13,213 ha;*

According to the national legislation, these Natura 2000 sites are being rendered for administration to government or non-government organisations through a public tender. FCC has won the tenders for the Leaota and the Raul Targului – Argesel – Rausor Natura 2000 sites.

With the target of purchasing or otherwise securing 50,000 ha and integrating this area into the larger protected areas landscape, the Foundation aspires to stimulate the creation of a large national park – the Fagaras National Park – with a total area of up to 288,000 ha. As a step in that direction, the Romanian Government decided in September 2016 to start the process of establishing a new Făgăraș Mountain National Park.



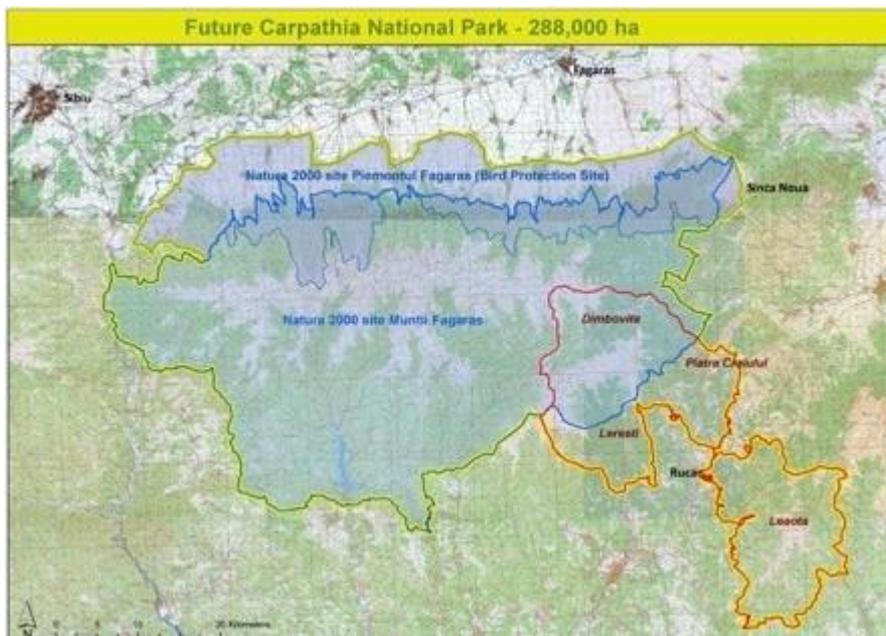
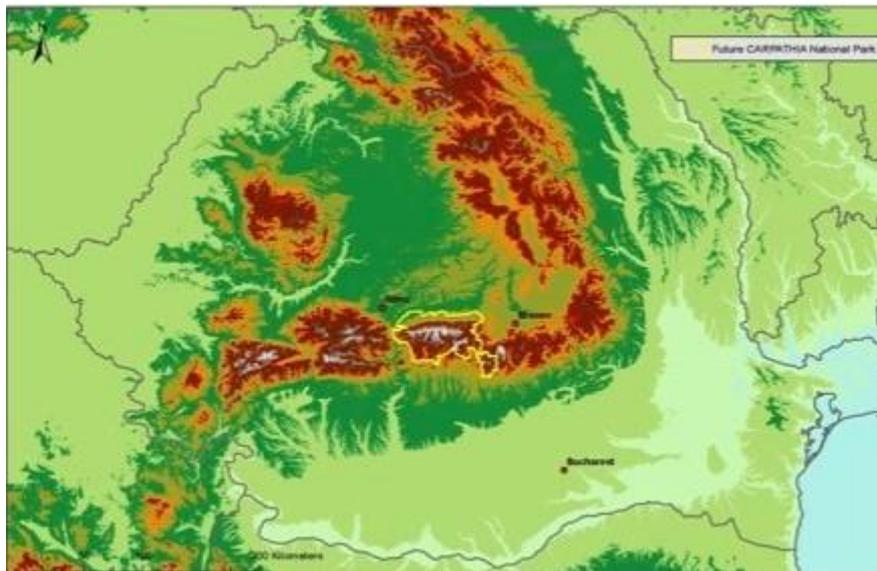
*Dramatic mountain slopes create inaccessible areas
good for many wildlife species*

In 2005 the Romanian State started to restitute forests, which had been nationalised during the communist time. As side effect, some forest areas were heavily affected by unsustainable, large clear-felling operations – some of them even illegal, which also affected the project area. FCC has therefore started the restoration of some of these areas with financial support by the EU LIFE Nature programme² () and the EEA Grants/NGO Fund. Through the same project, the negative impacts of streams affected by small-scale hydropower developments in the 1980s have been reduced through restoration of watercourses, riparian habitats and removal of obstacles for migrating fish.

Due to problems with wildlife management in Romania with inadequate monitoring of animals, often leading to inflated quotas and overharvesting of species, the density of red deer, chamois, wolf, and Eurasian lynx has declined in the area. To restore wildlife numbers, FCC therefore acquired a hunting concession of 13,500 ha, which, together with the neighbouring Piatra Craiului National Park has created a hunting free area on a total of 28,300 ha.. The ultimate goal is to create a hunting free area of over 50,000 ha in the next 5 years and eventually the total area of the National Park.

² See: <http://www.carpathia.org/ro/life-project/>

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The upper map shows the location of the Carpathia Wilderness Reserve in the southern Carpathian Mountain range west of the town of Brasov, Romania. The FCC project area is situated in a much larger 288'000 ha area with the tentative name Carpathia National Park.



Replanting of clear cut mountain slopes organised by Foundation Conservation Carpathia and co-financed by the EU LIFE programme

A specific Carpathia Forest Management Concept have been adopted by the FCC to:

- (1) guide the future protection in the core zones;
- (2) promote the return of natural forests in areas affected by artificial monocultures, clear cut operations and other human disturbances; and
- (3) develop an ecologically sustainable and responsible forestry in the buffer zone.

In the latter, fringe parts will be sustainably managed to produce some of the income needed for the maintenance of the park, with standards following the, so called, “Lübeck forestry model,”³ which now has been adopted by different landowners, forest companies (including in Sweden), government agencies (e.g. the German DBU) and NGOs (WWF, Greenpeace, Robin Wood and Bund in Germany).

For the future success of the Făgăraș Mountain National Park, FCC has started to engage with the local communities for protecting the remaining old-growth forests at the same time as helping the community to start up nature-based enterprises. The latter activity is done in collaboration with Conservation Capital.⁴ Here conservation

³ See, for example: <http://www.silvaskog.se/en/> and <http://www.iufro.org/science/special/wfse/forests-society-global-drivers-summaries/>

⁴ See: <http://www.conservation-capital.com>

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management plans - as also required by the VCA - could guide future developments and decision-making at the same time as providing incentives for target-oriented investments benefitting the nature values.



The Carpathia Wilderness Reserve is surrounded by old, traditional Landscapes where people have lived for generations, managing land. Through FCC, new, nature-based enterprise activities are being developed, creating additional economic activities.

For Carpathia, FCC wants to promote a new, green economy with conservation-oriented enterprises, such as nature friendly tourism, wildlife watching, local wood processing, and harvest of mushrooms and forest fruits in the buffer zones. High-quality tourism infrastructure will be required, including a multi-functional CARPATHIA Centre.

The FCC is a private, legal entity established under Romanian law, with a Board consisting of ten members from seven countries (Denmark, Germany, Hong Kong, Romania, Switzerland, UK & US). Different plots of land have been purchased by FCC for full protection. Some land is still in ownership of a private conservationist closely linked to FCC, but is managed by the Foundation in the same conservation manner as the forests in ownership of FCC.

C. Biodiversity Baseline Conditions

The four Natura 2000 sites together represent a hotspot of biodiversity values, however with an uneven documentation of species records. One of the best

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documented areas is the Piatra Craiului with 30 % of all Romanian vascular plant species out of which 181 are included into the “Red List of vascular plants in Romania” as endemic, rare or vulnerable species. Further, 40% of all Romanian mammal species are present and 35 invertebrate species are endemic to Piatra Craiului, which means they exist only here.

One of the most prominent values of the Carpathian Mountains in Romania is the concentration of old-growth/virgin and natural forests, which is among the highest in Europe. The project area is one of the large depositories of old-growth forests in Romania, although still facing many threats.⁵



Old, natural forests are the most important conservation element in central Carpathian Mountains.

In a recent compilation of the known biodiversity values of the Făgăraș Mountains Natura 2000 site,⁶ the list of recorded species included 57 mammals, 130 birds, 17 amphibians, 13 reptiles, 12 fish, 2 freshwater crayfish, 563 butterflies and moths, 125 beetles, 15 dragonflies, 40 spiders, 22 water-bugs, 28 water-mites, 144 lichens and 895 plants. For other species groups such as fungi (19 species), snails (6 species) and crickets (2 species) there is clearly a lot more registration to do before these species lists will become complete. Of these species, a total of 107 are of EU community interest, being listed on either the Habitats Directive or the Birds Directive. Many of the species are also on the national Romanian red list. In terms of its size, species diversity, and ecological integrity the Făgăraș Mountains are clearly an area with a very

⁵ See, for example: https://www.minzp.sk/files/sekcia-ochranyprirodyakrajiny/dohovory/stretnutie-riaditelov-ochrany-prirody-biodiverzity-clenskych-statov-eu/03_carpathians_harald-egerer.pdf

⁶ See: <https://brage.bibsys.no/xmlui/handle/11250/2394029>

high biodiversity value. The majority of the records we found come from only two areas that have been comparatively well studied (Sinca Noua and the Upper Dambovita river basin). As a result, further studies of new areas and other species groups are clearly going to lead to an increase in the areas known diversity.

It was further concluded that - although ecologically intact – “the Făgăraș Mountains are not a true wilderness because they have been subject to a diversity of human land uses for centuries, or even millennia. However, the impacts of these traditional activities have not degraded its biodiversity until recently. In fact, the human activity has been instrumental in the creation of some open habitats associated with exceptionally high diversity. Unfortunately, the massive institutional, social and economic changes that have occurred since the end of the communist era and with entry into the European Union have led to many changes in human activity and land use that have the potential to have negative effects on this biodiversity. If the biodiversity values of the site are going to persist into the future there is an urgent need to establish and enforce clear land use zoning guidelines and codes of practice for livestock grazing, forestry, hunting, agriculture and infrastructure development.” To this could be added FCC’s ambition to create local, economic incentives for ensuring a sustainable development of the area including the protection of critical old-growth forest stands.

Among the more well-known, charismatic species living in the area are brown bear, Eurasian lynx, wolf, European otter, chamois, golden eagle, lesser-spotted eagle, white-backed woodpecker, capercaillie, eagle owl, Ural owl, and white & black stork.

D. Conservation Impact Assessment & Stakeholders

Repeated estimates of wildlife population sizes or of an index are vital to determine if a population is increasing, decreasing, or stable and – where desired – to set hunting quotas that can be supported by the population. However, counting or obtaining reliable estimates of both ungulates and carnivore populations is extremely difficult as most of the forest species are elusive or rare.

While many commonly-used techniques rely on capturing, marking, or fitting of a transmitter to an animal (for example radio-telemetry through a collar, tags, inserts), it is CARPATHIA philosophy to use only non-invasive methods, without disturbance to the normal behaviour, ecology or physiology of the animal. FCC therefore works with three main categories of field methods: wildlife tracking, genetic sample collection, and remote camera traps.



A hallmark, conservation approach of FCC is to be in constant dialogue with every sector of Romanian society, especially the local villages.

To develop a new economy around the future Fagaras National Park, FCC received financial aid from the EEA Grants to explore conservation values and business opportunities around the Făgăraș Mountains. Through this project FCC wants to evaluate the socio-economic and conservation context in the Făgăraș Mountains Natura 2000 site, the current on-going business activities, and to synthesise how they could be transformed into a new economy, which would assist in the full restoration of ecosystem services and biodiversity conservation. The project aims also to analyse the political framework for the development of conservation enterprises, and to come up with policy recommendations to foster such a development not just in the Făgăraș Mountains, but in other protected areas of Romania as well. This project will also provide the baseline for future monitoring of the socio-economic developments of the FCC work.

The Carpathia initiative is founded on strong partnerships. Among the partners and supporters are: The Wyss Foundation, European Nature Trust, Rainforest Concern, Wildland, Foundation Temperatio, Frankfurt Zoological Society, Wild Europe, and a number of corporates. Since the start in 2007, the project is actively engaging with a long list of local, regional and national stakeholders in Romania and plays a strong role in the development and management of the Romanian Federation of conservation NGOs Coalitia Natura 2000.

E. Next Step for Registering the Area

When and how an external audit system can be put in place needs to be clarified. This, in turn, will determine the timing of the final VCA registration. We aim, however, to have the plan and audit completed by August 2019 at the latest.

In the future, the FCC intends to team up with the state, where the private land acquired by the Foundation would be integrated with a future Carpathia/Făgăraș Mountains National Park. There would be an agreement between the State and FCC that ensures that the original purpose of a National Park will not be violated and compromised. The VCA registration could then become a *conditio sine qua non* for the government and the audit would provide an independent, third-party assessment of the developments when it comes to the conservation side, giving FCC and all its donors the security that things are going right.