

Respect for the last remaining European Virgin Forests

“Urwälder in (Mittel)Europa – Verantwortung übernehmen für das Europäische Naturerbe (UrwaldVerantwortung)”

Final Report

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Submitted by Hochschule für Forstwirtschaft Rottenburg (HFR) to Deutsche Bundesstiftung Umwelt (DBU) and Heidehofstiftung

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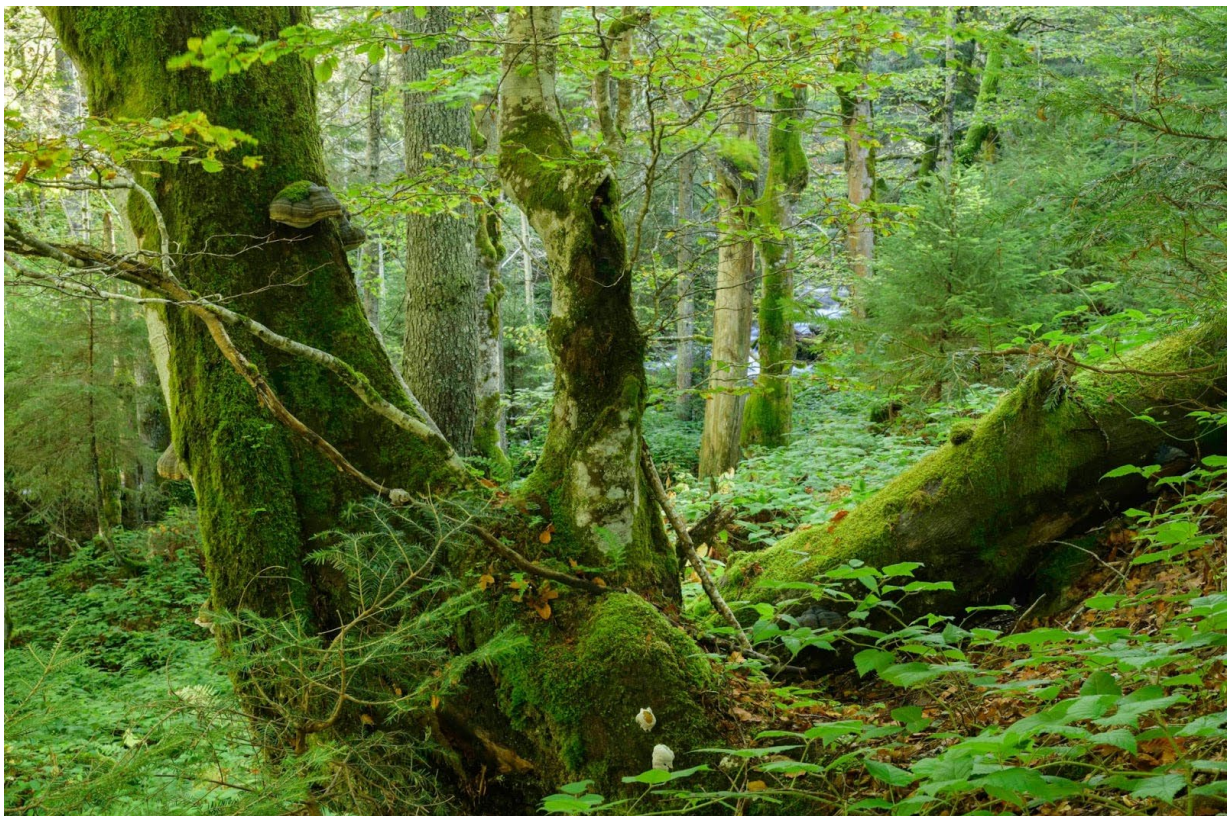


Figure 1: The magnificent primary forests in Romania offer extraordinary opportunities for nature-based tourism and related income-generating opportunities for the local population. Can tourism help to better protect these areas? Picture: Pojorta valley, Făgăraș Mountains Natura 2000 site.
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Content

	Projektkennblatt	3
	List of figures, maps and tables	5
	Summary	8
1	Introduction	9
1.1	<i>Status of primary forests in Romania</i>	9
1.2	<i>Status of wilderness / wild forest tourism in Romania</i>	11
2.	Main Part	14
2.1	<i>Aims of the project</i>	14
2.2	<i>Main Results</i>	16
2.3	<i>Detailed results</i>	19
2.3.1	Work package 1: Identification and mapping of ecologically and scientifically particularly important primary & old growth forest areas	19
2.3.2	Work package 2: Organization and implementation of an experts and citizen scientists workshop on mapping and monitoring of primary & old-growth forests efforts	21
2.3.3	Work package 3: Economic added value of forest protection for communities / rural regions with primary / old-growth forests	23
2.4	Discussion of the results with local, regional actors and stakeholders	37
2.5	Possible starting points, priority measures to promote tourism capacity and closing the competence gaps	38
2.6	Assistance with implementation of initial measures	40
2.7	Identification of further funding opportunities for project follow up	41
3.	Transfer and Outreach (WP 4)	42
4.	Conclusions	49
5.	Literature	53
5.1	<i>Used Literature referring to primary and old growth forest ecology and protection</i>	53
5.2	<i>Used literature referring to sustainable and nature tourism, rural economy and value adding</i>	56
6	Annex	58
6.1	<i>Mapping results</i>	58
6.2	<i>Impressions from project workshops and primary forest testing and educational hikes</i>	61
6.3	<i>Recommended hiking trails Romanian primary forest - image gallery</i>	81

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<p>Die Deutsche Bundesstiftung Umwelt (DBU) förderte in der Arbeitsgruppe von Prof. Dr. Rainer Luick von 2017 bis 2019 ein Forschungsvorhaben, das sich mit der Inventarisierung von Urwaldreservaten in Rumänien beschäftigte. Weniger als 1% aller europäischen Wälder sind noch Urwälder; der Großteil davon (außerhalb von Russland) liegt im Karpatenbogen und hier in erster Linie in den rumänischen Karpaten. Dort gab es noch um das Jahr 2000 geschätzt 200.000 ha Wälder, die über Jahrtausende ohne Nutzungseinfluss waren, bzw. nur marginale Spuren historischer Nutzungen aufweisen (so genannte "Quasi-Urwälder"). Mit dem EU Beitritt und dem Engagement von ausländischen Holzkonzernen, die überwiegend aus Österreich und Deutschland stammen, sind diese Urwaldflächen auf vermutlich schon weniger als 100.000 ha geschrumpft. Massive illegale und "legalisierte" Einschläge, aber auch ein vielfach nur in der Theorie bestehender Schutzstatus, sind die Ursachen. In diesem ersten Projekt wurden Kartierungen von Urwäldern und Quasi-Urwäldern durchgeführt, die für den sogenannten Rumänischen Urwaldkatalog gemeldet wurden. Insgesamt wurden Wälder in einer Dimension von 15.000 ha angesprochen; im Detail wurden ca. 5.200 ha untersucht und für 32 Gebiete Gutachten entsprechend den Kriterien des Nationalen Katalogprojektes erstellt. Mit den nach Abschluss des Projektes noch erkannten Gebieten wurden insgesamt rund 5.500 ha Urwälder und Quasi-Urwälder verteilt auf ca. 50 Teilgebiete in den Katalog aufgenommen.</p> <p>Das hier vorgestellte Förderprojekt hat folgende Zielsetzungen:</p> <p>(1) Identifizierung und Kartierung von Vorschlagsflächen für das auch von Rumänien zu erstellende Inventar von Schutzgebieten für Primär- und Alte Wälder als zentrales Ziel der EU Biodiversitätsstrategie 2030 und</p>					

ebenso als Element der völkerrechtlich verbindlichen UN Kuuming-Montreal-Vereinbarungen.

(2) Wertschöpfungsoptionen für Menschen und Gemeinden über die Installation von nachhaltigen Wildnis-(Urwald)-Tourismus in Regionen aufzeigen, wo noch großflächige Urwald- und Quasiurwälder vorhanden sind und erste Umsetzungsschritte gemeinsam entwickeln. Der zentrale Gedanke dabei ist, dass über das Belassen der Wälder ein regelmäßiger und nicht nur einmaliger Profit generiert werden kann.

(3) Erfahrungen bereitstellen, Wissen vermitteln und technisches Know-how trainieren, mit der Zielgruppe interessierter regionaler Akteure und Freiwilliger. Diese wurden über Workshops zu eigenen Kartierungen von Urwäldern und Alten Wäldern und zu Beiträgen zum Komplex Regionalwirtschaft motiviert, und dazu, sich in entsprechenden Projektansätzen zu engagieren und eigene Projekte zu initiieren.

Darstellung der Arbeitsschritte und der angewandten Methoden

Die Koordinierung des Projektes lag bei Prof. Dr. Rainer Luick und Prof. Dr. Monika Bachinger. Die wissenschaftlichen Arbeiten wurden von Experten aus Österreich und Rumänien durchgeführt (Matthias Schickhofer und Ion Holban). Die Arbeiten und Methoden umfassten Desktop und vor-Ort Recherchen und Kartierungen, Workshops (Präsenz, Online oder Hybrid) und intensiver Erfahrungsaustausch mit lokalen Akteuren.

Ergebnisse, Fazit und Diskussion

Arbeitspaket Kartierung von Urwälder und Alten Wäldern

Insgesamt wurden in den beiden Fokusgebieten (1) Făgăraș Mountains und (2) Domogled-Valea ca. 80.000 ha mit wahrscheinlichem Vorkommen von Primär und Quasi-Urwäldern erfasst und kartiert. Davon waren ca. 55.000 h in (1) und ca. 24.500 ha in (2). Ergänzend wurden für (1) ca. 32,600 ha und für (2) ca. 17,300 ha als notwendige Verbindungs- und Wiederherstellungsflächen vorgeschlagen. Die Vorschläge wurden Regierungsbehörden und EU-Institutionen übermittelt und werden ausführlich in einer separaten wissenschaftlichen Arbeit publiziert.

Arbeitspaket regionale Wertschöpfung über sanfte (Ur)Wald-Wildnis-Erlebnisangebote

Die Analyse zeigte, dass es in den Karpatenräumen mit Vorkommen von großflächigen Urwäldern und Alten Wäldern bislang kaum Tourismus-, Informations- und Bildungsangebote gibt; weder von lokalen / kommunalen und von übergeordneten staatlichen Einrichtungen noch von privaten Anbietern.

Hauptprobleme, die gleichzeitig Herausforderungen und Lösungsstrategien erfordern sind: (1) praktische keine Zugänge mit öffentlichem Verkehr und wenn nur vereinzelt und sehr rudimentäre Zugangswege mit privaten Verkehrsmitteln; (2) nur sehr wenige Pfade, die in interessante Waldgebiete führen; oft sind diese kaum ausgeschildert (oder verschwundene Beschilderung), sind abschnittsweise gefährlich oder durch forstliche Eingriffe zerstört; (3) es existiert oft nur eine rudimentäre oder keine Infrastruktur in räumlicher Nähe. Zentrale Ergebnisse des Arbeitspaketes sind:

(1) Basierend auf Desktop und eigenen vor-Ort Recherchen und Austausch mit lokalen Akteuren Entwicklung eines Online-verfügbaren Informations- und Beratungstools "Best Practice Primary Forest Tourism: Inspiration - guidance - checklists - for nature and wilderness tourism developers and practitioners".

(2) In den Fokusgebieten Făgăraș Mountains und Domogled - Valea Cernei National Park wurden jeweils 4 Trails ausgewählt. Diese wurden teils mehrfach, auch mit Testpersonen begangen und notwendige Daten für eine Charakterisierung erhoben, die auch von Geodatenportalen wie Komoot oder OsmAnd importiert werden können.

(3) Entwicklung und Hosting eine Projekthomepage, die nach Projektende von interessierten Karpatenbesuchern und Anbietern von Tourismusangeboten genutzt werden kann. Diese enthält Tourbeschreibungen, praktische Hinweise und ökologische Hintergrundinformationen.

Arbeitspaket Transfer und Öffentlichkeitsarbeit und Erfolg

Für den Transfer von Wissen und Erfahrungen und zur Schulung wurden mehrere Seminare durchgeführt, die auch praktische Komponenten beinhalteten. Mit Experten und interessierten Gruppen wurden Testwanderungen durchgeführt. Von Beginn an erfuhr das Projekt ein intensives internationales Interesse, was sich in einer beeindruckenden Presserezeption darstellt. Erste Touranbieter haben basierend auf unserer Arbeit Angebote entwickelt und erfolgreich durchgeführt.

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List of figures, maps and tables:

List of figures:

Figure 1:	The magnificent primary forests in Romania offer extraordinary opportunities for nature-based tourism and related income-generating opportunities for the local population. Can tourism help to better protect these areas? Image: Pojorta valley, Făgăraș Mountains Natura 2000 site. © Matthias Schickhofer
Figure 2:	Can sustainable "slow" tourism in protected primary forest areas offer an alternative source of income to logging and ensure long-term economic development? © Matthias Schickhofer
Figure 3:	Logging is also a threat to hiking routes, as this photo (October 2024) from the Natura 2000 site Făgăraș Mountains shows: The path is completely destroyed, the natural forest uphill largely devastated and the nature experience ruined. And: walking here is also very dangerous due to falling tree trunks. © Matthias Schickhofer
Figures 4 and 5:	Făgăraș Mountains Natura 2000 site: Strictly protected primary forest vs. spread of verified and potential high biodiversity value forest.
Figure 6:	Stakeholder workshop on best practice in wilderness tourism in the Făgăraș region in May / June 2023. © Matthias Schickhofer
Figure 7:	Ancient peasant land meets UNESCO listed beech forest wilderness: Heart of the Domogled - Valea Cernei National Park. © Matthias Schickhofer
Figure 8:	Exploration trip with Austrian nature photographers to Făgăraș Mountains (August 2024). © Matthias Schickhofer
Figure 9:	A touristically unattractive forest road leading to a primary forest valley in the Făgăraș Mountains. © Jana Ballenthien
Figure 10:	In October 2024, the first commercial photo journey (with paying customers) was carried out by ARR Reisen in collaboration with our project in the Domogled - Valea Cernei National Park. © Matthias Schickhofer
Figures 11 - 13:	Capacity building training in April 2024 in Romanian Făgăraș region - indoor session and outdoor training (Arpasu Mare valley). © Matthias Schickhofer
Figure 14:	The new website primaryforests.org combines (images rich) information about primary forests in Romania, hiking tour recommendations (with descriptions and maps) and advisory information for tourism stakeholders (screenshot).
Figures 15 and 16:	Exploring some forests in the northeastern Făgăraș Mountains with local area experts. Unfortunately, the forests visited were not suitable due to a lack of trails and poor accessibility. © Matthias Schickhofer
Figure 17:	Exploring a primary forest in Vâlsan valley near to Nucșoara's monumental trees project area. © Matthias Schickhofer
Figure 18:	Exploring the wild forest in Vâlsan valley. © Matthias Schickhofer
Figure 19:	Exchange with the mayor of Prisacina municipality about options for nature tourism in the area. © Matthias Schickhofer
Figure 20:	Exploration of a hiking trail in the UNESCO World Heritage Site in the Cerna Valley / Domogled - Valea Cernei National Park. © Matthias Schickhofer

Figure 21:	The project team with a local area expert in the UNESCO World Heritage Site in the Domogled - Valea Cernei National Park. © Matthias Schickhofer
Figure 22:	Hybrid workshop in a guest house in the north of Făgăraș with online input from tour operators and protected area managers (from Austria). © Matthias Schickhofer
Figures 23 and 24:	Exploratory hike in the Vistea Mare valley with workshop participants. © Matthias Schickhofer
Figure 25:	Breakfast made from home-grown ingredients in a village guesthouse in Prisacina. © Matthias Schickhofer
Figure 26:	The Austrian wilderness guide is thrilled by the old growth forests in the area around Prisacina © Matthias Schickhofer
Figure 27:	View over the UNESCO World Heritage Site high above the Cerna Valley. © Matthias Schickhofer
Figures 28 and 29:	Village guest house 'Talpes' in Priscina. 'Slow' and modest nature tourism can contribute to significantly improving the income situation of the inhabitants of the remote settlements, who live mainly from subsistence. © Matthias Schickhofer
Figure 30:	Breakfast presentation and discussion session in the workshop venue. © Matthias Schickhofer
Figures 31-33:	Educational (capacity building) hike in the Arpasu Mare valley with workshop participants. © Matthias Schickhofer
Figures 34-36:	Photographic "ecstasy" in the forest wilderness of the Făgăraș Mountains © Matthias Schickhofer
Figure 37:	Exploring an unprotected native mountain forest in Vistea Mare valley in Făgăraș Natura 2000 site. © Matthias Schickhofer
Figure 38 and 39:	Harsh contrasts in Pojorta Valley: paradisiacal primary forest in the upper valley, fresh devastation of both the hiking trail and the forest by logging in the lower section. © Matthias Schickhofer
Figures 40-46:	First nature photography journey in the autumnal primary forests and ancient cultural landscapes of the Cerna Mountains. Over four days, the group explored wild forests and scenic gorges photographically - and enjoyed the extraordinary hospitality in remote hamlet Prisacina (guest house Talpes) and in Baile Herculane (lovely pension Safrane) © Matthias Schickhofer
Figures 47 - 49:	Views from the trail into Vistea Mare valley. © Matthias Schickhofer
Figures 50-52:	Wild forest scenery seen from the trail in Arpasu Mare valley. © Matthias Schickhofer
Figures 53-55:	Trail into rarely visited and hidden Pojorta valley. © Matthias Schickhofer
Figures 56-58:	UNESCO protected primary beech forest, seen from hiking trails in Cerna valley. © Matthias Schickhofer
Figures 59-62:	Ancient cultural land side by side with primary and old growth beech forests in Cerna mountains next to the isolated hamlet Prisacina. © Matthias Schickhofer

List of tables:

Table 1:	Overview about the proposed protection regimes by this study.
Table 2:	Overview of the main protection proposal results for both Făgăraș Mountains and Domogled Valea-Cernei National Park
Table 3:	Overview of logging impacts for both Făgăraș Mountains and Domogled Valea-Cernei National Park

List of maps:

Map 1a:	Core Zone Map of Făgăraș Mountains: Display of potential primary, old-growth and high biodiversity forests based on our findings.
Map 1b:	Connectivity and Restoration Zone of Făgăraș Mountains: A map outlining proposed connectivity zones, including ecological corridors, buffer zones, and forests with high biodiversity value for long-term conservation.
Map 1c:	Logging Permits Map: A detailed visualization of logging permits granted in the Făgăraș Mountains in Primofaro polygons, highlighting areas impacted from 2021 to 2024.
Map 2a:	Core Zone Map of Domogled Valea Cernei (left image): A display of potential primary and old-growth forests based on our findings and 3.2 Connectivity and Restoration Zone (right image): A map outlining proposed connectivity zones, including ecological corridors, buffer zones, and forests with high biodiversity value for long-term conservation.
Map 2b:	Logging Permits Map: A detailed visualization of logging permits granted in the Domogled Valea Cernei National Park, highlighting areas impacted from 2021 to 2024. In red: logging permits, in green: Core Zones of potentially primary, old growth and high biodiversity value forests.

Summary

In our project, we have pursued two approaches that aim to contribute to the protection of primary and ancient forests in Romania:

1. mapping primary and old-growth forests (PF/OGF) and developing specific proposals for forest protection regimes in two selected primary (virgin) forest hotspot' regions in Romania, and train skills to address and map (PF/OGF)
2. promoting 'soft' hiking tourism in primary/old-growth forest areas to develop an economic incentive for better protection of primary forests and inform and entice local actor to get engage in setting up soft tourism value chains focussing on wild forests as an asset.

We focused our PF/OGF mapping efforts on two areas of outstanding biological and scientific value, hosting some of the largest PF/OGF clusters in Romania: (1) Făgăraş Mountains (Natura 2000 site) and (2) Domogled-Valea Cernei National Park (also UNESCO World Heritage Site and Natura 2000 site). Our aim was to implement the EU requirements for the protection of PF/OGF in respect to obligatory requirements such as (1) the EU Biodiversity and Forest Strategy 2030, (2) the implementation, management and monitoring of designated Natura 2000 sites and (3) giving guidance for the implementation of the EU Nature Restoration Law from 2024. We also provide scientific findings on the design of protected areas for forests with high biological value, and recommendations provided by UNESCO/IUCN (in connection with the World Heritage Site for the protection of European primeval beech forests) into **specific proposals for comprehensive forest protection regimes** in the two target regions.

We combined various methods to identify and map the forests worthy of strict protection:

- (1) using existing data sets (the National Catalogue of Virgin and Quasi-virgin Forests in Romania, the PRIMOFARO mapping of potential primary and old-growth forests)
- (2) AI-generated GIS data (in collaboration with a EURONATUR project) and field visits that also included drone-based field analysis.

To ensure that ecological integrity and connectivity are guaranteed and that fragmentation of protected forests and the associated increased vulnerability to edge effects and negative influences from the surrounding area are minimized, we have included not only strictly protected 'core zones' but also 'connectivity and restoration zones' in the proposed non-intervention protected area regime. The results were summarized as a scientific report in collaboration with additional key experts and will be published until mid-2025; at the moment (status March 2025) the study is still undergoing peer review.

The second part of the project is dealing with the aspect of promoting better primary / old growth forest protection through the support of sustainable development of '**primary forest tourism**'. This entailed the examination of the existing situation in Romania and the implementation of pilot activities. The assumption was that more demand for tourist primary forest experiences by holiday guests would bring the value of primeval forests to the attention of the local population and promote the economic potential of conserving the forests and by putting them to (sustainable and cautious) economic use for tourism.

In order to further develop this idea, we also examined and documented existing best practice examples (protected forests, the associated value creation and the concepts behind them), and made the findings available for Romanian stakeholders in advisory literature and discussed them in workshops in Romania. We summarised the findings of these discussions together with the results of our research in an advisory paper and made it available to stakeholders in Romania (website primaryforests.org, direct communication).

In a next step, we explored existing marked hiking trails in (target) primary forests and assessed their suitability for 'soft' tourism (by at the same time avoiding adverse effects on nature conservation). We then created a selection of trails and documented them with description text, maps and photographs. These selected trails were made available to tourists and tour operators via the project website primaryforests.org.

In addition, we analysed the existing competency gaps in the current tourism offer (with regard to primary forests as destinations and 'products') and carried out capacity building workshops with local stakeholders. We got in touch with tour operators abroad, researched their needs and initiated collaborations. The first 'primary forest' trips have already taken place (2024).

1. Introduction

1.1. Status of primary forests in Romania

A Forest Europe study (2020) identified some 227 million hectares of forest in Europe (including Eastern European countries and Russia), equating to 33% of its land area. At best, some 4.6 million hectares (2.2%) of European forests are still characterized as natural with little or no human influence, i.e. "virgin forests and old growth forests"; of these, some 3.6 million hectares (2.4%) are in the EU.

Disregarding the virgin boreal forests in the northern regions of Finland and Sweden (and also Russia), just over 80% of Europe's virgin forests in the Carpathian arc are located in Ukraine, Romania and Slovakia (s. figure 1). In relation to Central Europe a share of more than 90% are situated in the Carpathians. Within the European Union, Romania has more hardwood-dominated virgin forest than any other Member State, although with only 29% forest cover, it can no longer be called a "forested country". These facts highlight that Romania is of outstanding importance for the protection of Europe's natural forest ecosystems. It is home to the largest intact and contiguous primary and old-growth forests in the temperate climate zone of the EU (Luick et al. 2021, REMOTE 2024).

The 'EU Green Deal' and the 'EU Biodiversity Strategy 2030 (EC 2020)', which were unanimously adopted by all EU member states, stipulate that 10% of the EU's land and marine areas should be strictly protected. The EU Biodiversity Strategy 2030 also stipulates that all primary and old-growth forests (PF/OGF) in the EU be 'identified, mapped and strictly protected' by 2030. The mapping should be completed by 2025 (mid-2025: public forests, end of 2025: private forests) and the strict protection of these areas should be completed by 2029 at the latest.

These requirements are defined in the official "Guidelines for the definition, mapping, monitoring and protection of primary and old-growth forests in the EU" (EC 2023), which were developed in collaboration with the EU member states. In addition, the 'EU Nature Restoration Regulation' (Regulation (EU) 2024/1991) of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 June 2024 on nature restoration and amending Regulation (EU) 2022/869) requires that essential ecosystem areas (including forest habitats) in all EU Member States be restored to a good conservation status by defined deadlines. This also requires the conservation of intact habitats and species' habitats.

The identification, mapping and permanent preservation of primary and old-growth forests, which are of extremely high biodiversity value, are also of the utmost importance to safeguard a climate-resilient forest cover in the EU. Primary and old-growth forests harbour better adapted genetics and are pools of unique natural assets and ecosystem services such as water storage, flood protection, soil protection, oxygen production, and carbon uptake and storage. At the moment, less than 100,000 hectares of Romania's primary and ancient forests are under strict protection. They are listed in the 'National Catalogue of Primeval and

Old-Growth Forests' or are strictly protected from logging in national parks (core areas), (strict) nature reserves or as part of the UNESCO World Heritage Sites system.

According to scientific attempts to obtain a well-founded estimate about the spread of primary and old-growth forests in Romania, these areas could comprise approximately between 500,000 hectares (PRIMOFARO-Inventory study - Schwarz & Schickhofer 2019) and 700,000 hectares ('Forests with high conservation value', Munteanu, Sabatini et al., 2021). The PRIMOFARO Inventory study also estimates that more than 300,000 hectares of (potential) primary and old-growth forests are located within EU Natura 2000 sites. However, many of these forests are not strictly protected and logging of old stands is still ongoing despite mandatory conservation of defined habitats types and species as stipulated by EU legislation.

Non-governmental organizations (Agent Green, EURONATUR, Greenpeace) have often criticized the fact that legal stipulations (national regulations, EU law such as the Habitats and Birds Directive and the Strategic Environmental Assessment Directive) is often systematically ignored or only insufficiently enforced in the Romanian forestry sector. In 2019, the NGOs Agent Green, Client Earth and EURONATUR filed EU-complaints because the mandatory consideration of legally binding Natura 2000 obligations (scientific mapping of protected goods such as habitats and species, appropriate assessments in connection with forest management plans and prior to logging, restoration of damaged forest plots, etc.) is often ignored. The 'appropriate assessments' required under EU Natura 2000 legislation to assess the risk of potential deterioration of defined protected goods (natural habitats, species and their habitats) in connection with logging activities in EU-protected forests are rarely carried out and are often a farce. The ongoing loss of species-rich, old-growth stands rich in deadwood is the result of this situation.

Public debate about the protection of 'virgin forests' in Romania has been going on for more than a decade. However, there is still no comprehensive and validated map of all forests with high biodiversity value. Although the Romanian state has publicly stated that it will pursue the EU goal of protecting 10% of forests (forests with high biodiversity value the process of mapping these forests and defining strictly protected areas is not yet complete. A serious issue is the lack of budgets for compensation payments to forest owners who no longer exploit and sell the timber from their forests (or only to a limited extent) is a major problem and makes it difficult to find a solution for protecting ecologically valuable forests.

One important driver of the ongoing loss of primary and old-growth forests in Romania are economic interests because of the following facts: (1) Romanian primary and old growth forests show very high stocks of timber; (2) harvesting is still possible in the form of large-scale clear cuttings; (3) labour costs are cheap; (4) security standards / obligations, controls and sanctions are weak and; (5) NGOs and representatives of Romanian civil society complain that state institutions (such as the national forestry enterprise, Romsilva) are often riddled with corruption and report that the necessary 'legal' papers are easy to obtain. This applies to private, municipal and state forest owners.

Primary and old-growth forests offer much more than just timber. As described above they provide essential ecosystem services for society (water storage, carbon sequestration, local climate cooling, biodiversity, etc.). It is therefore important to develop other sources of income for forest owners instead of timber harvesting and sales. These solutions could include compensation payments for the loss of income or payments for the provision of ecosystem services to society – and nature-based tourism in protected primary and old-growth forest areas.



Figure 2: Can sustainable "slow" tourism in protected primary forest areas offer an alternative source of income to logging and ensure long-term economic development? © Matthias Schickhofer

1.2. Status of wilderness / wild forest tourism in Romania

The economic 'use' of intact natural landscapes does not always have to be associated with hard interventions in natural ecosystems such as the extraction of natural resources. One example of this is nature-based (hiking) tourism, which economically 'uses' the natural landscape without extracting resources and without the need for massive infrastructure that would severely impact the ecology.

High-quality protected areas – such as national parks (core zones), UNESCO biosphere reserves, UNESCO world heritage sites, or nature reserves with non-intervention management, which also act as a 'brand' (logo, name etc.), can help to develop sustainable, nature-based tourism – if there are attractive trails and/or specific offers from tourism providers. This can generate economic prospects without having serious impacts on the ecosystems, such as the logging of old-growth forests.

Instead of exploiting natural resources and thus interfering with ecosystems, nature-friendly tourism products – consisting of trails, accommodation, gastronomy and food supply, guided tours, natural products or handicrafts/artisanal natural products – create added value for the local population. Nature conservation and (limited and channelled) tourism could therefore be mutually beneficial partners.

Careful and non-invasive tourism infrastructure could include: marked hiking trails, information systems at the edge of protected areas, visitor centres in conjunction with protected areas with exhibitions, discrete structural facilities to enhance the wilderness/nature experience (footbridges, boardwalks, viewing platforms), guided tours (in wilderness areas), wilderness camps and/or individual tourism packages.

There are several good examples (as we researched in the course of the project) of successful 'wilderness or nature tourism' that does not harm nature in protected areas and at the same time promotes regional economic development.

Key factors for 'soft' nature tourism are:

- (1) limiting the volume of tourism to an environmentally sustainable level, e.g. by limiting the number of parking spaces or beds in the area,
- (2) providing visitor information and
- (3) restricting routes and channelling and concentrating tourist flows to selected and less ecologically sensitive parts of the protected area.

If tourism is restricted to areas that are already accessible via existing marked hiking trails, and ecologically valuable and endangered areas are excluded from tourist development and access to primary forest areas is not made too easy for a large number of people, e.g. by providing access roads and car parks nearby, then nature-based tourism and primary forest conservation are not irreconcilable contradictions.

The tourism value added potential of Romania's primary and old growth forests is theoretically huge, but has not been much discovered so far. So, the situation regarding tourism offers and 'products' in connection with protected primary and old-growth forests in Romania still has a long way to go: there are almost no offers that explicitly refer to the experience of "primary forests" or "wild forests". Until recently the beauty and experience of Romania's wild forests were rarely or never addressed in tourism.

Our main findings are:

- We could not detect any thematic hiking trails that explicitly lead into 'primary forests'.
- Specialized tourism information or organized tourism offers from tour operators to experience the unique wild forests of Romania are widely missing or in their infancy. Except for 'Travel Carpathia' (a subsidiary of the 'Foundation Conservation Carpathia'), we could not find any mention of 'primary forest' in connection with tourist tours or hiking destinations. The leading tour providers mainly talk about cultural assets like old towns or castles, cultural landscapes, "Dracula", mountaineering and peak climbing, biking, wood railway or horse riding. The wild forests have apparently either not yet been discovered as a destination (or experience) or their potential has not been recognized.
- The websites of the Romanian protected areas, such as national parks, provide information almost exclusively in Romanian. The existence of 'primary forests' in the protected areas is mentioned, if at all, only as a side story. This is in contrast to the websites of national parks in Germany, Austria or Scandinavia, where wild forests and primary forests are often at the centre of the narrative about the protected areas. Examples are the national parks Hainich, Kellerwald-Edersee, Bayerischer Wald (all Germany), Kalkalpen (Austria), Tyresta, Björnlandet, Hamra (Sweden).

A number of protected areas in Romania (including some national parks) have only relatively small, strictly protected core zones with less than 50% or even 40% and allow more or less intensive timber extraction in the buffer zones without any further restrictions, equivalent to the general legal provisions for production forests. Conservationists regret and criticize this, because as a result, ecologically very valuable forests - with qualities like in primary forests are being cleared and gradually disappear - even in protected areas (such as Natura 2000). Whether and how the forest protection zones should be expanded, is the subject of intense political debate.

Conservationists (such as Agent Green, EURONATUR, Greenpeace) complain that parts of the Romanian forestry industry reject better protection of the “primary forests”. This is probably an important reason why the development of nature tourism in these wild forest areas is not appreciated by parts of society, as it could make logging and timber harvesting more difficult.

Another aspect of the logging of old forest stands is that it also damages or destroys hiking trails. In addition, the forest paths that lead to the primary/virgin forest areas are often blocked by barriers, so that access is only possible via unattractive hikes on (muddy) forest paths with traces of deforestation (machines, felled trees, oil stains, etc.). All this could deter hikers in these areas and impair or ruin the tourist potential of these special and valuable landscapes.



Figure 3: Logging is also a threat to hiking routes, as this photo (October 2024) from the Natura 2000 site Făgăraș Mountains shows: The path is completely destroyed, the natural forest uphill largely devastated and the nature experience ruined. And: walking here is also very dangerous due to falling tree trunks. © Matthias Schickhofer

2. Main Part

2.1. Aims of the project

The project endeavoured to contribute to the protection of primary and old-growth forests in Romania in two ways:

- **Identification and mapping of particularly important primary and old-growth forests and the development of proposals for protected areas.**
- **Economic valorisation of strictly protected primeval and old-growth forests through tourism and to set incentives for improved protection regulations through the development of ‘primeval forest tourism’.**

We pursued these overall goals with a complex system of objectives and work packages, which were formulated initially as follows (from project contracts):

WP 1: Identification and mapping of ecologically and scientifically particularly important primary / old growth forest areas, including follow up for mapping the National Catalogue of Virgin and Quasi-virgin Forests

- Evaluations of previous entries for the National Catalogue of Virgin/Quasi-virgin Forests.
- Research in expert groups on regions / locations of primary / old-growth forests that have not previously been the focus of mapping and that are of high scientific and ecological relevance (cooperation with the REMOTE project at the Czech University of Life Sciences Prague).
- Conduct studies on at least 10 project areas with primary / old-growth forests in order to place them under strict protection - either in connection with the National Catalogue of Virgin and Quasi-virgin Forests or for strict protection through other protection systems e.g. as strict reserve, national park core zone, functional category T1, non-intervention zone of a Natura 2000 site, etc. - following the EU Biodiversity Strategy / Nature Restoration Law. Selection criteria: forest stands under logging threat, large intact forest stands, site with high scientific value / with ongoing scientific research, important stands with only partial protection; collaboration options with REMOTE.
- The researched / mapped sites will be published on a website to ensure sufficient public interest and pressure for their strict protection (“shadow map” / list of important forests deserving strict protection). This information will also be shared with partner NGOs and the European Commission / JRC.

WP 2: Organization and implementation of an expert and citizen scientist workshop (webinar or physical) on mapping and monitoring of primary / old-growth forests that have not previously been the focus of mapping and conservation efforts

- Communication and discussion on the gaps between the protection situation of primary/old growth stands in Romania and the objectives of the Natura 2000 regime, new EU Biodiversity Strategy 2030, the new EU Forestry Strategy and the EU Nature Restoration Law.
- Presentation of Primofaro study and methodology. Training on how to do mapping with freely available high res. databases (e.g. aerial/satellite data such as Google Earth).
- Working with drones (technology, planning of operations, data processing)

- Introduction to methodological working techniques: creation of investigation plots, working with modern recording devices (e.g. for location, determination of height and distance, dendrochronological investigations) recording of structures (e.g. dead wood, microhabitats).
- Communication of requirements for studies for the National Catalogue of Virgin and Quasi-virgin Forests.
- Discussion and preparation for the official processes, expected difficulties and dealing with the problems.

WP 3: Economic added value of forest protection for communities / rural regions with primary / old-growth forests (role Matthias Schickhofer: co-lead, expert contribution)

- Research / identification / documentation of best-practice projects that deal with sustainable tourism valorisation of "wilderness" (Germany, Austria, Switzerland and Romania)
- Contribute to identification and selection of one or more regions in Romania with a high proportion of primary and old-growth forests and the potential for value-added development through close to nature, non-destructive, sustainable tourism. Organization of a kick-off stakeholder workshop per study region. Analysis of the infrastructural initial situation (e.g. accessibility of the regions, accommodation infrastructure, tourist attractions, guest information, paths / paths in the area and any existing restrictions on use, existing offers, e.g. in the area of guiding).
- Analysis of existing tourism stakeholder situation in the project target regions incl. analyses of existing touristic offers, tourism capacity and identification of competence gaps and potential obstacles / supporting factors to tourism development initiatives.
- Identification of tourism development potential (topics and target groups) (workshop), based on this: development of touristic key products / priority measures per site to be implemented within the project scope (e.g. basic infrastructure and promotion of initial tourism offers; installation of new theme-trails on existing marked hiking routes, potential for excursions with interested parties, photo hikes / workshops, guided forest hikes part of "packages" for travel / experiences in special landscapes etc.) - to be prepared by participatory approach (workshop/conference) with relevant / supportive stakeholders.
- Discuss and agree on a set of initial measures with the relevant stakeholders and people in power.
- Identification of further funding opportunities for project follow up (e.g. for construction of basic accommodation infrastructure such as bathrooms, camp sites, basic cottages etc.).
- Assistance with implementation of initial measures / touristic offers / products such as: Creation of substantial information materials (flyers, website; in RO, EN, DE), pilot offers/guided tours (including key stakeholders, opponents / sceptics and domestic and international media)
- Identification of key packages for a follow program (arrange / apply for further funding opportunities; especially within the framework of the Romanian rural development programs of the new CAP) and ensure sustainable maintenance of project deliverables (hiking routes, accommodation options, touristic information services, guides / tour offers etc.).

WP4: Transfer & Publicity

- Development of a (basic) project website to ensure provision of info materials to interested stakeholders (in ROMANIAN and ENGLISH).
- Preparation, organization and implementation of a workshop (webinar or in the field) with experts (best-practice projects / experiences on the aspect of tourism-sustainable valorisation of wilderness from Germany, Switzerland and Austria. In particular, already existing experiences from national parks (corresponds with WP 3).
- Participation in the preparation, organization and implementation of a workshop (webinar) with Romanian and int'l experts and interested regions / villages / valley communities" (Romania) on experiences, wishes, best-practice projects / on the aspect of tourism-sustainable valorisation of wilderness from the project area Romania. Thereby also presentation of complementary national and especially EU funding opportunities. Goals will be also to win so-called "development patrons" to train.
- Participation, preparation, organization and implementation of practical workshops (webinar) for interested stakeholders (service providers: Accommodation, guides, multipliers / local and regional tourism). Real experiments (e.g. night tour in the forest, photo excursion in the forest) are also planned in order to make alternative use perspectives of forest tangible.
- Organization and implementation of workshops or / and webinars with key stakeholders and experts.
- Documentation on the project.

2.2. Main Results

Overview

As part of the previous project we were able to submit mapping studies covering 5,208 hectares of primeval and old-growth forests (32 different individual areas) to the Romanian government authorities for inscription into the "National Catalogue of Virgin and Quasi-virgin Forests" for full, permanent and strict protection (see also: https://opac.dbu.de/ab/DBU-Abschlussbericht-AZ-34044_01-Hauptbericht.pdf). Of these forests, 3,200 hectares were included by the authorities in the National Catalogue of Primeval Forests (by November 2019).

However, several studies were rejected. For example, because the forests allegedly did not meet the overly rigid criteria for "virgin" or "quasi-virgin" forests because of "sudden" unexpected forest interventions after mapping. Luckily, after the project officially had ended, another approximately 2,187 hectares of primary forest have been added to the National Catalogue in locations previously rejected such as Boia mica, Oltet and Fabrica veche. This was achieved by continued voluntary work of our Romanian partners having been engaged in the first project and despite multiple contestations by governmental authorities.

However, the immense bureaucratic obligations in conjunction with constantly changing demands with the intention to block and embarrass mapping activities of the "Technical Committee" in the Ministry for Environment led to the decision that the submission of any further studies for the National Catalogue of Virgin and Quasi-virgin Forests as part of this project could not be justified any longer in terms of resource allocation. Instead, resources

were now used to research and map larger forest areas with the intention to present a study with exemplary and comprehensive proposals for large protected areas in two ecologically particularly significant primary forest clusters: (1) Domogled-Valea Cernei National Park (also dedicated as UNESCO World Heritage and Natura 2000 site) and (2) Făgăraș Mountains Natura 2000 site. This new study also intends to give stimulus to the Romanian governmental institutions which have obligations derived from the EU Biodiversity Strategy 2030 and the EU Nature Restoration Law to map and protect defined areas and percentages of forests of high ecological value.

Mapping methodology

The methodological framework employed in this study integrates comprehensive data analysis with field-based verification. It builds on prior foundational studies, including PRIMOFARO, Pin Matra, and other research underpinning the inclusion of forest areas in the National Catalogue of Virgin and Quasi-virgin Forests of Romania. In addition to leveraging these previous datasets, this study employs novel analytical techniques, including automated satellite-based remote sensing and extensive on-site fieldwork conducted over eight years (2016–2024). In details the methodologies included:

- Evaluation of UNESCO-listed forests
- National Catalogue and Pin Matra Polygon Analysis
- Integration and validation of PRIMOFARO data
- AI-Driven Satellite Analysis, provided by Space4Good/ EURONATUR
- Forest Management Plan Analysis
- Field Data Collection
- Collaboration and access to data from international research projects such as the Czech University of Life Sciences in Prague, Faculty of Forestry and NGOs, the Environmental Investigation Agency (US) and EURONATUR (Germany).

Results

In total, in the current project, we have identified 79,582 hectares of potential primary and old-growth forests in our two study areas.

Out of these, **24,466 hectares** of potential primary and old-growth forest were identified in Domogled-Valea Cernei National Park and **55,116 hectares** were identified in Făgăraș Mountains Natura 2000 sites. We included all these forest stands in the proposed “core zones” of our study. In addition, we defined **17,236 hectares** in Domogled-Valea Cernei National Park and **32,653 hectares** in Făgăraș Mountains Natura 2000 site as “connectivity and restoration” zones.

Together, these two zoning systems form protected areas (proposals) of 41,702 hectares in Domogled-Valea Cernei National Park and 87,770 hectares in Făgăraș Mountains Natura 2000 site.

One key finding was the large presence of potential primary and old growth forests in Făgăraș Mountains, at a magnitude of 55,000 hectares. **This makes Făgăraș Mountains the largest hotspot for mixed beech-fir-spruce primary and old-growth forests in Romania and a top spot for the European Union.**

Despite the ecological importance of primary and old growth forests, their significance remains largely unrecognized by Romanian authorities. In Făgăraș Mountains for example, only **10,193 hectares** of primary forests are currently strictly protected by the National Catalogue, representing only 18.5% of all potentially primary and old-growth forests identified by our study.

The remaining 82% of potentially primary and old growth forests from Făgăraș mountains, accounting for 44,923 ha, are either under limited protection or with no protection from logging at all.

More concerning, potentially primary and old growth forests lacking strict protection are actively being degraded by logging operations throughout the region. Over the past three years, our study has identified as much as **4,992 hectares** of Primofaro polygons came under direct threat as logging permits were approved inside these forests from Domogled Valea Cernei and Făgăraș Mountains.

Furthermore, an additional **41,556 hectares** could be under threat from nearby logging, as logging permits have been approved in parcels that also contain Primofaro polygons.

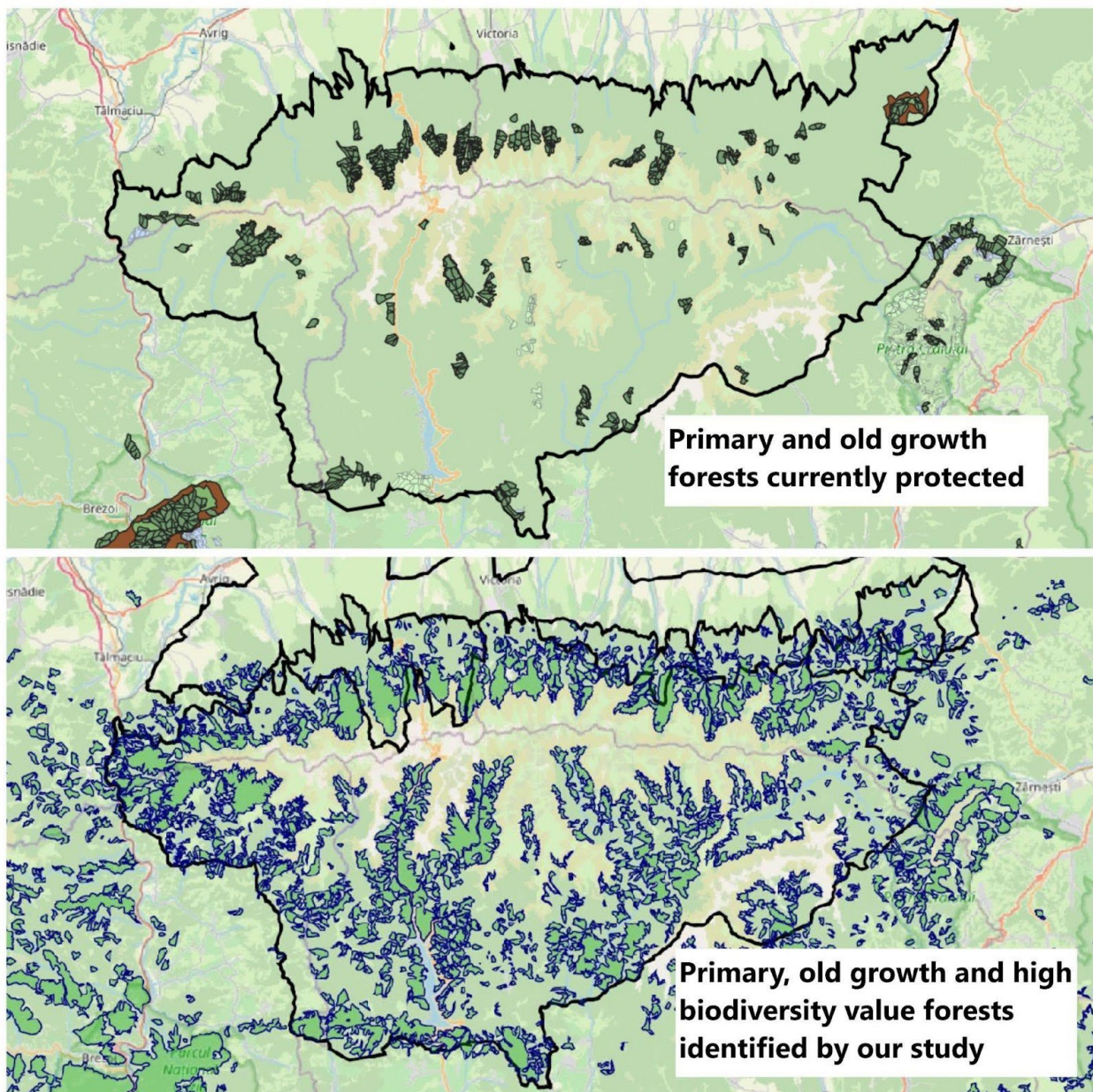


Figure 4 and 5: Făgăraș Mountains Natura 2000 site: Strictly protected primary forest vs. spread of verified and potential high biodiversity value forest.

The results of our analyses are already transferred into official processes in Romania: (1) the revision of the management plan in the Domogled -Valea Cernei National Park and (2) the definition of additional strictly protected forest areas for the purpose of implementing the EU biodiversity strategy (target 10% strict protected areas).

To achieve the second main objective of the project – economic valorisation of strictly protected primary and old-growth forests through tourism and intensification of improved protection regulations through the development of ‘primeval forest tourism’ – we conducted three workshops in Romania (best practice, capacity-building and final workshop) in Romania, scouted and tested several existing trails in two primary forest clusters regions (in Făgăraş and Domogled area), researched international wilderness / nature tourism best-practice examples and developed an advisory paper about this for interested stakeholders and for tourism practitioners, contacted international travel operators (and invited them to join trips to Romania) - and we created a comprehensive website (www.primaryforests.org) with info about Romania’s valuable primary and old-growth forest, recommendations for (scouted and tested) primary forest hikes and compact best-practice information.

As a result of the project, the first trips to Romania have already taken place with international partners: with the Austrian market leader in nature and photo tours, ARR Reisen, and with the VTNÖ (Verein der Tier- und Naturfotografen Österreichs), the Austrian largest association of nature photographers.

2.3. Detailed results

2.3.1 Work package 1: Identification and mapping of ecologically and scientifically particularly important primary and old growth forest (input for the National Catalogue of Virgin and Quasi-virgin Forests)

We evaluated the previous entries for the National Catalogue of Virgin and Quasi-virgin Forests: From our total submissions, 3,432 hectares from 18 studies were included in the catalogue and 778 hectares from 9 studies were rejected. The time frame for the initial project was 2 years (2017-2019), but the time span for the approval of the 18 studies by the Ministry of the Environment took much longer (over 4 years: from 2018 to 2022) - because in many cases there was consciously intended and not expected extra bureaucracy. Overall, the willingness of the authorities (forest guards, ministry) to cooperate was often inadequate and the process consumed a lot of resources. This large time scale was the main negative factor from the previous mapping project, together with the rejection rate (9 studies, 778 ha).

It is also important to mention that 8 out of the 18 studies accepted, were only approved after the end of the project, up to 2022. This was only possible because our experts decided to continue working and revising these studies for up to 2 years after the project ended on a voluntary basis. Thanks to the determination of the mapping team to continue their volunteer work outside of the project, a further 2,187 hectares have been added to the National Catalogue of Virgin Forests (between 2020 and 2022). Due to this complicated and resource-consuming situation, we had to revise our strategy in order to achieve project success more efficiently with the available resources.

Instead of conducting studies on 10 forests for the National Catalogue of Virgin Forests (and consuming most of our resources for extended bureaucracy) we decided to focus on two large hotspots of primary and old growth forests and to submit studies with recommendations for forest areas to be considered in the framework of Romania's efforts to achieve the objective of 10% strict ecosystem (forests) protection by 2030 in accordance with the EU

Biodiversity Strategy 2030. This offer was discussed with the team working with the Ministry for the Environment to define the 10% strictly protected areas in Romania.

The decision was made to map the two biggest hotspots of primary and old growth forests in Romania (and in the European Union): (1) Făgăraş Mountains and (2) Domogled Valea Cernei. The selection of these two regions for our analysis is corroborated by data from the National Catalogue of Virgin and Quasi-virgin Forests of Romania, which reports approximately 22,251 hectares of protected forests in these two regions, constituting 30% of the National Catalogue of Virgin and Quasi-virgin Forests of Romania.

However, the potential of these two is much greater than currently recognised and our study identified a total of **79,583 hectares** of potential primary and old growth forests. We label these as vital **Core Areas** in need of strict protection but we have also proposed large **Connectivity and Restoration Zones**, totalling an additional **49,889 hectares**.

The advantage of this new strategy is that we were able to avoid resource-consuming regulatory hurdles and drastically expand the total areas proposed for strict protection. Therefore, while in our previous mapping project we proposed an area of just over **5,000 hectares** for protection, in the new project we are proposing a total area of just under **130,000 hectares** for forest protection. The total area we have mapped and proposed for strict forest protection in the Domogled National Park is **41,702 hectares** and the total area in Făgăraş Mountains is **87,770 hectares**.

Location	Current protection in the National Catalog	Proposed Core Zone	Proposed Connectivity and Restoration Zone	Total areas proposed for protection
Fagaras mountains Natura 2000 sites	10,193 ha	55,116 ha	32,653 ha	87,770 ha
Domogled Valea-Cernei National Park	12,046 ha	24,466 ha	17,236ha	41,702ha
Total area	22,224 ha	79,583 ha	49,889 ha	129,472 ha

Table 1: Overview about the proposed protection regimes by this study.

2.3.2 Work package 2: Organization of an experts and citizen scientists workshop (webinar or physical) on mapping and monitoring of primary and old-growth forests efforts

At several meetings with Foundation Conservation Carpathia, Agent Green, Greenpeace, Asociatia Altitudine and the team of Prof Burdusel (who is mapping primary forests for the Ministry of Environment) it was discussed how to better implement EU strategies in Romania. The situation is complex and there are various approaches to solving the problem of primary forest protection: (1) focussing on a specific area (e.g. Făgăraș; FCC), legal-action-media initiatives (Agent Green), (focus on larger / overall protection schemes for the entire Carpathian Mountains including PL, SK (Greenpeace), (3) focus on state forests / problem of lack of willingness to cooperate / lack of funds to compensate private forest owners (Burdusel). Unfortunately, so far there is no generally accepted official solution for improving the protection of PF / OGF in Romania that sufficiently takes into account the objectives of the Natura 2000 system, the new EU Biodiversity Strategy 2030, the new EU Forest Strategy and the EU Nature Restoration Law as a whole.

As a basis for discussion and as well as to show to the public and to political audiences such as the EU the magnitude of still existing primary and old growth forest We have come to the conclusion that the best way to make our contribution to primary forest protection is through scientifically sound studies on two focus areas. In our studies for Domogled and Făgăraș as, we have decided to include strategic feedback from all the institutions we have spoken to, as there is no accepted solution so far for improving the protection of PF and OGF in Romania that takes into account the objectives of the Natura 2000 system, the new EU Biodiversity Strategy 2030, the new EU Forest Strategy and the EU Nature Restoration Law. Our studies for Domogled and Făgăraș incorporate strategic input from all the organisations we have spoken to.

Freely available, high-resolution aerial imagery, as offered by Google Earth, is key to locating potential PF/OGF areas. Therefore, we explained to interested participants (volunteers, NGO staff) in a webinar on June 9, 2023, how to interpret high-resolution aerial and satellite data to identify and map potential PF/OGF areas. For reasons of efficiency, it is important to identify potential PF/OGF on aerial photographs before a forest is visited / sighted and subsequently mapped. The main objective of the online briefing was to explain to the interested parties how to recognise PF/OGF on orthophotos - based on features such as crown structure, tree density, naturalness of tree species in the respective stand, etc. - and how these forests can be confirmed in the field based on simple criteria (such as: naturalness of trees, forest structure, uneven-agedness and presence of old trees, presence of deadwood, absence of signs of logging, etc.).

Google Earth in particular, with its very high resolution, is very helpful in recognising specific crown structures / tree densities / tree species - which provides valuable initial indications of a primary and OGF forest. However, Google Earth data must then be confirmed on site and / or from other sources. Google Earth images are sometimes several years old, so that the identified forests have sometimes already been destroyed in the meantime.

The webinar was attended by 8 persons representing various interest groups (NGOs with dedication to primary forest protection, hiking associations, wildlife photographers, free-lance forest engineers and local actors interested in eco-tourism). The presentations of the webinar are available here:

https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1Z2xSCfPzwB_Vcy7kcTTM880lsnagdgBO?usp=sharing

Almost all participants were interested in working with drones as a vital tool to detect and map target forests areas. Drones allow quickly to evaluate large areas of forests and to

establish certain perimeters needed for our studies. Especially when mapping for the National Catalogue drones were very useful in identifying past interventions or disturbances in the canopy but as measuring tools, such as tree heights, sizes of plots, identifying certain tree species, etc.

Main focus of the workshop was the gap between the protection situation of primary and old growth stands in Romania and the objectives of the Natura 2000 regime and also opportunities, such as the new EU Biodiversity Strategy 2030, the new EU Forestry Strategy and the EU Nature Restoration Regulation. We instructed the group on criteria for identification of PGF and PF in the field and using satellite and aerial images. The seminar also provided information on how to describe the usual steps in collecting evidence from the ground, from photographing elements typical of OGF to using GPS to track a perimeter of the forest and other devices to measure tree heights, dead wood, microhabitats. We also emphasised the use of remote wildlife cameras to record fauna typical of primary and OGF.

In the webinar we gave examples of successful protection of virgin forests such as the wild valley of Boia Mica but also of challenges and excessive bureaucracy that slowed down the process of populating the National Catalogue of Virgin and Quasi-virgin forests of Romania. Unfortunately, the wild valley of Boia mica, at almost 1,000 hectares of PF, is more the exception than the rule: the majority of the other plots we mapped were much smaller, averaging between 100-200 hectares each.

At the end of the mapping exercise in the first project it was clear to us that the National Catalogue of Virgin Forests is not an instrument fit to protect larger areas of PF and OGF. This is because of the strict criteria for inclusion into the Catalogue only allows mainly climax stages of primary forests to be accepted and not OGFs (wood extraction long time ago), for which there is currently no accepted definition under the Romanian legislation. One of the outcomes of the seminar therefore was the need to develop other instruments in order to protect large areas of OGF. On our current studies in Domogled and Făgăraş Mountains we presented our attempt for large scale protection of OGFs.

Following our education seminar 3 volunteers from NGOs have since started working with us on checking and mapping primary and OGF in their spare time. From members of the hiking association Asociația Altitudine we got valuable feedback on our map and parcel analysis in Domogled. The volunteers have then also helped with mapping and parcel analysis in Făgăraş Mountains.

To deepen knowledge and improve technical proficiency of the volunteers interested to join and help us we offered and organized in total five field trips; two in Domogled and three in Făgăraş Mountains in 2023 and 2024. We showed and explained details as for instance: (1) why so many OGFs do not meet the strict criteria for the National Catalogue; (2) why so many OGFs are still without any protection status and (3) how the criteria of the new EU Biodiversity Strategy 2030 have to be applied since this requires Member States to strictly protect 10% of the EU area incl. all primary and old-growth forests.

2.3.3: Work package 3: Economic added value of forest protection for communities / rural regions with primary and old-growth forests

WP 3.1. Best practice examples and learning from others

At the beginning of the project, we conducted desktop research on best practice examples of 'wilderness tourism' in connection with similar experiences in protected areas in Austria, Germany and Switzerland. We wanted to find examples that prove that nature-based tourism in connection with experiencing 'wild natural landscapes' and 'consuming' associated tourist offers can contribute to both nature conservation and regional value creation (through tourism). We also wanted to understand what experiences had been made and what success factors had been identified. In the following main findings from our desktop research are reported on.

(A) Identification of exiting tourism stakeholders in both focus regions:

Domogled Valea Cernei national park:

- Tourism board: Domogled – Valea Cernei Tourism and Information Centre: <https://primaria.baile-herculane.ro/turism/>
- National park: <https://domogled.ro/ro/>
- Mountain / hiking tour operators / guides (not specialised in wilderness / wild forest hikes): <http://www.proturismherculane.ro/>
- Local NGOs: Asociatia Altitudine
- Pension owners / hotels (tested): Pensiunea Safrane, Pensiune Roua De Munte (Baile Herculane)
- Village accomodation in Prisacina (farm houses)
- Isolated "glamping" experiences (accomodation in tipi-tents; rather not "glamping" in the original understanding):
- Glamping camp Dobroaia: https://www.facebook.com/GlampingCampDobraia/?locale=ro_RO
- Glamping camp Arjana: <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100063468339899>

Făgăraș Mountains:

- Tourism board (The Centre of Information and Tourism Promotion of Fagaras): https://www.primaria-fagaras.ro/tara_fagarasului
- Foundation Conservation Carpathia: <https://travelcarpathia.com/ro/>
- NGOs:
Acum: <https://www.facebook.com/9acum/>,
Agent Green: <https://www.agentgreen.ro/>
- Pensions / hotels tested: Aer de Munte, Agropensiunea Maria, Cabana Hermeneasa (Alpinlife), Casa Nica, Pensiunea Leia (Northern Fagaras)

- Southern Făgăraș: Caezu, Conacul Doamnei

(B) Project-related tourism offers and infrastructure (e.g. hiking trails, signposting, web based information)

Domogled - Valea Cernei National Park:

Several well marked trails to peaks, waterfalls, gorges, emperor “Sisi” locations, thermal baths and to the hamlets. But no distinctive trail on “virgin forests”.

Făgăraș Mountains:

We identified several marked hiking trails in northern valleys leading to the highest peaks of the Făgăraș Mountain_range. In some valleys logging has been destroying or degrading parts of the old growth and primary forests. Several valleys are not easily accessible due to logging and closed barriers at access forest roads. Some valleys are completely wild and have no trail or path and are not accessible for “normal” hikers (eg. Boia Mica, Laita, Arpaselu, upper Ucea mare, upper Ucisoara etc.). Nevertheless, we identified the following valleys suitable for touristic experiences:

- Doamnei
- Arpașu Mare
- Vistea mare and
- Pojorta.

(C) Existing touristic information in the regions for tourists (e.g. primary forests experiences)

We have examined the websites of the respective regions and protected areas that are available on the internet with regard to the information offered for international visitors. Unfortunately, there is hardly any information in English or German and regarding the topic of primeval forest.

Domogled - Valea Cernei national park:

- The website of the national park <https://domogled.ro/ro/> offers substantial information only information in Romanian language. The English version is more or less "empty". We could not find any distinctive or detailed information about “virgin and old growth or information about the ecological importance of forests in general” and no info on hiking routes leading to these forests.
- The national park administration proposes two packages (<https://domogled.ro/ro/turism/programe-turistice/>) but there is no mention of “virgin forest” or “UNESCO World Heritage” (status 2023).

Făgăraș Mountains:

We could not find a distinctive website or web information for foreign tourists from the administration of the Natura 2000 protected area with tourist information (as of 2023). The forest-related tourism in the region is offered only in relation to the UNESCO site in Sinca, but there is little information and only in Romanian. We could not find any information about further hiking trails to other primeval forests in the Făgăraș Mountains (status 2023).

(D) Best practice research (desk research as of 2023):

In the following we present a compilation of our research on best-practise examples of projects in selected countries / in areas with virgin and old-growth forests that consider sustainable tourism and studies focusing on the topic:

Slovenia:

- The Krokar Primeval Forest Hiking Trail to the UNESCO beech forest world heritage site Krokar (in the context of the BEECHPOWER Interreg project): Long distance hiking trail to primary beech forests incl. UNESCO world heritage site: <https://www.slovenia.info/en/stories/mysterious-green-experiences-in-slovenian-wilderness>

Poland:

- Bialowieza primary forest: Backpack Adventures

Germany:

- Nationalpark Kellerwald-Edersee: Nature / wilderness experience in (UNESCO beech forest world heritage): <https://nationalpark-kellerwald-edersee.de/erleben>
- "Urwaldsteig Edersee" / Nationalpark Kellerwald-Edersee („primary forest trail“) - several websites / app's: <https://touren.edersee.com/de/tour/wanderung/urwaldsteig-edersee-wandern-in-wilder-natur/43396883/>; <https://www.outdooractive.com/de/route/fernwanderweg/waldecker-land/urwaldsteig-edersee/1362303/>; <https://www.komoot.de/collection/495/urwaldsteig-edersee-uralte-baeume-und-glitzerndes-wasser>; <https://www.wanderbares-deutschland.de/wege/alle-wege/urwaldsteig-edersee-2e352adc15>; <https://www.wildganz.com/fernwanderweg/urwaldsteig>
- Nature / wilderness experience in Nationalpark Hainich (UNESCO beech forest world heritage): <https://www.nationalpark-hainich.de/de/lernort-urwald/erlebniswanderungen.html>
- Guided tour "Urwald" in Nationalpark Bavarian Forest: <https://www.nationalpark-bayerischer-wald.bayern.de/aktuelles/veranstaltungen/detailansicht.htm?ID=A%2Bs3RgSTi2QBIWP2mk5npw%3D%3D>

Austria:

- IUCN Wilderness area Dürrenstein - Lassingtal - hiking trail & Visitor center: Haus der Wildnis: <https://www.wildnisgebiet.at/wildnisgebiet/exkursionen/freigegebene-wanderwege>; <https://www.wildnisgebiet.at/haus-der-wildnis>
- Wildnisakademie Nationalpark Kalkalpen (also UNESCO beech forests world heritage): https://www.kalkalpen.at/de/Besuchen_Erleben/Veranstaltungskalender/Wildnisakademie
- Guided tours to wild forests in Nationalpark Kalkalpen (status 2023): https://www.kalkalpen.at/de/Am_Weg_zur_Waldwildnis
Visitor programme 2025: <https://www.kalkalpen.at/presse-aussendungen/nationalpark-programm-2025>

- Wilderness experience trail in Nationalpark Kalkalpen
"Buchensteig": <https://www.kalkalpen.at/veranstaltung/welterbe-tour-wildnistrail-buchensteig>
- Nationalpark Gesäuse: Wild forest experience (photography walks):
<https://nationalpark-gesaeuse.at/en/discover-national-park/national-park-foto-school/events/AT1/c3d39ae9-f5e6-4e0e-b56b-97f7f0b16781/wilde-waelder---fotowanderung-im-fruehling?useDetailSearch=false/AT1/4210de4e-a81e-4726-b9a0-65c222f57fc2/rauschende-wasserwelten>

Slovakia:

- Congress on "sustainable tourism development in Slovakia: enhancing livelihoods for local communities": <https://whc.unesco.org/en/news/1750>

Miscellaneous references:

- German Umweltbundesamt (EPA): report on best practices in sustainable tourism in the Carpathians:
https://www.umweltbundesamt.de/sites/default/files/good_tourism_carpathians_0.pdf
- Carpathian Convention: Carpathian Sustainable Tourism Center Platform and study:
http://www.carpathianconvention.org/tl_files/carpathiancon/Downloads/03%20Meetings%20and%20Events/Implementation%20Committee/CCIC_Budapest2019/presentations/12_Carpathian%20Sustainable%20Tourism%20Platform%20-%20Interim%20Report%202019.pdf;
https://www.oete.de/images/dokumente/projekt_karpaten-2/Work_Programme_CSTC-RO.pdf
- Naturwaldakademie, Lübeck, Germany: Fact sheet: „Tourism magnet“ natural forest (status 2022, the document is not available online any more): <https://naturwald-akademie.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Factsheet-Tourismus-WEB-1.pdf>
- Bundesamt für Naturschutz (BfN) Study on regional economic effects through nature tourism - "Regionalwirtschaftliche Effekte durch Naturtourismus"
<https://www.bfn.de/sites/default/files/BfN/service/Dokumente/skripten/skript431.pdf>
- Deutsche Bundesstiftung Umwelt (DBU): Abschlussbericht Nachhaltiger Tourismus in Rumänien Maßnahmen für Wissensaufbau und Bewusstseinsbildung im Nachhaltigen Tourismus: https://opac.dbu.de/ab/DBU-Abschlussbericht-AZ-34575_01-Hauptbericht.pdf

D) Workshop on "best practice in wilderness tourism"

Based on information and experience from projects and studies presented above, a stakeholder **workshop on best practice in wilderness tourism** was organised from 30 May to 1 June 2023 in Savastreni / Făgăraș area in Romania. Participants (N= 20 in presence and online) represented Romanian and Austrian Travel Agencies, wilderness guides, nature and wildlife photographer, regional NGOs, tourism experts from the Southern Carpathians and scientists from Rottenburg University.

The workshop included expert presentations and inputs from protected areas (e.g. Kalkalpen National Park in Austria, Hainich NP in Germany), tour operators (Austria), and experts from Romania, Austria and Germany. We discussed with the Romanian stakeholders, in particular, quality criteria for tourism products, needs of international tourism partners, the various problems associated with logging in primary forests, as well as competency gaps and development needs.

Within the workshop the Bachelor thesis of Johann Weiss (Rottenburg University) on "success factors for sustainable wild forest tourism" was presented and discussed. The thesis centres on a qualitative analysis of successful wilderness tourism projects in Germany and Austria.

All other presentations and briefing documents from the workshop can be accessed with the following link:

<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1PdcHHQAKHpLA37EQHeA6C000PGeJT2B7>





Figure 6: Stakeholder workshop on best practice in wilderness tourism in the Făgăraș Mountains in May / June 2023. © Matthias Schickhofer

The inputs and results from the workshop were basis to develop an **advisory paper on “Best Practice: Primary Forest Tourism. Inspiration - guidance - checklists - for nature and wilderness tourism developers and practitioners”** - to support Romanian partners/interested parties.

The paper was produced collaboratively by the project team in 2023/2024 and was published on the project website (November 2024):

<https://primaryforests.org/advisory-tourism-development>

The paper provides:

- a detailed overview of success factors in ‘wilderness tourism’ and
- various checklists e.g. about quality criteria for trails, tour guiding or the needs of international tour operators to be gained as partners.

Best Practice: Primary Forest Tourism

Inspiration - guidance - checklists - for nature and wilderness tourism developers and practitioners



Lead author: Matthias Schickhofer
Input, review: Prof. Monika Bachinger, Prof. Rainer Luick, Ion Holban
Photography: (c) Matthias Schickhofer

This paper has been compiled in conjunction with the project: „Respect for the last remaining European virgin forests” (Lead: Hochschule für Forstwirtschaft Rottenburg; financed by: Deutsche Bundesstiftung Umwelt und Heidehofstiftung)

Vienna, Rottenburg, Bacau - November 2024

<https://primaryforests.org>



WP 3.2. Focus regions of the project

As already outlined the two target regions (1) **Făgăraș Mountains** and (2) **Domogled - Valea Cernei National Park** have been assessed with the following rationale:

For the Făgăraș Mountains:

- The Făgăraș Mountains contain the biggest cluster of primary and old growth forests in Romania - and probably in Central and Eastern Europe. However, only a small part of these primary forests are under strict protection currently. Logging also threatens hiking trails (forest works, falling trees), destroys landscape beauty and makes access routes to the primary forests on forest roads unattractive (noise, traffic, mud, logs).
- Tourism could create an incentive for better forest protection by strengthening an alternative source of income to logging (liquidation of old forest stands) in the communities.
- The easily accessible (train, car, flight) tourist hotspots Sibiu and Brasov are nearby, tourism around mountaineering is already well developed, there are plenty of family run pensions close to the mountains and there is a good network of hiking trails - which allows good access to some valleys with important and attractive primary forests.

For the Domogled - Valea Cernei National Park:

- The Domogled - Valea Cernei National Park is the biggest national park in Romania. It is home to some very large remnants of primary/old growth forest and has therefore been included as a UNESCO World Heritage Site for the protection of European primeval and ancient beech forests (<https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1133/>).
- The valley in the area of the town of Baile Herculane has a long history as an ancient spa resort and there are numerous accommodation options. Some of the primary forests in the UNESCO World Heritage Site are very close to the town. In the lower, scenically very impressive part of the national park there are already a number of attractive hiking trails, some of which lead to very beautiful primary / old growth forests.
- On a terrace above the gorge-like Cerna valley there are some very remote hamlets. Their inhabitants live mainly in subsistence, only from their land and have hardly any income. Limited, soft hiking tourism would bring them some additional income, which can significantly improve their quality of life (solar power, household appliances, money for medical treatment, etc.). However, this is only the case if tourism can be limited and large hotel investments and large crowds of people (in the event of road construction) can be avoided.
- In the Domogled - Cerna valley area, tourism could contribute significantly to improving the lives of the people in the remote mountain settlements and at the same time help preserving the unique mosaic of ancient cultural landscape (around the hamlets) and embedded wilderness (primary forests). This would also perfectly reflect the UNESCO World Heritage idea.



Figure 7: Ancient peasant land meets UNESCO listed beech forest wilderness: Heart of the Domogled - Valea Cernei National Park. © Matthias Schickhofer

WP 3.3. Analysis of the infrastructural situation in the focus areas

In the target regions the following aspects were analysed in detail: (1) accessibility of the regions; (2) infrastructure such as accommodation; (3) tourist attractions; (4) existing guest information; (5) existing paths / hiking trails and their condition: marking, restrictions on use; (6) existing offers such as guiding. The information was compiled as follows:

- Desktop research on hiking infrastructure
- Information from Romanian stakeholders and local actors. The following link leads to a document with a compilation of data:
<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1uOFp7omwZioYBDPSwMe7JBLaUmUS0RUP/view?usp=sharing>
- Checking of pre-selected paths and suitability of the surrounding environments (cultural landscapes of touristic and ecological interest, primary and old-growth forests). These field-survey explorations were carried out as follows:
 - in October 2022 (Făgăraş and Domogled region)
 - in May / June 2023 (Făgăraş region)
 - in October 2023 (Domogled area; test visit with the travel operator Experience wilderness)
 - in April 2024 (Făgăraş region)
 - in August 2024 (Făgăraş; with Austrian nature photographers)
 - in October 2024 (Făgăraş and Domogled region in cooperation with ARR-Reisen / Austria).

Additional we organised the following trips with external partners from the travel business and with "test clients":

- In October 2023 a field trip to Domogled - Valea Cernei National Park with the founder and CEO of the Austrian tour operator "Experience Wilderness", a representative of NGO Alitudine, a local supporter and two German filmmakers. As an outcome a movie was produced titled: But the Flowers remain; the movie can be accessed with the following link: <https://www.el-flamingo.de/but-the-flowers-remain>
- Members of Austria's leading nature photography association VTNÖ (Verein der Tier- und Naturfotografen Österreichs) took part in an exploratory excursion to the Făgăraş Mountains in August 2024 to test and assess the area from a photographer's perspective. A blog story about the trip was published on the website of VTNÖ and can be accessed with the following link: <https://blog.vtnoe.at/fotografische-urwaldexpedition-in-rumaenien/>
- Another testing trip was organised in cooperation with the Austrian travel operator ARR Reisen to Domogled - Valea Cernei NP, it took place in October 2024. The agency is the biggest provider of nature and photo travels in Austria. This was the first trip with paying customers (ARR Reisen was the organizer). Matthias Schickhofer accompanied the group. In May 2025 there will be another trip to Romania offered by ARR Reisen. The feedback from participants was supporting: The photo locations were rated as very satisfactory (photography motives, scenery, wildness of forest etc.). The access routes were mostly judged to be pleasant. The village guesthouse in Prisacina (hamlet area) got partly very enthusiastic feedback, especially because of the hospitality, authenticity and good food. The offer of this ARR-tour can be accessed with this link: <https://arr.at/trip/fotoreise-rumaeniens-urwaelder/>

One of the most important results of our project is the selection, mapping and web-based presentation of recommended trails on our website:

- For Făgăraș Mountains see: <https://primaryforests.org/paradise-forests-fagaras-mountains>
- For Domogled National Park see: <https://primaryforests.org/index.php/paradise-forests-domogled-national-park>

The following overview presents the tested, mapped and recommended trails:

Făgăraș mountains:

- Vistea Mare (2,7 km, 350 m from end of road to alpine terrain; one way)
- Arpașu Mare (2 km, 350 m one way to first lookout)
- Pojorta (5 km, 450 m one way - upper section of valley)
- Doamnei (5 km, 700 m until lake Doamnei, one way)

Domogled - Valea Cernei National Park:

- Cerna valley - Cascada Vânturătoarea (from Cerna valley; 1,5 km, 700 m; one way to waterfall / UNESCO World Heritage)
- Baile Herculane - Stanca lui Sisi (from Cerna valley; 3 km, 700 m, one way to lookout and UNESCO world heritage)
- Prisacina - primary beech forest (UNESCO site) above the isolated hamlet (ca. 2 km, 300 m, one way)
- Prisacina - Inelet - Cerna valley (9 km, 180 m up / 720 down; one way)

The following overview presents tested trails that unfortunately did not meet project requirement:

- Boia mica (2 km wild valley ending in a great look out point). This trail meets most requirements for wilderness hikes. Here we failed to have a collaboration with owners of this private forest that were mostly hunters not interested in tourism.
- Ucea mare, (5 km wild valley). This valley used to be open to walkers and without a barrier but now there is a barrier that stays close most of the time, making it too far to walk
- Avrig (4 km) - this was a wild footpath trail in the past, but in the last year it has been affected by logging roads in the middle and upper part (towards the cabin), making it unsuitable
- Sambata (3 km former wild trail) - this was also a wild footpath trail in the past, but in the last two years it has been affected by an access road in the middle and upper part (towards the cabin), making it unsuitable
- Sebes / Dejeni / Berivoi - we tested these trails but all have long sectors where the footpaths have been replaced by roads, making them unsuitable.



Figure 8: Exploration trip with Austrian nature photographers to Făgăraș Mountains (August 2024).
© Matthias Schickhofer

WP 3.3.4. Analysis of existing tourism stakeholder situation in the project target regions

The analysis of the existing tourism stakeholder situation included aspects such as (1) touristic offers, (2) tourism capacity and (3) the identification of competence gaps and potential obstacles as supporting factors to tourism development initiatives. The analysis of stakeholders was conducted in the two target areas: (1) Făgăraş Mountains and (2) Domogled. Our main findings were:

- In Făgăraş Mountains we identified suitable capacity for eco-tourism, especially a large capacity for accommodation, restaurants and available local guides.
- However, in the Domogled region we struggled with very limited availability of local guides, rental and transportation options (in particular to the remote hamlets above Cerna valley) and also low availability of accommodation in the mountain hamlets. In these isolated hamlets for example we could only identify four accommodation options, one transport option and one local guide. However, locals told us that they are working on expanding accommodation options in the near future. One intensive is growing demand from hikers using the new Via Transilvanica route, which also passes these remote hamlets.

In summary, we had to realise and accept that the topic of primary forest protection is obviously a sensitive and highly polarising issue and associated with fears and anxieties among Romanian stakeholders and particular among the local population. Participants reported strong pressure from the timber industry, forestry managers and local key players in the communities against increased protection of primary forests and related activities such as wilderness tourism. We therefore had to accept that it is difficult to find partners who openly support an initiative for “primary forest tourism” and a better protection of old forest stands.

We also screened **development and competency gaps** and needs for capacity building. The greatest gap in this respect was the lack of support from regional tourism associations in coordinating and promoting suitable offers as well as providing information for ecotourism. Local stakeholders seem to act individually and compete with each other instead of working together.

It also became clear from our stakeholder discussions that there is apparently a lack of tour guides with a certain basic training in ecology, with basic biological knowledge or with skills in ecological storytelling. So far, the demand for guides in nature has been dominated by topics such as mountaineering, hiking or cycling. As a result, there are hardly any guides who have ever dealt with the subject of primary forest and wilderness.

There is also a lack of information about the extraordinary biological and touristic value of primary and old-growth forests and about the importance of access for tourists. This leads to a knowledge gap among local stakeholders regarding the opportunities for increased ecotourism aimed at experiencing primary forests – beyond the traditional touristic focus on alpine peaks and lakes, old towns and castles.

There are also **problems with accessibility and hiking infrastructure** (trails) of primary and old-growth forests, mainly due to forestry activities. We have identified several problems related to hiking tourism that are connected to forestry work, such as:

- forest access roads closed by barriers for vehicles, resulting in long access hikes on forest roads in valleys to the wilderness landscapes,
- damage to natural forest stands next to the paths / access roads due to logging and the resulting depressing views,

- muddy forest access roads, rutted by tractors and lined with huge piles of logs and
- sometimes also hostile attitude of forest workers towards tourists, mainly in areas with poorly developed tourism.

Detailed results of the competency gaps – analysis can be accessed with this link:

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1RycAz3Xgkz5WRNkfOxFWQtEc98XEJUCATQk1Niq-Jc/edit?usp=sharing>



Figure 9: An unattractive forest road from a tourist point of view that leads to a primary forest in a valley in the northern Făgăraș Mountains. © Jana Ballenthien

WP 3.3.5. Identification of tourism development potential - topics and target groups

As a result of own research, workshop outcomes and discussions with stakeholders from various sectors, it became clear that it would not be possible to build new, targeted tourist infrastructure (such as a primary forest theme trail) in model regions because of the following reasons:

- the lack of willingness of many forest owners, forest managers and protected area administrations (national parks are administered mainly by the Romanian State Forests Enterprise) to cooperate with a 'foreign' project that also aims for improved forest protection; forest protection is a controversial issue and thus sensitive in Romania and
- the lack of funds and time within the project timeframe and budget for infrastructure instalments.

For instance, we had explored the Nucșoara municipality in the **South of Făgăraș Mountains** where we had initially noticed interest by the municipality in developing more tourism related to existing old trees and forests. After discussions with stakeholders and explorations in the area, however, it became clear that the area was not suitable for our project as there were no marked trails providing access to primary forests or accessing areas with veteran trees in the countryside. Therefore, we decided (1) to explore existing trails in primary forest areas of outstanding natural and aesthetic value with potentially existing (good) trails and (2) to make them known. In a next step, (3) we set out to find international travel agency partners who were interested in organising first trips to these "magical" forest wilderness hikes.

After numerous approaches and face-to-face meetings with potential commercial partners and also in close cooperation with local Romanian partners we concentrated cooperation and exchange with the following tourist companies:

- Experience Wilderness (Austria)
- ARR Reisen (Austria) and
- Naturreisen OEG (Austria).

With these partners and in close contact we developed in the following **concrete touristic offers / pilot products** for the seasons 2024 / 2025:

- ARR Reisen offered a trip for October 2024 that actually took place. Another trip is planned for June 2025 (https://arr.at/trip/?force_tour_guide=17040).
- Experience Wilderness plans a first "wilderness tour" for 2026.
- "Naturreisen" showed interest, but a scouting tour has not yet taken place.

In discussions with these agencies, it became clear that they primarily need **local partners as "problem solvers"** (finding good accommodation, managing local mobility, acquiring permits for the use of closed access roads, permission to camp in the primary forests, etc.) and as local area experts (guides).



Figure 10: In October 2024, the first commercial photo journey (with paying customers) was carried out by ARR Reisen in collaboration with our project in the Domogled - Valea Cernei National Park. © Matthias Schickhofer

2.4. Discussion of the results with local, regional actors and stakeholders

During several workshops (stakeholder workshop / “best practice” in May 2023, workshop on capacity building in April 2024, final workshop), it became clear that **on-site measures** (new marked trails, information boards, etc.) **are not a realistic option** within the framework of this project, as there is a lack of willingness and ambition on the side of landowners and / or the management of protected areas (which is often controlled / driven by forestry interests in Romania).

As described above, possible target areas for guided tours on existing trails were selected and cooperation was established with international tour operators (specialized on nature travels, photo travels, wilderness and adventure hikes) for offering initial trips to primary forest areas to demonstrate this option to the relevant local audiences and to let it appear on the radar of more international tour operators. Cooperation with local partners was secured to realise these trips (see also 3.5). An initial “pilot” commercial travel to RO (with clients) in partnership with ARR Reisen happened in October 2024 (accompanied by Matthias Schickhofer).

To inform about the threats to hiking trails and primary forests by forest interventions, we passed on information about acute problems to Romanian NGOs. Agent Green responded by filing **legal complaints** where we had perceived potential violations of the legislation, such as logging in primary forests (in Natura 2000 sites) or destruction of trails by logging operations and endangering hikers. These complaints against logging operations in primary forests concern the Pojorta Valley, the area of Sebesu de Sus, the Ucisoara Valley, Valea rea and Valea Valsanului.

2.5. Possible starting points, priority measures to promote tourism capacity and closing the competence gaps

This work package overlaps with work packages described above. All our workshops also addressed deficits and shortcomings, and where starting points for improvements can be found.

A capacity-building workshop in April 2024 with 14 participants focused on the topic of tour guiding in primary forests – in theory and practice with the following elements:

- indoor sessions providing and discussing theory on tour guiding, storytelling and experience design in primary forests and
- outdoor trainings with the main objective to train potential Romanian partners (in particular guides and trainee guides) in how to organise guided tours in primary forests: from tour planning and execution to involving participants, incl. fascinating people with convincing storytelling about forest wilderness (key facts and interesting narratives).

The presentations from the workshop can be accessed with this link:

https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1YACU1t81o3q0SL-EW7yeygcV6sXE0I_d?usp=sharing

With a view to capacity building and quality improvements, we also discussed matters how we can solve the problem that ‘participatory approaches’ to forest conservation and related tourism initiatives are currently difficult to implement in Romania. The reasons for this are

- the polarised debate on forest protection and the associated fears of being exposed or attacked
- the political circumstances - the forestry sector and its user interests are closely linked to political parties/the local power elite
- and fear of widespread corruption/illegal practices that prevent many people from participating in such processes.

This applies in particular if foreign institutions are responsible for the project.

Longer project durations, the support and empowerment of local actors (e.g. hiking associations) and the development of local structures such as an open minded local tourism agency would be necessary, but are outside the current project capacities and framework.

Following our workshops and outdoor training sessions **3 local volunteers have decided to gain their certifications as Local guides**. Two of them have already completed the official course/exams and gain the certification allowing them to legally take groups of tourists both in the forests and in the local villages. We will continue supporting volunteers to gain local guide certification and we will also advertise their services on our website.





Figures 11 - 13: Capacity building training in April 2024 in Romanian Făgăraș Mountains - indoor session and outdoor training (Arpasu Mare valley). © Matthias Schickhofer

2.6. Assistance with implementation of initial measures

In terms of information material, the project results are as follows:

- Existing trails to “wild forests” in Făgăraș Mountains and in Domogled have been described in text (detailed descriptions), maps and with photographs and published on a dedicated website with information about the project, the Romanian primary forests and travel opportunities. The website is online since end of September 2024 and publicly accessible (for both individual trips and organised tours): <https://primaryforests.org/>; see also figure 14.

- In addition, a dedicated Facebook page - “Primary Forests” was published in December 2024 and can be accessed with this link: <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=61569824762672>

- Information on recommended hikes through special Romanian primary forests has been published on the popular online platform ‘Outdoor active’. The following links lead to the published hiking tours:

<https://www.outdooractive.com/en/route/mountain-hike/banat/primary-beech-forest-and-mountain-scenery-hike-prisacina/290600619/>

<https://www.outdooractive.com/en/route/mountain-hike/banat/unesco-world-heritage-wilderness-hike-prisacina-valley-and-cerna/290601232/>

<https://www.outdooractive.com/en/route/mountain-hike/banat/unesco-world-heritage-primary-beech-forest-windy-waterfall-cascada/290485467/>

<https://www.outdooractive.com/en/route/mountain-hike/transylvania/great-wilderness-hike-in-arpasu-mare-valley/290430733/>

<https://www.outdooractive.com/en/route/mountain-hike/transylvania/forest-wilderness-of-pojorta-valley/290394318/>

<https://www.outdooractive.com/en/route/mountain-hike/transylvania/enchanted-forest-walk-in-vistea-mare-valley/290210635/>

<https://www.outdooractive.com/en/route/mountain-hike/transylvania/primary-forest-and-high-mountain-experience-in-doamnei-valley/289993694/#caml=8hk,429lbb,7jlvpi,0,0>

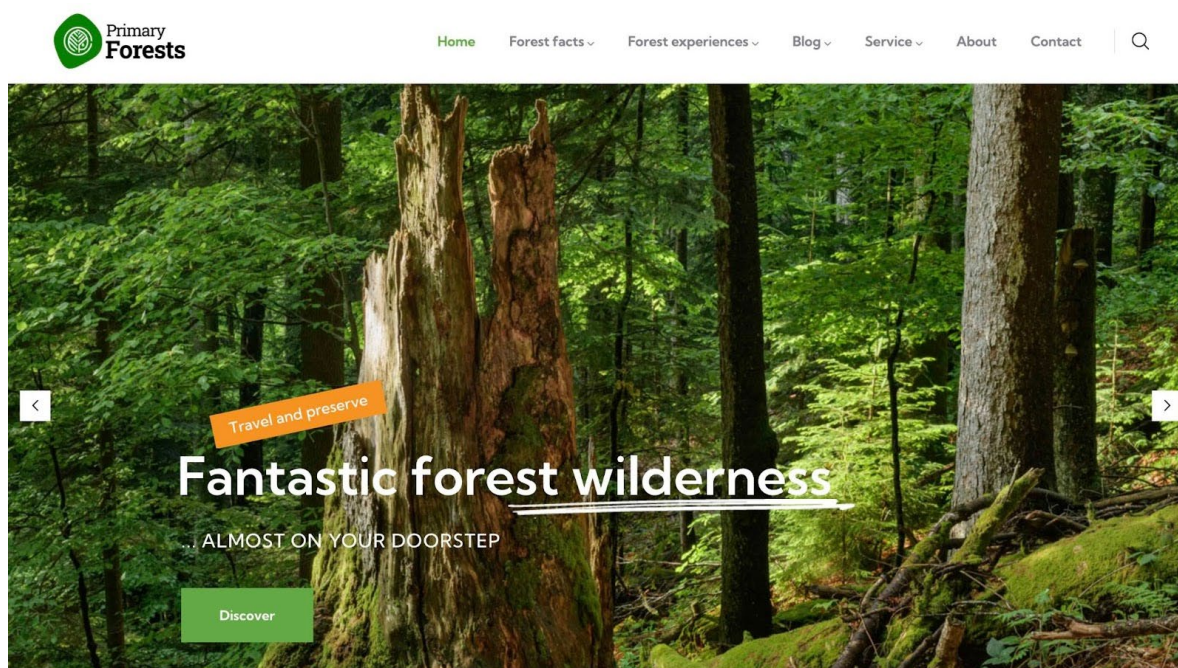


Figure 14: The new website primaryforests.org combines (images rich) information about primary forests in Romania, hiking tour recommendations (with descriptions and maps) and advisory information for tourism stakeholders.

2.7. Identification of further funding opportunities for project follow up

Inspired by this very project, an application for an **Interreg project on the topic of promoting primary forest tourism** in four EU countries including Romania was developed with partners and submitted by Rottenburg University together with Bodensee Foundation in Germany (December 2024). The decision on the realisation of the project is pending.

In January 2024, an **info mail was sent to an extensive list of potentially interested travel operators in several EU countries**, suggesting that they develop tourism offers related to Romania's primary forests in the future. The project team also offered to work with the companies to develop and implement tourism products. Some of them responded to the email and expressed their interest in including Romania's wild forests in their future plans. We (Matthias Schickhofer, Ion Holban) will continue to pursue this also after this project is completed. At the moment we are in concrete discussions with three tour operators about

tours to Romania forests in 2025 and 2026. Two tours with an Austrian agency are planned and one tour is advertised.

If these initiatives work, there is a long-term prospect of keeping them running – and thereby attracting additional interest from other market participants.

With this strategy, we want to achieve that the topic of ‘primary forest tourism’ becomes known through the models and pilots we have created (also supported by publications in relevant media) and then spreads ‘by itself’ through buzz and imitation.

The **project website *primaryforests.org* and the dedicated Facebook-page will stay** and will be maintained and updated by Matthias Schickhofer and Ion Holban. This will provide options to further spread the idea of sustainable wild forest tourism.

3. *Transfer and Outreach (WP 4)*

Institutional outreach:

- We have contacted the **Carpathian Convention/UNEP** (Vienna Office) and the **European Commission (DG Environment)** with initial project information (2022) and information about the project results in 2025.
- Several **Members of the European Parliament who had shown an interest in the protection of Romanian forests in the past were** informed about the project (personal contacts) and received an email with information about our results and links to the website when the project was completed.

Direct communication outreach by the project:

- A **dedicated Website** with info about the project and options for “wild forest tourism” in Romania has been published: <https://primaryforests.org/>
- High-quality photography illustrating the beauty of primary forests have been created to illustrate the project website primaryforests.org and to make them available to the media. They are available to the team and partners in the tourism sector.

Active outreach to journalistic media:

- Selected environmental / travel journalists in AT / DE (**Süddeutsche Zeitung, DieZeit, Kurier, ORF, DiePresse**) have been informed about the project. These media all showed interest to come to RO or to report about the situation in RO and about the project. The German media house **Die Zeit** signals interest to participate in a joint primary forest exploration trip will take place in early May 2025.
- We sent out a press release to selected travel and environmental media contacts and distributed a stakeholder info mail in conjunction with the launch of the completed website (<https://primaryforests.org>) on January 13, 2025). The text of the press release was also posted on the project website: <https://primaryforests.org/blog-0>

- The Austrian daily **Kurier** accepted an invitation and visited Romania / Southern Carpathians together with Matthias Schickhofer and Ion Holban in October 2024. Outcome was an impressive report on the primary forest protection controversy in Romania: <https://kurier.at/politik/ausland/rumaenien-fargaras-holzindustrie-ikea-entwaldungsverordnung-eu/402964333?>



The screenshot shows the top of a Kurier article. The header includes the Kurier logo, a blue 'Abo' button, and links for 'Anmelden' and 'Menü'. Below the header is a navigation bar with categories: Schlagzeilen, Zweite Republik, Wien-Wahl, US-Chaos, Inland, Ausland, Wirtschaft, Sport, Wien, NÖ, and Bl. The main image is a lush green forest with moss-covered tree trunks. Below the image is a white text box containing the article title and a short summary.

KURIER Abo Anmelden Menü

Schlagzeilen | Zweite Republik | Wien-Wahl | US-Chaos | Inland | Ausland | Wirtschaft | Sport | Wien | NÖ | Bl

REPORTAGE

Bulldozer gegen Buchen: Wo in Rumänien der Kampf um Europas größte Urwälder stattfindet

Während in der EU Gesetze zum Schutz des Waldes auf die lange Bank geschoben werden, bedient sich die Holzindustrie in Jahrhunderte alten Wäldern in Europa.

Von **Konrad Kramar** 18.10.24, 14:38

The nature conservation magazine of **national park Gesäuse "Im Gseis"** (Austria) invited the project to publish a feature story in their stakeholder magazine. about the project and a field trip in August 2024. The report (written by Matthias Schickhofer) was published in April 2025: <https://nationalpark-gesaeuse.at/service/downloads/>

Targeted communication work / nature photographers:

We also tried to attract the attention of important specialist target groups and potential 'ambassadors', such as nature photographers, and to spark interest in trips to Romania. The largest Austrian nature photographers' association, VTNÖ, took part in a trip to the Făgăraș Mountains in Romania in August 2024. (accompanied / coordinated by Matthias Schickhofer, Ion Holban). The blog story about the trip on their website can be accessed with this link: <https://blog.vtnoe.at/fotografische-urwaldexpedition-in-rumaenien/>



MATTHIAS SCHICKHOFER

Rumänien beherbergt die größten Urwälder in der gemäßigten Klimazone der EU. Doch sie sind akut von Abholzungen bedroht. Ein wissenschaftliches Projekt will nun „Urwaldtourismus“ ankurbeln, um ökonomische Anreize für besseren Urwaldschutz zu schaffen. Eine Gruppe österreichischer Naturfotograf:innen hat sich im Sommer 2024 erstmals als „Urwaldtouristen“ in das wilde Fagaras-Gebirge begeben ...

List of Social media reporting (influencers, partners) and postings on social media by Matthias Schickhofer):

Instagram:

https://www.instagram.com/p/DB6HjTYICAS/?img_index=1
<https://www.instagram.com/p/DBpLWZOIjgH/>
<https://www.instagram.com/p/C5a4LI-oZwn/>
<https://www.instagram.com/p/CzMVBFsIEo4/>
<https://www.instagram.com/p/CzEe8gSIQbl/>

Facebook (a selection):

<https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=61569824762672>
<https://www.facebook.com/matthias.schickhofer/posts/pfbid037DTF7Uk8da3hYkfvvkokvY83F8qkUUGbiE2mFQ76m1zYN8mRTMteHGavgEbYqzqjl>
<https://www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=10235958658016237&set=a.1259178369005>
<https://www.facebook.com/matthias.schickhofer/posts/pfbid02V7od4vNKkvZWP1MDWmtqnyMZtD48Prt2cQ5z4VQNn6cp6L59kGFQsywLTGLjYtpeI>
<https://www.facebook.com/matthias.schickhofer/posts/pfbid02FjsCojLVrVKbxyTCpDcXSTKvjyNbh88jP43CsPL9eMPgC5sPzEAYvVSkoSsX2Y1ol?rldid=k9PI2leE2vqLk5ix>

Twitter / X:

<https://x.com/mschickhofer/status/1881994105502503123>
<https://x.com/mschickhofer/status/1784579847571853621>

Bluesky:

<https://bsky.app/profile/mschickh.bsky.social/post/3lqd3xvzuck2g>

The travel agency “Experience Wilderness” published teaser stories about the scouting trip and upcoming travels (2026) on social media:

<https://www.instagram.com/p/C2kpyqvNPgA/>
<https://www.instagram.com/p/C22rhPwNznq/>
<https://www.instagram.com/p/C3A-wzlt1wq/>
<https://www.instagram.com/p/C2c7meBKqvq/>

Gerald Klamer, a former forester and now a “global hiker” interviewed team member Matthias Schickhofer during the project first scouting trip to Romania and posted on his Instagram account: <https://www.instagram.com/reel/CdjiVnpDnEE/>

Public presentations and media reports including mentions of our project (facilitated by Matthias Schickhofer):

- “Waldkonferenz” (organised by Martin Häusling, MEP), Hessen / Germany (9.9. 2022); highlighting need for better protection of OGF in EU in particular in RO, mention of the HFR tourism project
- “Waldkonferenz” (organised by Martin Häusling, MEP), Hessen / Germany (19./20. Oktober 2023); presentation focusing on problems with partly collapsing forest cover in EU (in particular in RO) and calling for better protection of OGF
- Press conference in Vienna (14.10.; Stiftung Comun; with Thomas Waitz MEP, Gabriel Paun / Agent Green) about status of natural forests in RO and EU (reports in

ORF / Ö1 and other media);

https://www.ots.at/presseaussendung/OTS_20221011_OTS0168/aviso-aufdeckung-dubioser-machenschaften-oesterr-holzkonzerne-in-rumaenien-1410)

- Interview with FM4 Radio (nat'l radio channel AT) about protection of natural forests in EU (RO, AT); 18.11.2022
- Webinar on 14.11.2023 with Pierre Ibisch, Martin Häusling MEP (organiser) - about forests and climate crisis (contribution on protection status of OGF in particular in RO, mention of nature tourism as potential driver of better OGF protection)
- Contribution to ORF-TV report("Thema") about the fate of natural forests and Natura 2000 (18.11.); mention of Romania and our project
- Contribution to the investigative research project "Deforestation Inc." (2022) by International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ): online briefing to several AT-based leading journalists (ORF, DerStandard, Die Presse, Profil)
- Contribution to conference of Gesäuse national park (AT) on photography and landscape perception / nature protection (by Schickhofer) (<https://nationalpark-gesaeuse.at/dialog/>) - contribution to panel discussion, using Romania / documenting forest destruction as example; mention of the HFR project
- Discussion event on forests and climate in Vienna (12.12.; Comun foundation; https://www.ots.at/presseaussendung/OTS_20231204_OTS0002/aviso-klima-wald-was-braucht-es-fuer-die-oekologische-holznutzung-1212-1830-uhr-anhang)
- Statement about the project during a panel discussion on protection of primary forests at the ECCB 24 conference (Conservation Biology, Bologna, June 2024; by Matthias Schickhofer)
- The project and the upcoming photo travels (ARR travels, Experience Wilderness) have also been presented by two online webinars with presentations about the project and the upcoming travel offers (in March / April 2024; organized by Matthias Schickhofer).

Several documentaries and news reports were produced related our work (facilitated by Ion Holban), including:

- Contributions to a documentary about the struggle to protect primary and old growth forests in Făgăraș Mountains, called Blood Wood, due to be launched in the summer of 2025, trailer here: <https://youtu.be/nMU1TWZNfgE?si=Y-N-y2fZ33OopF0>
- Locations for an art movie about living in Domogled's wilderness, called: But the Flowers remain: <https://www.el-flamingo.de/but-the-flowers-remain>
- We provided locations and drone filming for an UK Channel 4 investigation into primary forests at risk, including in Făgăraș Mountains: <https://www.channel4.com/programmes/unreported-world/on-demand/76658-004>
- We provided locations and drone filming to the United Nations Champions of the Earth Programme, 2024: <https://www.unep.org/championsofearth/laureates/2024/gabriel-paun>
- We provided locations and drone filming to a WaterBear documentary about Southern Făgăraș Mountains called Spirit of the Forest: <https://youtu.be/-EBYN5i8Ggg?si=z50OkPb04x3GLqMX>

- We provided locations and drone filming to a RAI3 / Presa Diretta reportage (Life of Plants) about the destruction of primary/old growth forests in Northern and Southern Fagaras, due to be aired on 27.04.25, promo here: <https://fb.watch/z4srYOMYGb/>

Nature Friends International (<https://www.nf-int.org/en>) has been dealing with the topic of sustainable tourism for decades and has been an important source of inspiration in this context. The NGO has interviewed team member Matthias Schickhofer and published a [blog story](#) about the project measures to promote primary forest tourism' and the issue of forest protection in Romania.

A **photography blog story** about the photography trip into primary forests of Făgăraș Mountains (2024), guided by Matthias Schickhofer and Ion Holban was published on the website of the Austrian nature photographers association **VTNÖ**:
<https://blog.vtnoe.at/fotografische-urwaldexpedition-in-rumaenien/>

The Austria based agency **ARR Reisen** published information and offers for photo tours to Romania in in 2024 and 2025 (print booklet and online).
https://arr.at/trip/?force_tour_guide=17040


New photography tours are already organised in Fararas and Domogled by Matthias Schickhofer in partnership with the experienced travel operator ARR Reisen - Natur.Kultur.Foto from Austria: <https://arr.at/trip/fotoreise-rumaeniens-urwaelder/>

It is important have to emphasise that the **current extraordinary news situation (wars, crisis, news dominating concerning political development etc.) makes it very difficult to pitch special interest stories** about such a project. We will continue to try to stimulate additional media coverage in the follow-up to the project.

Scientific articles:

tourism_LOG

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Rumänische Urwälder – Nachhaltiger Tourismus statt Abholzung

VERÖFFENTLICHT AM 4. April 2025 von nfinf

[english version below](#)
[version française ci-dessous](#)

<https://tourismlog.respect.at/rumaenische-urwaelder-nachhaltiger-tourismus-statt-abholzung/>

An essay on the influence of logging and large scale forestry interventions on the attractiveness of wild forests for tourism in the case of Romania has been recently submitted to a peer review journal, the essay is currently under review (as of April 2024).

In the essay, we argue that wilderness offers unique opportunities for recreation in natural and remote environments. An outstanding element of wilderness areas are primary forests. The essay investigates whether logging has an effect on the attractiveness of primary forests for wilderness tourism. The findings show that primary forests are a unique selling point in tourism. Logging is associated with direct (loss of biodiversity) and indirect (change of target group) effects. Logging not only causes severe changes in forests as a tourism attractor, but also changes the attractor's contexts, by prohibiting access to or destroying of hiking trails. Recommendations include the need to distinguish various target groups based on different degrees of naturalness of forests, which could help to maintain a nuanced portfolio of recreational opportunities in wild forests.

4. Conclusions and Discussion

In our project we have been dealing with two aspects which aim to contribute to the protection of primary and old growth forests in Romania:

- (1) the mapping of primary and old growth forests (PF/OGF) and drafting specific proposals for forest protection regimes in two selected 'hot spot' regions in Romania and related skill training of local actors to address and map (PF/OGF)
- (2) promoting 'slow' hiking tourism in primary and old growth forest areas as an incentive for improved primary forest protection and related still training of local actors to get engage in setting up soft tourism value chains focussing on wild forests as an asset.

(1) Primary and old growth forest conservation in Romania:

We concentrated our PF/OGF mapping efforts on two areas with outstanding biological and science value and which include some of the largest clusters of PF/OGF in Romania - the Făgăraş Mountains (Natura 2000 site) and the Domogled-Valea Cernei National Park (UNESCO World Heritage property and Natura 2000 site).

Our goal was to showcase the implementation of EU requirements for the protection of PF/OGF (EU Biodiversity and Forest Strategies 2030, Natura 2000, Nature Restoration Regulation), scientific findings regarding the design of protected areas for forests of high biological value, as well as UNESCO / IUCN recommendations (in connection with the World Heritage for the protection of European primeval / ancient beech forests) into specific proposals for forest protection regimes in the two target regions.

To do this, we combined different methods: (1) use of existing data pools ('National Catalogue of Virgin and Quasi-virgin Forests' in Romania), (2) PRIMOFARO mapping of potential primary and old growth forests), (3) AI-generated GIS data (in cooperation with an EURONATUR project) and (4) field visits also using drone-based field analyses.

The results will be published in a scientific report with contributions from other experts being engaged in the mapping of PF/OGF in Romania. This study is still in progress and will be published in a timely manner. Our study reveals that the Făgăraş Mountains and Domogled-Valea Cernei National Park collectively represent the largest hotspot for mixed beech-fir-spruce primary and old-growth forests in Romania and the European Union, covering approximately 79,600 hectares. We have designated these forest stands as Core Zones, which require stringent protection. Furthermore, our study advocates for a long-term protection strategy for these Core Zones by establishing larger Connectivity and Restoration Zones, spanning approximately 49,946 hectares within both the Făgăraş Mountains and Domogled-Valea Cernei National Park.

Together, these two zoning systems form protected areas (proposals) of 41,812 hectares in Domogled-Valea Cernei National Park and 87,734 hectares in Făgăraş Mountains Natura 2000 site. The total area proposed for protection is 129,546 hectares.

With reference to the scientific literature and the political and legal framework, we firmly believe that the most effective way to enhance the protection of potentially primary, old growth, and high biodiversity value forests is to designate larger connectivity and restoration zones. The two areas analysed exhibit stark differences in their national protection regimes and the resulting effectiveness of forest conservation:

- Domogled-Valea Cernei is a national park, benefiting from a higher level of protection through the designation of large core zones, which account for 48%, based on the current Management plan and up to 73% of the park's total surface, based on the Proposed New Management plan.
- Făgăraş Mountains, in contrast, is a Natura 2000 site without extensive core zones, leaving its primary and old-growth forests significantly less protected. Primary and old-growth forests in strict protection currently account for only 4.18% of the two Natura 2000 total surface.

These differences in national classification have a profound impact on the protection of the forests we studied: in Domogled-Valea Cernei National Park, the majority of primary and old-growth forests are proposed for strict protection in the new management plan. In Făgăraş Mountains, however, the majority of these forests lack strict protection, making them vulnerable to degradation and loss. Domogled-Valea Cernei leads Romania in the strict protection of primary forests listed in the National Catalogue, with approximately 12,058 hectares. Făgăraş Mountains follow closely in second place with 10,193 hectares.

However, if all the primary, old-growth and high biodiversity value forests were granted full protection, the rankings would reverse: Făgăraş Mountains would become the top area of Romania for protected primary, old growth and high biodiversity value forests, with 55,131 hectares, while Domogled-Valea Cernei would rank second with 24,469 hectares. Unfortunately, ongoing logging in primary, old-growth and high-biodiversity forests (especially in Făgăraş Mountains) undermines the capacity of these ecosystems to fulfill their ecological roles and place the majority of these forest stands in danger of degradation.

Logging Impacts are particularly severe in the Făgăraş Mountains region as shown with PRIMOFARO Polygons. Ground prove and satellite data clearly confirms that Făgăraş Mountains are a hotspot for logging activities. This is also evidenced by a high concentration of logging permits (APVs) distributed throughout the Natura 2000 sites. The disparity in protection is evident in extent of areas affected by logging permits issued within PRIMOFARO polygons for the two regions:

- Between 2021 and 2024, about 409 hectares of Primofaro polygons were affected by logging permits granted in Domogled-Valea Cernei National Park, a rather small area.
- In the same period, 4,583 hectares of Primofaro polygons were affected by logging permits granted in Făgăraş Mountains Natura 2000 sites, a very large area.

To prevent further degradation, we strongly advocate for a moratorium on logging in all potential primary and old-growth forests identified in our study. This moratorium should remain in place until these forests can be thoroughly mapped and assessed by researchers, ensuring their proper protection for future generations.

Our study has identified forest degradation in several previously intact forest parcels in which researchers from the Prague University for Life Sciences Prague (Project REMOTE: <https://www.remoteforests.org/>) have established vital research plots. We strongly urge Romanian authorities to collaborate with researchers from Prague University to prevent further destruction of their scientific research plots and to place all remaining research sites under strict protection.

(2) Tourism as an incentive for forest conservation:

The tourism value-added potential of Romania's primeval and old-growth forests is theoretically huge, as the examples of successfully developed forest reserves in Germany or Austria – such as the national parks Hainich, the Bavarian Forest or the Kalkalpen – show.

High-quality, strictly protected areas that guarantee the long-term protection of pristine nature, such as primary and old growth forests, and that also have a sufficiently high-quality and nature-friendly tourist infrastructure (trails, information systems, guides, accommodation, gastronomy etc.) can therefore serve both nature conservation and regional economic value creation.

However, this economic potential of intact and protected primary and old growth forests has not yet been much recognised by Romanian stakeholders, international tour operators or individual travellers. So far with status 2025, the beauty and experience of Romania's wild forests have hardly been addressed in tourism. We did not identify any thematic hiking trails that explicitly lead to 'primary forests' and provide information about their ecology. Specialised tourist information or organised tourist offers from tour operators to experience the unique wild forests of Romania are therefore still in their infancy.

The project aimed to change this and to raise awareness of the exceptional value of primeval and old-growth forests. Main objective was to make a positive contribution to recognising the great potential for tourism value creation in Romania's primary and natural forests and to developing solutions that would help preserving these forests in the long term and create value for tourism operators and the local population.

However, we had been faced with various problems and obstacles for which solutions need to be provided:

- The issue of primeval forest protection is highly polarised in Romania and there is apparently strong pressure from forestry users against the protection of further forests. This could explain why some stakeholders (such as established tourism players) initially showed interest in the project and agreed to participate, but then did not attend workshops and were apparently not willing to collaborate with the project. In this case, it would be very desirable if leading and / or regional tourism associations would open up to the topic, recognise the potential and work with the relevant communities and interest groups to develop solutions (tourist offers and enhanced forest protection measures).
- Logging not only damages primary and old growth forests, it often also affects the tourist infrastructure and impairs the experience of hiking in the wild forests. It would therefore make sense to reduce logging in the affected areas or to establish forest reserves (in return for compensation for the forest owners) in order not to destroy the tourist potential.
- Many hiking and mountain guides currently lack sufficient knowledge on topics related to guided hikes in the forest (forest ecology, identification of species, importance of nature conservation, etc.). There are currently only a few institutions that train guides in this area (such as the Foundation Conservation Carpathia). More courses and training would be desirable here.
- The public transport system in Romania is in need of improvement in some areas in order to reach primary forest areas without a car or plane. There is a growing trend towards sustainable and climate-friendly travel, but these target groups are currently facing major challenges in Romania. The situation could be improved at least in the 'last mile' (from larger towns to the hiking areas) with flexible systems (such as taxi shuttles with attractive prices for holiday guests) and better schedule information for foreign guests (at least in English). The communities and tourism associations in the primary forest regions could take action to develop solutions to these problems.

In the course of the project, we have found that a gratifying number of people in the communities have a great interest in tourism in 'their' primary forests in the neighbourhood.

We very much hope that our project will help to ensure that the potential of Romania's protected and preserved forest treasures is better recognised and that people at the local level will be inspired to work to preserve 'their' primary forests and to develop tourism offers.

Ultimately, nature conservation it is often also about economic decisions. In view of the global climate and nature crisis, species-rich, natural, vital, growing forests are needed. Alternative forms of forest use, which are not based solely on timber extraction, therefore need much more (economic) support. This includes compensating forest owners for protecting intact nature and their ecosystem services – and promoting sustainable, targeted hiking tourism in securely protected forests.

Last but not least, the project team hopes that the travel industry will increasingly 'discover' Romania's magnificent and unique primary forests and include hikes in wild forests in their programmes. First of all, some pioneers are needed to create models that will then inspire other market players and encourage them to create similar offers.

5. Literature

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Annex 1: Mapping results

Table 2: Overview of the main protection proposal results for both Făgăraş Mountains and Domogled Valea-Cernei National Park.

Location	Current protection in the National Catalogue	Proposed Core Zone	Proposed Connectivity and Restoration Zone	Total areas proposed for protection
Făgăraş mountains Natura 2000 sites	10,193 ha	55,131 ha	32,603 ha	87,734 ha
Domogled Valea-Cernei National Park	12,058 ha	24,469 ha	17,343 ha	41,812 ha
Total area	22,251 ha	79,600 ha	49,946 ha	129,546 ha

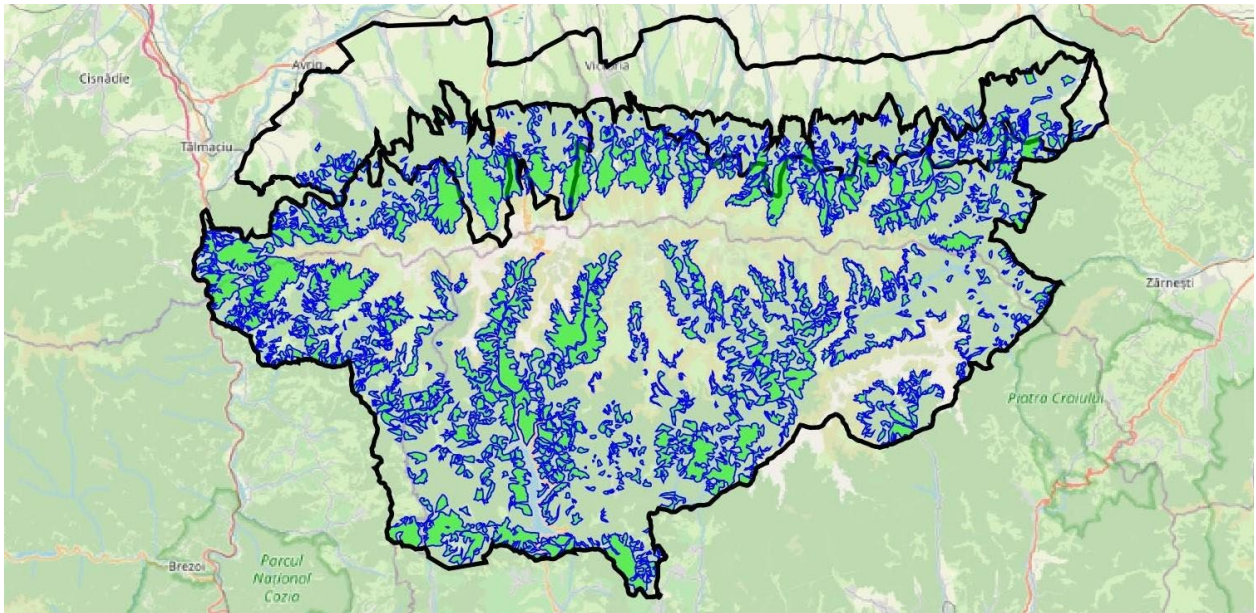
Table 3: Overview of logging impacts for both Făgăraş Mountains and Domogled Valea-Cernei National Park.

Impact of logging (2021-2024)	Direct threat* (ha)	Nearby threat** (ha)
Făgăraş Mountains Natura 2000 sites	4,583 ha	30,803 ha
Domogled Valea-Cernei National Park	409 ha	10,753 ha
Total area affected	4,992 ha	41,556 ha

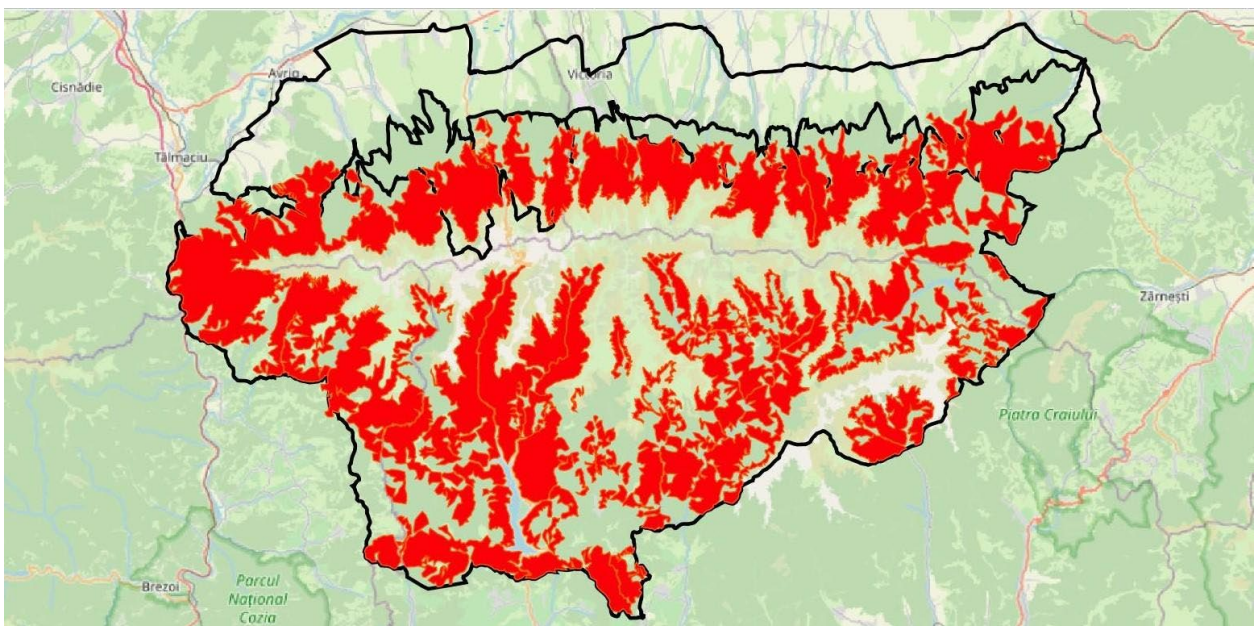
***Direct threat** = where logging permits were approved and implemented directly inside Primofaro polygons;

****Nearby threat** = where logging permits have been approved and implemented in parcels that also contain Primofaro polygons, but these PRIMOFARO polygons do not directly overlap with the logging permits, even if they share the same forest parcel

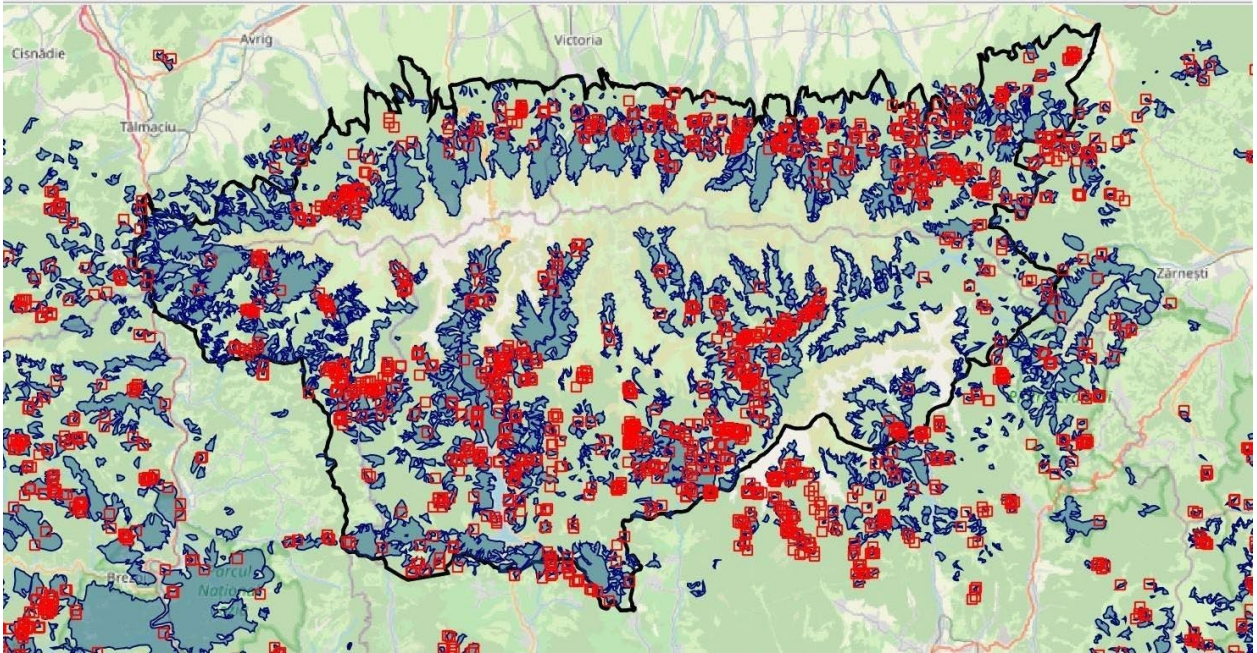
Maps 1: Făgăraş Mountains



Map 1a: Core Zone Map of Făgăraș Mountains: Display of potential primary, old-growth and high biodiversity forests based on our findings.

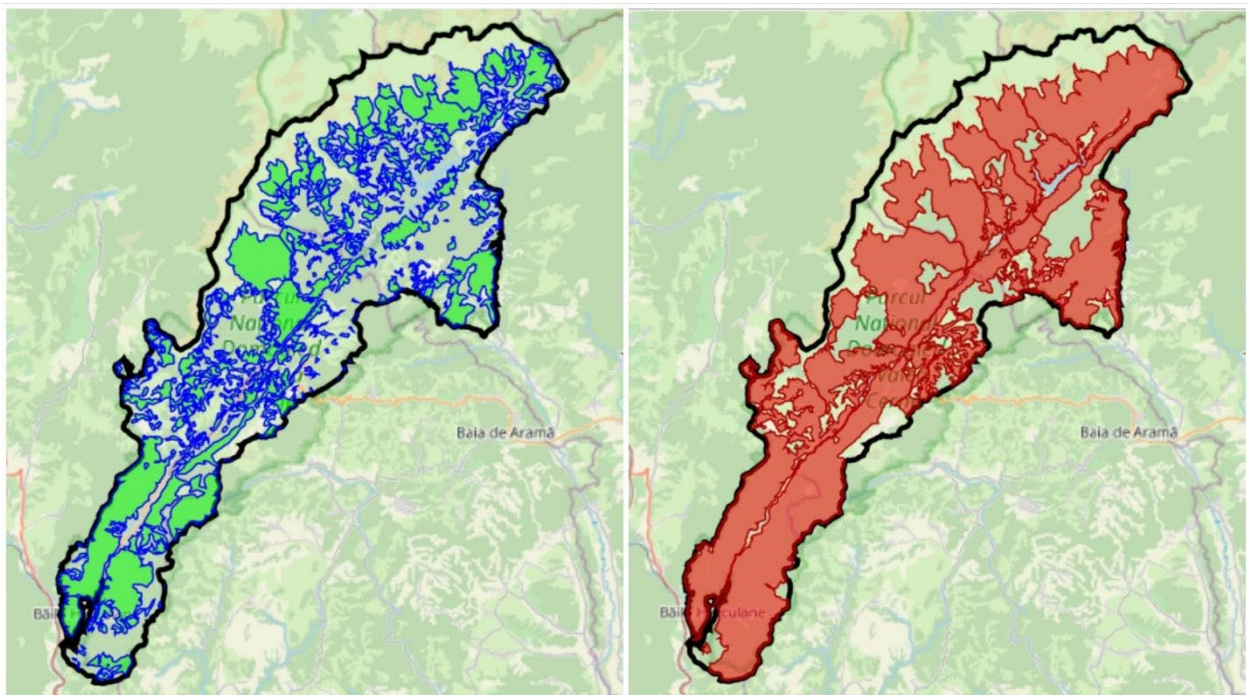


Map 1b: Connectivity and Restoration Zone of Făgăraș Mountains: A map outlining proposed connectivity zones, including ecological corridors, buffer zones, and forests with high biodiversity value for long-term conservation.

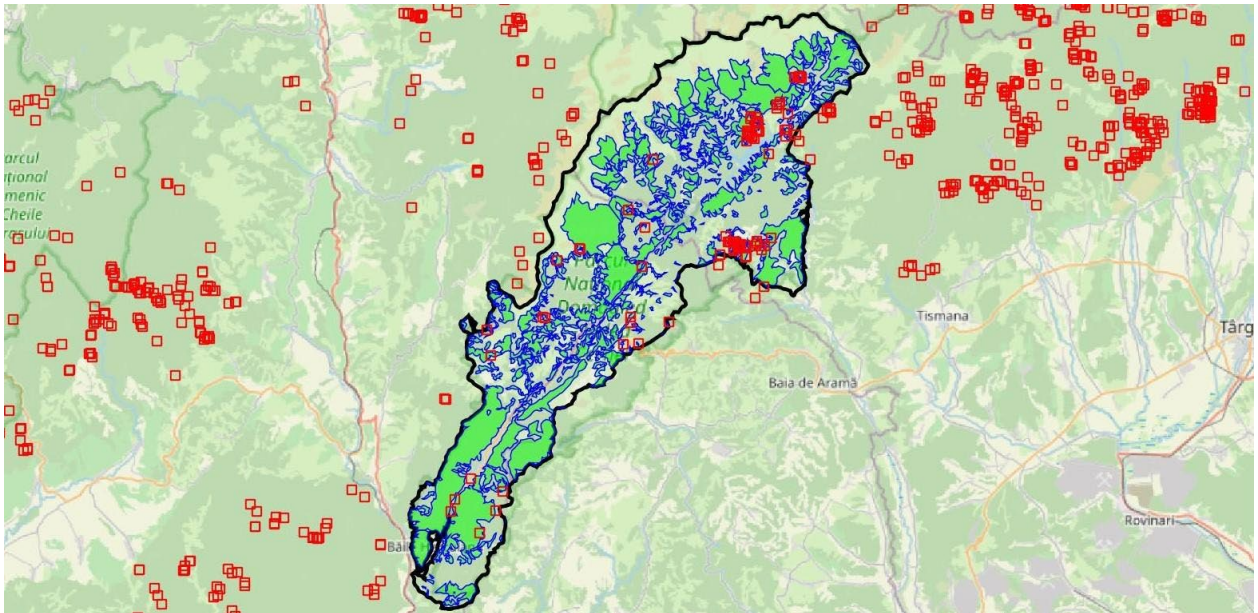


Map 1c: Logging Permits Map: A detailed visualization of logging permits granted in the Făgăraș Mountains in Primofaro polygons, highlighting areas impacted from 2021 to 2024.

Maps 2: Domogled Valea Cernei National Park



Map 2a: Core Zone Map of Domogled Valea Cernei (left image): A display of potential primary and old-growth forests based on our findings and **3.2 Connectivity and Restoration Zone (right image):** A map outlining proposed connectivity zones, including ecological corridors, buffer zones, and forests with high biodiversity value for long-term conservation.



Map 2b: Logging Permits Map: A detailed visualization of logging permits granted in the Domogled Valea Cernei National Park, highlighting areas impacted from 2021 to 2024. In red: logging permits, in green: Core Zones of potentially primary, old growth and high biodiversity value forests.

Annex 2: Impressions from project workshops and primary forest testing and educational hikes

Kick off workshop (Sibiu) and initial trip to primary forests in Romania (Făgăraș) in May 2022:





Figures 15 -16: Exploring forests in the northeastern Făgăraș Mountains with local experts. Unfortunately, the forests visited were not suitable due to a lack of trails and poor accessibility.
© Matthias Schickhofer

Trail and forest scouting trip in September 2022 to (southern) Făgăraș Mountains and to Domogled - Valea Cernei National Park:



Figure 17: Exploring a primary forest in Vâlsan valley near to Nucșoara's monumental trees project area. Unfortunately, it was not possible within the scope of our project to get access to this beautiful primary forest area or to integrate it with existing other projects in the region. © Matthias Schickhofer



Figure 18: Exploring the wild forest in Vâlsan valley. © Matthias Schickhofer



Figure 19: Exchange with the mayor of Prisacina municipality about options for nature tourism in the area. © Matthias Schickhofer



Figure 20: Exploration of a hiking trail in the UNESCO World Heritage Site in the Cerna Valley / Domogled - Valea Cernei National Park. © Matthias Schickhofer

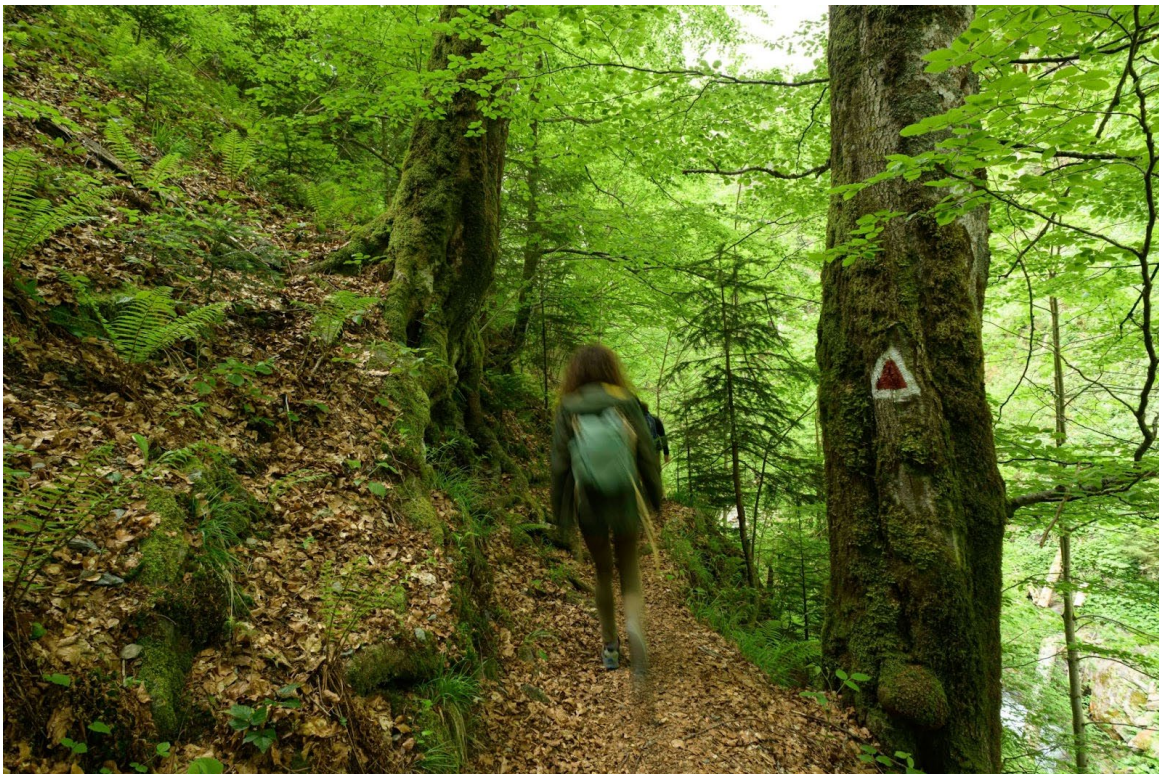


Figure 21: The project team with a local area expert in the UNESCO World Heritage Site in the Domogled - Valea Cernei National Park. © Matthias Schickhofer

Best practice workshop in May 2023 (Făgăraș Mountains area):



Figure 22: Hybrid workshop in a guest house in the north of Făgăraș, with online input from tour operators and protected area managers (from Austria). © Matthias Schickhofer





Figures 23-24: Exploratory hike in the Vistea Mare valley with workshop participants.
© Matthias Schickhofer

Scouting trip with travel operator Experience Wilderness (Austria) to Cerna Mountains in Domogled - Valea Cernei National Park (September 2023):



Figure 25: Breakfast made from home-grown ingredients at a village guesthouse in Prisacina.
© Matthias Schickhofer



Figure 26: The Austrian wilderness guide is thrilled by the old growth forests in the area around Prisacina. © Matthias Schickhofer



Figure 27: View over the UNESCO World Heritage Site high above the Cerna Valley. © Matthias Schickhofer



Figures 28-29: Village guest house 'Talpes' in Priscina. 'Slow' and modest nature tourism can contribute to significantly improving the income situation of the inhabitants of the remote settlements, who live mainly from subsistence. © Matthias Schickhofer

Capacity Building / Guiding Training Workshop in April 2024:



Figure 30: Breakfast presentation and discussion session in the workshop venue.
© Matthias Schickhofer





Figures 31-33: Educational (capacity building) hike in the Arpasu Mare valley with workshop participants. © Matthias Schickhofer

Test hike with the Austrian Association of Nature Photographers (VTNÖ) in August 2024 (Făgăraș Mountains area):





Figures 34-36: Photographic “ecstasy” in the forest wilderness of the Făgăraș Mountains. © Matthias Schickhofer

Field visit with Austrian Kurier-Newspaper journalist in Romania's wild forests (October 2024):



Figure 37: Exploring an unprotected native mountain forest in Vitea Mare valley in Făgăraș Natura 2000 site. © Matthias Schickhofer





Figure 38 and 39: Harsh contrasts in Pojorta Valley: paradisiacal primary forest in the upper valley, fresh devastation of both the hiking trail and the forest by logging in the lower section. © Matthias Schickhofer

Pilot trip with with commercial travel operator ARR Reisen to the wilderness of Domogled -Valea Cernei National Park and UNESCO site (October 2024):





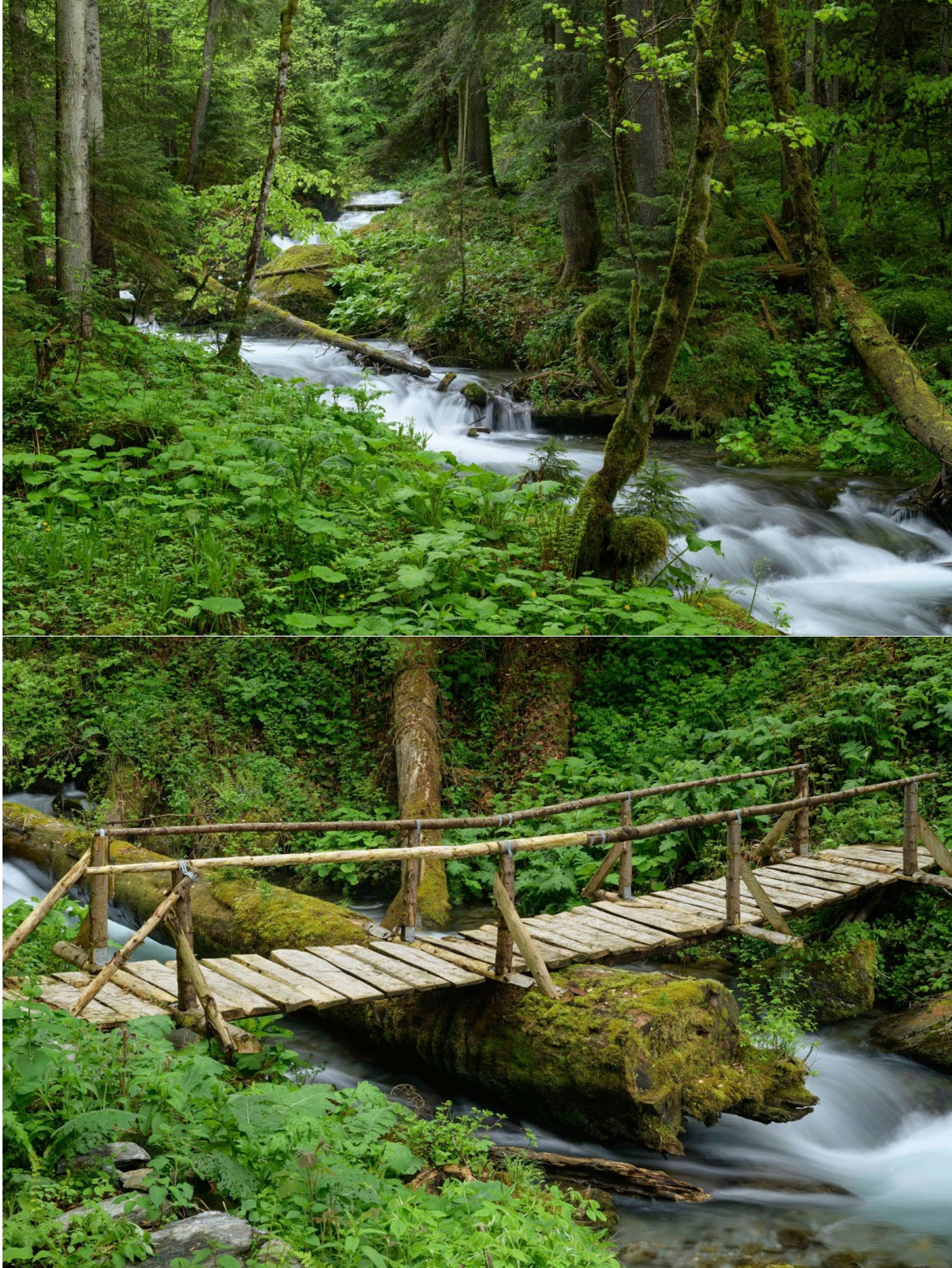




Figures 40-46: First nature photography journey in the autumnal primary forests and ancient cultural landscapes of the Cerna Mountains. Over four days, the group explored wild forests and scenic gorges photographically - and enjoyed the extraordinary hospitality in remote hamlet Prisacina (guest house Talpes) and in Baile Herculane (lovely pension Safrane) © Matthias Schickhofer

Annex 3: Recommended hiking trails Romanian primary forest - images gallery

Focus area 1: Făgăraș Mountains Natura 2000 site





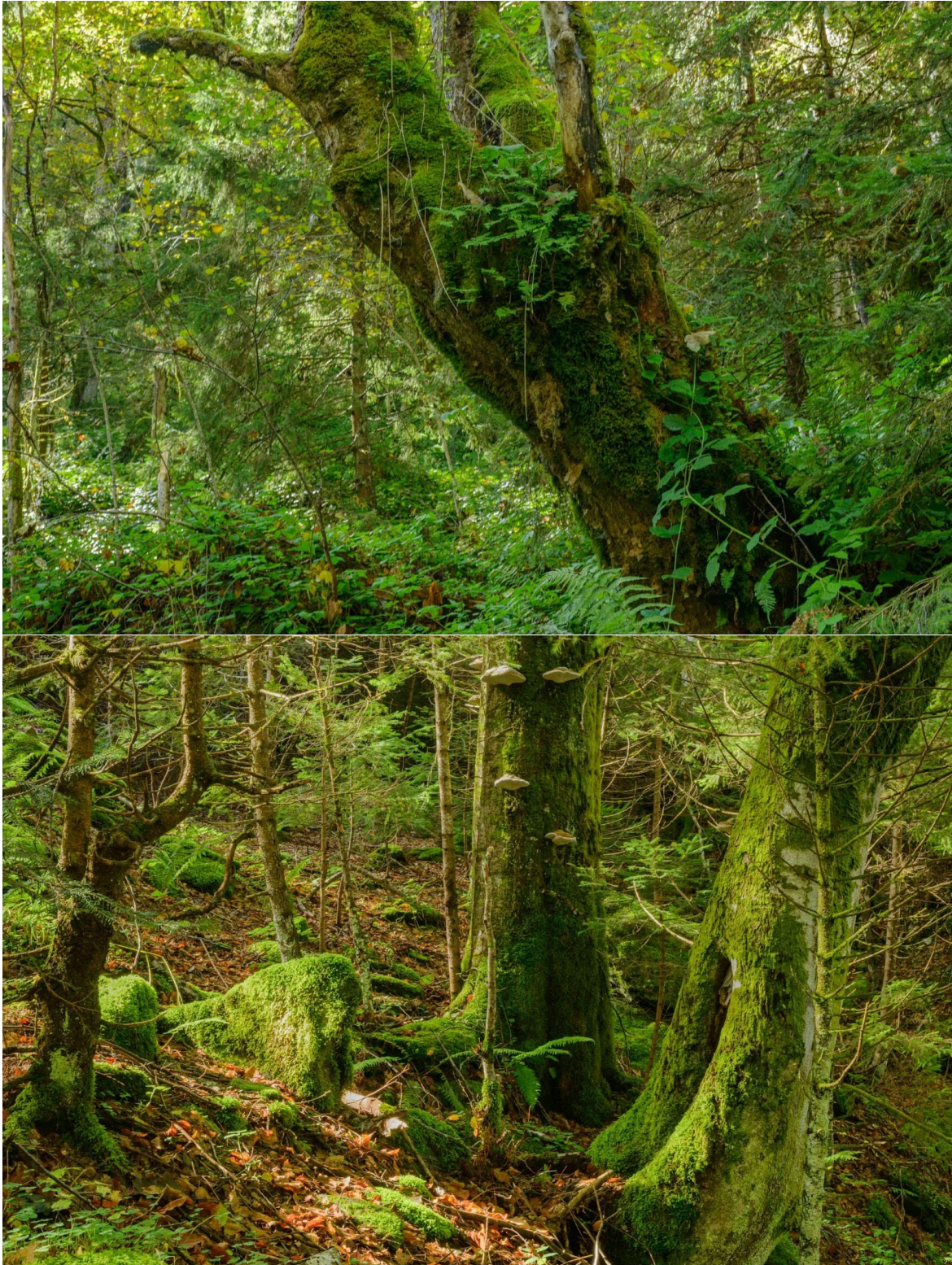
Figures 47 - 49: Views from the trail into Vistea Mare valley © Matthias Schickhofer





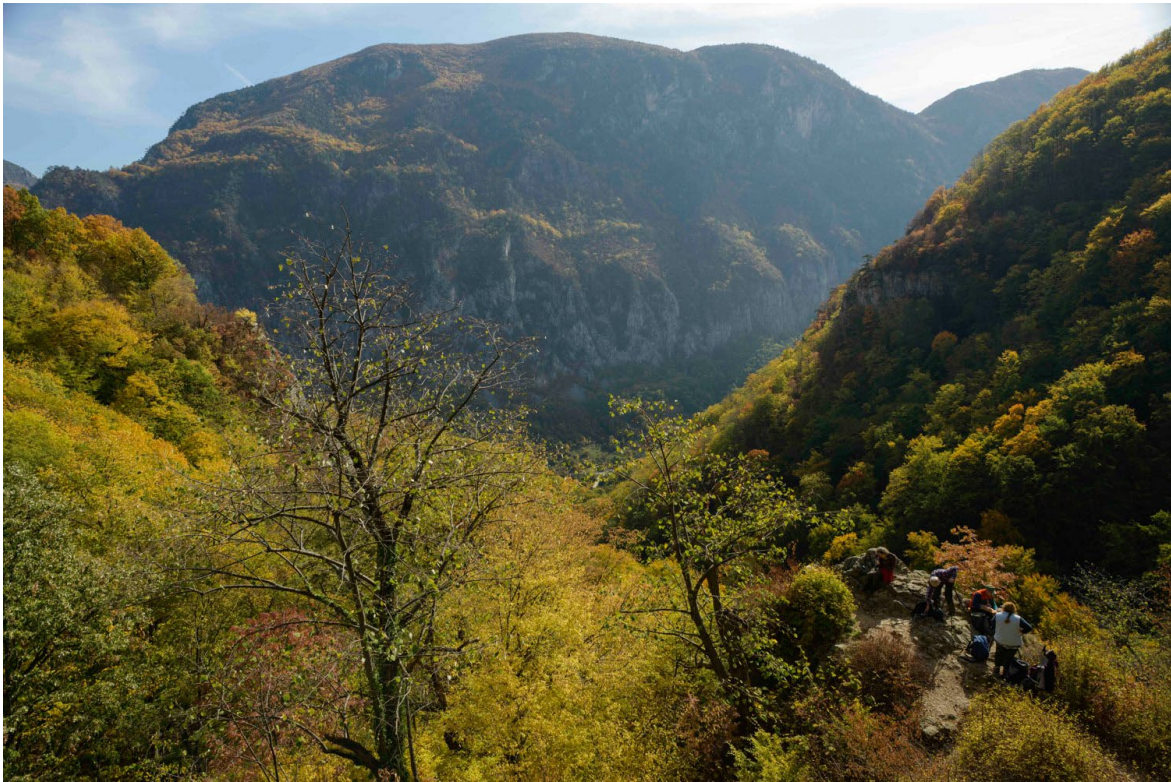
Figures 50-52: Wild forest scenery seen from the trail in Arpasu Mare valley © Matthias Schickhofer





Figures 53-55: Trail into rarely visited and hidden Pojorta valley © Matthias Schickhofer

Focus area 2: Domogled - Valea Cernei National Park





Figures 56-58: UNESCO protected primary beech forest, seen from hiking trails in Cerna valley. © Matthias Schickhofer





Figures 59-62: Ancient cultural land side by side with primary and old growth beech forests in Cerna mountains next to the isolated hamlet Prisacina. © Matthias Schickhofer