



Forests in Central and Eastern Europe

BRIEFING • JULY 2020

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A Green Recovery for CEE's Forests

It is not without reason that the Danube-Carpathian Region has received the name [Green Heart of Europe](#): around 60% of Europe's pristine forests outside of northern Scandinavia and Russia can be found in the Carpathian and Balkan Mountains. These include old-growth forests such as the primeval beech forests that stretch across Eastern Slovakia and Western Ukraine, and which figure on the [UNESCO list of world heritage sites](#). Furthermore, the carpet of trees covering the Southwestern Carpathians in Romania has been identified as one of the largest remaining forested areas in Europe of national, regional and global significance.¹ It is also home to two-thirds of Europe's [large carnivore populations](#), including brown bears, wolves and lynx.

Forests, particularly old-growth and High Conservation Value Forests (HCVF) are critical to life on Earth.² Old-growth forests are home to 9 out of 10 land flora and fauna species. Many, such as the large carnivores, are listed as endangered. Almost 500 vascular plants are endemic to the Carpathians; meaning that they cannot be found anywhere else in the world. Moreover, **forests lock up vast amounts of carbon from the atmosphere, generate oxygen, and filter freshwater**, thus representing a **crucial element in Earth's resilience to climate change**.

¹ Category 2 [High Conservation Value](#) sites as defined by the High Conservation Value Resource Network denotes "Large landscape-level ecosystems and ecosystem mosaics that are significant at global, regional or national levels, and that contain viable populations of the great majority of the naturally occurring species in natural patterns of distribution and abundance."

² Ibid.

What we mean by Green Recovery

The **Covid-19 pandemic** and its immediate health, social and economic impacts require an urgent response. Beyond this, however, public stimulus packages to relaunch the economy are already being developed, requiring crucial decisions on where these substantial financial flows should be directed or through which channels and vehicles, in order to bring most benefits.

Badly designed recovery plans in response to the Covid-19 outbreak risk exacerbating the social inequalities and environmental crisis. Instead, **governments must draw up their plans in a way that helps tackle social inequalities, climate and environmental breakdown, and the need to improve long-term resilience**, by taking a consistent approach across the board, and aiming clearly at a green, equitable and resilient recovery.

WWF is calling on the European Union and its governments to demonstrate leadership and foresight by continuing to follow, and reinforcing, a trajectory towards a resilient, sustainable and just economy and society, **in line with the European Green Deal, the Paris climate agreement, biodiversity goals and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**.



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Today, however, **less than 320,000 ha of old-growth forests are now thought to remain in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE)**. Many are felled every year as our appetite for wood continues to increase and new forest roads and more powerful machines allow us to reach previously inaccessible areas. In the case of **Romania, more than 60% of its old-growth forests have been lost between 2005 and 2019**.

What we need to do

How to make a recovery strategy 'green'?

Our decision makers in the EU, representatives in national governments and parliaments, and spokespersons at the municipal level must ensure just and sustainable recovery plans, by

1. directing **at least 50% of recovery plans into environmentally sustainable activities**;
2. **not supporting environmentally harmful activities**;
3. delivering social benefits through a **"just transition" for all**;
4. upholding and strengthening existing **environmental standards and policies**;
5. **communicating benefits** of improving the overall environmental health of societies;
6. and ensuring that **EU support to third countries adheres to the same principles**.

...and rethink regulation to strengthen resilience. This requires

7. strengthening and continuing the **implementation of the European green Deal**;
8. **ending environmentally harmful subsidies** and scaling up **environmental fiscal reform**;
9. reforming EU fiscal rules to **facilitate public investment in decarbonising the economy**;
10. accelerating **EU sustainable finance policies** to shift the trillions;
11. ensuring **sustainable production and supply chains** within and to the EU;
12. and putting **people's wellbeing at the heart of the crisis response**.

Timeline

September 2020	WWF Living Planet Report
22.09-23.09.2020	UN Biodiversity Summit New York
20.10-22.10.2020	EU Green Week and launch of the EU State of Nature Report
23.10.2020	EU Environment Council conclusions on EU Biodiversity Strategy
10.-11.12.2020	European Council meeting and adoption of the 2021-2027 EU budget
07.01-15.01.2021	IUCN World Conservation Congress
21.01-26.02.2021	World Economic Forum
17-30 May 2021	COP 15 - Convention of Biological Diversity

IN THE FACE OF THE UNPRECEDENTED CRISIS OF NATURE LOSS, AS THE DOMINANT SPECIES ON THE PLANET WE HAVE THE MORAL RESPONSIBILITY TO PRESERVE THE DIVERSITY OF LIFE ON EARTH.

Addressing forests at a regional level

Coordinated regional action defined by trans-border cooperation is a central component for effective conservation work. Therefore, we call on the **European Commission, in consultation with Member States, Western Balkan and [European Neighbourhood countries](#), to develop an ambitious forest ecosystem restoration plan by 2021**, and to allocate adequate resources for its complete implementation by 2030.

Efforts should aim to enhance forest resilience to climate change; a move which would also represent an integral element in boosting the EU's efforts to achieve its climate ambitions. Simultaneously, actions should also be taken to restore the EU's priority forest habitats and increase the capacity of forests to sequester and store carbon. This can be achieved by promoting the natural regeneration of forests involving a diversity of native European tree species best adapted to the current *and future* climate of the region. **Therefore, we call for the restoration of 10% of all forests in the CEE Region (2.4 mil. ha.) and for the afforestation of an additional 2.4 million hectares of degraded land in CEE using native species and local provenances.** Ambitious restoration strategies do not only make sense from an environmental perspective: according to a US study, every \$1 million invested on restoration supports the creation of on average 33 new jobs. Equivalent spending on the oil and gas industry yields only 5.2 new jobs.³

Addressing forests at the national level

To facilitate the implementation of this restoration plan, we urge **CEE governments to support the participatory development of a New Forest Vision** that includes a new set of forest management and forest governance principles. The principles must take the social, environmental and economic realities in each country into consideration, as well as regional and global challenges related to the climate and biodiversity. A central element of this New Forest Vision should be a **network of ecosystems covering 10% of the region's forests** in which all forms of commercial timber-harvesting are excluded. This vision must be in place by 2022, and subsequently lead to strategies and actions that can be implemented by 2030.

Key facts & figures

- In 2017, the world lost 29.4 million hectares of tree cover: This is the equivalent of a football pitch every second or the loss of an area the size of Italy within a year.³
- The global number of trees has fallen by 46% since the beginning of human civilisation;⁴
- Over 25% of the world's population lives in and around forests, depending on them for fuel, food, medicine and building material; and ⁵
- Global demand for timber products is expected to more than triple over the next three decades.⁶

Current trends can still be reversed if transformative changes are implemented that address the root causes of nature deterioration.

THE WORLD MUST COME
TOGETHER TO REVERSE
NATURE
LOSS AND SAFEGUARD THE
FUTURE OF HUMANITY

³ T. BenDor, et al. (2015), „Estimating the Size and Impact of the Ecological Restoration Economy”, *PLoS ONE*, Vol. 10(6).

⁴ Global Forest Watch (2019), available here: <https://www.globalforestwatch.org/dashboards/global>

⁵ T. H. Crowther, et al. (2015), “Mapping Tree Density at a Global Scale,” *Nature*, Vol. 525, pp. 201-268.

⁶ FAO (2015), *Forests and Poverty Reduction*, available here: <http://www.fao.org/forestry/livelihoods/en/>

⁷ WWF (2011), *Living Forests Report*, available here: http://wwf.panda.org/our_work/forests/forest_publications_news_and_reports/living_forests_report/



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In the Ministries of finance

In order to create the best circumstances for successful forest conservation, decision-makers must ensure that the financial regimes governing our interventions in forest habitats are satisfactory. To this end, we appeal to **ministries responsible for finance, EU funds and forests to promote sustainable compensation mechanisms** (including [Payment for Ecosystem Services schemes](#)) for forest owners and local communities to compensate them for the usage restrictions imposed on them for the protection of conservation values, and to **provide financial support schemes for investments in environmentally-friendly forest infrastructure** and harvesting machinery.

In the energy and agriculture Ministries

As agricultural and energy production are among the main drivers of forest loss, we urge **ministries responsible for agriculture and EU funds to reduce or eliminate harmful subsidies for agriculture**. Agricultural subsidies contribute to the deforestation of large swathes of forested landscapes throughout CEE. Governments should **halt all subsidies that lead to the removal of forest vegetation such as field protection belts and agricultural lands** (pastures), and they should instead promote agro-forestry systems that offer benefits in terms of agricultural yield and climate resilience.

Ministries responsible for energy and climate should eliminate subsidies for “renewable energy” produced by the industrial burning of forest biomass. Said ministries should issue plans and strategies that foster the transition to an energy system in line with the UNFCCC Paris Agreement and that do not include the burning of forest biomass other than residues. In order to mainstream biodiversity protection in all economic sectors, we appeal to **CEE governments to promote investment and financial support for the development of green businesses** that aim to promote and safeguard the natural capital around protected areas.

In the energy sector, we call on **ministries responsible for energy to ensure that by 2025, industrial bioenergy use in Europe only includes wood residues, while simultaneously taking steps aimed at doubling the current level of carbon dioxide removal through EU carbon sinks by 2030**. These efforts should include legislation that establishes a well-funded programme of nature-based solutions such as restoration of forests and wetlands that keep carbon stores and water retention areas intact, e.g. 320,000 ha of old-growth forests and 2.5 million ha of functioning wetland habitats in Central and Eastern Europe. Additionally, we urge **ministries responsible for agriculture, climate, forestry and spatial planning** to identify agricultural lands of low conservation and production value as potential areas for forest restoration, or sites for energy plantations to reduce the pressure on natural forests.

Favourable legislative environment

The successful and rapid delivery of the above actions requires a favourable and reliable legislative environment. Therefore, we call on **responsible ministries and parliaments to amend legislation to enable more land to be assigned for forest restoration** in order to establish green belts around large infrastructure or cities. We also appeal to **ministries responsible for environment and forests to harmonise environmental and forest legislation, strengthen collaboration** and ensure sufficient staff capacity and finances for good management of Natura 2000 forest habitats.



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The measures outlined in the four preceding pages have the potential to support a green and resilient recovery to the Covid-19 crisis. Not only do they represent important steps in the long-term sustainable transition of our economies, they also allow governments to create numerous new employment and investment opportunities, thereby alleviating the immediate and heavy economic toll of the crisis.

To complement and ensure the longevity of these measures, the following actions are required:

In the environment and forestry Ministries

The newly defined provisions for forest management and governance under the above-mentioned Forest Vision should complement existing tools in the region such as [FSC®](#) certification. In this regard, we call on **ministries responsible for the environment and forestry to implement responsible forest management practices according to the FSC® standard on at least 12 million ha of forests in the CEE Region by 2025.**

In addition, it is crucial that decision-makers take the necessary steps required to safeguard those parts of the forest that are still in good health. Therefore, we call on **ministries responsible for the environment and forestry to work together towards the rapid identification and conservation of all High Conservation Value Forest sites⁸ in the region, with a special focus on the estimated 320,000 ha of virgin and old-growth forests by 2022.**

In the Ministries of transport and spatial planning

A further step should ensure that **illegal logging is substantially removed from supply chains in all CEE countries by 2025.** Furthermore, in order to guarantee that the remaining swathes of intact forest habitats in CEE remain intact, we urge **ministries responsible for transport and spatial planning to plan new infrastructure projects in a way that minimises forest fragmentation and ensures ecological connectivity.** This is essential, since habitat fragmentation is one of the leading drivers of global biodiversity loss.

Further reading

- WWF, Building resilience: WWF recommendations for a sustainable and just recovery after Covid-19 (2020), available at: https://www.wwf.eu/wwf_news/media_centre/?uNewsID=362052
- WEF, The Future of Nature and Business Policy Companion: Recommendations for policy-makers to reset towards a new nature economy (2020), available at: http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_NNER_II_The_Future_of_Business_and_Nature_Policy_Companion_2020.pdf
- IPBES, Summary for Policymakers of the Global Assessment Report on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (2019), available at: <https://www.ipbes.net/news/ipbes-global-assessment-summary-policymakers-pdf>
- WWF, Living Planet Report 2020, available here: <https://livingplanet.panda.org/>

For more information

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⁸ Defined as such by the [High Conservation Value Resource Network](#).



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