

Most people pass near veteran trees and don't understand their value. Certainly, some veteran trees have a special significance because of their association with culture, heritage or history, but I want to refer to all veteran trees.

In the southern part of Transylvania where I live, there is a large area of wood pasture and meadows with veteran trees, and many rural communities. Over many centuries, a unique natural-cultural landscape has developed here, featuring a wide heterogeneity of habitats, a rich flora and fauna biodiversity, a high aesthetic value, strong rural character and a rare balance between human needs and nature's capacity to support. A key component of this landscape is represented by the ancient wood pastures and meadows with veteran trees (monuments of nature). Some of these meadows are priority habitats according to the EU's Habitats Directive.

In the past, trees were often removed for a variety of reasons and still now they are not well protected. Because of the intensity of the land use, "cleaning" the land using fire, year after year we lose many veteran trees. Protection from such threats is therefore essential in order to avoid accelerating the losses that would occur anyway due to natural causes. Environmental issues are a constant concern of the Romanian Parliament. Illegal felling of trees is a big problem in Romania and this also impacts on the veteran trees. Currently the number of these trees decreases steadily due to overgrazing and lack of proper management. In order that we can continue to enjoy their existence in the future, we must find solutions to protect and manage them carefully so we can keep them alive for as long as possible.

So I am glad that through this project many people in Romania will have the opportunity to gain experience and become specialists so that we can spread best practice about the values and management of these veteran trees. In the longer term this will help us to manage the trees properly and give them the protection that they need.

Given the experience in other countries, we must start to make an inventory of veteran trees in Romania, such an inventory is not easy because we have over 6.5 million hectares of national forest plus many thousands of hectares of wood pastures both of which include old trees. There have been several initiatives which have included inventories of

trees including characteristics such as girth, height or connection with famous people, but none of these include management proposals. Through the VETree project we will reach people who are already working professionally with trees, to give them the skills to manage our tree heritage for the future. We also need to turn our attention to young people by raising awareness in schools about the value of these trees in terms of the biodiversity they host. We need to train future specialists in, for example arboriculture, so that as a country we have the skills and competency to carry out practical management to prevent unavoidable loss of veteran trees.

Another objective is to create a legal framework to ensure the security of veteran trees. Although there is a National law dealing with the management of trees in forests it explicitly provides no protection for trees in meadows and wood pastures. However, in southern Transylvania, veteran trees are mostly found in wood pastures belonging to local communities and are not part of the state forests, therefore they currently have no protection.

In order to conserve these wood pasture and meadows with veteran trees, our efforts will be directed to support and stimulate the sustainable development of rural communities by encouraging traditional farming practice and increasing local awareness of the veteran trees. We must help administrators to finish the Natura 2000 site management plans and adapt them to include aspects relating to veteran trees. Last but not least we must have a legislative framework to secure the future for veteran trees in Romania.