

REPORT ON EuCAN VISIT TO AGGTELEK 2007

Location: Aggtelek National Park, northern Hungary

Organisation: European Conservation Action Network (in conjunction with Kingcombe Centre) working with Aggtelek National Park

Mission: European conservation volunteers exchange scheme for 'people in the labour market' to carry out conservation management work on nature reserves and receive training in related ecological, historical, cultural, social and language issues and skills.

Project aim: to work with National Park Directorate staff on a range of grassland (wet or upland) sites within the park threatened by scrub encroachment as a result of pastoral abandonment, and to become familiar with SWOT issues for conservation management in the park and Hungary in general.

Funding: Costs covered by grant from Leonardo da Vinci Lifelong Learning Programme.

Project duration: 2 weeks

Expedition date: 4-18/9 2007 + 3 days travel

Proposed team: Approximately 15, plus 2 leaders.

Actual team: 2 leaders, and 14 others. English: 6x 20+, 2x30+, 1x40+, 2x50+, 1x60+ (5 female, 7 male). Polish: 2x 20+ (1 female, 1 male) for 10/5 days respectively. Also 5 Hungarian students 20+ (3 male, 2 female) for 1 week and 20-ish Hungarian students (20+) for 1 day.

Worksite: Various high butterfly-diverse scrub-encroached grassland (ex-pasture) clearings within recently wooded low upland area, and one site of Large Copper habitat wetland associated with small stream subject to damaging fires due to build-up scrub/reed litter.

Methods: Clearing blackthorn thickets, juniper etc from grassland patches and edge encroachment by hornbeam, oak etc, and ditto blackthorn, willow and reeds from wetlands with chainsaws, brush-cutters and hand tools, dragging away and stashing within woodland edge clearings, or burning as appropriate. Species presence (across the usual plant/animal groups) monitored and photographed throughout.

Workday: Variable/flexible dependent on weather, task size and cultural programme, but generally away from centre 9am-6pm.

Base: Salamandra Guest House, near Szogliget within secluded area of the National Park – large hostel with bunk beds and full catering/washing facilities, large dining area, pool table, veranda, barbecue, lawn and

outbuildings. Local village (with bars and shop) 1 mile. Minibuses (and other transport) only via park staff. Bicycles. Park restaurant in nearby Josvafo.

Training and education: Initial induction to park followed by full programme of ecological, socio-economic, cultural and historical talks/events. Park leaflets and posters. Also talks on butterfly conservation projects in Poland and Dorset. ID books/DVDs table.

Local interaction: Key (including pre-project) ongoing contact with Sandor Bodolgh (Aggtelek NP), together with Park fieldwork and professional colleagues, and catering and caretaking staff of guest house. Village contacts included ex-pat Simon and friends, shopkeepers/bar/restaurant staff. Also professional personnel associated with educational programme. Local mayor. Hungarian students and leaders. Free time visits. TV interview. Newspaper article.

Issues (negative):

1. Task variety: Limited by individuals' pre-project skills/training and tool ownership. Main site limited to relatively homogenous continuous tract of grassland through young woodland.
2. Weather: Poor (cool/wet) start threw out work schedule but cultural programme diverse and flexible enough to fill free time. Generally good.
3. Work/life balance: Very full programme meant that little time for team members to relax and/or pursue own interests.
4. Biodiversity: Not that brilliant but enough to keep appetites whetted.
5. Travel: Train ad nauseam but environmentally-friendly, laced with glimpses of European capitals: London, Brussels, Cologne, Munich, and Vienna. Sleeping arrangements for some particularly difficult.

Issues (positive):

1. Volunteer motivation: Generally good, although manual arduousness, aggressive thorns, heat of day, machine noise etc lead to a slowing pace in some.
2. Volunteer interaction: Generally good, One young but non-exclusive couple.
3. Polarisation: Generally absent. Good relations within team (age/gender etc) and with Hungarian/Polish students. Some resentment over variable individual work output and sociability. Some clique-iness/couple-iness.
4. Pastoral arrangements: Leaders' competence fully respected, although some inter-generational estrangement. Much intra-team support.
5. Communications: Generally very good. Leader and key Hungarian host adopted democratic/consensual approach combined with decisiveness, although Hungarian fieldwork leader displayed occasional autocratic tendencies. Foreign language effort largely accommodated by host, assisted by ex-pat etc meant translation issues kept under control but most of English team responded to limited or minimal degree.

Problems with catering communications initially, and English v. Latin binomial classification of species throughout. Also programme flexibility created uncertainty over timetable and task rationale.

6. Food: Very varied and authentic menu whilst catering coped well with range of dietary needs. Some had difficulties with extensive use of paprika and potency of pelinka.
7. Environs: Attractive wooded hills on border with Slovakia (in contrast to Communist-era industrial areas, the agriculturally-intensive Great Plains and big city Budapest)
8. Host culture: Visits to mining museum, rural life museum, medieval church and castles, bird ringing, bat capture, moth trapping, wolf/red deer spotting, wild boar eating, vineyard and wine tasting, cave visits (including concert), carriage ride/native horses, Zemplen Hills, floating peat bog, thermal spa. Locally-produced wares. Talks/tours on butterflies, large carnivores, insects, flora, orchards, Hungarian culture and history. Saunters around Budapest. Food and drink.
9. Project feedback: Informal acknowledgment of project success by all involved. Leaflets/posters/books to take back to England. Post-project participant reports. Leader's/host's ongoing formal assessment focussed around funding priorities/criteria.

Melvyn Jones
9/10/2007