

EU Conservation Action Network: Hungary and the Aggteleki Nemzeti Park.

Report by Sam Stewart

Upon arrival

I awoke to a sleepy-eyed blur of green and grey - I was in Hungary.

"Hungary is a flat agricultural desert". *I said, as I slowly came round from my train cabin coma, as we passed field after field, interspersed by those ugly gigantic red Tesco signs that never cease to fill me with anger (even in Hackney).*

In my semi-conscious state I wondered where I was, and pondered over what exactly I was expecting after crossing that pen-thin-line on a map which denotes the Hungarian border.

Clearly this was not a lasting impression, as through my sleepy eyes my pre-conceptions of this central European stronghold, passed with each field we slid by.

As my eyes opened three-quarters, I entered the restaurant carriage to the sound of (televised) "Gypsy" music with a hint of trashy "Hungarian" pop, and my negative pondering resolved itself- I had entered onto another plain, pardon the pun, and was feeling this. The tired disappointment (although I cannot explain exactly what I did expect) dissipated with the smoke in the carriage.

Budapest was a fleeting moment before the infinite fields returned, as we journeyed north to Aggtelek. I saw a glimpse of the past, present and future of Hungary through it's capital's eyes, and gained a plethora of images, feelings and questions.

Aggtelek

Aggteleki Nemzeti Park (Aggtelek National Park) is a 200 000 ha national park on the Slovakian and Hungarian border. It is an important protected area both on a national, European and international level. It is important, at least on the level of its geology and ecology, which contains a rich Carpathian (and Mediterranean) biodiversity at the species level. The area contains a multitude of distinct microclimates due to various aspects and slopes, giving rise to a mix of species from the Carpathian, Panamonnian and Mediteranean biogeographic regions. Moreover, this is coupled with the unique ecological diversity associated with karstic geology.

The objective of our trip was to help maintain grasslands in their semi-natural states. They support a whole host of flora and fauna, but are of particular importance to the butterflies, and other insects- these were our motivational fauna, so to speak.

Active conservation management of grasslands is required in areas such as Aggtelek, mainly due to the move away from traditional agricultural practices (which saw much

higher grazing levels) and the rural-urban migration, as seen recently elsewhere in central, east and south east Europe. For example, similar problems exist in some parts of Croatia, where the rural-urban migration has had a huge impact on land uses, which directly impacts the nature which has historically (as far as humans are concerned) been present in the area/s.

Conservation strategies

Many arguments exist in conservation, as to which of the different conservation strategies are best in different areas, when conserving habitats and/or particular species. For example, conservationists can take the gardening approach and actively manage the land (i.e. active management, as is dominant in the UK) or (amongst many other strategies) can take the entirely opposite approach, by allowing "nature" to develop without human impact, in order to achieve a "wilderness" (although arguably a true wilderness no longer exists, as ultimately all earth-bound habitats have been influenced in some sense by human beings), as inspired by people such as John Muir.

Arrival in Aggtelek

I had no previous knowledge of Hungary, except in a geographical sense, and the Anglicised comprehensive school version of Hungarian imperial history. Ashamedly, I also knew little about Aggtelek prior to landing my feet on the rusting blood red soils, only knowing of the Parks existence via some brief encounters of the Google variety.

So the cutting, walking, cutting, walking, cutting, walking (conservation work), lectures, discussions, and demonstrations commenced. In tandem newly formed opinions about conservation volunteering, and conservation volunteers themselves, gathered pace. I gained a greater insight into the different perceptions of other conservation volunteers, and the heterogeneity of their different motivations, interests, and moreover dedication to conserving natural history.

Whilst taking part in this conservation program, my personal thoughts and concerns internally focussed on two particular areas: involvement of particular groups of stakeholders in conservation, and treatment by Park authorities of a large minority group inhabiting the park.

Management of the Aggteleki National Park: how inter-disciplinary is its style?

Although ideologically unfortunate, it is now accepted in current conservation literature and practice that purely ecologically-based protected area management will not create an effective protected area: instead a much broader, multidisciplinary approach to management must be followed, incorporating not only ecological objectives, but also socio-economic aspects, so that ecological objectives may be effective and enforceable (Roberts *et al.*, 2003). These disciplinary considerations are often conflicting (e.g. 'exploitation' versus 'conservation') (Sumaila *et al.*, 2000), coupled with internal conflicts between exploiters/inhabitants. In the Aggteleki Park one would argue that, due to the vast area of Park, and general "good relationship" (*Pers comm.* of Park employee) with the small number of Park inhabitants, some of the above considerations are less

valid. Nevertheless they should still be fully considered and explored, however large or small the effect of the Park inhabitants might be perceived or portrayed. As within any protected area, land managers of an area must try to address a multitude of issues for conservation to be effective.

As I perceived it, a state led, top-down approach to conservation is employed within the Aggteleki Park. In other protected areas, a similar approach would be likely to create friction with local people through the imposition of rules, perhaps be detrimental to people who depend upon specific areas for resources/livelihood, and perhaps fail to incorporate local knowledge into management. I must point out that I lack information on which to judge the Aggtelek Park fully, with regard to their overall management plan and success, and therefore the remainder of the issues I will address are my own personal interpretations and perceptions, borne out of my experiences in the Park, coupled with my own conservation ideals/ramblings, and own belief in equality for all.

The park inhabitants

The region contains a divided, yet small, community which has 10% cooperative stake in land, with actual ownership lower.

The "others"

The Hungarian Romany population is one of the largest Romany populations in Europe. In Hungary it has been estimated that the Romany community (I must point out that by referring to the "Romany community" I by no means see this ethnic group as a homogenous entity) comprise approximately 5% of the overall population.

In Hungary (unlike many other European states) the Romany population have been recognised as a distinct ethnic group, and some Romany communities have even been given "self-government" powers. However, there are many arguments to suggest that these powers provide to Romany people have little actual power or influence politically. Whilst Hungary has been forward thinking, legislatively, in regard to the Romany population, on further reading, I found that what happens on paper does not always reflect actions. As recently as the late 1980's, the Hungarian government undertook a campaign to actively encourage Romany women to be sterilised, and some reports suggest that some women were forcibly sterilised. Based on this relatively recent history alone, it was no surprise that even now prejudice and discrimination against Hungarian Roma within Hungary is well-documented (European Roma Rights Centre). The divides in Hungarian society between the "Hungarians" and "others" remain a serious social issue.

In the Aggtelek park the (static) Romany community are a comparatively large population of peoples. My overall impression through the general comments and attitudes I saw and heard, it is very apparent that the Romany community or communities within the park are marginalised.

Example 1

One Park employee referred to non-Romany communities, as the “Hungarians”. In saying this, the Romany people are being referred to as the “others” by those with influence (in the region).

This is not to say that I consider the Romany people versus the “other” Aggteleki’s as two homogenous entities distinctly dissimilar to one another. I have merely discussed my impression, as an outsider, with an entirely different positionality to the people I am considering.

Example 2

The mayor of Szosliget town referred to the Romany people in the area as lazy people, in that “they do not want to work”. With regard to unemployment, this was perhaps said with little sympathy for the tremendously complicated socio-economic reasons which may underly the situation of many Romany individuals and communities in the area.

Example 3

Several Park employees stated that the Romany community seem “closed” to others in the area. However, I would like to say, that in the climate of prejudice painted by various reports and my exposure to the marginilising opinions of park authorities, Romany communities may have little choice but to close ranks, so to speak.

Why include the “others”

Public participation, the use of local knowledge in conservation management planning, and stakeholder involvement are important when conserving the natural and cultural artefacts of any region. Efforts have been made by the Aggtelek Park through annual cultural festivals etc, to bring about public participation within the park by inspiring an interest. However, I saw no evidence of efforts to work with, or indeed bring together *all* sections of the Aggtelek community as a whole, as one, albeit culturally diverse, community.

The importance of National Park inhabitants

To ensure that the Park moves forward successfully into the future with regard to successful park management, it is important that they actively involve all sections of the community, and make further efforts to allow public participation, through e.g. through activities such as Conservation Volunteering, and increasing the level of outreach activities and decision making. As far as possible, all sections of the Park communities should be involved with conserving the park. For example the marginalisation (not only in a discriminatory sense, but also socio-economically) of one community could be having serious ramifications on environmental initiatives. Fundamentally it is clear that all inhabitants of an area will make use of the land in one way or another, however small.

Through my own personal interpretations of the situation, without thorough investigation on my part, I hope that in the future, inter-disciplinary research should be undertaken to see how the Aggtelek Park authorities can engage with all stakeholders, to take the success they have so far achieved with their conservation efforts to a new level: with the

support and involvement of all interested community members, incorporating as much local knowledge as possible into management plans and prioritisation of future areas of work. Furthermore, they should actively campaign to encourage Park inhabitants to get involved with conservation volunteering, with a structured, *inclusionary* campaign to encourage participation.

I have come away with a multitude of personal impressions of the Aggtelek region, and of Hungary itself. I have developed an insight into the different effects of prejudice, and how it potentially damages more than the humans it is focussed on, i.e. the conservation of protected areas. Moreover, I have learnt that Hungary has a rich and interesting cultural heritage, with outstanding areas of natural beauty, which I am pleased to say, in the case of the Aggtelek Park are backed by people who show the necessary passions and desires to achieve their conservation goals.